

Week 23 - Benjamin's Preservation - Judges 21:1-25

Scripture Reading: Joshua 24:14-28

Introduction

In 1958, Theodor Geisel, writing under his more familiar pen name Dr. Seuss, released a book called The Cat in the Hat Comes Back. [book]

The book was a favorite of my girls when they were little.

It relates the story of a brother and sister whose mother has left them alone for the day with instructions to clear away a large amount of snow while she is out.

However, they are soon interrupted in their work when the Cat in the Hat comes for a visit.

The boy's sister warns him not to get involved with the Cat, who lets himself into the house, where they find him in the bathtub with a piece of cake with pink icing.

The plot picks up when the Cat gets out of the tub only to find the cake he has been eating has left a pink ring around the tub.

Without going into the details, all attempts to clean the stain only serve to spread it until it covers the snow outside, leading to a crisis for the two siblings.

Sometimes life works that way.

We find we have created a problem, and all our solutions to that problem only serve to make it worse somehow.

That's the position Israel finds itself in as we pick up the narrative in Judges 21.

And I'd like to be able to tell you that the book of Judges ends on a high note, but I can't because chapter 21 is, in many ways, the strangest chapter of all.

Israel would have done well to follow the old adage that says, "When you find you've dug yourself into a hole, the first thing you should do is stop digging."

Chapter 20 ended with the tribe of Benjamin all but wiped out as a result of the other 11 tribes implementing *herem* on them in an effort to purge the evil committed in Gibeah from their midst.

Last week we saw how the vastly outnumbered Benjamites had successfully defeated the combined army of the rest of Israel in two battles only to be routed in the third and final battle.

And we saw that 600 of the Benjamite soldiers had fled into the wilderness and holed up in the rugged country of Rimmon as the Israelite army turned back to slaughter every man, woman, and child in Benjamin.

In their zeal, they also killed all the Benjamite livestock and burned every village they could find.

In other words, they devoted Benjamin to complete destruction - almost.

And as chapter 21 opens, Israel comes to their senses and realizes they have created a crisis.

They have, for all practical purposes, eliminated one of the twelve tribes of Israel because, even though there was a remnant of Benjamin left alive in the 600 fugitives, there were no women for them to take as wives.

Benjamin will be no more in a generation.

And the account of Israel trying to fix the problem they created would be comical if it weren't so monstrous.

Not only had Israel ignored God's prescription for dealing with sin and gone with what they thought was best, but they had also been overly zealous in applying *herem* to the innocent.

So, in the end, the murder of one concubine morphed into the wholesale slaughter of all of Benjamin's women.

And Israel found itself in the middle of a dilemma.

I. Israel's dilemma

They were incensed when Israel answered the Levite's call to arms, assembled at Mizpah, and heard his account of what had transpired in Gibeah.

And in their zeal, they vowed that none of them would return to their home until Benjamin had been dealt with [Judges 20:8].

Now, in verse 1 [Judges 21:1], we read that they had also vowed that none of them would give their daughters in marriage to a Benjamite.

And jumping ahead to verse 18 [Judges 21:18], we read that they had called for a curse to be attached to the vow, saying, "*Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin.*"

We aren't explicitly told why the Israelites made these two vows, but it doesn't take much imagination to conclude they did so partly due to their enthusiasm and to ensure that no one would go soft on Benjamin.

But we also have to conclude that it was what seemed right in their own eyes.

God had commanded Israel not to intermarry with the Canaanites, but Israel had shown little hesitancy in that regard.

Now, here they were, pledging not to intermarry with their own countrymen.

It was a rash pair of vows made in the heat of the moment without much regard for the consequences.

We can't help but be reminded of Jephthah's ill-guided and tragic vow from Judges 11.

We live in a time when making a vow, taking an oath, or giving our word means very little.

Promises are very casually uttered and broken, seemingly without a second thought.

Eric Clapton even wrote a song called "Promises End," where the chorus contains the line, "We made a vow to always be friends, how could we know that promises end?"

But in the time of the judges, an oath was legally binding.

Look with me at **Numbers 30:2**, which says:

If a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

And looking back to the gathering of Israel at Mizpah, we are reminded that they were gathered "*as one man to the Lord,*" meaning they made their vows before the Lord or in the Lord's name.

That means breaking the vows made there would cause them to break the commandment found in **Leviticus 19:12** and profane God's name.

To put it mildly, Israel was in a pickle.

However, as we saw when we considered the Jephthah narrative, God knew that his people would occasionally enter into unthinking vows and make rash oaths.

So he made provision for that eventuality in **Leviticus 5:4-6** whereby a person could buy their way out of a rash oath through a sin offering.

But, apparently, Israel had forgotten about that provision by the time of this account, so they engaged instead in a kind of legalistic contortion whereby they upheld the strict letter of the law while obliterating the spirit of the law.

