

Immediate Context

Although the final narrative of Judges is placed at the end of the book, it is not the last event addressed chronologically. Recall that the final judge we studied was Sampson. The last two narratives do not directly involve a judge but pertain to larger national issues: Dan finding a new inheritance; and the almost-destruction of the tribe of Benjamin. Both narratives are placed at the end of the book because they do not fit in the judge-to-judge cycle of the prior sixteen chapters. However, they occurred in the midst of this time period. Interestingly, both of these national events are shaped by the personal choices of individuals. In fact, a primary character in both stories is a Levite, a man of God.

The name of the Levite in chapters 17-18 was Jonathan and he was revealed to be a grandson of (or descendant of) Moses. We are never given the name of the Levite in chapters 19-21, but when the nation gathers at Bethel to seek the Lord's will, Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron (Moses' brother) was the high priest. Although Phinehas had personally been zealous for the Lord during his younger years, the rest of the Levites and the nation as a whole had not followed suit. This is the generation described by *Judges 2:8-15*, a generation that did not know the Lord and that did evil in the sight of the Lord.

It is important for us to keep the chronological context in mind as we read this passage. We are just one generation removed from the Israelites who conquered the Promised Land by the power of God.

Judges 19:1-9 – Southern Hospitality

Our main characters in this chapter are not known by name but rather by their tribal affiliation and roles. The man is a Levite, one of the priestly class. We aren't told whether he is an actual priest or perhaps from one of the other divisions of the Levites that had other roles in Israelite ministry. Our second character is his concubine.

Concubine – a second-class wife viewed more as property than a partner

What do we learn about the character of the Levite and his concubine from the first two verses? **The Levite is a "sojourner," just like Jonathan the Levite in Judges 17. He is not residing in his tribal allotment but has ventured out for some reason. He also has married a concubine. This is not a biblically-endorsed marital arrangement. His concubine appears to have been unfaithful to him and then ran away back home to her parents in Bethlehem. She was a Judahite.**

Does the Levite reconcile with his concubine? **He came with intention of speaking kindly to her and bringing her back. She brought him into her father's home. It seems they reconciled.**

We see that the concubine's father warmly welcomed the Levite and his servant and twice was able to extend their stay. We aren't given a reason for the repeated extension of time in the text, but we do know the man had great hospitality and the Levite and his servant were well fed and cared for while in Bethlehem of Judah. Middle-eastern hospitality is well known, even to this day. They ultimately spent almost five full days with him.

Judges 19:10-21 – A Stark Contrast

We aren't told why the Levite resisted staying another night. It is obvious he wants to return to the hill country of Ephraim, so he stubbornly sets out on the journey despite the late hour. The total return journey was probably about 40 miles. However, he only makes it about 5.5 miles to Jebus (Jerusalem) and his servant is already suggesting that they seek shelter for the night. Why did he refuse to stay here and what does that teach us about this Levite? **He refused to stay with foreigners, recognizing a distinction between the people of God and the Gentiles.** Assuming this was more than a prejudice, he probably expected a better environment and hospitality from his Israelite brothers than the Jebusites.



Gibeah was a Benjamite city about half way between Jebus (Jerusalem) and Ramah. It was the nearest Israelite city, perhaps about three miles past Jebus. As they journeyed into the town at sundown, it would have been obvious to the locals that they were travelers but none offered them a place to stay. Therefore they went into the city (likely a walled city) and went into the middle of town so that their presence and need would be obvious. If nothing else, they should be safe in the middle of the city to spend the night if no one would take them in.

Why is it significant that an old man was the one who took in the Levite and his companions? **This was a man from a prior generation and also from a different tribe.** He was perhaps a remnant of the generation that entered into the Promised Land with Joshua. He would not have been expected to be a host because of his age, but he was willing to show gracious hospitality though none others would. **This is a testimony against the present generation of Israelites.**

Judges 19:22-26– An Abomination

The men of the city who arrive at the old man's door are identified by the passage as "worthless fellows" (ESV) or "sons of Belial" (KJV). The Apostle Paul uses the name "Belial" as synonymous with Satan in the New Testament (*2 Corinthians 6:15*). The sense is that these are wicked and depraved men. They are also later identified by the Levite as leaders of the city (*Judges 20:5*).

