

Judges 21

- We've come to the end of the book of Judges
 - Today we study the final chapter, the chapter that concludes the story of the Benjamite civil war in Israel
 - This is the second of two stories written to conclude and summarize the entire time of Judges
 - The writer of Judges wanted to capture the spirit of rebellion and ignorance that dominated during this period of Israel's history
 - So he selected these two stories about events that took place at earlier points in the 300 years of Judges to represent the entire time
 - A time of men doing what was right in their own eyes
 - My guess is the writer felt these accounts were his best examples of the trouble of this time
 - He must have expected that a retelling of these stories would lead his readers to shake their heads in disbelief and disgust at the anarchy in Israel
 - Even more, they demonstrate how depraved, wicked and self-deceived the human heart becomes apart from the Lord
- The second account began in chapter 19, and it tells of how the tribes of Israel entered into civil war over a single incident involving an Ephraimite man and his concubine
 - Twelve of the tribes decided to attack the tribe of Benjamin in retribution for the atrocity in Gibeah
 - They were so hell-bent on revenge that they were willing to put one of the tribes of God's people to an end
 - And they very nearly succeeded
 - After two set-backs, the Lord granted the tribes a victory against the Benjamites
 - But then the tribes went beyond what was proper or necessary

- They chased down as many Benjamite men as they could find among all the cities of the tribe, killing all but 600
- Those 600 remaining refugees hid in the mountains
- The fate of the entire tribe of Benjamin now hung on the future of these men
- The foolishness of the tribes of Israel went far beyond merely acting with excessive force against their brothers
 - The tribes were placing their very existence at risk
 - It's clear they have no appreciation for the purpose of Israel in God's plan for all nations
- The Benjamites were not just another group of people living in the land
 - They were one-thirteenth of a nation God created to save humanity
 - Israel is the wife of Jehovah
 - Through Israel the Lord will bring the prophets, the covenants, the temple, and ultimately the Messiah Himself
 - Yet here they are preparing to destroy one another, beginning with the tribe of Benjamin
 - If these people had understood how important the nation was to the plan of God, they would never act in this way
 - But they only have eyes for earthly concerns
 - They are doing only what is right in their own eyes
 - Which is to say, they were doing sinful things
 - Because what seems right in the eyes of evil men is always sin
 - Interestingly, this moment was foreshadowed prophetically in Genesis in the story of Jacob and his sons
 - After Joseph's reported death, Jacob refused to let the brothers take Benjamin back to Egypt
 - He said he didn't trust his sons to protect Benjamin's life
 - Judah had to step forward – to go up first – to guarantee Benjamin's life before Jacob would allow Benjamin to go

- Now we see Jacob's fears for Benjamin were prophetic, in that his brothers are indeed seeking his destruction
- So as we enter our final chapter, the question we need to answer is what will this disobedient and evil people do in the face of this self-induced disaster?
 - And how will God ensure the continuation of His people while holding Israel accountable?
 - And as usual, the peoples' response will be sin on top of sin
 - They propose solutions that only further the anarchy
 - And I need to warn you that the narration in chapter 21 approaches the circumstances somewhat dispassionately
 - It would be easy to conclude from a quick reading that the Lord isn't particularly bothered over the events
 - But that's like failing to notice someone's dry sense of humor
 - If the joke is delivered with a straight face, you have to read between the lines to see the sarcasm
 - Similarly, the events in chapter 21 are not at all in keeping with the Lord's desires
 - He allows them to happen, self-evidently
 - But He does so merely to allow the people to serve as a negative example
 - So that we can see clearly the impact of their sin on Jewish society
 - Thankfully, the Lord has a plan to correct for all these problems
 - That solution is presented as a final story from this period of Jewish history
 - The story isn't in Judges, though
 - It's in the book of Ruth that follows the book of Judges
- So let's enter the final sad episode of this book, paying attention to the mistakes these people pill atop of previous sins

- It begins with the men of Israel acting like someone who awakens from a drinking binge to discover the regrettable things he's done while out of his senses
 - They are suddenly faced with an urgent need to save the very group of men they were working so hard to destroy earlier

Judg. 21:1 Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpah, saying, "None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin in marriage."

Judg. 21:2 So the people came to Bethel and sat there before God until evening, and lifted up their voices and wept bitterly.

