

## **Week 21 - Benjamin's Guilt - Judges 19:1-30**

### **Scripture Reading: Genesis 19:1-11**

#### **Introduction**

When I was a kid living in Illinois, my family took a vacation to the Wisconsin Dells, which, at the time, was an exotic, north woods destination for us flatlanders.

At that time, there was a tourist attraction called "The Wonder Spot," where it was said, "the laws of natural gravity seem to be repealed."

My folks took us to see it, and I remember seeing people standing on an extreme slant, water flowing backward, and chairs that could balance on two legs from a little ledge on the wall.

According to the guides who demonstrated the phenomena of the spot, the cause was the result of strange rock formations in the area.

But, in reality, all of what looked so natural was merely an optical illusion caused by the unique construction of the little cabin on the site where all the action was centered.

Sadly, when preparing this sermon, I discovered that the Wonder Spot was sold and bulldozed to make way for a road in 2007.

It seems the proliferation and popularity of water parks in the Dells led to fewer and fewer people wanting to be amazed by a simple visual anomaly.

Having one's eyes fooled in that way was good, clean fun, but not seeing correctly can also be deadly.

Ask any pilot about the deadly effects of spatial disorientation.

Humans aren't designed very well for flying, and we require sight and all our other senses to maintain proper orientation while flying.

And when our visibility is restricted to the point we no longer have a clear visual reference to the horizon or the surface of the earth, our other supporting senses can conflict with what we see, making it difficult to know which way is up.

All modern airplanes have instruments that show the plane's orientation, speed, altitude, etc.

But when sight is taken away from a pilot who hasn't been trained to trust those instruments completely, they often allow the sensations they feel to override the clear reporting of the instruments.

On average, it takes less than three minutes for spatial disorientation to cause a crash after a pilot is deprived of his or her visual references.

It's one of aviation's biggest killers.

There is also another type of spatial disorientation that can overtake us in matters of spirituality.

It's what we've seen so far in our study of Judges, as God's people did what was right in their own eyes.

They either forgot or ignored the guidance that God had provided to keep them out of danger and trusted themselves to a kind of optical illusion that put them into a downward spiral.

And only the faithfulness and graciousness of God kept it from being a death spiral as he continually delivered them despite their disobedience.

This morning we come to an account that has to be one of the most horrific in the pages of the Bible.

It could well be called Second Sodom or Sodom: Israel Style; it so closely parallels the event Lot and his family went through in Genesis 19.

Only this time, it isn't the pagans who are committing the atrocities - it's God's own people.

The nation claiming to be following after and worshipping Yahweh has become completely indistinguishable from the Canaanites surrounding them, not only in their idolatry, as we saw last week, but also in their brutality.

And just as we saw in chapters 17-18 how the sin of a family led to the corruption of the priesthood and the tribe of Dan, this week we will see how a family dispute will come close to wiping out a tribe of Israel altogether.

The final three chapters of Judges tell one continuous account where each event builds on the one before it, but it would be too much to effectively handle all three chapters at once.

So we will take a week to look at each chapter even though we might want to blitz through the whole sordid affair and get it behind us.

Today's passage, Judges 19, contains one of those accounts in the Bible that I would just as soon avoid because it's difficult even to read it, let alone preach on it.

But as we read in **2 Timothy 3:16-17** God put it in his Word for our benefit, so we must take the time to understand it - otherwise, in avoiding exposure to its depravity, we would be denying ourselves access to its profit.

Still, the account before us certainly deserves an R-rating for its depiction of sexual sin and violence, and I want to be careful not to be too graphic as we confront the details of it and turn it into something gratuitous.

But we need to recognize that it's a narrative intended to shock those who read it and I hope we never get so jaded that we aren't shocked by it.

Israel is in the condition they are because they have ceased acknowledging God as king.

Therefore the nation lacks the theological incentive to prevent them from sinking to the level of their Canaanite neighbors.

So once again, we see the phrase that introduces this section in verse 1 [**Judges 19:1**]:

*In those days, when there was no king in Israel...*

And the narrative begins with introducing an unnamed Levite living in the hill country of Ephraim.

It turns out that the Levite had a concubine who also remains unnamed.

In fact, no one is named in this entire narrative that spans three chapters except for Phineas in 20:28.

