

Judges 20A

- As we approach the end of our study and as we find the circumstances in Israel growing increasingly dire, I assume you are starting to question whether to keep listening
 - I don't blame you...after all we turn to scripture to be encouraged, inspired and reminded of God's love and goodness
 - And then we hear stories like the one we read last week, and we wince a little and prefer to dwell on better things
 - That's only natural
 - But if that's you, let me remind you that the story isn't over yet
 - I'm not referring to Judges
 - I'm speaking of the story of God's redemptive plan, His plan to deal with this endless downward spiral of sin among His people
 - Because that's where this story is taking us
 - The human heart is desperately wicked and without hope in this world
 - And when men and women live without restraint, sin takes over
 - And few books of scripture demonstrate that truth better than the story of Judges
- But even as the story has taken us to limits of our patience, it's reminded us of why we needed a Savior
 - Of why Christ had to die for us
 - And yet God loved His people so much that He was willing to take that penalty in the most cruel fashion
 - And so as you consider the ugliness of this time, let that truth remind you of how ugly your own sin is to God
 - All sin grieves God's heart
 - And yet our Redeemer is powerful enough to cleanse us of it all

- We'll hear that story in the book of Ruth, which Samuel gives us to finish the time of Judges
- So as the saying goes, it's always darkest before the dawn
- So let's return to the darkness of Judges as we move toward to dawn of Ruth
 - We stopped last week at the end of chapter 19 after the wife of a Levite had been raped and left for dead by the mob in the Benjamite town
 - The husband responded by sending his wife's dismembered body to the twelve tribes as a disturbing message
 - By that message he hoped to trigger a response to exact revenge upon the Benjamites
 - And at the end of chapter 19, we saw the people respond as expected
 - Collectively, the nation cried out for something to be done
 - It's a significant moment in the time of Judges
 - For at least this one moment, the people of Israel have come together in a desire to contend with the sin among them
 - But predictably, the people respond to one sin by acting in even greater sin
 - They start a war against their brothers, which takes us into chapter 20

Judg. 20:1 Then all the sons of Israel from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, came out, and the congregation assembled as one man to the Lord at Mizpah.

Judg. 20:2 The chiefs of all the people, even of all the tribes of Israel, took their stand in the assembly of the people of God, 400,000 foot soldiers who drew the sword.

Judg. 20:3 (Now the sons of Benjamin heard that the sons of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) And the sons of Israel said, "Tell us, how did this wickedness take place?"

Judg. 20:4 So the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, "I came with my concubine to spend the night at Gibeah which belongs to Benjamin.

Judg. 20:5 "But the men of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house at night because of me. They intended to kill me; instead, they ravished my concubine so that she died.

Judg. 20:6 "And I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout the land of Israel's inheritance; for they have committed a lewd and disgraceful act in Israel.

- The nation's response to this atrocity is somewhat reminiscent of how our nation responded to the disaster of September 11, 2001
 - The people became of one mind that something must be done
 - In the process that follows, we'll see glimpses of righteousness
 - Men seeking for justice and even inquiring of God for direction at a moment
 - But since this is the time of Judges, their actions remain untethered from the Law of God or from the heart of God
 - Consequently, the results will not be justice
 - Samuel says that men from Dan to Beersheba and Gilead joined together to fort an army some 400,000 strong
 - As you remember from a few chapters earlier, Dan had relocated to the north of Israel
 - And Beersheba is the southern most town in Judah
 - While Gilead is the eastern border of Israel
 - Therefore, this phrase means the whole of the nation from north to south to the edges of the land in the east
 - In fact, this phrase became a common saying in Israel during the time of the monarchy to describe a united Israel
- At this assembly, the chiefs of the tribes hold a convocation in Mitzpah, which was in the territory of Benjamin just a few miles north of Gibeah
 - This meeting is a trial to determine the facts and the response
 - But notice the troops have already been gathered
 - So you get a sense of where this is going before it starts
 - In v.3 we're told that the Benjamites are aware of the meeting
 - The people of Israel gave Benjamin notice of this trial
 - They expected the leaders of Benjamin to appear and give a defense against the accusations
 - But it appears that Benjamin ignored the summons

