

A HEINOUS CRIME IN A HORRIBLE TIME

• JUDGES 19–21 •

“Now it came about in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite staying in the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, who took a concubine for himself from Bethlehem in Judah” (19:1).

Judges 19–21 contains another story concerning the degradation of the Israelites. The writer of Judges tells of one of the most heinous sins ever committed by God’s people.

We are introduced to a Levite who lived in Mount Ephraim with his concubine who was originally from Bethlehem in Judah. After his concubine became unfaithful to him, she left him and returned to her home in Bethlehem. Four months later, the Levite decided to bring her back to their home. He traveled to her father’s house and stayed for five days. He and his concubine left in the afternoon of the fifth day in spite of the fact that they could not get to their home before nightfall. As nightfall came, he decided to spend the night at Gibeah, a city inhabited by people of the tribe of Benjamin.

The people of Gibeah were extremely inhospitable and allowed the man and his concubine to remain on the streets. Finally, an older man came by who was returning home from working in his field. Discovering that the Levite was from Mount Ephraim, the older man invited him and his concubine to his home, since he was also from Mount Ephraim.

While they were visiting in the home of this older gentleman, some of the men of the town came to his door and demanded that he send the Levite out in order for them to have homosexual relations with him (19:22). These men were said to be “sons of Belial” (KJV). The word translated “Belial” means “worthlessness” or “wickedness.”¹ The concept of Belial became a proper name for the prince of evil, Satan. Thus, the men of Benjamin at the door were of such immoral character that they would have been comfortable in the company of modern-day devil worshipers.

In defending his guest, the older man offered to give the men his own daughter and the man’s concubine to satisfy their lascivious desires. The men refused the offer, but the Levite threw out his concubine to them anyway. The men of Benjamin raped the woman all night (19:25). The next morning, she fell dead at the threshold of the older man’s house. When the Levite was about to leave that morning, he discovered that his concubine was dead on the porch. After arriving at his home, he cut her body into twelve pieces and sent the pieces to the various tribes of Israel.

Horrified by what they had seen, the leaders of the tribes of Israel gathered at Mizpah to ask the meaning of such an atrocious act. The Levite explained that he was trying to call their atten-

¹W. E. Vine, “Belial,” in *An Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1978), 34.

tion to the even more atrocious act that had been done by the tribe of Benjamin. After hearing of the shocking events in Gibeah, the nation of Israel determined to punish the tribe of Benjamin in war for what they had done.

A PRICE MUST BE PAID (10:18-48)

As the eleven tribes of Israel were planning their war against the tribe of Benjamin, they consulted with God regarding who should lead the tribes into battle (20:18). Under God's instructions, the tribe of Judah led the first battle against Benjamin, and the Israelites lost twenty-two thousand men.

The men of Israel were puzzled by the defeat. They approached God a second time to determine if they should continue the fight against Benjamin (20:23). Under God's instructions, Israel went into battle against Benjamin again. On this occasion, eighteen thousand Israelites were killed (20:25).

The men of Israel asked God a third time whether they should fight against Benjamin or not (20:27, 28). This time, God assured them that He would give them the victory. The Israelites fought against Benjamin the third time, and God give them the victory. On that day, all but six hundred of the original twenty-six thousand Benjamite soldiers died.

Since it was God's will that Israel defeat Benjamin, why did Israel lose the first two battles? The most logical explanation is that victory requires consecration and devotion to God. When the Israelites first entered the promised land, they overthrew the cities with great victories. After getting established in the land, they began dwelling in houses they had not built and eating of vineyards they had not planted, and they forgot God. Surely this had something to do with the initial defeats in Judges 20. God wanted His people to understand that the triumph of good over evil carries an expensive price. People have to invest themselves in godly living and deep dedication before victories can be granted.

This lesson needs to be indelibly engraved on the hearts of God's people today. For good to triumph over evil in the church, the price must be paid by each Christian.