That may be because the author intends to subordinate the identities of the specific people involved to highlight the relative importance of the issues they represent.

Like the young Levite in the previous account, he is also a sojourner in Ephraim, meaning he was a temporary resident without roots.

We can also surmise that he had no sense of mission because he was dwelling in a place that God had not designated for a Levite to dwell.

We are left to wonder if the Levite has another proper wife or even multiple wives.

We are only told that he had a concubine.

And a concubine was a kind of second-class wife that had to perform all the marital duties of a wife but without the legal protections of a wife.

If he didn't, we would have to question why this concubine wasn't an ordinary wife.

So, with that brief introduction, the author creates a sense of tension and unease and gives us the setup for what comes next.

## **I. The Catalyst: A marital spat**

It appears the couple has a quarrel or falling out of some sort, and the concubine leaves and returns to her father's home.

Our text translates the original Hebrew phrase "played the harlot" to say she was "unfaithful" to the Levite, but I don't think it necessary to view this as adultery.

It seems unlikely that she would have returned to her father's home if that were the case, so I believe our author uses a bit of hyperbole because she had left her husband in anger after a quarrel.

And, even though he doesn't indicate who was at fault, the evidence seems to pile up against the Levite as the story continues.

Whatever the case, her father accepts her back under his roof, where the Levite found her four months later.

I can only guess that the Levite was either waiting for her to return on her own or it took him that long to admit he was wrong, but after four months, he took a servant and a pair of donkeys and went to make amends.

Our text says he set out to "speak kindly to her," which tells me he was trying to coax her into returning.

And when he arrived, his estranged concubine seemed to have warmly welcomed him as she invited him in.

Her father may have been embarrassed by his daughter's behavior, or he may have simply been pleased by the thought of a possible reconciliation, but whatever the reason, he was thrilled to see his son-in-law arrive.

And after three days, it appears all was well, and the only thing left for the Levite and his concubine to do was return home together.

But things don't always go as planned, and the Levite is about to be frustrated by his father-in-law's over-the-top hospitality.

## **II. The prolonged reunion**

An old saying goes: "Fish and house guests both stink after three days."

And it's an old saying precisely because it has a ring of truth to it.

So that makes what happens next border on the comical as the girl's father becomes almost aggressively gracious while her husband becomes increasingly desperate to extricate himself from his clutches.

For three days, the concubine's father showered the Levite with typical Middle-Eastern hospitality as he wined and dined him lavishly.

And on day four, they rose early to get on the road, but the girl's father convinced them to have a bite to eat first, and apparently, breakfast turned into a bit of an all-day party for the two men.

So, of course, the father-in-law insisted they stay the night and leave in the morning.

But, when the morning of what is now the fifth day arrived, the same thing happened again, and when evening came, he pressured his son-in-law to stay another night and leave early the next morning.

Having seen this movie before, the Levite's patience finally has reached its end, and they left - but it was late in the day and not the early morning start that would have been preferable.

Their late start would naturally necessitate their finding lodging along the way, and the Levite seems to have planned to spend the night in whichever Israelite village they were near when it got too late to travel.

It was late in the day when they came near Jebus, also known as Jerusalem - only the city was controlled by the Jebusites at this particular point in history.

And because night was coming on, the Levite's servant suggested they spend the night there, but the Levite was unwilling to spend the night in a foreign city and insisted they press on to an Israelite town, either Gibeah or Ramah.

Given what we've seen throughout the book of Judges, we can reasonably assume that his objection had less to do with any theological rationale but likely had only to do with whether they could expect hospitality and safety in a foreign city. Pressing on, it was nightfall before they reached the Benjaminite city of Gibeah, so they went in and sat down in the city square, which was the societal signal that they needed lodging for the night.

But, in stark contrast to the over-the-top hospitality of his father-in-law, no one took them in, so they prepared to settle in for the night in the open town square.

The fact that no one had taken them in would have been surprising anywhere in the Mideast, but it was especially shocking in Israel.

Still, the fact that they had bypassed a foreign city to get to a town of their countrymen made no difference.

The people were infected by apathy toward travelers passing through, and it made no difference that these particular travelers were their own countrymen.

The fabric of society had unraveled to the degree that no one would open their heart and home to a stranger.

But then, in verse 16, a ray of hope shines through the narrative as we are introduced to an old man coming home from his work who happens to see the travelers in the square.

