

JUDGES SESSION #22

A British bishop characterized the moral climate of the past few decades this way:

“it doesn’t matter what you believe, so long as you believe that it doesn’t matter.”

- in other words, there are **no absolutes** – everything is relative, dependent on majority opinion and other social factors;
 - there is **no objective standard** which is absolutely & independently ‘right’
 - that’s the prevailing view of most modern societies in our day
- but the stories in the epilogue chapters of Judges show us what happens when people, any people, turn their backs on God’s absolute standards for human behavior (as declared in His Word, the Bible) and substitute instead “**what is right in their own eyes**”
- **disobedience** to our Creator-Designer God contains its own built-in seeds of destruction & **disaster**, eventually producing **death**

- chapter 19 begins the **2nd** set of two stories in the **epilogue** of the book of Judges
- this **2nd** appendix contains different stories than those we saw in the past two sessions, from chapters 17 & 18, but the 2 sets relate to each other with these points:
 - this chapter begins with the same phrase as chap. 18: “there was **no king** in Israel”
 - a **Levite** living in **Ephraim** is once again in focus
 - **Bethlehem** figures again in the story
- both sets of stories deal with the results of disobedience to God but this **2nd** set reveals **moral anarchy** whereas the first set gave us an insight into the **spiritual** anarchy of those times, seen in the attitudes & actions of Micah and his Levite priest
- *let’s begin with...*

A. The Nightmare Narrative

- the first story concerns another Levite living in the hill country of Ephraim; it is one of the most appalling stories in all the Bible so bear with me as we need to read the whole chapter (I’m using the Living Bible version):

Judg 19

At this time when there was no king in Israel, there was a man of the tribe of Levi [a Levite] living on the far side of the hill country of Ephraim, who brought home a girl from Bethlehem in Judah to be his concubine. ² But she became angry with him and ran away, and returned to her father’s home in Bethlehem, and was there about four months. ³ Then her husband, taking along a servant and an extra donkey, went to see her to try to win her back again. When he arrived at her home, she let him in and introduced him to her father, who was delighted to meet him. ⁴ Her father urged him to stay awhile, so he stayed three days, and they all had a very pleasant time.

⁵ On the fourth day they were up early, ready to leave, but the girl’s father insisted on their having breakfast first. ⁶ Then he pleaded with him to stay one more day, as they were having such a good time. ⁷ At first the man refused, but his father-in-law kept urging him until finally he gave in. ⁸ The next morning they were up early again, and again the girl’s father pleaded, “Stay just today and leave sometime this evening.” So they had another day of feasting.

⁹ That afternoon as he and his wife and servant were preparing to leave, his father-in-law said, "Look, it's getting late. Stay just tonight, and we will have a pleasant evening together and tomorrow you can get up early and be on your way."

¹⁰ But this time the man was adamant, so they left, getting as far as Jerusalem (also called Jebus) before dark.

¹¹ His servant said to him, "It's getting too late to travel; let's stay here tonight."

¹²⁻¹³ "No," his master said, "we can't stay in this heathen city where there are no Israelites - we will go on to Gibeah, or possibly Ramah."

¹⁴ So they went on. The sun was setting just as they came to Gibeah, a village of the tribe of Benjamin, ¹⁵ so they went there for the night. But as no one invited them in, they camped in the village square. ¹⁶ Just then an old man came by on his way home from his work in the fields. (He was originally from the hill country of Ephraim, but was living now in Gibeah, even though it was in the territory of Benjamin.) ¹⁷ When he saw the travelers camped in the square, he asked them where they were from and where they were going.

¹⁸ "We're on the way home from Bethlehem, in Judah," the man replied. "I live on the far edge of the Ephraim hill country, near Shiloh. But no one has taken us in for the night, ¹⁹ even though we have fodder for our donkeys and plenty of food and wine for ourselves."

²⁰ "Don't worry," the old man said, "be my guests; for you mustn't stay here in the square. It's too dangerous."

²¹ So he took them home with him. He fed their donkeys while they rested, and afterward they had supper together. ²² Just as they were beginning to warm to the occasion, a gang of sex perverts gathered around the house and began beating at the door and yelling at the old man to bring out the man who was staying with him, so they could rape him. ²³ The old man stepped outside to talk to them.

"No, my brothers, don't do such a dastardly act," he begged, "for he is my guest. ²⁴ Here, take my virgin daughter and this man's wife. I'll bring them out and you can do whatever you like to them - but don't do such a thing to this man."

