

Week 22 - Benjamin's Punishment - Judges 20:1-48

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 17:2-7

Introduction

Last week we considered one of the most horrific accounts contained in the pages of the Bible.

It's a tough passage to read and contemplate.

I wish I could tell you that this week will be a lot better - but I can't because, even though the narrative isn't as graphic in chapter 20, the events are equally, if not more, disturbing if only because of their scale.

When we left off last week, the Levite had just cut his concubine into twelve pieces and sent a part of her dismembered corpse to each of Israel's twelve tribes as a call to arms.

And as chapter 20 opens, we see his message hit home with his countrymen and have its desired effect as armed men from every part of the nation come together.

I. The gathering of Israel

When reading of the gathering of Israel at Mizpah, we might well be encouraged by its description.

First, we read that *"all the people of Israel came out."*

Then we see the author add the phrase *"from Dan to Beersheba,"* and looking at a map, we recognize that Dan was situated on the northern border of the land while Beersheba was in the extreme south.

And we're told that armed men even came from *"the land of Gilead,"* which is significant given what we saw earlier of Gilead's sense of isolation in the Jephthah cycle in chapters 10-12.

Then the inclusive nature of the response is capped off in verse 2 as we read that the chiefs of *"all the tribes of Israel"* presented themselves before the assembly.

In all, 400,000 armed men responded in a demonstration of unity so that it could be said they assembled *"as one man."*

Given the decline we've seen in the book's latter chapters, this apparent unity is a welcome change.

And when we consider the success of this unnamed Levite from an obscure place in Ephraim within the context of the entire book, it's impressive indeed.

Even Deborah and Barak weren't able to motivate and mobilize the nation's military as he has.

And, at this point, it appears the Israelites weren't even entirely sure why they had been called out.

All they seemed to know was that they had witnessed a thing never before seen in Israel when they received a piece of a woman's body.

Still, reading how the author describes the people who did assemble is encouraging.

First, he refers to them as the *"congregation,"* which defines them as a spiritual group devoted to Yahweh.

Then he calls them *"the assembly of the people of God"* and says they assembled *"to the Lord."*

As readers, it would be difficult to miss the point that our author is making - this was a spiritual assembly called out to engage in a holy war.

It seems the people of Israel are doing as God intended them to do all along as they unite to fight against evil in the land.

However, not everything is positive, and we're left with a sense of unease as we discover in verse 3 that the Benjaminites didn't join with their brethren - they only *"heard that the people of Israel had gone up to Mizpah."*

We aren't told why the Benjaminites had stayed home and not joined their countrymen before the Lord at Mizpah, and the open question provides tension in the narrative.

But we see the rest of Israel gathered, and the question is raised about how the evil had happened.

And in response, the Levite speaks up and gives his version of the events.

II. The report of the Levite

As we consider his report, we need to notice that he does what most people are prone to do; he tailors his tale to make himself look as good as possible.

His report is surprisingly economical as he simply says that he and his concubine had come to Gibeah of Benjamin to spend the night, the men of the city had risen against him and surrounded the house intent on killing him, but their rape and abuse of his concubine had resulted in her death, and outraged, he had cut her up and mailed her parts out.

While his report seems impressive on its surface, we can't help but recognize how he has tailored his narrative to give himself the moral high ground.

Notice how he paints himself as the actual victim and shows no concern for his concubine as he diminishes her role almost entirely in his report.

He doesn't share the details of the domestic disturbance that had led to his being in Gibeah in the first place.

He fails to mention the young man, his servant, traveling with them.

He, therefore, makes himself the focus of the mob's interest - perhaps falsely, as we aren't told which man they were clamoring for.

He elevates the mob's intention, saying that they were seeking to kill him, not that they were seeking homosexual relations.

He doesn't say how it came to be that the interest of the men of Gibeah, who he refers to as the "leaders of Gibeah," was deflected from him to his concubine.

He doesn't share how his concubine fell into the hands of the mob so that they could violate her.

And, while he ties her death to the mob's actions, his words don't conclusively rule out the possibility that he had a hand in her death.

Actually, the fact that we read in verse 4 [**Judges 20:4**] that he is introduced as "*the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered*" further muddies the water as the word used there indicates premeditated murder.

And, if the mob intended to abuse her and let her go, we have to wonder why her death would be called premeditated "murder."