He, too, is a temporary resident in Gibeah, a more permanent one than the Levite and his party as he has a job and a home there, but he's still referred to as a "sojourner," showing Gibeah was more of a home away from home for him.

Maybe his status as a fellow outsider causes him to reach out as he goes over to the trio and asks the Levite where he's from and where he's going.

And as the Levite answers, he gives all the pertinent information before complaining that no one had offered to provide them with lodging and expounding on the social dysfunction of the people of Gibeah.

He points out that they have brought food for themselves and fodder for their animals, so they weren't expecting to be fed - they just need a safe place to sleep.

The old man proves to be the hospitable host they need as he warmly invites them into his home and puts his resources at their disposal, saying he would go even further than providing a bed - he would care for all their wants.

Then he ominously warns them that, whatever they do, they must not spend the night in the square - although he doesn't say why.

And this is telling because they should be safe from outsiders since Gibeah is a walled city.

But, as a resident alien, the old man has learned that the danger is inside the city - he knows the ways of the citizens of Gibeah all too well.

So he takes the travelers in, feeds their livestock, gives them water to wash up, and serves them a meal.

And while they are eating and drinking and no doubt having a good time after a long walk, the old man's hospitality turns to horror.

### **III. Hospitality turns to horror**

Suddenly their enjoyment is interrupted by a loud pounding on the door as the men of the city have finally arrived.

But they don't arrive to extend a belated hand of friendship or an offer of welcome complete with a warm bed.

This was no Welcome Wagon come to call, but a gang of worthless men bent on perversion.

While it's highly doubtful that the entire male population of Gibeah was involved, the author intends to paint the citizenry with the same broad brush and leave us with the understanding that the depravity involved is generalized.

The mob demands to have the Levite brought out so that they can have homosexual relations with him.

We must be sure we understand that is the proper interpretation of the text because liberal scholars insist that the sin here is a lack of hospitality - just as they do with the passage in Genesis 19.

And, while a lack of hospitality is certainly a part of the problem in Gibeah, a plain reading of the text also shows a propensity to engage in extramarital and homosexual relations - both of which are prohibited by God.

Any other interpretation defies logic as we see the old host respond by pleading with the gang not to act "so wickedly" and not to do this "vile thing" before offering up his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine in the hope of satisfying their lustful intent.

I think it's safe to say any respect or positive inclination we had for the old man vanishes with his proposal in verse 24. His predisposition to hospitality was spot on, but here we see him revert to doing what seems right to him - to doing what is right in his own eyes - and it's repugnant.

It seems he didn't spend a whole lot of time wrestling with weighing out whether it was nobler to defend his honor and the honor of his male guest or to stand for morality and justice.

In his mind, heterosexual rape was preferable to homosexual rape, so rather than betray his obligation to his male guest, he immediately offered up the two females present.

I don't want to wander off into all the social and ethical issues involved here because they are pretty complex.

Let me know if you want to delve into those matters, and we can discuss them further privately.

What we want to notice today is that the old host tells the men they can do whatever vile things seem good to them.

When we remember that these are men of Israel and not Canaanites, we are hit with the realization that the author's analysis of the time of the judges is accurate.

Everyone is doing what seems right in their own eyes, and by not looking to God as their king and not doing the good that he has revealed, they are sinking to the lowest depths of depravity all on their own.

That fact is no more evident than in the picture of the Levite as he is portrayed here.

Amazingly, he doesn't protest when his host offers up his concubine as a consolation prize leading us to believe that he is okay with the proposal.

Then, when the townsmen turn down the offer and continue to press for him to be sent out, he grabs his concubine and pushes her out the door.

Having put forth the effort to make up with her and bring her home, he now willingly offers her up to be used and abused by the mob that has attained a fever pitch of desire.

And it will suffice to say that, as a result, the mob raped and abused her all night before discarding her as dawn broke.

It's heartbreaking to visualize her making her way back to where her husband was and collapsing by the door as she sought the protection of her husband.

But we see the Levite, having been spared from the mob by his actions, had gone to bed and gotten a good night's sleep.

He awakes refreshed and seemingly unconcerned about his concubine's fate until he almost trips over her as she lies on the stoop with her hands on the threshold.

And what does he do?

He gruffly and callously commands her to "Get up; let's go" because he's ready to be on his way!

