

Civil War

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- [0 : 0 0] Lord, open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things from your word. Soften our hearts that we might receive that word. Transform our wills that we might be doers of it.
- And loose our tongues that we might proclaim it. We ask this for the glory of your son, your living word, in whose name we pray. Amen. Please sit down. Now, friends, I wonder if I could begin this Bible talk by telling you a little bit about how I prepare to preach.
- First, I pray for God's insight and for the people that I'm preaching to, i.e. you today anyway. Then I copy the passage onto a sheet of paper.
- That could be literally, write it out, or I copy it, or it could be on my computer, which is preferable these days. Then I read it, and I think about it.
- And then I read what others think about it. And then I summarize my findings. And I generally look for, in my preparing to preach, an aha moment when I think, yep, that's it.
- [1 : 0 3] That's what this passage is about. That's how it ought to be applied to this group of people. That's how I'm going to structure my message to convey that idea, that main point, that application. Now, let me tell you that this week I have waited and waited and waited for that aha moment.
- And it had not come by about 6 p.m. last night. And I'm not surprised. Friends, this passage is very complex.
- It is full of difficulties. And no one that I read this week was clear on its main point either. So I found myself in very good company. Nor were they agreed about the interpretation of this passage.
- I read somewhere between 10 and 15 commentaries. And in the end, I came to the conclusion there was no main point. That's unusual for a passage like this.
- In the end, I concluded that there were many people doing many things, and we could learn from a variety of them in this passage. We could learn about things we should and should not do.
- [2 : 0 7] And we could be rebuked by this passage, and we could be encouraged by it. So here's what I'm going to do today. It's a little unusual for me. I'm going to give you an overview of the passage. That's not unusual.
- But then I'm going to look at three or four things we can learn from three or four individuals or groups of people. I think that will be a better way of us approaching the passage. So let's take a quick run through the chapter.
- And I want you to have your Bibles open. And I forget a page number. 259. So have a look at it with me. So follow with me.
- And let's remember the overall context of the book of Judges. Do you remember what the book of Judges is about? The book of Judges is about the time when Israel first entered the land that God had given them. During those early days, they had no king.
- God gave them judges. And some of those judges were strong and godly. Others were rather oddball. And amongst the most oddball was probably the last of them.

[3 : 05] That is, Samson. And Samson did what was right in his own eyes. However, the Lord did work through him. And he did begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines, as God had always wanted of him.

But what we found out was that Israel followed suit. That is, they too did what was good in their eyes. However, what was good in their own eyes was largely not good in God's eyes.

And we saw that last week. We saw a sort of where an inclination to do what is right in your own eyes ends up. And it was not pretty.

You might remember last week. Perhaps you remember. It's the rather gruesome story. There was a certain Levite. He had a concubine, a second wife. Now, that concubine became angry with our Levite and ran off.

He went after her. He spoke tenderly to her. Eventually, he began the journey home with her. Although, because he'd been delayed by the father's hospitality, he didn't get a start till late in the day.

[4 : 05] Which meant he arrived in a city square late in the afternoon. In fact, just after sunset. They arrived at a place called Gibeah in the region of the tribe of Benjamin. They could not find lodgings.

And eventually, an old man on his way home from work took them in. But the town itself was filled with violent, worthless men. Thugs and louts. And these thugs came in the night.

They wanted to have sex with the Levite. In the end, the woman was given to them. She was violently raped. And she ended up outside the door sometime during the night. And the Bible leaves her situation somewhat ambiguous.

Because it doesn't tell us whether she was dead or not. However, what we do know is that the Levite loaded her on his donkey in the morning. And he took her home.

Then he dismembered her. He cut her into 12 pieces and sent all the 12 pieces to the 12 tribes of Israel. And all Israel, as you can imagine when they received this, was aghast.

[5 : 03] They acknowledged themselves that things had hit rock bottom. Sodom had come to Israel. Israel was Sodom. Something must be done.

So that's the background. A Levite. A raped and abused concubine. An atrocious act by the men of Gibeah in Benjamin. The act of thugs and louts who do what is right in their own eyes.

And an agreement by all of Israel that something needed to be done. And that brings us to chapter 20. Let's summarize the main events of chapter 20. First, we're told that all Israel gathers.

