

July 30/31, 2022

## From Evil to Evil

*Messes. Choices. Faithful God Series*

**Judges 20:12-21:25**

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I'm sure we have all witnessed real evil, whether that's personally or something through the media, and it makes our hearts sick. And there's something deep within us that longs for true justice. But how do you have true justice in a land where there are no more moral absolutes? How do you have true justice when we can't come to an agreement about what is good and what is evil? It simply becomes a subjective thing, that is determined by those in power. In other words: *might makes right*. There will be no justice. It's just evil, chasing evil, chasing evil. And so it was in the time of the judges.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Judges, Chapter 20. This is our last week in the book of Judges. Two weeks ago, Josh told us that starting in chapter 17 to the end of the book, is what is called the epilogue. These stories don't necessarily fit chronologically at the end of the period of the judges. Matter of fact, we know they don't. They probably happened very early in the period of the judges, but instead they are placed at the end, as one final glimpse of just how dark and evil this time period was. In chapter three, verse four, we were told that God left these pagan nations to test Israel, to see whether or not they would be true to the Law of God given through Moses. So, it is worth noting that in the book of Joshua—24 chapters—Moses is referred to 57 times. In the book of Judges—21 chapters—other than the verse I just mentioned in chapter three, verse four, Moses is mentioned zero times. It's a time of rebellion. It's a time where *everyone did what was right in their own eyes*. The people were rebellious; they were idolatrous; they had turned their back on God.

Last week Ryan did an excellent job of walking us through a very difficult text of what happened to the Levite's concubine and just all the horrors of that. So now the nation of Israel is aware. They have gathered together, the text tells us, as one person, in order to execute justice. But here's the question. How do people who themselves are evil and lawless, administer justice for evil? We pick it up then in chapter 20, verse 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? 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. The sons of Benjamin gathered from the cities to Gibeah, to go out to battle against the sons of Israel. 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. Out of all these people 700 choice men were left-handed; each one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. Then the men of Israel besides Benjamin were numbered, 400,000 men who draw the sword; all these were men of war. (\*NASB, Judges 20:12-17)**

Now we have a lot of material to cover. I'm going to limit my comments to just the main storyline through the text. So, remembering in the ancient Near East, these were tribal people and the only way any of these people survived was to come together as a tribe. So, whenever there was internal violence against one another, that violence was to be pulled out and purged, and those people put to death. It was the only way that tribe could survive. So that's actually what was written in the law. That is what should be done. So Israel starts on the right track. They go to Benjamin. They want the men that have done this horrible thing with the Levite's concubine to be brought out and we will put them to death. But the tribe of Benjamin chooses loyalty over integrity, and they won't do it.

So now it will be a civil war. The tribe of Benjamin puts forth 26,000 fighting men plus 700 from Gibeah, specifically identified as 700 experts with the slingshot. Now don't dismiss this. This is as close as they came in the ancient world to a firearm. These experts with a sling shot could sling a one-pound stone 90 miles an hour and hit a hair. They were deadly warriors. But Israel puts together an absolutely massive army of 400,000 fighting men.

Now, last week, Ryan reminded us that these things happen one choice at a time. So, the Levite made a choice to take a concubine. Whatever happened there, she chooses to go home. Whatever was going on with her father, then they leave. You have the choice of the host; you have the choice of the Levite, and you certainly have the horrible choices of the men that devastated her. One choice at a time! But now you have roughly a half million people going to war against one another. Verse 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." So the sons of Israel arose in the morning and camped against Gibeah. The men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel arrayed for battle against them at Gibeah. Then the sons of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and felled to the ground on that day 22,000 men of Israel. But the people, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and arrayed for battle again in the place where they had arrayed themselves the first day. The sons of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until evening, and inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall we again draw near for battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin?" And the Lord said, "Go up against him." Then the sons of Israel came against the sons of Benjamin the second day. Benjamin went out against them from Gibeah the second day and felled to the ground again 18,000 men of the sons of Israel; all these drew the sword. Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel and wept; thus they remained there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. The sons of Israel inquired of the LORD (for the ark of the covenant of God *was* there in those days, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, Aaron's son, stood before it to *minister* in those days), saying, "Shall I yet again go out to battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?" And the LORD said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand." (Vs. 18-28)**