The triumph of good over evil today will cost in money. Many people believe that the church should not talk about its need for money. This may be a reaction to the fraudulent activities of the tele-

vangelists who plead for money. It may also be the reaction of a guilty conscience that does not like to be bothered. Whatever the reason for the objection, we are naive if we think that the work of the church can continue without money.

Our society is structured so that money is essential to survival. Groceries cost money. Cars require money. The need for money is a fact of life that we have to accept. It is a fact of life in the congregation that is reaching out for God. Missionaries need money. Children's homes require money. The evangelism of the local community costs money. The local full-time minister must be adequately supported. Utilities for the church building have to be paid. The church has to have money to function.

Where can the church get the necessary money to do God's work? Should we apply for federal assistance? Should we set up a special fund at the bank to which the people of the community can contribute? God has not directed that the work of the church be done in these ways. When the brethren in Jerusalem were suffering, Paul wrote to the brethren in Greece and Asia Minor requesting that they provide financial assistance. He said, "On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper. . . ." (1 Corinthians 16:2). He told "each one" to contribute. When the church is in need of resources to do the work of God, our Father looks to each one of us to do it. For the Lord's work to triumph, each member must pay the price. Joe Barnett wrote the following article:

I'M GLAD THIS CHURCH NEEDS MONEY—
If it didn't, it would mean it wasn't supporting missionaries and preaching the Gospel in other places. No missionary zeal!

I'M GLAD THIS CHURCH NEEDS MONEY—
If it didn't, it would mean it wasn't doing anything to support the homeless and needs. No compassion!

I'M GLAD THIS CHURCH NEEDS MONEY—
If it didn't, it would mean it had "topped out" and wasn't interested in expanding into other areas of needed service. No vision!

I'M GLAD THIS CHURCH NEEDS MONEY—
If it didn't, it would mean it wasn't interested in providing wholesome activities for its teenagers. No concern!

I'M GLAD THIS CHURCH NEEDS MONEY—
If it didn't, it would mean it wasn't interested in

teaching children in those impressionable, formative years. No future!

YES, SIR, I'M GLAD THIS CHURCH NEEDS MONEY—The fact that it does means it has not forfeited its zeal, compassion, vision, concern and future. This church needs my gifts, and I am glad of it. I wouldn't want to be a member of any other kind!

If God's work is to be done and good is to triumph over evil in any local congregation, each member must be willing to pay the price by giving his money.

Second, *the triumph of good over evil will cost in time and talents*. When Paul came to Macedonia to collect the money for the saints in Jerusalem, he was amazed at what he found. People living in poverty were manifesting "liberality" (2 Corinthians 8:2). How could people in such a condition give so liberally to the needs of others? Paul said, "They first gave themselves to the Lord." When someone gives his entire life to God, it is not difficult for him to give a small part of his life to God. Paul was reluctant to accept such a gift from people who obviously had financial needs of their own. However, the Macedonian Christians insisted that he take their gift. As one reads this exchange between the Macedonians and Paul (2 Corinthians 8:1-6), he is struck by a deep sense of commitment in the Macedonian church. They were ready to be used so the cause of Christ could advance and the will of God be done. The first-century brethren were ready to "spend and be spent" in service to their King!

It must be the same today. The progress of God's cause depends upon the willingness of Christians to be spent in God's service. Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. . . ." (Galatians 2:20). Paul had died to himself, and the life he was living was directed by God's will. He wrote to the Philippian brethren: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). When the day of our death arrives, we will know gain because we have lived with Christ. For the child of God, whether he lives or dies, he is the Lord's servant. Service to God cannot be taken out of the closet and put on when Sunday morning comes; it must be a daily life.