As you read this passage, what other Old Testament event does it resemble? What is the significance? This passage is very closely aligned with the account of the events at Sodom and Gomorrah, a symbol of the depravity of man and the judgment of God against such sin (see Genesis 19). The significance is that we are witnessing similar wickedness amongst God's people who have received His Word and have enjoyed His blessing.

The intention of these men is clear. There is no ambiguity in the text. Their desire to "know" the Levite was a clear reference to an intention to "gang rape" him in an abominable act of sodomy. The rampant and bold wickedness is a clear testimony of the spiritual state of this community. What is right and what is wrong with the old man's response? What about the Levite He was right to desire to protect his guest. He was wrong to offer his daughter and the Levite's concubine as surrogates for the Levite. By sending out his concubine, the Levite spared the old man's daughter. However, even among the victims there was no honor, no sense of duty to sacrificially protect others. They gave up this young woman, his concubine, to avoid a fight.

Judges 19:27-20:7 – The Gathering

What do we learn about the Levite from verses 26-28? He was a calloused man, who fell asleep after giving his concubine to those worthless men. He then expected her to just get up and go after being abused all night. He had no true love for her.

What is the significance of the hands of the woman being on the threshold? It appears that she was reaching for the door; perhaps she had even called out for help. She wanted the Levite to provide her safety and comfort but he had none for her. One of the indications of the depravity of Israel's culture was how this young woman was devalued throughout the text. She wasn't given full marital status by her husband, but treated as property. She is used as a bargaining chip and given away to be abused. **Devaluing of human life is another mark against Israel.**

By dismembering the body of his concubine, the Levite further dishonored her. However, there was a somewhat noble intent: Israel needed a wake-up call. Even this unspiritual Levite recognized that. What began as a lack of hospitality in Gibeah soon turned into perversion and then murder. What happened was horrific and this behavior could not go unaddressed.

The grisly message was enough to draw all of the tribes together (except Benjamin) to Mizpah, which was actually within Benjamin's inheritance. It was probably around four to five miles north of Gibeah. Even the trans-Jordan tribes crossed the river and joined their brothers. The Levite recounted the

events, but his recollection diverged from what we read in chapter 19. In what ways did his accusation differ from what happened? Why did he do this? He did not state that the Gibeonites intended to sodomize him but instead stated that they intended to kill him. He also did not state that he bartered his concubine to save himself and gave her to the men willingly. He hid or manipulated any facts that were not favorable to him.

Despite the twisted account, the Levite rightly called the actions of the Benjamites an abomination and outrage. Now, Israel must act.

How did we get here? Just a generation prior the Israelites were blessed with godly leadership and won many battles against their enemies. The answer is actually straightforward and clearly stated in our text (*Proverbs 21:25*). God was not allowed to be the King of Israel; His Word had no authority. Everyone did what seemed right to them. *Proverbs 14:12* says, “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.*” Death is the consequence of sin and sin is a result of valuing our desires above God’s desires. Israel was happy to take God’s blessings but they did not want to follow Him.

Judges 20:8-17 – The Lines are Drawn

What is emphasized with the expression, “all the people arose as one man”? Unity. This is the only time in Judges we see the nation acting as a nation. Otherwise, some tribes were always missing in the military campaigns (e.g. *Judges 5:15-17*). It is ironic that the only time they could gather with unity was to take action against one of their own.

What type of military campaign is described in verses 8-11? They planned an immediate and sustained campaign against the city of Gibeah in Benjamin. They recognized that if Benjamin did not give up the wicked men for punishment that this would be a potentially difficult and long battle. They made plans to endure and complete what they would begin.

Why would the Israelites send up one tribe at a time against Benjamin? Israel had not maintained a national army. Therefore, the soldiers were not accompanied to acting in unison and would be most effective working alongside other soldiers within their tribe.

How would the Israelites decide who would go first and how does this reconcile with *Judges 21:18*? See also *Joshua 7:14* and *Proverbs 16:33*. The casting of lots was a common Old Testament means of determining God’s will in response to a “yes or no”, or “this one or that one” type of questions.