So the nation of Israel gathers to attack, but Gibeah and Benjamin have the home field advantage. They know all the hills; they know all the caves; they know the terrain, and this terrain was perfectly suited for the way the people of Benjamin fought. So, on the first day 22,000 soldiers of Israel die. They come back, and they're weeping and they're offering offerings, and they're trying to figure out what happened. They go back on the second day, and this time 18,000 soldiers of Israel die—so 40,000 soldiers die in two days. And so they're weeping and they're fasting and they're offering offerings. One of the things we have to remember is this wasn't a group of Boy Scouts. Israel was far from God. They were pagan, idol-worshiping people. God was using this opportunity to get their attention. How do evil people administer justice? The only chance is if they repent and come back to God. So, He is using this to discipline them that they might repent of their sins. So while they're weeping and they're fasting and they're offering sacrifices, what you don't hear is that they were repentant. There are no sin offerings. They're just losing, and they somehow want God's favor to win.

This is the only mention in the entire book of Judges of the ark of the covenant, which represents the very presence of God among them. It is guarded and protected by a man by the name of Phineas, who was Aaron's grandson—as in Moses and Aaron. The last time we saw Phineas was in Numbers chapter 25. Again, the nation of Israel was far from God. They were involved in idolatry; they were involved in immorality. There was all kinds of terrible stuff going on, and the Israelites were bringing evil and immorality into the Israeli camp in broad daylight. One of the Israelites brought a Midianite woman into the camp, into the tent, obviously to have relations with her in the middle of the day. Phineas, Aaron's grandson, just could not take this level of evil and offense to God anymore so he picks up a spear, he goes into the tent, and he drives it through the couple, pinning them to the floor of the tent, and both of them die. And in that text, God says that because of the righteous action of Phineas, God would not pour out His wrath on Israel that day. So, Phineas has quite a reputation. Phineas would have gone with Joshua and the children of Israel into the land of promise across the Jordan River. He would have lived all the way through the book of Joshua, and this helps us date this very early in the time of the judges. By this time, he's an old man. He's a godly man, who is in charge of ministering at the ark of the covenant, and he delivers word that God says, “*Go. This time, I'll give you the victory.*”

**So Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah. The sons of Israel went up against the sons of Benjamin on the third day and arrayed themselves against Gibeah as at other times. The sons of Benjamin went out against the people and were drawn away from the city, and they began to strike and kill some of the people as at other times, on the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, and in the field, about thirty men of Israel. The sons of Benjamin said, “They are struck down before us, as at the first.” But the sons of Israel said, “Let us flee that we may draw them away from the city to the highways.” Then all the men of Israel arose from their place and arrayed themselves at Baal-tamar; and the men of Israel in ambush broke out of their place, even out of Maareh-geba. When ten thousand choice men from all Israel came against Gibeah, the battle became fierce; but Benjamin did not know that disaster was close to them. And the LORD struck Benjamin before Israel, so that the sons of Israel destroyed 25,100 men of Benjamin that day, all who draw the sword. (Vs. 29-35)**

I'm going to explain that paragraph in just a second, but I'm going to continue reading because understand, starting in verse 36, this is a second time through the murder scene. Basically, it was just described, and now we're going to go back through it again. It's a Hebrew narrative technique that causes us to slow down and really take in what's happening here.

**So the sons of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. When the men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin because they relied on the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah, the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush also deployed and struck all the city with the edge of the sword. Now the appointed sign between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of smoke rise from the city. Then the men of Israel turned in the battle, and Benjamin began to strike and kill about thirty men of Israel, for they said, "Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle." But when the cloud began to rise from the city in a column of smoke, Benjamin looked behind them; and behold, the whole city was going up *in smoke* to heaven. Then the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were terrified; for they saw that disaster was close to them. Therefore, they turned their backs before the men of Israel toward the direction of the wilderness, but the battle overtook them while those who came out of the cities destroyed them in the midst of them. They surrounded Benjamin, pursued them without rest *and* trod them down opposite Gibeah toward the east. Thus 18,000 men of Benjamin fell; all these were valiant warriors. The rest turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, but they caught 5,000 of them on the highways and overtook them at Gidom and killed 2,000 of them. So all of Benjamin who fell that day were 25,000 men who draw the sword; all these were valiant warriors. But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they remained at the rock of Rimmon four months. The men of Israel then turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, both the entire city with the cattle and all that they found; they also set on fire all the cities which they found. (Vs. 36-48)**