It's an open question that is never answered, but if she didn't die due to her abuse, her husband's status instantly shifts from innocent victim to despicable criminal.

Despite the Levite's motives and his self-serving revisions in his version of the events, his report had its intended effect.

III. Two responses

The assembled Israelites were obviously impressed by the Levite's report as they vowed to take action against the scene of the crime, Gibeah.

And the troops unanimously agree that no one will return to his home until Gibeah has been dealt with.

Their minds to go to war made up, they then determine how to proceed, and we read in verse 9 [**Judges 20:9**] that they will draw lots to see who should go up against Gibeah first.

At first, this sounds like what we saw in Judges 1 when the Israelites inquired of Yahweh and asked who should lead the charge against the Canaanites.

But then we notice that there is no mention of Yahweh here - only that they intended to discover his will by casting lots.

It's also problematic that they don't ask God if they *should* attack Gibeah - they made that decision on their own without apparently inquiring of the Lord at all - they only seek to determine who should join the fight.

Again, without directly asking God.

Verse 10 then shows us that the leaders of the gathered forces might have recognized that this could be a prolonged campaign as we see them set aside 10% of their troops to maintain supply lines for those doing the fighting.

The lot was used to select these men, and I suspect the designated men were tasked with scavenging and foraging for food throughout the Benjaminite countryside since they were far from home.

And at the end of verse 10, we see them state their objective is to defend the covenant standard of justice by dealing with the errant Benjaminites.

Again, we are tempted to view this as a positive sign.

Finally, after everything we've seen in the record of the judges, Israel is committed to rooting out the evil in their midst as God wanted them to do.

However, we can't help but be dismayed to see that they aren't going to war against the Canaanites but that their zeal is directed against their own countrymen.

They appear to be fired up and ready to attack, so what they do next is commendable - they send delegates throughout the tribe of Benjamin to demand an accounting for the crime committed in their midst.

But all is not as it should be even in this gesture because we see they have already rendered a guilty verdict without hearing the other side of the matter.

They demand the Benjamites hand over the guilty so they can execute them and thereby purge evil from Israel.

Surprisingly, the Benjaminites choose to side with the rapists against the rest of their kinsmen.

We can't be sure, but perhaps they had already decided what course they would take when they didn't answer the call to arms alongside the rest of Israel.

They did come together now, though, as we read in verses 14-16 [**Judges 20:14-16**]:

Then the people of Benjamin came together out of the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle against the people of Israel. And the people of Benjamin mustered out of their cities on that day 26,000 men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who mustered 700 chosen men. Among all these were 700 chosen men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.

They should have investigated the situation and handled the violators themselves if they didn't want to hand them over.

But they are determined to defend the evildoers, so they summon fighting men from all the towns of Benjamin.

And we see that 26,000 men rallied to the call to join with their 700 kinsmen from Gibeah.

Our author also adds a note that helps explain the surprising success that the Benjaminites will have against the vastly superior force of the other tribes, saying that there was a contingent of 700 left-handed slingers included in their army.

We looked briefly at this verse when we studied the Ehud judge cycle, as he was also said to be a left-handed man.

And when we did, we talked about how being left-handed in a right-handed world was just as much, if not more, of a disadvantage in those days than it is now.

A single left-handed soldier in a contingent of right-handed soldiers would have been considered a liability because their fighting stance and style would be "backward" and not mesh with the other soldiers beside them.

But, with 700 left-handers forming a troop, what would have been a disadvantage was transformed into a distinct physical and psychological advantage.

It would be like a right-handed boxer coming up against a southpaw for the first time.

And these 700 left-handed Benjaminites were excellent marksmen with a sling who were said never to miss the smallest target.

Therefore, it's somewhat remarkable that their left-handedness is never mentioned again, and we aren't told what, if any, specific impact they had on the battles to follow.

In verse 17, the author again reminds us of the size of the combined Israelite forces to draw attention to the vast disparity between the two sides.

Benjamin is outnumbered by a margin of more than 15 to 1!

And so the stage is set for a direct military confrontation, and we naturally expect to read next that Benjamin suffered a sound defeat at the hands of their brethren.

But our author slows the narrative way down at this point as he recounts the not one, but three, battles that ensue.