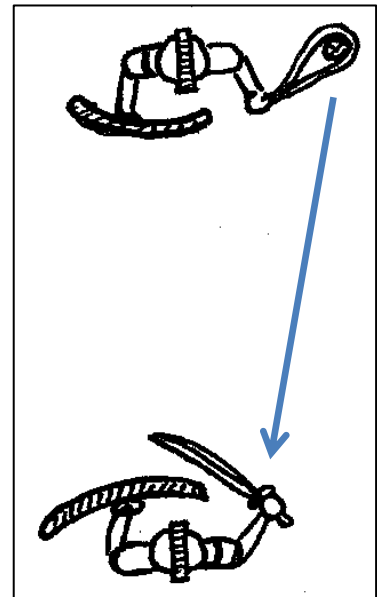
Why didn’t the Benjamites give up the evil men for judgment? See *Judges 20:5*. The Levite described the assailants as the “leaders of Gibeah.” Some commentators believe this was an exaggeration, but the fact that the Benjamites would not just give up the men to spare themselves from war supports the truth of the Levite’s statement. Spiritually, the Benjamites were in a horrible condition and practicing rampant immorality. It is safe to say that the Lord had given them up (*Romans 1:18-32*), removing His protection from them and likely had hardened them for judgment (*Exodus 14:4, Revelation 9:20-21*). **Do not underestimate the power of hardening. A man given over to his sin can do very stupid things.**

What advantage does a left-handed crack-shot stone slinger have against an Israelite swordsman? See the illustration to the right for insight.

Typically a right-handed soldier would brandish his sword with his right hand and carry his shield in his left hand. Though his right side is guarded by his sword in hand-to-hand combat, it is vulnerable to distance weapons. When facing a left-handed stone slinger, the stone would be coming from his right, the unshielded side. The left-handed Benjamites had a distinct advantage in middle-distance warfare.

Judges 20:18-48 – Israel’s Civil War

Judah was chosen by the Lord as the first tribe to face the Benjamites. This was fitting because the Levite’s concubine was originally from Bethlehem, a city of Judah (*Judges 19:1*). However, the first day of battle did not go well for Judah and they lost 22,000 men.



What was wrong with Israel’s first question posed to the Lord (verse 18)? They asked the Lord to choose which tribe should go up rather than whether they should fight. This is akin to deciding to buy a house without consulting God and then praying about what color curtains to hang. This is the theme of these final chapters of Judges. **Every man does what was right in their own eyes (*Judges 21:25*), even when the nation gathers as “one man.”** Independent decision making creates more problems than it solves.