If a first-century Christian could be transported into our worship services, he would feel, I believe, very much at home. Our worship and our doctrine is what he knew in the first century.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to those who have given their lives in restoring the New Testament order of teaching. However, if a first-century Christian could be transported into your home, would he see a lifestyle that is concerned with paying bills, accumulating possessions, and "keeping up with the Joneses"? Would he hear of Jesus and His church as he went with you to work? Would the urgency to tell others about the glorious salvation that God offers to every man be discussed? Would he hear mention of the glad anticipation of the second coming of Jesus and a home in heaven? If a difference would be seen, the reason for that difference would be this: an unwillingness to invest ourselves.

The defeats of Israel against the tribe of Benjamin show that the victory of good over evil exacts a very costly price. God's children today must be willing to pay that price if His work is to be done!

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**EVIL CANNOT BE EXCUSED
(17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25)**

The statement "There was no king in Israel," appears four times in Judges 17—21. Each occurrence of the phrase is either just before or after some act of rebellion against God. In 17:6 it occurs immediately after Micah set up his idolatrous shrine; in 18:1 it occurs just before the Danites stole Micah's images and bribed his priest to come with them; in 19:1 it occurs just before the Benjamites committed their grievous sin in Gibeah; and in 21:25 it occurs after the Benjamites stole their wives from among the virgins of Shiloh. This statement is made each time by the writer in an effort to explain what was happening—not to excuse it! While a lack of leadership helps us to understand how such activities as we have read could transpire, it in no way excuses what happened. Neither does it remove the guilt of those who took part.

What a tragedy for God's people in any location to be without human leadership! In some churches, the elders do not have the ability or the desire to provide bold leadership for God's people. Sometimes elders are content with "keeping house" and maintaining the status quo. In some churches, a lack of qualified men results in no eldership whatsoever.

Elders who are not fulfilling the leadership role that God has given them will be accountable to God for their negligence. It is also true that churches that do not have the men necessary to serve as elders are missing a vital element in the functioning and overall welfare of the body of Christ. However, in neither of these situations does the lack of human leadership excuse rebellion and negligence in the members. God has given us our marching orders. While the leadership of godly men is a definite advantage, Christians do not need to be given a special assignment to do what God has already said to do! The battle lines have been drawn, and the orders have been given. It is a wonderful blessing from God to have faithful servants who will lead the fight. However, when that leadership does not exist, God's children must press the battle on their own. No one is given a reprieve from duty because of a lack of leadership!

CONCLUSION

The early days of the judges were confusing times! The Israelites not only forsook the worship of God, but they also forsook the will of God. This resulted in actions which were totally foreign to the moral system God established for His children. From this time in the history of Israel, we learn that the victory of good over evil has a price attached to it. We also learn that the lack of human leadership does not excuse rebellion. If we will learn these lessons, the door will be open for us to accomplish much in our service to God.

A denominational missionary society uses a seal with an ox in the center and an altar on one side and a plow on the other. Below the seal are the words, "Ready For Either!" Is that not the challenge God has given to His children today? God makes it clear that serving Him demands a lifetime of work and possibly the sacrifice of one's life. That thought does

not deter the child of God, for he stands "ready for either."

—Craig Tappe

QUOTATIONS

"Collapse in the Christian life is rarely a blowout—it's usually a slow leak."

Dr. George Sweeting

Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* says to the boys that "there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education."

"Interestingly, the most prestigious center of Muslim studies in the world is al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, which has thirty thousand students. The prerequisite for study there is the ability to recite the Koran by heart."

Wilhelm Dietz,
Holy War

"I am reminded of the illustrious New Testament scholar, prolific writer and expositor, Professor F. F. Bruce. Writing about his long and fruitful life, he concedes that he has one regret—that God never called him to be an evangelist! In his own words, 'There is no nobler gift than the gift of the evangelist—a gift I do not possess.'"

Stephen F. Olford

"You can't save souls by reforming society, you reform society by saving souls."

Norman Vincent Peale

"It is not faith plus works, but faith that works."

Martin Luther

"Don't spend so much time getting your guns into position that you have to finish without firing a shot."

G. Campbell Morgan