Every tribe from north to south. Even from the other side of the Jordan River. They came. And this is the first time, let me tell you, in the whole of the book of Judges. That such a unified action and gathering had taken place.

That's astounding, isn't it? You see, they'd never gathered against foreign aggressors to do this. They'd never got together in such large numbers. An overwhelming number assembled in the presence of the Lord in Mizpah.

[6 : 03] 400,000. Astounding numbers. But then verse 3 tells us that one tribe is missing. The tribe responsible for the atrocity is missing.

Benjamin is missing. Now, I need to tell you that such a gathering is striking for another reason. There is no leader, you see. There's no judge behind whom they've rallied. Now, there have been judges in the past.

They've never been able to get these numbers together. But everyone who's come together, leaderless, knows that a reckoning and explanation is needed. And that's called for at the end of verse 3.

And in verse 4, our Levite, a sort of anti-judge in some ways, steps forward. He gives a report. And then he takes the lead in urging a response.

Now, friends, I want you to remember last week. And I want you to look at the report that our Levite gives. Okay? So remember the story from last week. Now, look at the report that the Levite gives.

[7 : 02] This is 4 to 6. He says, I and my concubine came from Gibeah in Benjamin to spend the night. During the night, the men of Gibeah came after me and surrounded the house intending to kill me.

They raped my concubine and she died. I took my concubine, cut her into pieces and sent one piece to each region of Israel's inheritance because they committed this lewd and outrageous act in Israel.

Now, what I want you to notice is what is said and what is left unsaid by our Levite. I want you to notice what is left out and what is changed.

The changes appear to be deliberately designed to make sure there is no chance of him being charged with any blame. Did you notice that? He smooths it all over so that no one can charge him with anything.

For example, we know from the story that the men of Gibeah were not seeking to kill him. They were seeking to use him sexually. Notice that no account is given of how the woman came into be possession of the man.

[8 : 01] We think it's probably the Levite. We know that the truth in the story could implicate him. Next, he states that the woman was raped until dead.

But we know from the story that she was alive when she made it to the door and where the men were sheltered. And we know that her husband was not waiting for her, but only found her when he got up in the morning.

The tweaking of the story is very human, isn't it? Facts are not grossly distorted. They're just tweaked to give a false impression.

The Levite's a very manipulative man. Because our writer has told us the story in the previous chapter, we know that this war that is about to begin is based on insufficient evidence given by this Levite.

In fact, we can't help but feel that in the face of being threatened sexually, this man is using the death of a concubine to achieve his own revenge. The people of Israel do not do what they're meant to do.

[9 : 03] They don't investigate. They don't call witnesses. The Benjaminites are not present to defend themselves, nor are they asked. Israel does not do what Deuteronomy requires of them to do.

They don't inquire, probe, and investigate thoroughly. They just take the word of this man. Later on, they might give some chance for the Benjaminites, but not much.

Instead, they are quickly and without adequate evidence and procedure. Look at verses 8 to 11. A decision is made. Now notice, the Lord is not consulted. Plans are made to enact vengeance on the people of Gibeah.

And for the first time in the whole of the book of Judges, this is astounding, all Israel is gathered together with one goal. The first time in the whole of the book of Judges. Look at verse 11.

So all Israelites got together and united as one against the city. Well, not quite all because the Benjaminites aren't there. But can you see the irony? Here they are, united as one, but not against foreign aggressors.

[10:04] That's what they're meant to do. They're sort of being compliant with the foreign aggressors all the way through the book of Judges. No, they've largely caved into foreign aggressors throughout the book. No, but now they're united against their own.

Anyway, verses 12 to 17. The Benjaminites are confronted and the rest of Israel demands that they turn over the wicked men from Gibeah. And those events happen in verses 12 and 13.

And the result is given at the end of verse 13. We're told the Benjaminites would not listen to their fellow Israelites. Verse 14 tells us that instead they prepare for battle. They gather some of their elite forces, including some left-handed crack shots with the slings.

Now, there's a real irony here. If you could hear it in Hebrew, anyone know what a Benjamin means? It means son of my right hand. So the tribe of Benjamin's got a whole host of people gifted with their left hands.

Just very interesting. And you're meant to have a giggle at it. Okay. Anyway, you've got 26,000 Benjaminites. And on the other side, on the side of all of Israel, how many have you got?