- So the convocation begins with a testimony from the Levite who cut up his wife
 - The Levite is the star witness
 - They ask him to explain what happened
 - But in this case the Levite elects **not** to tell the whole truth
- In the broad strokes, the Levite relates the facts correctly, but he overlooks some key details intentionally to ensure the result goes his way
 - For example, in v.5 he says that the men of Benjamin wished to kill him but killed his wife instead
 - That's true, but he left out the part where he threw his bride to the crowd
 - Obviously, the Levite's omission doesn't lessen the sin of the men Gibeah
 - But we have to wonder if the crowd would have been so ready to go to war had they known the whole truth
 - Furthermore, the Levite testifies that he received his bride dead and so he cut her up to send her around Israel
 - Once again, he paints a picture that favors himself
 - Was she truly dead when he cut her up? Maybe
 - But even still, his response was equally troubling
 - Yet he piously says he did what he did in response to a lewd and disgraceful act
 - Would this national response have resulted had he merely brought his concern to the judge of his day?
 - His selective memory of the event illustrates how everyone judged sin according to a preferred perspective
 - He recognized the sin of the mob in Gibeah plainly
 - But he conveniently overlooked his own contributions to the situation
 - And he's not followed the Law in seeking justice himself

- He hasn't appealed to the representatives God assigned to judge Israel's sin
- Instead, he's acting as a vigilante seeking justice in his own way
- As a result of his decision to incite his brothers to bloodshed, this man will trigger the death of 65,000 fellow Jews'
- That is not a just response
- So as he finishes his testimony, the Levite once again calls for action

Judg. 20:7 "Behold, all you sons of Israel, give your advice and counsel here."

- The Levite says, in so many words, "don't you see what must be done in the face of this offense?"
 - He's clearly working to manipulate the minds and hearts of these people
 - He's acting out of revenge, which is a sinful desire in itself
- Israel's own law taught the people to be patient and rely on the Lord for protection in the face of your enemies

Deut. 32:35 'Vengeance is Mine, and retribution,
In due time their foot will slip;
For the day of their calamity is near,
And the impending things are hastening upon them.'

Deut. 32:36 "For the Lord will vindicate His people,
And will have compassion on His servants,
When He sees that their strength is gone,
And there is none remaining, bond or free.

- And Proverbs teaches Israel not to act in this way against one another

Prov. 24:28 Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause,
And do not deceive with your lips.

Prov. 24:29 Do not say, "Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me;
I will render to the man according to his work."

- So while this man was wronged, but his response is equally wrong, and so is the response of the leaders of the tribes

[Judg. 20:8](#) Then all the people arose as one man, saying, “Not one of us will go to his tent, nor will any of us return to his house.

[Judg. 20:9](#) “But now this is the thing which we will do to Gibeah; we will go up against it by lot.

[Judg. 20:10](#) “And we will take 10 men out of 100 throughout the tribes of Israel, and 100 out of 1,000, and 1,000 out of 10,000 to supply food for the people, that when they come to Gibeah of Benjamin, they may punish them for all the disgraceful acts that they have committed in Israel.”

[Judg. 20:11](#) Thus all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, united as one man.