Judg. 21:3 They said, "Why, O Lord, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel, so that one tribe should be missing today in Israel?"

Judg. 21:4 It came about the next day that the people arose early and built an altar there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.

Judg. 21:5 Then the sons of Israel said, "Who is there among all the tribes of Israel who 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 at Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death."

Judg. 21:6 And the sons of Israel were sorry for their brother Benjamin and said, "One tribe is cut off from Israel today.

- The people awaken to the reality of a tribe on the brink of extinction
 - Now we wonder why this is such a big deal
 - After all, aren't 600 men enough to repopulate a tribe?
 - After all, Noah and his family repopulated the entire earth
 - Well, ordinarily that would be true, except the people of Israel dug their hole even deeper
 - In vs.1-6 we learn that the sin of Israel went much further than merely murdering every Benjamite they could get their hands on
 - Sometime during the events of chapter 20, the men of Israel made every tribe swear an oath
 - The oath was a "wife oath" or promise to never again give their daughters into marriage to a Benjamite
 - All the Benjamite women were killed in the genocide, so these 600 surviving men need to find wives from other tribes

- But as the people of Israel contemplate the plight of their Benjamite brothers, they come to realize they have tied their own hands
- They were now under obligation by their oath to deny those 600 Benjamites wives
- The tribe seems destined to go extinct
- This oath was a real barrier for Israel
 - An oath was a solemn thing, a commitment that is binding until death
 - If a man should break this oath, the rest of Israel was bound to execute such a person
 - Men believed that if an oath was made before God and then broken, God Himself would bring vengeance
 - So no one was going to be the first person to test the oath
 - Furthermore, in v.5 we learn the tribes took a second oath to kill town or village in Israel that refused to contribute soldiers to the battle against Benjamin
 - They took the second oath to compel participation in the war by all other tribes
 - And all those who participated in the battle also took the wife oath
 - So as Israel seeks wives for the Benjamites, they realize in v.6 that they are between a rock and a hard place
 - Everyone who participated in the battle against Benjamin pledged a wife oath never to give wives to the Benjamites
 - And those in Israel who didn't participate in the battle must be executed for not taking up arms
 - So it seems there is no hope of finding wives and As the people say, one of the tribes is cut off
- This situation illustrates perfectly why scripture warns us never to take oaths that bind us before God
 - The reason is because we cannot be sure what God will do in the future

- And if you cannot control the future, then how can you be sure your interests will be well served by your commitment?
- What seemed like a good thing in the beginning might prove to be a terrible idea later
- That's what we see here
 - Israel was now committed by its own word to doing something contrary to its own best interests
 - Yet no matter how the circumstances transpire, God expects us to keep our oaths
 - That's why Jesus said don't make oaths before God...just determine to keep your promises when you say "yes" and "no"
- These people have acted rashly and sinfully in making vows against their brothers, and yet they don't see their predicament that way
 - Notice that as the people weep and lament in v.3, they blame the Lord for the situation
 - They ask God how He could allow this to happen, as if it was His idea to extinguish one of the tribes of Israel
 - The Lord didn't prevent it from happening, but that doesn't mean it was His fault
 - No more than Adam's fall in the Garden was God's fault
 - On the contrary, the people are standing in this situation because they are living without regard for the Lord or His law
 - In fact, the nation is acting exactly opposite to the Lord's commands
 - In Deuteronomy 7 the Lord instructed the nation to extinguish all the people of Canaan upon entering the land
 - And not to marry the women of Canaan lest they become entangled in idol worship
 - Now we're about to see Israel doing exactly the opposite
 - They are extinguishing away their own people in the tribe of Benjamin

- And by their stupid oath, the people seem to leave the surviving Benjamites with no choice but to marry Canaanites
- In all that we've studied in this book, all the tragedy, all the depravity and arrogance, this is the icing on that cake of sin
 - The people of God are doing the enemy's work for him
 - They are murdering thousands of their own in the land
 - While preparing to intermarry with the very people who live under God's curse
 - I imagine the enemy and his demons were celebrating in this day, giddy at the prospect of watching Israel destroy itself
 - But we know the Lord will not allow his people to come to their end, so the rest of the chapter describes how Benjamin survived
 - But as we read what happens, take note that the solution is not one given by God
 - It comes from the very same group who created the problem in the first place
 - And it comes in the very same way, with men doing what was right in their own eyes

Judg. 21:7 "What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the Lord not to give them any of our daughters in marriage?"

