



## Judges - Chapter Twenty

### III Judges 17:1-21:25 - The Depths of Israel's Apostasy (continues)

#### III.b Judges 19:1-21:25 - Moral and Social Corruption (continues)

##### Summary of Chapter Twenty

Gibeah, the site of the moral outrage of Chapter 19, was a Benjaminite city, and so an assembly of all Israel convened at Mizpah to unite against Benjamin. However, the Benjaminites, who apparently were not at the assembly, refused to deliver the inhabitants of Gibeah to them, but rather prepared for battle. The battle was joined, Judah going first, and the Israelites were repelled twice by the Benjaminites at Gibeah.

Each time, God directed the Israelites to continue the fight. The third time, Benjamin was routed and subjected to the complete annihilation that earlier had been reserved exclusively for the Canaanites. Readers are not told whether God approved of this; certainly he did not explicitly command it. It was a grim measure of Israel's apostasy and the attendant chaos that complete annihilation now was directed internally, against fellow Israelites.

#### III.b.ii Judges 20:1-48 - The Other Tribes Attack Benjamin

Refer to the chapter summary above.

The final chapters of Judges record the migration of the tribe of Dan to the north, and Israel's war with Benjamin for deeds committed against a Levite passing through Gibeah. After refusing to surrender the perpetrators to judgement, the Benjaminites were defeated by the other tribes, and the remaining Benjaminites fled to the rock of Rimmon. In order to rescue the Benjaminites from being completely wiped out, the other tribes provided wives captured from Jabesh-gilead and Shiloh.



Dan's Migration and Israel's War with Benjamin

<sup>1</sup> Then all the Israelites came out, from Dan to Beer-sheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembled in one body before the Lord at Mizpah. <sup>2</sup> The chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand foot-soldiers bearing arms.

### Judges 20:1-2

Then all the Israelites came out. It was a positive sign to see Israel gather for such a reason. This showed that they were willing to deal with the problem of sin in their midst.

It seems that the crime of Gibeah shocked the conscience of Israel. Today it seems that the crime at Gibeah would be material for tabloid news, twenty four hour television news, daytime talk shows, and talk radio, more than a national call to righteousness and repentance.

From Dan to Beersheba. This phrase was commonly used to speak of the entire land of Israel, from north to south; examples can be found in 1 Samuel 3:20, 2 Samuel 24:2, 1 Kings 4:25, 1 Chronicles 21:2 and 2 Chronicles 30:5.

The congregation assembled in one body before the Lord at Mizpah. The Hebrew word translated assembled is *qahal*, and denotes a specially summoned gathering, usually for a religious ceremony: <<*They assembled against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, 'You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?'*>> (Numbers 16:3), and: <<*Now therefore in the sight of all Israel, the assembly of the Lord, and in the hearing of our God, observe and search out all the commandments of the Lord your God; that you may possess this good land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children after you for ever*>> (1 Chronicles 28:8), or for military purpose: <<*And Moab said to the elders of Midian, 'This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.'* Now Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time>> (Numbers 22:4), i.e. horde, <<*and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand*>> (1 Samuel 17:47). Here, the Israelites gathered for war against the tribe of Benjamin.

The chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves. Deuteronomy 13:12-18 instructed Israel how to deal with such abominations among them. It said they must first test the truth of the accusations. If the charges were true, they must then utterly destroy those who committed such an abomination.

<sup>3</sup> (Now the Benjaminites heard that the people of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) And the Israelites said, ‘Tell us, how did this criminal act come about?’ <sup>4</sup> The Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered, ‘I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night. <sup>5</sup> The lords of Gibeah rose up against me, and surrounded the house at night. They intended to kill me, and they raped my concubine until she died. <sup>6</sup> Then I took my concubine and cut her into pieces, and sent her throughout the whole extent of Israel’s territory; for they have committed a vile outrage in Israel. <sup>7</sup> So now, you Israelites, all of you, give your advice and counsel here and now.’

#### Judges 20:3-7

Tell us, how did this criminal act come about? The children of Benjamin wanted to know, so they could do something about this outrage. It was customary to ask for an explanation in order to ascertain the matter: <<*Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?*>> (John 7:51), and: <<*So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet’*>> (John 9:17).

They intended to kill me, and they raped my concubine until she died. The Levite spun the story to his own advantage. What he said was true, but he did not mention the cruel and callous way he had abandoned his concubine to the mob.