All they saw was that their excessive slaughter of the Benjamites and the rashness of their oath had combined to virtually guarantee the extinction of the tribe of Benjamin if they didn't do something.

And so they became like Old Testament versions of the Pharisees as they manipulated the law to follow it in a technical sense, leading to even more violence and victimization.

II. Israel's first solution

Verse 2 opens with promise as the Israelites assemble before God again to cry - the text says they engaged in intense lamentation, weeping, and wailing for an entire day.

And that would be a positive sign if they wept over their sins.

But when we saw them weep before the Lord in **20:26**, those were tears of humiliation as Benjamin had wounded their pride on the battlefield.

And now, their grief is more a symptom of sentimentality over the loss of their brethren.

There appears to be no concern over their spiritual condition and any wrong they may have done.

In fact, they turn around and blame God for the loss of Benjamin in verse 3, where they aren't seeking information but protesting.

They already knew the backstory and what had transpired to get them to where they were.

After all, they had been the ones on the battlefield, and they were the ones who turned their attention from the soldiers of Benjamin to the women and children and put them to the sword.

And, while it's true that God gave them the victory over Benjamin, they could hardly have honestly viewed themselves as innocent bystanders.

But still, they blamed God as if he had failed them somehow by not fulfilling his role in protecting his people.

Still, their request does reflect a sincere desire to know where they should go from here, and they seem to want to know at this late point what is God's solution to their predicament.

And whereas God answered their inquiries in chapter 20, this time, he refuses to be drawn in and remains silent.

So the people of Israel take things up a notch in verse 4 as they try to get God's attention through ritual observance.

They got up early, built an altar, and offered sacrifices to God as if they could obligate God through their mechanical religious service.

We saw them do the same thing after their second defeat in their fight with Benjamin and how they had brought out the ark as a good luck charm in an attempt to force God to help them.

But this time, God remains silent, and Israel is left to figure things out on their own.

The skill of the human author in painting a picture is evident in the somewhat disjointed way he tells the story.

You can sense Israel's confusion and frustration at God's silence as he begins to relate Israel's line of thought in verse 5, only to interrupt himself with a brief sidebar in verses 6-7.

And in relating Israel's concern and compassion toward Benjamin, he includes the direct quote:

"One tribe is cut off from Israel this day," and the use of the passive tense leaves open the question of who is responsible for this violent hacking off of one of Israel's limbs.

And looking forward again to verse 15, we see him answer that open question when he says that "the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel," showing us that the people were blaming God for the situation.

So Israel, feeling sorry for their youngest brother but rejected by God, take matters into their own hands as they devise a solution by exploring their decisions and actions to see if they can find a loophole.

First, they recognized that all was not lost, as the 600 refugees of Benjamin provided a means of keeping the lineage alive if they could find wives for them.

However, their oath not to give their daughters to the men of Benjamin complicated matters significantly.

And that's when they suddenly remembered that they had also made a third oath when they gathered at Mizpah. They had agreed to a "great oath" that death should be imposed on all who stayed out of the fight against Benjamin. That oath could be the answer to their dilemma if only someone had failed to show up, so they set their attention to finding out if anyone had stayed home.

So they took a call of the roll, and by a perverse stroke of good fortune, they were relieved to discover that the people of Jabesh-Gilead weren't represented in the assembly.

Our author doesn't say why they didn't respond when the call went out, so it could have been out of simple ignorance of the call, from benign neglect, or perhaps it was a matter of defiance.

But whatever the cause, we can't help but feel sympathy for the city as we see their countrymen conclude that giving Benjamin the virgins of Jabesh-Gilead will keep them from technically breaking their oath.

And, without giving any legal or theological rationale, they sent 12,000 armed men to slaughter everyone but the virgins- including the married women and little children.

We're told the operation netted 400 virgins who were brought back to Shiloh, and word was sent to the refugees of Benjamin who were hiding in the rocks of Rimmon that they could come and take them as wives - which they did.

Of course, given that the number of men of Benjamin who were left numbered 600, this was only a 2/3 solution, so something else would need to be done to get 200 more suitable women.

And in verses 16-24, we find Israel's second and final solution.

III. Israel's final solution

Again, the plan they devise has a patina of legitimacy and may have been technically within the letter of the law.

And it was undoubtedly done with the best of intentions and was an act of compassion toward Benjamin.

Still, it certainly violated the spirit of the law and was morally reprehensible.

But, it was what seemed best in their eyes.

It's not hard to imagine the scene as the leaders of Israel, the elders, come together to ponder the problem of where they might get their hands on 200 virgins; when thinking aloud, someone mentions the annual Shiloh festival.

We aren't told any of the details of this festival, so we can't pinpoint its nature.

It's called a "feast of the Lord," but it doesn't seem to align with any biblically prescribed feasts for Israel.