[11:14] 400,000 swordsmen fit for battle. Verse 17. 26 versus 400. Everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, aren't they? It started off with Samson.

It spread. Now all Israel is in focus. All doing what is right in their own eyes. But I want you to notice verse 18. Look at what's said. We're told that the Israelites went up to Bethel and inquired of God.

And they said, who of us is to go up first to fight against the Benjaminites? And the Lord replied, Judah shall go first. Now, if you read the book of Judges, you know there's an incredible irony here.

You see, the book of Judges begins in the very same way as this. In chapter 1, verse 1 of Judges, after the death of Joshua, Israel asks of the Lord, Who of us is to go up first to fight against the Canaanites?

And the Lord answered, Judah shall go up. I have given the land into their hands. Same question. It's not asked about Canaanites here, is it?

[12:17] It's asked about fellow Israelites. Now, I should say that there's something appropriate about the leadership of Judah here. After all, do you remember where the concubine came from? She came from Judah.

So it's entirely right that one of her own tribespeople should lead the battle. The raped and murdered woman is from Judah. Now, friends, let me give you a quick account of the war that ensues.

It is quite complicated and you can get quite lost in it. So I'll just give you the summary. There are three battles. The first battle happens in verses 18 to 21. Israel inquires of God.

God tells them that Judah should lead. The Israelites line up against the Benjaminites. But Israel is defeated. 22,000 Israelites are killed.

How many Benjaminites are there in total? 26,000. They wipe out 22,000. That brings us to the second battle. It's outlined in verses 22 to 25.

[13:16] Israel asked the Lord in verse 23, Shall we go up to fight against the Benjaminites, our fellow Israelites? And the answer is given in verse 23. The Lord answered, Go up against them.

And they're defeated again. This time, 18,000 armed Israelites are cut down and die. You're doing the mass? That's a lot of these 26 really gifted left-handers are doing real damage.

In verse 26, the Israelites throw themselves back into seeking the Lord. And this time they do it with a lot of vigor. There's weeping, fasting, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then they inquire of God again.

And they have on board, let me say, some heavyweights. That is the right priest in the right place doing the right thing. And the Ark of the Covenant, a rightly credentialed priest present.

And the question is put. Verse 29, Shall we go again to fight against the Benjaminites, our fellow Israelites, or not? And the Lord responds, This time he even gives an indication of the result.

[14 : 20] Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands. And the battle rages for quite some time. There's lots of detail given in the text. It runs all the way to verse 48.

But I do want you to notice a few things. First, the strategy is different this time around. It involves ambush and deception rather than direct confrontation. Second, the location is different.

It takes place in Benjamin, in the region of Gibeah, where the crime has been committed. Third, I think that the battle is won in verse 35.

The victory promised by God back in verse 29 is accomplished in verse 35. Basically, at that point, the Benjaminites have been wiped out as a military force.

That happens by verse 35. But then the account goes on for another 13 verses. And it gives a slightly different perspective. And this perspective looks like holy war.

[15 : 18] Not only are the Benjaminites warriors defeated. That happens in verse 35. But here, the towns of Benjamin are put to the sword. Animals are killed as well.

Towns are set on fire. I mean, this is heavy-handed holy war aggression. Basically, Benjamin is decimated in what looks like unauthorized holy war against the people of God themselves.

A type of war not prescribed for fellow Israelites. It's aggressive and over the top. Friends, here's the story. That's pretty grim, isn't it? The aftermath.

The aftermath. Let me tell you, when I come back from holidays in three weeks and we conclude. The aftermath will be equally grim. However, I told you at the beginning that I had some observations I wanted to make today.

These observations are formed by the way the text is written. They're shaped by what I've learned about the person and work of Christ. So let me just go through them quickly. Three main points. First, what do we learn from this Levite?

[16 : 22] Well, this Levite is a vengeful manipulator of truth, isn't he? He is not like the Lord Jesus, who speaks truth and then faces consequences.

There's no manipulation with him. There's no sense of him enacting vengeance, is there? He is set on truth. The Lord Jesus is set on forgiveness. He is set on grace.

Friends, all so often I think we are more like the Levite than we are like our Lord. You can tell it in the way we use our mouths. We manipulate truth so that people will do our will or not think quite so badly about us.

No, friends, no. Don't learn from the Levite. Learn from the Lord Jesus. The Levite's actions led where? To war and death and atrocity. The actions of our Lord Jesus lead to peace and life.