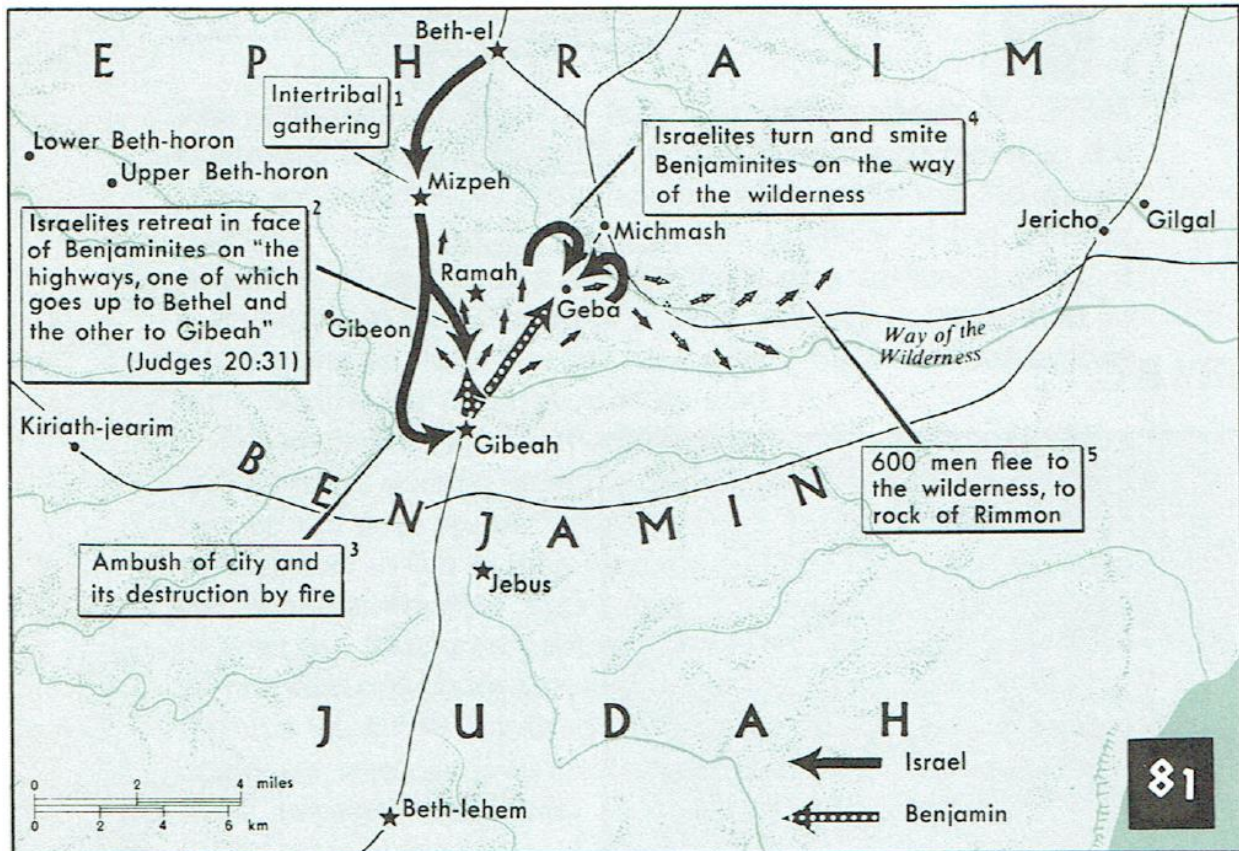
What is the distinction between the second question asked of God (verses 22-23) and the first question? The second time, there was weeping (no doubt over the loss) and a more general question: should we even be doing this? However, notice that they only asked AFTER they had drawn the battle line for the second day of fighting. There was some improvement but they still weren’t fully surrendered.

What is the distinction between the third question posed to God (verses 26-28) and the second? No battle lines were drawn. The entire army went to Bethel, a holy city and wept and fasted (humbled themselves before God). They also made burnt offerings and peace offerings. They also sought a more definitive word from God (more than a yes or no answer). They presented themselves to God with a willingness to do whatever He commanded and addressed their own sin through the offerings. God then provided them direction and a promise. **This is the way to seek the will of God.**

Why did the Lord allow the nation of Israel to experience such massive casualties? The text does not give us a definitive answer. However, the purpose of the war was to purge wickedness. Perhaps the Lord was revealing that the failure did not lie in Benjamin alone. The whole nation played a role in things getting to this place. This is a great lesson for us. Perhaps we are not personally committing abominable sins, but are we complicit in some way? Do we turn a blind eye to our responsibilities? Do we take the easy way out when we should take a stand? If so, we may find that we bear some of the guilt as well. **“He judges both those more in the right and those who are utterly in the wrong.”¹**

¹ Davis, Dale Ralph. Judges, Such a Great Salvation. Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications Ltd. 2000. Page 217.

The third day of the battle had a much different outcome for Israel and Benjamin. The battle itself is reminiscent of the Battle of Ai (*Joshua 7-8*). Initially the nation of Israel fell to Ai because there was sin in the camp. Once the sin was purged, they destroyed the people of Ai by luring them out of their city and then sending in a regiment to burn the city and ambush them from behind. The map below provides an illustration of the battle movements of the parties in the war with Benjamin. **While we marvel at the battle plan, recognize that the Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel (verse 35).**



The Rock of Rimmon (pomengranate in Hebrew) is likely a 30-meter high cave pocketed with hundreds of smaller caves. The name was probably coined because the “rock” looks like a split-open pomengranate from a distance. This would have made a great hide-out for the 600 Benjamites who escaped death, but also would have made it easy for the Israelites to guard the caves and imprison them. It was a perfect jail cell.



Israel showed no mercy to the Benjamites who did not find refuge in Rimmon, their families, their beasts, or their towns. This was the kind of destruction intended for the Canaanites that Israel so often spared. Ironically they doled out justice without mercy on their brethren... until the next chapter. While the Lord granted them victory, this complete destruction may have not been God’s plan.