<sup>8</sup> All the people got up as one, saying, ‘We will not any of us go to our tents, nor will any of us return to our houses. <sup>9</sup> But now this is what we will do to Gibeah: we will go up against it by lot. <sup>10</sup> We will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand of ten thousand, to bring provisions for the troops, who are going to repay Gibeah of Benjamin for all the disgrace that they have done in Israel.’ <sup>11</sup> So all the men of Israel gathered against the city, united as one.

#### Judges 20:8-11

All the people got up as one. This was an encouraging response in a very dark time. They came together in unity and decided to bring justice for the concubine against the people of Gibeah.

The tribes agreed to send a tenth of their men, chosen by lot. Far from this being a matter of chance, God was always in control of the lot: <<*But the land shall be*

*apportioned by lot; according to the names of their ancestral tribes they shall inherit*>> (Numbers 26:55), <<*Their inheritance was by lot, as the Lord had commanded Moses for the nine and a half tribes*>> (Joshua 14:2), <<*The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone*>> (Proverbs 16:33), <<*And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles*>> (Acts 1:26). However, perhaps significantly, he is not mentioned in this instance.

It would not have been a case of divine will when the Roman soldiers cast lots for Jesus' garments for that was simply gambling. However, it was by divine inspiration and will: <<*When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.'* This was to fulfil what the scripture says, 'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.' And that is what the soldiers did>> (John 19:23-25a).

Who are going to repay Gibeah of Benjamin for all the disgrace that they have done in Israel. This was extreme, but a valid and proper fulfilment of God's command to Israel. Some may argue that they should have sought God as to what the punishment should have been; others that God's Word provides the answers and they acted in accordance with it. Care should always be taken not to act according to what human consensus thinks God may want but to seek him first.

<sup>12</sup> The tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, 'What crime is this that has been committed among you?' <sup>13</sup> Now then, hand over those scoundrels in Gibeah, so that we may put them to death, and purge the evil from Israel.' But the Benjaminites would not listen to their kinsfolk, the Israelites. <sup>14</sup> The Benjaminites came together out of the towns to Gibeah, to go out to battle against the Israelites.

#### Judges 20:12-14

To purge evil from Israel was something commanded by God: <<*But those prophets or those who divine by dreams shall be put to death for having spoken treason against the Lord your God – who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery – to turn you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst*>> (Deuteronomy 13:5), and: <<*The hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised against the person to execute the death penalty, and afterwards the hands of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst*>> (Deuteronomy 17:7). This evil deed is seen as polluting

the whole people. In addition, when viewed from outside of Israel it would have also been God's reputation at stake. The same stance should be taken by the church: <<*God will judge those outside. 'Drive out the wicked person from among you'*>> (1 Corinthians 5:13).

But the Benjaminites would not listen. The other tribes of Israel did the right thing in asking the tribe of Benjamin to deliver up the men who had committed this crime. They sought to justly resolve the crisis without going to war. However, the tribe of Benjamin committed a great sin by putting loyalty to their tribe before obedience to God's Law. Benjamin's decision to protect the evil doers sets the stage for further horrors.

Today, followers of God can make the same mistake when they put the interests of their own nation before the interests of the Kingdom of God. It is important for Christians to remember that they are citizens of the Kingdom of God first: <<*But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ*>> (Philippians 3:20).

<sup>15</sup> On that day the Benjaminites mustered twenty-six thousand armed men from their towns, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah. <sup>16</sup> Of all this force, there were seven hundred picked men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair, and not miss. <sup>17</sup> And the Israelites, apart from Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand armed men, all of them warriors.

#### Judges 20:15-17

The Benjaminites mustered twenty-six thousand armed men. The Benjaminite force, large as it was, equalled only a small fraction of the Israelite coalition, which had four hundred thousand armed men.

There were seven hundred picked men who were left-handed. The tribe of Benjamin not only failed to support the just cause of the other tribes, they actively resisted the other tribes with an assembled army. The army included this division of seven hundred select men. The left-handedness of the seven hundred expert slingers was an advantage, since their shots would come at an unaccustomed angle. Ironically, the name Benjamin means 'son of the right hand.'

**This not the first account of a left handed Benjaminite:** <<*But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The Israelites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of Moab*>> (Judges 3:15).