This is what the text is saying. So, the third day Israel went into battle as before, but when Benjamin killed about 30 Israelites, Israel started to pull back, started to retreat and to flee, giving the impression they were turning and running hoping that the armies of Benjamin would follow them, which they did. As soon as they got far enough away from the city of Gibeah 10,000 Israelite soldiers came around the back, went into the city of Gibeah, killed every man, woman, child, and cattle—every animal in the city—and set it on fire. The men of Benjamin then turned around; they saw the city going up in smoke. They realized what would happen. They had no chance, and they took off for the hills. But the Israelite army caught them and slaughtered them all the way. Only 600 soldiers fled and survived in the rocks and the caves of Rimmon.

One of the questions would be, "Is this justice?" And the answer is, "Absolutely not! This is mass slaughter." Up until this point, the text has been careful to say these were valiant men who carried the sword. They were soldiers engaged in a battle. But now the army of Israel has gone into every one of these cities, including Gibeah, and they have slaughtered every man, woman, child, and animal. Literally, at the end of this battle, there are 600 men left of the entire tribe of Benjamin. This is what happens when *might makes right*. This is what happens when evil people seek out justice. It's not justice. It is *everyone does what is right in their own eyes*. Chapter 21:

**Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpah, saying, “None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin in marriage.” So the people came to Bethel and sat there before God until evening, and lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. They said, “Why, O Lord, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel, so that one tribe should be *missing* today in Israel?” It came about the next day that the people arose early and built an altar there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. (Vs. 1-4)**

So the nation of Israel, when they had gathered at Mizpah, made a foolish vow that none of them would ever give one of their daughters to a man from the tribe of Benjamin, under penalty of death. So now they realize, “We can't break our vow,” but there are only 600 Benjamite men left. Everyone else is gone. So, unless we can figure out how to give them wives to have children to repopulate the tribe, one tribe will be forever missing from Israel. You can't miss what they say in verse three, **“Why, O Lord, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel, so that one tribe should be missing today in Israel?”**, as if somehow this is God's fault. How did this happen? It happened because you slaughtered every man, woman, and child of the tribe of Benjamin. That's how it happened. It's just evil chasing after evil, chasing after evil. Verse 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.” And the sons of Israel were sorry for their brother Benjamin and said, “One tribe is cut off from Israel today. 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?” (Vs. 5-7)**

So now we're told of a second vow, and the second vow was that if any of the people did not come to the gathering at Mizpah, they were then subjected to death. So the thought is, “Is there anyone who didn't come? Maybe that's where we can go and find 600 wives for the 600 men. Verse 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. For when the people were numbered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there. 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. This is the thing that you shall do: you shall utterly destroy every man and every woman who has lain with a man.” 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. (Vs. 8-12)**

Now just to understand how confused the morality is in this story, they've made a vow that they can't give their daughters to the men of Benjamin. And so they are so morally convicted, that they can't go against their vow. But they seem to have no hesitation to utterly devastate an entire town full of men, women, and children in order to come up with 400 virgins that they can give to the 600 remaining men of Benjamin to repopulate the tribe. We can't break this crazy vow we made,

so instead we'll slaughter an entire city of people. This is what happens when *might makes right*, when everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

**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. 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. And the people were sorry for Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.** (Vs. 13-15)

So they had rescued 400 virgins, but there are 600 men, and so they're still 200 short. They're still going to have to figure out a plan. At the end of verse 15, this attitude that the people, these people that had just slaughtered all these men, women, and children, was that they felt sorry for Benjamin. They had deep compassion and kindness for Benjamin, and they were angry that that mean old God had done this to create a breach in one of the tribes of Israel.