- In v.8 the the leaders say no one is going home until this matter is settled
 - Their response sounds very brave and manly, but it’s not particularly godly
 - No one said let’s go home and pray about this
 - They are rushing to act while in the heat of the moment
 - Because no one really cares what God thinks
 - Everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes
 - And they want to do it while passions are enflamed
 - No one makes good decisions when acting in the heat of the moment
 - The Lord commanded His people in the Law, and likewise He directs the Church in the NT, to leave room for His wrath
 - We are to respect God’s purposes in everything that transpires in our life
 - Concern yourself with following Him, so that even when He permits unpleasant things to enter our lives, we trust Him with the outcome
 - Don’t step in by your own hand to satisfy your own sinful desires for retribution or revenge
 - Instead, leave room for Him to work, which means don’t add a sinful response on top of the sin of others
 - This people are not working for justice

- Instead, the people are assembling to feed their fleshly desire for satisfaction in the face of his loss and humiliation
- They are not concerned with God's will or their own sin...they are only concerned with revenge
- So in preparation for the battle, they begin to count out a proportional number of each tribe to support the army
 - They are taking measures to work in a united fashion for a long battle
 - Once again, they are assuming war is the necessary outcome
 - No one says let's go ask Samuel or whoever was judging Israel for advice
 - And Israel is willing to devote it's entire effort to the task
 - They apportion men to the battle and to the work of feeding the soldiers at a rate of 10%
 - This is an allusion to the Law's requirement for tithing
 - In other words, a people who were supposed to give their whole heart, mind, soul and strength to serving God have instead turned their devotion and energy to the pursuit of revenge for one act of sin
 - Take note of how often we see the phrase "as one man"
 - It appears in v.1, 8 and 11
 - The phrase stands out because it's so unusual to seeing Israel acting in unison about anything
 - It was an anomaly in the age of men doing what was right in their own eyes
- So as we move ahead to the next scene, keep in mind that a people who are never united in anything God has commanded are finally united
 - But their unison leads to near catastrophe in the nation, leading to a tribe nearly being decimated
 - Ironically, we're watching a people finally unite but still living in sin, apart from God

- It's a lesson in how the sin of men, unrestrained by submission to God's will, will do more harm than good
- In other words, unity among sinners doesn't produce righteousness
- It merely magnifies sin
- Because we cannot find righteousness nor justice in our own power
- After convocation, the leaders of the tribes enter the territory of the Benjamites demanding to have the men of Gibeah who killed the woman

Judg. 20:12 Then the tribes of Israel sent men through the entire tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What is this wickedness that has taken place among you?"

Judg. 20:13 "Now then, deliver up the men, the worthless fellows in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and remove this wickedness from Israel." But the sons of Benjamin would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the sons of Israel.

Judg. 20:14 The sons of Benjamin gathered from the cities to Gibeah, to go out to battle against the sons of Israel.

Judg. 20:15 From the cities on that day the sons of Benjamin were numbered, 26,000 men who draw the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah who were numbered, 700 choice men.

Judg. 20:16 Out of all these people 700 choice men were left-handed; each one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.

- Again, this course wasn't wrong in itself
 - The Law demanded that Israel respond in this way to this kind of sin
 - And Benjamin should have turned them over to justice
 - But the justice should have been conducted by the judges according to the Law
 - This is mob justice
 - Instead, the men of Benjamin decide to reject the authority of the other tribes and prepare for war instead
 - We probably can't find a better example of men doing what is right in their own eyes

- What basis could the Benjamites have for refusing justice in this matter?
- It appears they merely wanted to protect their pride and independence
- Notice, the author emphasizes in v.13 that the Benjamites wouldn't listen to the voice of their brothers
 - They chose to see their fellow tribes as adversaries rather than brothers in a united cause of justice
 - And so they acted defensively
- The extent to which a people will stand up to defend evil is a measure of the moral decay within their community
 - And Paul says that the society of the last days – our days – is a society that hates good
 - And celebrates evil
 - And we can certainly see the same tendency of our culture to side with and protect the evil doer
 - Which tells us that the same evil infecting the Benjamites is still with us today
- Sop Benjamin assembled a sizable army to fight the other tribes
 - You might assume that they wouldn't have a chance, but the tribe of Benjamin was known for its warriors
 - In fact, Jacob's prophetic blessing on this tribe describes their military prowess

**Gen. 49:27 "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf;
In the morning he devours the prey,
And in the evening he divides the spoil."**