IV. Three battles

The first battle is related in verses 18-21 [**Judges 20:18-21**]:

The people of Israel arose and went up to Bethel and inquired of God, "Who shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin?" And the Lord said, "Judah shall go up first." Then the people of Israel rose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah. And the men of Israel went out to fight against Benjamin, and the men of Israel drew up the battle line against them at Gibeah. The people of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and destroyed on that day 22,000 men of the Israelites.

The first battle opens on a hopeful note as the Israelites at Bethel ask God which tribe should lead the fight.

But again, we see that they don't ask *whether* they should go up against the people of Benjamin; they only ask *how* they should attack Benjamin.

And that should trouble us because it appears that they had decided to go to war without involving God in that decision.

Remarkably, God answers that Judah should go up first, which seems proper because the victims were from Bethlehem in Judah.

However, we want to be sure to note that God gives them no assurance of victory.

Being eager for the fight, we read that the Israelite army rose early in the morning and attacked Gibeah only to suffer a humiliating defeat.

Despite being vastly outnumbered, the Benjaminites struck down 22,000 Israelite soldiers.

That works out to just shy of one casualty per Benjaminite warrior!

Curiously, the author does not mention how this was accomplished and does not account for any Benjaminite casualties.

You might think that such an outcome would give the Israelites pause.

But in verse 22, we read that they weren't exactly demoralized as they encouraged one another and took up their positions once more in preparation for the second battle.

Then we read how, before they entered the fray again, the people of Israel once again inquired of the Lord.

But this time, they went weeping, and we see that the previous day's defeat has caused them to question the rightness of their action.

This time, they asked the better, more fundamental question: "Should we attack our kinsmen?"

And God's answer is unequivocal as we read in verse 23 [**Judges 20:23**]: the Lord said, "Go up against them."

But again, we must note that God gives them no assurance of victory.

The second battle is related in verses 24-25 [**Judges 20:24-25**]:

So the people of Israel came near against the people of Benjamin the second day. And Benjamin went against them out of Gibeah the second day, and destroyed 18,000 men of the people of Israel. All these were men who drew the sword.

The second battle results in another Israelite defeat as they suffered 18,000 casualties while, once again, no mention is made of Benjaminite losses.

At this point, I suspect the combined Israelite forces were beginning to feel like Charlie Brown finding himself flat on his back after trying to kick the football, only to have Lucy pull it away again.

After suffering two defeats and losing a tenth of their army, things were getting serious in the Israelite camp.

After their first defeat, our author records that they simply “went up and wept before the Lord,” but now we see a much more intense effort put into determining God’s will.

In verse 26, we read that the whole army went to Bethel and wept as they sat before the Lord and fasted all day, and they made sacrifices by offering burnt and peace offerings before the Lord.

When we read that the people again inquired of the Lord in verse 27, it seems, at first, to be like the previous inquiry.

But then we come to the parenthetical phrase, “for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days,” and we realize that the ark isn’t in its proper place in the inner sanctum, the holy of holies, of the tabernacle.

It has been carried to Bethel as a kind of talisman or lucky charm.

It’s not difficult to see why the Israelites might have thought this was proper, given the ark’s role when they crossed the Jordan and when they conquered Jericho.

But in each of those cases, they were acting following the explicit instructions of the Lord.

A closer parallel is found in 1 Samuel 4, where the ark is brought out to secure victory only to be captured by the Philistines when Israel suffered a disastrous defeat at their hands.

And if the ark had been present during the first two battles, the strategy had also failed in this case.

Then, in verse 28, we find the only person named in this three-chapter narrative, Phinehas, Aaron’s grandson.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, when we looked at the first conclusion to the book found in chapters 17-18, his presence helps us place these events early in the period of the judges.

And we can’t help but marvel further at the young, shiftless Levite in that narrative who was looking for any lucrative opportunity and wonder why he didn’t go and see his powerful cousin, who was high priest then.

As Aaron’s grandson, Phinehas would have been quite old when these events took place, but we are once again struck by just how quickly things went awry in Israel after the death of Joshua.

And with the mention of Phinehas, we are left to presume that he was involved in inquiring of the Lord, perhaps by consulting the Urim and Thummin - although we aren’t told that specifically.

But, in the event, the answer as to whether or not the combined forces of Israel should attack Benjamin again is a clear affirmation.