Every one could sling a stone at a hair, and not miss. The Hebrew word translated miss is literally sin. This illustrates the principle that the word sin literally means to miss the mark, whether by an inch or by a mile!

And the Israelites, apart from Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand armed men, all of them warriors. The tribes of Israel prepared for a small civil war against the tribe of Benjamin. Israel was right in believing that the greatest good was not unity. Unity apart from justice and truth is unity not worth having.

<sup>18</sup> The Israelites proceeded to go up to Bethel, where they inquired of God, ‘Which of us shall go up first to battle against the Benjaminites?’ And the Lord answered, ‘Judah shall go up first.’

#### Judges 20:18

The Israelites proceeded to go up to Bethel, where they inquired of God. In the first battle, Israel sought the Lord, yet they were defeated. One can speculate that although they inquired of God, they still trusted in the might of their army and in the goodness of their cause, but not in the Lord.

Judah shall go up first. As before in Judges 1:1-2 Judah took the lead. This is the tribe from which David, the greatest embodiment of the monarchy would come, which is what the Israelites lacked most at this time.

<sup>19</sup> Then the Israelites got up in the morning, and encamped against Gibeah. <sup>20</sup> The Israelites went out to battle against Benjamin; and the Israelites drew up the battle line against them at Gibeah. <sup>21</sup> The Benjaminites came out of Gibeah, and struck down on that day twenty-two thousand of the Israelites.

#### Judges 20:19-21

The Benjaminites came out of Gibeah, and struck down on that day twenty-two thousand of the Israelites. This was a staggering, severe loss in the first battle of this small civil war. After this first day of battle it seemed that single tribe of Benjamin might successfully resist the other tribes of Israel. Perhaps there was something wrong in the way that Israel sought the Lord before this battle; or, it is also just as likely that this was simply part of God’s plan to discipline and correct his disobedient nation.

The American President, Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address of 1865, spoke on this very theme in relation to the American Civil War: “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and

until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Perhaps, something of the same dynamic was at work with Israel at this time - God correcting a disobedient nation through the tragic loss of twenty-two thousand soldiers of Israel.

<sup>23</sup> \* The Israelites went up and wept before the Lord until the evening; and they inquired of the Lord, ‘Shall we again draw near to battle against our kinsfolk the Benjaminites?’ And the Lord said, ‘Go up against them.’ <sup>22</sup> The Israelites took courage, and again formed the battle line in the same place where they had formed it on the first day. \*

#### Judges 20:22-23

\* Verses 22 and 23 are transposed making sequential sense.

The Israelites went up and wept before the Lord until the evening; and they inquired of the Lord. To their credit, the children of Israel did not stop seeking the Lord after the first disaster in battle. They properly humbled themselves before God and sought him regarding the next battle.

The Israelites took courage, and again formed the battle line in the same place where they had formed it on the first day. This was a wonderful reaction in the midst of such a dark event. These soldiers did not lose hope; like David: <<*David was in great danger; for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in spirit for their sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God*>> (1 Samuel 30:6), they strengthened themselves in the Lord and moved forward.

<sup>24</sup> So the Israelites advanced against the Benjaminites on the second day. <sup>25</sup> Benjamin moved out against them from Gibeah the second day, and struck down eighteen thousand of the Israelites, all of them armed men.

#### Judges 20:24-25

So the Israelites advanced against the Benjaminites on the second day. This would not be an easy or a quick war. After a first day of heavy losses, the Israelites were willing to keep on fighting.

Benjamin moved out against them from Gibeah the second day, and struck down eighteen thousand of the Israelites, all of them armed men. The loss on

the second day of battle was also severe. This shows that even though the tribes of Israel sought the Lord and fought in a just cause, it was still a very difficult struggle. There was a great cost for them to pay in doing what was right.

One may think and wonder at the courage of men in battle like those in World War I who just kept coming out of the trenches time after time irrespective of the slaughter that was going on all around. In the case of man's wars it is pure folly, but when it is of God's calling then it is justified. Because of the crime committed in Gibeon Israel had right on its side. Whether God wanted them to go through such slaughter on both sides is questionable.