- So the battle isn't as one-sided as you might expect
- In fact, the town of Gibeah supplies 700 men who were the Special Forces of their day
 - These men were especially skilled in use of the sling

- A sling in this day was not the children's toy we are familiar with today
- This was a pouch of leather with long cords tied to the ends
- A skilled thrower could place a stone as large as 1 pound in the pouch and spin it overhead at speeds that approached 90-miles/hour
- By releasing one set of cords, the thrower could place this projectile on target with remarkable accuracy
- It was a deadly weapon
- These men are skilled in this technique, but curiously they are all left-handed fighters
 - You may remember our second judge, Ehud, was also a left-handed Benjamite
 - In fact, this story might have been set in the same general period of history as Ehud
- We learned then that Ehud may have fought left-handed because he lacked the use of his right hand
 - His left-handedness was seen as a deficit
 - In Ehud's case, it reflected God's willingness to do great things with weakness
 - But in this case, it's telling a different story
- Here we have 700 skilled and powerful men, not weaklings
 - And they are all left-handed by design, hand-picked to be in this unit
 - This is a special unit that the Benjamites assembled and trained to create an advantage
 - Like a baseball team that fields a left-handed pitcher on the mound to create an advantage against certain batters
 - By operating in unison against the usual convention, this unit could gain a tactical advantage in combat
 - But symbolically, their distinction is a commentary on the spiritual heart of this tribe

- The name Benjamin means “son of my right hand”
- Remember, Benjamin was Jacob’s favorite son
- And so the name reflects being close to father’s authority and honor
- And yet the tribe of Benjamin couldn’t be farther from God’s heart in this matter
 - So we see the evil of their hearts symbolized by this band of warriors
 - The tribe of sons of the right-hand is placing its trust in left-handed men
- All is ready for battle, and now finally the people appeal to the Lord for direction

Judg. 20:17 Then the men of Israel besides Benjamin were numbered, 400,000 men who draw the sword; all these were men of war.

Judg. 20:18 Now the sons of Israel arose, went up to Bethel, and inquired of God and said, “Who shall go up first for us to battle against the sons of Benjamin?” Then the Lord said, “Judah shall go up first.”

- The tabernacle of the Lord was in Bethel in these days, so the men of Israel decide to approach the Lord for direction and blessing
 - This certainly sounds like an encouraging development
 - Finally we see Israel taking steps to seek the Lord’s counsel, or so it seems
 - But as we look a little deeper, we’ll see that their actions are not necessarily as they seem
 - The first thing we notice is that that name for God in v.18 is not the personal name for the Lord
 - Notice in our English Bibles it says the men inquired of “God”
 - The Hebrew word for God is elohim, which is the generic word for God
 - It is not the personal name of God, Yahweh

- So the text says that the people when to inquire of God, but they aren't approaching Him on the basis of a personal knowledge of Him
 - The people of Israel are far from God, such that they don't even address Him personally
 - He is like a pagan god to them
- And now that they are approaching Him, they do so merely for advice on the order of battle
 - They want to know which tribe should lead them into battle
 - The Lord directs that Judah should go up first
- It's no coincidence that the book of Judges began with Judah leading the people into battle
 - In chapter 1 the Lord directed that Judah should enter into battle first against the Canaanites
 - Only back in chapter 1:1 the people approached Yahweh
 - In this case they approach Elohim
 - And in both cases, the Lord said the people shall be led by Judah
 - The connection between the beginning and end of the book is intended to catch our attention so we can see how the nation has slid into apostasy
 - They used to approach the Lord by name seeking to do His will
 - Now they approach Him without knowing Him and so that they can get His blessing to do their own will
 - They used to fight the enemies of Israel
 - Now they fight one another
 - But in both cases, Judah is the key
 - The mention of Judah leading Israel is looking forward to the coming monarchy
 - One day Judah will lead the people into righteousness
 - One day Jesus will come