Judg. 21:8 And they said, "What one is there of the tribes of Israel who did not come up to the Lord at Mizpah?" And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead to the assembly.

Judg. 21:9 For when the people were numbered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there.

Judg. 21:10 And the congregation sent 12,000 of the valiant warriors there, and commanded them, saying, "Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead with the edge of the sword, with the women and the little ones.

Judg. 21:11 "This is the thing that you shall do: you shall utterly destroy every man and every woman who has lain with a man."

Judg. 21:12 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.

Judg. 21:13 Then the whole congregation sent word and spoke to the sons of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon, and proclaimed peace to them.

[Judg. 21:14](#) Benjamin returned at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had kept alive from the women of Jabesh-gilead; yet they were not enough for them.

[Judg. 21:15](#) And the people were sorry for Benjamin because the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.

- We see how the solution begins in v.7...not with a word from the Lord, not through a judge or prophet, but from the people themselves
 - They ask what should we do to solve this problem?
 - More specifically, they ask how can we get around our own oath?
 - In other words, they want to violate the spirit of their oath while appearing to keep the letter of the law
 - People in general, and especially the Jewish people, have always been experts at this sort of thing
 - The Pharisee and scribes were always on the lookout for ways to avoid their own rules and circumvent the Law without appearing to violate the law
 - Sinful men want the credit for piety without actually denying themselves the pleasures of sin
 - We want to be righteous in the eyes of men only
- As the people seek for a solution to their dilemma, they find hope in v.8 as they learn that one village in Israel didn't heed the call to join the battle
 - The town of Jabesh-gilead was located on the east side of the Jordan river near the edge of Jewish settlement in the land
 - The people of Israel are under oath to destroy the inhabitants of this town
 - Yet they see this town as source of wives for the Benjamites
 - How will they get around their vow though?
 - Simple...they ignore it at least part of it
 - They elect to send 12,000 warriors to destroy the people of the town

- More vengeance on top of vengeance, murder on top of murder, sin on top of sin
- And the final sin was to disobey their own oath
- They determine to leave any virgin woman untouched so she can be taken as a wife for the Benjamites
 - The people had no basis for making this distinction, since their oath placed the towns under the ban for failing to answer the call to arms
 - Nevertheless, they do what's right in their own eyes
 - They are making up the rules as they go
 - By killing all the men, children and married women, they feel justified in leaving the virgins alive
- After they wipe out the town and collect the virgins, they realize they have only 400 women, which is 200 too few to give each Benjamite a wife
 - The number 4 in scripture symbolizes the fallen earth, while the number 2 is the number of division or separation
 - The suggestion is that God limited Israel to obtaining only 400 women through their scheme as a commentary on their sin
 - The schemes of men will always lead to a fall in keeping with the ways of the world
 - And in this case, it's easy to see how Israel's scheming has produced nothing but a downward spiral of calamity
 - Such is the world's wisdom
 - And the number 2 reminds us that the sin of the people has divided them from God and from each other
 - They are not walking in unity as a nation nor in fellowship with the God Who brought them into the land
 - This is a fundamental principle of our sin, that it divides us from one another in the body and it breaks fellowship with the Lord
 - Our faith in Jesus Christ saves us from the eternal judgment that our sin deserves, since He took that penalty in our place

- Nevertheless, a believer's sin produces negative earthly consequences, including distancing us from an abiding walk with the Lord by His Spirit
 - We move outside His will, which has the effect of making it easier to indulge our flesh further
 - Which is why scripture issues such strong warnings against believers living in unrepentant sin
 - We're playing with fire, as if walking on a tightrope from which we may slip at any point
 - And we may never recover from that fall
 - Our soul will be saved in the end, but our life of shipwrecked faith will be a testimony against us
- As the tribes lament the inadequate supply of virgins, once again they blame God in v.15
 - And once again, this is not God's doing
 - How interesting that they never seek God's counsel before they act
 - And yet they are quick to blame Him when their own plans fail to work
 - This shows you how stubborn and ignorant they have become
 - So now they need a second plan to find the additional 200 wives needed for the men on Benjamin

Judg. 21:16 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?"

Judg. 21:17 They said, "There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, so that a tribe will not be blotted out from Israel.