<sup>26</sup> Then all the Israelites, the whole army, went back to Bethel and wept, sitting there before the Lord; they fasted that day until evening. Then they offered burnt-offerings and sacrifices of well-being before the Lord. <sup>27</sup> And the Israelites inquired of the Lord (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, <sup>28</sup> and Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, ministered before it in those days), saying, 'Shall we go out once more to battle against our kinsfolk the Benjaminites, or shall we desist?' The Lord answered, 'Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand.'

#### Judges 20:26-28

Then all the Israelites, the whole army, went back to Bethel and wept, sitting there before the Lord; they fasted that day until evening. The fasting and sacrificing of the Israelites is very rare during this period. God seemed to allow the two days of defeat for the purpose of bringing Israel low. They needed to be humbled, and these days of defeat compelled them to humble themselves.

This emotional response of the people was very hopeful. With all the weeping and wailing, there was reason to believe that God's Word had a deep impact upon them, and they that were on their way to a genuine revival of God's work among them. Sadly, it was not the case. The subsequent record of the Book of Judges shows that this initial reaction of sorrow and repentance did not mature into a real, lasting repentance. Real repentance shows itself in action, not necessarily in weeping. Anyone can be sorry about the consequences of their sin without being sorry about the sin itself. One can weep and outwardly show repentance without ever inwardly repenting. This is why the Lord later challenged Israel: <<*Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing*>> (Joel 2:12-13).

God used this to humble the whole nation. They had to understand that the horror of the crime at Gibeah was not merely the result of the sin of one group of men, or one city, or even one tribe. The whole nation had to be humbled because they first thought that the sin problem was only in Benjamin. Israel had to see that that nation as a whole had a sin problem. After the first failure, Israel was sorry and wept. But it was only after the second failure that they put their repentance into action by fasting and made a sacrifice for sins. Sorrow and weeping are not enough if they are not matched by real repentance and taking care of the sin problem through sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Cross.

Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron. The mention of Phinehas as high priest means that this was fairly early in the days of the Judges. Numbers 25:6-11 provides the account of Phinehas killing the Israelite and his Midianite woman who had incurred the wrath of God in their sin. This occurred before Israel even entered the Promised Land. Some commentators state this early date is further supported by the fact that the Tabernacle appears to have still been at Bethel and not Shiloh. It had perhaps been move to Bethel from Gilgal, the first camp of the Israelites after crossing into the Promised Land. However, the Tabernacle was first set up in Shiloh in Joshua 18:1 and there was an annual festival being held in Shiloh referred to in Judges 21:21. Therefore, it seems that the Tabernacle remained in Shiloh throughout this period and it may be that it played no part in the Israelites seeking the Lord at this time.

The Lord answered, ‘Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand’. God did not want the two days of humbling to make Israel think that they could never win. They were encouraged to go out tomorrow and trust in God’s promise.

John Chapter 21 tells the story of some of the disciples going fishing overnight while waiting for Jesus to arrive. He did so the following morning after a fruitless night’s work by the men. This account shows that God sometimes makes his people go through an experience before coming to them. The fishermen landed a huge haul of fish after instruction from the Lord! A lesson for all here who always expect God to answer them immediately.

<sup>29</sup> So Israel stationed men in ambush around Gibeah. <sup>30</sup> Then the Israelites went up against the Benjaminites on the third day, and set themselves in array against Gibeah, as before. <sup>31</sup> When the Benjaminites went out against the army, they were drawn away from the city. As before they began to inflict casualties on the troops, along the main roads, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, as well as in the open country, killing about thirty men of Israel. <sup>32</sup> The Benjaminites thought, ‘They are being routed before us, as previously.’ But the Israelites said, ‘Let us retreat and draw them

away from the city towards the roads.’<sup>33</sup> The main body of the Israelites drew back its battle line to Baal-tamar, while those Israelites who were in ambush rushed out of their place west of Geba.<sup>34</sup> There came against Gibeah ten thousand picked men out of all Israel, and the battle was fierce. But the Benjaminites did not realise that disaster was close upon them.

#### Judges 20:29-34

So Israel stationed men in ambush around Gibeah; Let us retreat and draw them away from the city towards the roads. The strategy used by the tribes of Israel against Gibeah was remarkably similar to the strategy used at Ai in Joshua Chapter 8. Perhaps they got this strategy by reading the writings of Joshua and Moses; this may reflect that that they returned to God’s Word in the course of their repentance.