This reminds me a lot of what I hear today—that God is this mean old, angry, judgmental God because He has a standard of right and wrong, because He is a God of absolute truth and morality. And we, as sinful, rebellious people, convince ourselves that we are far more kind and far more compassionate and far more loving than that mean, judgmental God. So even though He's going to be all mean and judgmental, we're going to be loving and kind and compassionate to those who do things that are deeply offensive to God. It's the very same attitude we see today—as if somehow we as fallen people, could possibly be more loving, more kind, more compassionate, more comparing, than the God who created them. Verse 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?” They said, “*There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, so that a tribe will not be blotted out from Israel. 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.” 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.” And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, “Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, 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. 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.’” 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. 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.** (Vs. 16-24)

So here's the plan. We still have 200 men of Benjamin who don't have wives. But we can't give them wives because we made an oath. So here's what we'll do. Up at Shiloh every year they have

this feast. And as part of the feast, the young girls come dancing out into the vineyard. So whoever among Benjamin—the 200 men that don't yet have a wife—you go hide in the vineyard at night. And when they come out dancing, you kidnap them; you haul them back to Benjamin, and you make them your wives. And when the fathers and the brothers come to us, we will say, "Actually, we did you a favor because we made an oath that you can't give your daughters to Benjamin, so if you would have done this willingly, we'd have to kill you. But because they kidnapped them, then you're not guilty and you get to live. So just go home and be quiet. All of this is so perverted. It is so ugly, and it is so evil. Imagine you're one of these girls; you're one of these fathers; you're one of these families. What has happened is absolutely horrific! This isn't justice. This is evil, chasing evil, chasing evil. And why does it happen? The last verse of Judges:

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

When there is no agreed upon standard of morality, when there is no absolute morality that defines good and evil, then it becomes subjective. **Everyone does what's right in their own eyes**, and justice comes down to those who are in power. *Might makes right*, and it's just evil, chasing evil, chasing evil.

Now, it is not hard to see the correlation between the period of the judges and our culture today. Once we have moved God to the margin, once we have denied that there is such a thing as absolute truth and absolute morality, then everyone does what is right in their own eyes, and justice comes down to the subjective opinion of those in power. It's: *might makes right*, and it's evil, chasing evil, chasing evil.

But as Ryan reminded us last week, before we get too caught up in pointing fingers at others, we must start with ourselves. If anything is going to change, it has to change with us as the people of God, which means it must start with me. Do I take sin seriously? Do I truly pursue righteousness? Am I willing to bow a knee and surrender to God as King? It's His truth. It's His morality. And I can choose to bow a knee and surrender to God as King. Last week, Ryan walked us through this prayer of confession. It was beautiful. I'm not going to go back through all that again this weekend. But when you look at what's happening whether you're talking about the time of the judges, or whether you're talking about our own culture today, it all can seem so overwhelming. It can seem absolutely hopeless. I mean, be honest. When you get to the end of the book of Judges, it feels like there is no hope for these people. They are so far gone, there is no way back.

So it's good to remind ourselves that technically, the last judge of the period of the judges, was a man by the name of Samuel. His story is recorded in 1 Samuel, and God would use Samuel to bring an entire nation back to God. They would put away their evil; they would put away their idolatry, and they would return to God under Samuel. And they would prosper, and they would flourish in peace and safety—all in one generation! Why? Because God is faithful, because God is forgiving, because God is gracious, because God is good. Samuel was followed by Saul, who was a so-so king, followed by David, who would be the greatest king in the history of Israel. And Israel would prosper in peace and flourishing under David in a way they would never know at any other time, all just three generations after the book of Judges.

We're also reminded that each of these judges was meant to be a picture, a type of the ultimate hero, the ultimate judge to come, which was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Himself, the ultimate Deliverer, the ultimate Savior. And because of His death, burial, and resurrection on the cross, He could offer salvation and forgiveness, mercy and grace to anyone who chooses to ask. Because God is gracious and forgiving, no one has sinned too much. No one is too far gone. No one is hopeless. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter what's been done to you. Because God is gracious and forgiving and compassionate and kind, He offers His forgiveness; He offers His salvation freely to anyone who chooses to receive it. It is never too late to begin to write a new story, and that can begin today as you reach out to the God of unimaginable grace and mercy and compassion and forgiveness. Whatever your story has been, there is every reason to believe that God can raise you up to be a hero, to make a difference in a very dark world. We remember the familiar words of Joshua, "***As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.***" What will it be for you?

*Our Father, we are appalled at the evil and the wickedness at the end of the book of Judges. God, it just seems like at the end of the book, there is absolutely no hope for these people. Yet within a generation, they would prosper and flourish again because of Your faithfulness, because of Your grace and mercy and kindness. God, may each of us recognize this morning that no one is beyond reach, no one is beyond hope. No one has sinned too much, and today can be the day that we begin to write a new story because of Your grace and forgiveness and compassion and kindness. For it's in the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*

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