And the way the account is related, it appears he was going to leave without her had she not returned and that he was utterly indifferent about the horrors he had caused to be inflicted upon her or her well-being.

We can't help but be struck by the revelation of the depths of depravity in his heart.

And the simple statement "But there was no answer" leaves us with a huge and very troubling question:

Was she alive or dead at that point?

Our author allows that to linger as an open question he never answers directly.

And the fact that we can't automatically and emphatically state that her death was a direct result of the abuse by the men of Gibeah is also troubling - and I think our author intended it to be so.

This was a turbulent and troubled time, and I don't think we're supposed to get a sense of tidy closure or tidiness at the end of this account.

And the horror isn't over yet as we see the Levite load his either dead or unconscious concubine onto one of his donkeys and head home, where he takes a knife and dismembers her body.

Naturally, it is preferable by far to believe that she had either died in Gibeah or on the way home than to think that she was killed by her husband and then cut up.

But in either event, we have to conclude that he was responsible for her death even if he didn't kill her with his own two hands before cutting her into twelve pieces so that he could send a portion to each of the tribes of Israel.

I'm relieved to see that his actions were as shocking to his contemporaries as it is to us today.

They didn't know what to make of what he had done, and neither do we until we take something that happened much later into account.

Look with me at 1 Samuel 11, where we find the story of when Nahash the Ammonite sought to bring disgrace to Israel.

Saul was out in a field plowing with his oxen when he heard how Nahash was threatening his countrymen and, in verse 7 [1Samuel 11:7], we see him take a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces and then send the pieces throughout the land as a graphic call to arms complete with an overt threat.

I believe we see in Saul's later action the rationale behind the Levite's action in our account.

He was calling his countrymen to mobilize against those who had threatened him and brutalized his concubine.

By sending out the pieces of her body, he provided them with graphic and concrete evidence of the inhospitality, brutality, and overall degeneracy their society had sunk to.

And in chapter 20, we will see that his message was received and acted upon as all Israel comes together to respond to the outrage we have just considered.

## Conclusion

Liberal and feminist scholars miss the point of this account when they focus on the lack of hospitality angle or impose modern feminist ideology onto the text as they make it all about the dangers of a patriarchal society.

Sure, there is a problem with the residents of Gibeah being inhospitable - but it's a surface problem that simply serves to set the rest of the scene.

And we can't help but wonder at the mindset that believes heterosexual rape is somehow better than homosexual rape - if only because it protects the male guest and the honor of his host.

But both of those options are contrary to God's will.

Both violate God's law, and no one could rightly argue that either was truly acceptable during the time of the Judges or at any other time in history.

God's Word is clear about its proscription against homosexuality - that isn't even debatable by honest people.

But God's Word is also clear about its proscription against heterosexual relations outside of marriage and rape and the mistreatment or degradation of women in any fashion.

Still, while we condemn the men of Gibeah for seeking homosexual union with the Levite, we must be careful to recognize that they didn't actually commit a homosexual act here - but they did commit heterosexual rape and brutality against a defenseless woman.

And they were able to follow the dictates of their depravity primarily because of the depravity of the Levite who delivered her into their hands.

The corruption of Israel was nearly universal in those days - all because the people had rejected the kingship of God and were left with only their own internal ethics to guide them.

And doing what seemed best in their eyes led them deeper and deeper into sin.

But that's the nature of sin.

Sinning is a habit that progressively worsens and drags us down in a spiral of increasing wickedness.

Sadly, any and all of us would more than likely suffer the same fate if we were left to our own devices.

And that points us to our need for a Savior.

Throughout the book of Judges, we have seen God be faithful to his fallible and faithless people.

He has repeatedly tried to get their attention by sending oppressors and come to their rescue by providing deliverers when the pain became more than they could bear.

And ultimately, we know that God sent his Son as the Savior of all mankind.

We live in a time that isn't so different from the days of the judges.

We, too, are surrounded by people who have rejected God and are being guided only by their own internal compasses.

We're even tempted to do likewise from time to time ourselves.

So we should look at this passage not just as a record of past human depravity but as a call to action.

We know the only solution to this problem is Christ, and we know the way to him.

As we prepare to participate in the ordinance of the Lord's Table, let me challenge you to consider how you might be instrumental in providing rescue to someone by pointing them to the gospel.