Judges 21:1-7 – Saving a Tribe

We begin chapter 21 by learning of two vows the Israelites made at Mizpah. The first vow was to withhold their daughters from the sons of Benjamin as wives. What would be the impact of this vow? It would lead to either the physical or moral disintegration of the tribe. Either they would dwindle in number or would violate God's law and intermarry with Canaanites, incurring spiritual injury.

The second vow was to kill any Israelite men who did not come up to fight against Benjamin with the rest of the nation. Given the Israelites' current desire to spare the tribe of Benjamin, is this second vow appropriate? Both of these vows appear to be rash and therefore made without consulting God. They vow to kill anyone who would not help destroy the immoral Benjamites, but only consider fulfilling the vow after they decide to spare the immoral Benjamites. **They are going to kill the cowards and spare the depraved.**

Who do the Israelites seem to blame for their predicament? What is His response? Amazingly, they look to the Lord and seem to ask why He allowed this to happen to Benjamin (verse 3). While they recognize His sovereignty, they only seemed to submit to it on a temporary basis after their circumstances forced their hand. They are now acting independently again, but have no problem asking why He allowed this. His response is silence. Perhaps they are asking the wrong question again. **This is worth considering. If God is silent to your request, are you asking the wrong question?**

Who was to blame for the current predicament regarding wives for the Benjamites? There is an echo of Jephthah here (Judges 11). Foolish vows hemmed Israel into undesirable predicaments.

Judges 21:8-15 – A Man-Made Solution to a Man-Made Problem

How did they come up with the idea to save 400 young virgins from Jabesh-gilead? This appears to have been a democratically-derived decision... they made the decision. There is no indication they sought the Lord's wisdom.

Does the punishment inflicted upon Jabesh-gilead go beyond the vow they made? It appears to do so. Rather than just eliminating the males of fighting age who did not show up, they kill everyone except young female virgins. They were only spared because they served a national interest.

What is missing from the restoration of Benjamin in this passage? There is no indication that there was any repentance over their sins. They remained in defiant opposition and hiding at Rimmon.

Why were the Israelites so concerned about eliminating the tribe of Benjamin? Was this an appropriate concern? The text states that the Israelites had compassion on Benjamin because the Lord made a breach (a gap) in the tribes of Israel. Israel was composed of twelve tribes, one of which is really two half-tribes, descended directly from Jacob/Israel. Losing a tribe would be a blow to the identity of the nation and to God's prophetic plan for them. What could be done to one tribe could be done to the others. Perhaps they realized that in their rashness to punish Benjamin, they did not count the cost.

How did they come up with the idea on how to supply the remaining 200 young virgins? Again, we have a democratically-derived decision. Democracy does not guarantee good results.

The irony of the final solution to the Benjamite problem is that it is reminiscent of the sins that caused this mess in the first place. The Benjamites were directed and emboldened to go and take a woman against her will and against the will of her family and use her to further their desires. Although these actions are clearly distinguishable, they remain undesirable and I would say sinful. Now the whole nation is complicit.

Judges 21:25 – One Verse Says it All

The final verse of Judges sums up not only chapters 19 through 21, but also the book as a whole. We should not read God's approval into all the actions of Israel. We are reading the painful truth of what happened, not what should have happened. I will close these lessons with two points.

In these final chapters we see an all-too-common refrain. Man lives independently of God and makes a mess. Man tries to solve the mess on his own and starts to make a bigger mess. Man cries out to God for help and gets gracious aid. Man strikes out to live independently again and makes a mess again. Consistent pursuit of God, seeking His will, and obedience is rare. Sin begets more sin, which ultimately leads to destruction. Even when there is victory through God's mercy, we beget painful consequences (think Jephthah) through our sin. How often are these patterns repeated in our lives?

Finally, despite the horrible mess they made, Israel remained the people of God and He spared them. At the end of the book, they remain a distinct people with a God whose grace was greater than their sin. They were paying a painful price, but God would prevail and accomplish His will. This should produce hope in our hearts about the power of God to accomplish good things and keep His promises despite the mess we and others create. He is an awesome God and worthy of all praise.