Only this time, it comes with God’s promise of victory, *“Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand.”*

Right away, we notice that, while the other two battles were handled succinctly, our author spends a good bit of time relating the facts of this one.

The account of the third battle is three times as long as the other two battles combined.

In part, that’s because the author chronicles the activity of the main Israelite army, those who were set in ambush, and the Benjaminite forces.

And he utilizes shifts in viewpoint as he switches between the perspectives of the Israelites and Benjaminites, with the realization by the Benjaminites that they are about to be annihilated serving as the climax of the narrative.

In a nutshell, the battle is reminiscent of the battle for Ai in Joshua 8, where a similar ambushing tactic was used.

The Israelite forces place some of their troops in a position to ambush the Benjaminites when they come out to do battle, while the remainder launch a frontal assault and then retreat to draw the Benjaminite forces further out.

The Benjaminites have become overconfident and rush forth to confront their attackers and are drawn away from the city just as planned, only to have the ambushing forces, 10,000 elite troops, rise up behind them.

And after a day of fierce fighting, the tables had turned completely, and Benjamin was defeated on the battlefield.

And in verse 35, our author subtly includes his interpretation of Israel's victory on the battlefield as he credits God with the outcome.

The final accounting of Benjaminites' losses in verses 44-47 reveals that out of all of the tribe of Benjamin, only 600 soldiers escaped to safety in the wilderness, where they holed up for four months.

Clearly, God had given the Israelite army a decisive victory.

Still, the description of the slaughter of the Benjaminite army is hardly flattering for the Israelite forces as we see the slain Benjaminites described as "men of valor" who were cut down by the persistent Israelites as they fled.

Their victory secured, the men of Israel turned back and committed the people of Benjamin and their livestock to total destruction and burned all the cities they could find in the territory of Benjamin.

Thus the tribe of Benjamin was very nearly wiped out in the most literal sense.

Conclusion

There is something positive to be said about the nation of Israel coming together in a wholehearted war against evil.

Still, it would have been better had they continued to show as much unity and vigor against the Canaanites.

And we can't help but be saddened by the Benjaminites' willingness to defend that evil and those who committed it.

Unfortunately, things aren't better today; we still see those same tendencies in many churches.

The army of God is the only army I know of that consistently shoots its own wounded, and the tolerance of moral rot in our churches indicates how deeply we have been integrated into the culture around us.

We tend to think that evil lurks "out there" somewhere beyond us because we fail to recognize that unthinkable rebellion lies in wait within the heart of every person.

The question isn't whether we *can* commit acts of sin because we most certainly can, but whether we *will*.

And, if we live like Israel during the time of the judges and stray from God and don't remain in his Word and are left with only our own judgment to guide us, we will eventually find ourselves in exactly the same condition as they were.

The moral decline in churches we see and hear about today emphasizes how just prone we are to sin and just how unlimited our capacity to sin remains - and that realization should sober us.

Israel needed to deal with the sin in their midst just as much as they needed to deal with the evil surrounding them.

The fact that they did so really isn't the issue.

The problem is that they didn't deal with it in a God-honoring way.

God had set up standards and practices by which to determine the truth of a matter and a person's guilt in Deuteronomy 19:15-20.

Multiple witnesses and diligent inquiry into a matter was God's way.

However, they followed their own counsel, made decisions without God, and only sought his approval on their plans and went further than God's justice would seem to prescribe.

We have the same capacity for making our prayers more about "my will" than "thy will" and seeking to have God bless our ideas and plans.

God and Israel both wanted justice in this case, but Israel's understanding of justice had become muddled and misguided.

So God's will and Israel's will intersected, but they weren't perfectly aligned.

And God allowed Israel to execute justice as they saw fit while using their actions to fulfill his judgment on the whole nation.

God sometimes gives his people what they want and what they pray for to teach them a lesson, and I believe that's what we see in this account.

The Israelites thought they were doing well - they did what seemed right to them - but they asked God the wrong questions and were determined to do what they had set out to do, only asking God to clarify some of the details.

They didn't even consider that God might want them to take a completely different approach, so they heard what they wanted to hear, and God let them do what they wanted to do.

And their best intentions came close to wiping out one of the nation of Israel's twelve tribes.

Next week, we will examine chapter 21, where we will see Israel again do what they think is best as they try to fix the unintended consequences of their actions.