Follow your Lord. Second, learn from Israel. Now, I think that Israel has two things to teach us. One is positive and one is negative.

- [17 : 28] Let me explain. And again, we need to refract both through what we know of our Lord Jesus Christ. First thing to learn is that the people of Israel were right in seeking to bring the perpetrators to justice.
- They were right in seeking to bring the perpetrators to justice. Even though they had been led by a wily and lying Levite, the deed that had been done by the men of Gibeah was wrong.
- It was wrong. There is no doubt about that. That's why God says it's okay to make war, to punish. It is right that the evildoers will be sought out and punished.
- Sin deserves punishment. We see God's acknowledgement of this on the cross, don't we? That is why Jesus needed to die, because sin deserves punishment.
- Sin is abhorrent to God. In the cross, God acknowledges that sin deserves punishment. The law in the Old Testament makes it clear that sin and sinners deserve punishment. There is a penalty to be paid for not treating your neighbor rightly.
- [18 : 32] And it is right to do justice and to make sure that justice is done. What is not right, this is where Israel got it wrong, is to enact vengeance.
- That is what Israel does here. They go far beyond what is warranted. Holy war is not appropriate here. It was not ordered.
- It was not sanctioned. And as we'll see in our next passage, the result will be that Israel becomes like the men of Gibeah. They wipe out cities in revenge because they raped and killed a woman.
- And they've now wiped out a tribe, effectively. And in the next passage, they will sanction the rape of more women so that the leftover men can have wives.
- They will do the very thing that they are punishing. It is abhorrent. Friends, it is right to punish sins. It is not right to enact vengeance. The cross shows us this, doesn't it?
- [19 : 33] On the cross, Jesus takes the punishment for us. He doesn't act in vengeance. Friends, he acts to stand in our place. And he enables the forgiveness of the sinner.
- That's the second thing to learn. Don't learn from the Israelites here. Learn from the Lord Jesus. But there is a third thing to learn. Friends, did you notice the three rounds of the battle? You can't help but notice it in my view.
- Did you notice that three times the Israelites sought the Lord? Three times he told them to go out in his name. And the first two times, they lost. They lost phenomenal amounts of men.
- They were defeated by the Benjaminites. Only in the third battle are they victorious. Friends, I can't explain this. But it's something I regularly experience myself.
- I don't go out and wage war very often. But that is, I regularly come across things about God's actions that I cannot understand. I do what I think is right.
- [20 : 34] I do what I read about in his word. But the results are not what I think that doing right should reap. Have you experienced that? I can't understand that.
- But it's not an uncommon experience of the godly, let me tell you. Reading scripture will show you this. We sometimes have difficulties, don't we? Even when we do the right.
- Sometimes we do things right and they turn out wrong. They don't work. I can't explain this. But what I do know is that God wants me to seek him, to follow his guidance and to do his will.
- He offers no guarantee that this will bring the results that I expect. Friends, read the Psalms. One third of the Psalms are laments. What's a lament? A lament is when you say, this ought to be happening, it's not happening.

Life ought to be like this under a good God, but it's not like this. Read our passage for today. This is the experience of God's people throughout history.

[21 : 44] However, let's return to the cross of Christ again. The cross of Jesus tells us that even the most unexpected results can, in the purposes of God, bring the most good.

Isn't that what's happening in the cross? Even the most dastardly deed can bring the ultimate good. So let us entrust ourselves to God.

Let us do so knowing that through the cross that he loves us. And let us take the unexpected along with the expected. Saints of old, friends, have often said, Yep, if I trust, who am I?

If I trust God to give me good. But also, if I don't trust him when the bad comes. Friends, let us take the unexpected along with the expected.

And let us do so knowing that God can be at work, even using the unexpected and the ugly for his good. After all, he did it on the cross, didn't he?

[22 : 49] And he can do it in our lives as well. Let's pray. Now, Father, please, as we read these passages in Scripture, let us help us to refract them through what we see in your son, so that we might understand them better.

Father, we think of the dastardly things done in these couple of chapters. And Father, we pray that we might not be people who do what is right in our own eyes, but do what is right in your eyes.

And then, Father, help us to refract what happens through the death of your son on the cross, that we might properly understand them and live in the life of who he is and what he's done.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.