<sup>35</sup> The Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel; and the Israelites destroyed twenty-five thousand one hundred men of Benjamin that day, all of them armed.

#### Judges 20:35

The Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel. Despite Israel’s apostasy, God still intervened in its affairs and gave victory. These words briefly recall the real meaning of the awful judgement that fell upon Benjamin. It was the hand of God.

**Yet a remnant would be spared and from them came Israel’s first anointed king:** <<*Saul answered, ‘I am only a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel, and my family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin. Why then have you spoken to me in this way?’*>> (1 Samuel 9:21).

<sup>36a</sup> Then the Benjaminites saw that they were defeated.

#### Judges 20:36a

Then the Benjaminites saw that they were defeated. There was perhaps the realisation that God was now against them and they could therefore not prevail against their adversary. There comes a time in any battle or ministry to come to the realisation that God is no longer in it: <<*For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will confront you there, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following the Lord, the Lord will not be with you*>> (Numbers 14:43), and: <<*Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go out, O God, with our armies*>> (Psalm 108:11).

<sup>36b</sup> The Israelites gave ground to Benjamin, because they trusted to the troops in ambush that they had stationed against Gibeah. <sup>37</sup> The troops in ambush rushed quickly upon Gibeah. Then they put the whole city to the sword. <sup>38</sup> Now the agreement between the main body of Israel and the men in ambush was that when they sent up a cloud of smoke out of the city <sup>39</sup> the main body of Israel should turn in battle. But Benjamin had begun to inflict casualties on the Israelites, killing about thirty of them; so they thought, ‘Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle.’ <sup>40</sup> But when the cloud, a column of smoke, began to rise out of the city, the Benjaminites looked behind them – and there was the whole city going up in smoke towards the sky! <sup>41</sup> Then the main body of Israel turned, and the Benjaminites were dismayed, for they saw that disaster was close upon them. <sup>42</sup> Therefore they turned away from the Israelites in the direction of the wilderness; but the battle overtook them, and those who came out of the city were slaughtering them in between. <sup>43</sup> Cutting down the Benjaminites, they pursued them from Nohah and trod them down as far as a place east of Gibeah. <sup>44</sup> Eighteen thousand Benjaminites fell, all of them courageous fighters. <sup>45</sup> When they turned and fled towards the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, five thousand of them were cut down on the main roads, and they were pursued as far as Gidom, and two thousand of them were slain. <sup>46</sup> So all who fell that day of Benjamin were twenty-five thousand arms-bearing men, all of them courageous fighters. <sup>47</sup> But six hundred turned and fled towards the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and remained at the rock of Rimmon for four months. <sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the Israelites turned back against the Benjaminites, and put them to the sword – the city, the people, the animals, and all that remained. Also the remaining towns they set on fire.

#### Judges 20:36b-48

The Israelites gave ground to Benjamin, because they trusted to the troops in ambush that they had stationed against Gibeah. Again, this reminds the reader of the ambush set for Ai in Joshua 8:17-22.

Eighteen thousand Benjaminites fell, five thousand of them were cut down on the main roads. Despite the rout, six hundred men of Benjamin survived to become the core of the renewed tribe: *<<Then the whole congregation sent word to the Benjaminites who were at the rock of Rimmon, and proclaimed peace to them. Benjamin returned at that time; and they gave them the*

*women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh-gilead; but they did not suffice for them. The people had compassion on Benjamin because the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel>> (Judges 21:13-15).*

*It should be remembered that the apostle Paul was a Benjaminite: <<If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee>> (Philippians 3:4b-5). Had the tribe not survived then there would no doubt have been a different person called to do so much to build the early church. However, the writings in the NT would then have been very different to the way they are. This can only be surmised for it is likely things turned out just as God had planned all along.*

But six hundred turned and fled towards the wilderness. The two days of defeat made the tribes of Israel ruthless towards the tribe of Benjamin, and they killed thousands of men of Benjamin. As a result of the battle, there remained only a six hundred man remnant from the tribe of Benjamin.

Meanwhile, the Israelites turned back against the Benjaminites, and put them to the sword – the city, the people, the animals, and all that remained. The tribe of Benjamin was undeniably guilty, but there was no need for the complete slaughter as described here. This too severe judgement against the tribe of Benjamin would soon be regretted by Israel. Uninstructed zeal, even in the cause of righteousness, often goes beyond its proper limits.