Judg. 21:18 "But we cannot give them wives of our daughters." For the sons of Israel had sworn, saying, "Cursed is he who gives a wife to Benjamin."

Judg. 21:19 So they said, "Behold, there is a feast of the Lord from year to year in Shiloh, which is on the north side of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and on the south side of Lebonah."

Judg. 21:20 And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards,

[Judg. 21:21](#) and watch; and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to take part in the dances, then you shall come out of the vineyards and each of you shall catch his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin.

[Judg. 21:22](#) "It shall come about, when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, that we shall say to them, 'Give them to us voluntarily, because we did not take for each man of Benjamin a wife in battle, nor did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.'"

[Judg. 21:23](#) The sons of Benjamin did so, and took wives according to their number from those who danced, whom they carried away. And they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the cities and lived in them.

[Judg. 21:24](#) The sons of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and each one of them went out from there to his inheritance.

- In v.16 the elders of the tribes ask what shall they do to save Benjamin, since the women of the tribe are destroyed?
 - But of course that destruction was their own doing, yet they speak of it as if it was an unavoidable tragedy outside their control
 - Then in v.17 they declare that Benjamin must not be allowed to die out
 - Again, it sounds as if they are the Red Cross coming to the aid of the unfortunate victims of some natural disaster
 - They were the perpetrators of the very disaster they now wish to mitigate
 - And the plan they devise this time is another attempt to circumvent their own ill-conceived oath
 - No man in Israel can give his daughter to a Benjamite or else he must be killed because of the wife oath
 - But what if a daughter is taken *involuntarily* by a Benjamnite?
 - Then the father would be innocent of breaking his oath, since he didn't knowingly offer his daughter against his own oath
- So that becomes the solution for this people
 - The elders instruct the remaining 200 Benjamites to hide in the fields outside the town of Shiloh before an upcoming festival

- The young daughters of the town would come out into the field to participate in the festival dances as was custom
- So when the Benjamites hiding in the field see these women, they are told to kidnap a woman as wife and take them home
- The elders devise this plan unbeknownst to the fathers of the town of Shiloh
 - And they know that once it comes to pass, the fathers and brothers of these women will be outraged as they should be
 - They will demand justice, since their rights were violated
 - The marriage was arranged properly, there was no dowry paid and the women were forced against their will
- The elder say in v.22 that they will respond to the men of the town by saying you should be happy we took these women this way
 - They will say we could have taken them in battle, which means they could have done to Shiloh what they did to Jabesh-gilead
 - Or they say they could have required the men to break their vows, which would have meant death as well
 - So in light of the alternatives, they should be happy to allow this kidnapping
- We can see how their twisted logic allows them to act with such obvious injustice while still declaring the outcome to be good
 - This story started with the brutal rape of one woman because of the sin of the Benjamites
 - And that moment led to a remarkable and tragic chain of events that has produced an astounding amount of suffering, death and injustice
 - One rape of one illegitimate wife has ultimately led to the rape of 600 illegitimate wives by the Benjamite men
 - And the number 6 in scripture represents sinful man
 - That's why this story is the capstone account for the times of Judges
 - On the surface, it seems like men doing what's right to stop depravity and save a tribe of Israel

- But the truth is this is a story of reckless, unrestrained men living without regard for God or His commands
- It's this contradictory nature of Israel's existence that the writer wants us to understand
- Notice in v.24 we're told that the people return to their families and to their appointed places in the land
 - This phrase may sound familiar to you
 - It's similar to the ending of the prior book, the book of Joshua

Josh. 24:26 And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.

Josh. 24:27 Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, so that you do not deny your God."

Josh. 24:28 Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance.

- At that time, Joshua reminded the people they must live according to God's law, not their own
- They returned to the part of the land, to their inheritance, with a warning not to deny the God Who delivered them into the land
- Now in Judges we hear the people are once again returning to their inheritance
 - From outward appearances, everything seems normal
 - It's as if nothing has changed in the past 300 years
 - But that's just illusion
- In the final verse of the book, the writer leaves us with the most important point of the story, the theme of the entire book

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

- From an earthly point of view, life in Israel may appear to be in keeping with the times of Joshua
- But spiritually, the nation is in crisis and at risk of annihilation
- This is a nation that needs a king, a savior, a new "Joshua"