It may well have been a local festival involving the grape harvest because it apparently involved the city's maidens congregating and dancing in the vineyards.

So the elders ordered Benjamin's remaining bachelors to hide in ambush, grab a wife for themselves, and take them home.

They even had a plan if the fathers of the purloined girls protested.

First, they would appeal to them to act benevolently toward Benjamin and do us a favor because we didn't get enough wives for them during the war.

Then they made a veiled threat by telling them that they wouldn't hold them guilty of breaking the oath not to give their daughters in marriage to a Benjamite.

In other words, keep quiet, or we'll enforce the blood oath on you because we'll claim you gave your daughter to be married to a Benjamite.

Once again, this is a mere technical application of the law that is morally repugnant because they are simply twisting the event to give the girl's fathers legal cover for what they were doing.

Their activity is reminiscent of the New Testament Pharisees hiding their wealth under the practice of Corban so they wouldn't be required to support their parents.

It's just legal wrangling to do what they wanted while still being able to protest they had operated within the law.

Again, the plan they devise has a patina of legitimacy and may have been technically within the letter of the law, but it certainly violated the spirit of the law and was morally reprehensible.

But, it was what seemed best in their eyes.

And we see that everyone went along with the scheme as the results are recorded matter-of-factly in verse 23 [**Judges 21:23**]:

And the people of Benjamin did so and took their wives, according to their number, from the dancers whom they carried off. Then they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and lived in them.

All of that sounds rather mundane and inconsequential, but it also reveals how far the Israelites have strayed from God.

According to Deuteronomy 13, any city devoted to destruction was to remain that way into perpetuity and was never to be rebuilt.

But Israel has abandoned the covenant way of life and begun functioning like Canaanites in every respect.

So the people are satisfied with what they have done, and every man returned to hearth and home.

Because [**Judges 21:25**]

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

And that closing refrain interprets this final chapter and the book as a whole.

Nothing is right in the eyes of God; wickedness is democratized, so there is no need for a king to lead the people astray.

God is distant because the people ignore him, there is a growing insensitivity to sin, and everyone is doing what seems best to themselves.

And the results are disastrous.

Conclusion

Once again, we find ourselves looking at Scripture and realizing we are looking into a mirror that reflects our present culture.

As we heard in our Scripture reading from Joshua 24, the people of Israel were committed to doing well in following God - they pledged to do so repeatedly in the face of all Joshua's warnings about how difficult they might find it.

And in Judges, we've seen how far and how quickly they strayed from God once Joshua had passed on.

Despite their stated intentions and their initial enthusiasm to drive the Canaanites out of the land, they were instead drawn into idolatrous worship and apostasy.

The Canaanite culture influenced Israel - there's no doubt about that - but the true source of their problem lay elsewhere.

I want you to notice that the Canaanites aren't a force to be reckoned with in chapters 17-21.

The peaceful, unsuspecting citizens of Laish who were attacked and killed by Dan in chapter 18 are the only Canaanites who appear in the final five chapters.

So we have to face the fact that the real problem facing Israel wasn't the Canaanites surrounding them; it was the "Canaanite" within their hearts.

The presence of their Canaanite neighbors only served to amplify the inherent sinfulness and rebellion that lay waiting to spring forth and grow.

And God's people are no different today.

We still tend to want things our way and to do what seems best to us.

Like Israel, we often think we know better than God - and if God only knew all the facts, he would agree with us.

Like God's people in the time of the judges, the ultimate problem of the church today isn't in the influence of the culture around us; it's in our readiness to adapt to that culture.

It's in our unwillingness to know what God says in his Word, to understand it, to believe it, and then obey it.

The grim reality is that we are our own worst enemy because we, like Israel, are fallible people who must always be on guard against what seems good in our own eyes.

We must choose to serve the Lord, and that isn't a once-and-done choice but a choice that is often made daily or even momentarily.

What we learned about ourselves isn't pretty, and it should cause us to be watchful and diligent to avoid finding ourselves in the same condition as ancient Israel.

But what we learned about God through our study of Judges gives us reason to rejoice.

We are fallible, to be sure, but God is even more faithful.

We saw times in Judges when God stepped aside or went silent to reach his people, Israel; to cause them to seek him and return to him.

But God never quit on Israel or abandoned them.

From Othniel to Samson, God proved just how longsuffering he can be as he withheld his righteous judgment and extended grace and mercy to his people no matter how awful they became.

And we can rejoice in knowing that the God of history remains unchanged in his character and intent.

God is still committed to his people, he still offers deliverance to those who call upon him, he still extends grace to those who are called by his name when they wander, and he still works to draw them to return to him.

So let's strive to remember what we've seen during our study of Judges and commit to being diligent students of God's Word so that we remain true.

While remembering also that it's often when we are at our most fallible that God proves himself faithful.

Let's pray