²⁵ But they wouldn't listen to him. Then the girl's husband pushed her out to them, and they abused her all night, taking turns raping her until morning. Finally, just at dawn, they let her go. ²⁶ She fell down at the door of the house and lay there until it was light. ²⁷ When her husband opened the door to be on his way, he found her there, fallen down in front of the door with her hands digging into the threshold.

²⁸ "Well, come on," he said. "Let's get going."

But there was no answer, for she was dead; so he threw her across the donkey's back and took her home. ²⁹ When he got there he took a knife and cut her body into twelve parts and sent one piece to each tribe of Israel. ³⁰ Then the entire nation was roused to action against the men of Benjamin because of this awful deed.

"There hasn't been such a horrible crime since Israel left Egypt," everyone said. "We've got to do something about it."

- this story is told with unusual **literary finesse** as the narrator builds terrific tension:
 - he tells it like a **nightmare**, with its emphasis on nightfall and the dark, dreadful things that happen in the midnight hours in Gibeah
 - John does much the same in his Gospel, chapter 13; when describing Judas leaving the upper room to betray Jesus, John adds the powerful little phrase "**and it was night**"
- ...notice here in Judges 19 how the times of day are emphasized with a growing foreboding:
 - the Levite delays leaving Bethlehem until **late afternoon**
 - at **sundown** they by-pass **Jerusalem**; and we begin to feel uneasy about what may happen
 - they arrive in **Gibeah** but no one speaks to them or invites them in, and they are stranded alone in the town square
 - **twilight** comes: an old man urges them not to spend night out in the town square – why not? ...our sense of uneasiness about the situation grows
 - **darkness falls**: a perverted sex gang surrounds the house demanding horrible things
 - **midnight to dawn**: a terrible scene of rape & murder
 - and then just as the **sun rises**: the wife dies

Why use this literary device of tension buildup?

...to arouse a **sense of outrage** in the readers – how could such a horrible thing happen?! – and the answer would be: people have turned away from God & godliness, and replaced His absolute standard with society's subjective standard of 'what is right in their own eyes'

B. **Clues in the Details**

1. **Detained**

- the father-in-law tries to **detain** them from leaving, 5 times!
- ...the theme of "**detaining**" which is highlighted so strongly in the details here may be intended to point to a formal parallel with Israel's being 'detained' in the father-in-law's house of idolatry ...as a nation, God's people had intermarried with heathen idol-worshippers and now worshiped those same gods themselves; instead of finding joy in God's house they are spiritually 'eating & drinking' in their 'father-in-law's house'
- our main character here is a **Levite** – he's a man with a **calling** - he should return to his service to God as soon as possible -- instead, what is the emphasis in the father-in-law's home? (eating & drinking & enjoying himself)
 - the whole **nation** has a calling: to be God's special people, reflecting God's life to those around them in spiritual darkness – but they're not exercising their calling either; instead they have abandoned God & His house and are focused on their own enjoyment
- ...so, by repeating the details about the Levite & his concubine being detained again & again, we get a sense of **urgency** about this departure
- they finally do break loose and start their journey, but then another significant detail is mentioned: they **don't stop at Jebus** (later Jerusalem)
 - the Levite reasons that it may not be safe to stop in a town of non-Israelites – which of course only highlights even more the subsequent wickedness of the people of Gibeah who were *Israelites*!

- and his comment is a reminder that this city (Jebus) was not captured during the conquest as it should have been
 - ...again, if the people had done what God had earlier commanded, the Levite & his wife would most likely have stopped there and perhaps this story would not have happened at all!

2. Flashback to Rachel

- the mention of **Ramah** in vs. 13– a town about 3 km north of Gibeah – is also significant as it introduces a very significant parallel [suggested by James Jordan]
 - back in Genesis, Rachel & her husband Jacob left her father Laban’s house and in their journeying to Bethlehem they got as far as Ramah (chapter 35), but Rachel was heavy with child and at this point her birth pains started; she gave birth here to Benjamin but in the process Rachel herself died
 - here, the woman leaves her father’s house with her husband
 - and then *she* dies ...near Ramah!
 - ...but there is no birth for Benjamin; instead the consequence is death for the whole tribe of Benjamin! – as we’ll see a couple of sessions further on
- ...this story is “a complete **inversion of the Rachel story**”
 - and rightly so – virtually everything in Israelite life is now inverted, upside down, backwards, mixed up & messed up!

3. Death of Hospitality

- the **first** breach of etiquette at **Gibeah** was **no hospitality**
 - ...even for a ‘holy man’, the Levite, who had his own provisions
 - vs. 18 in the Hebrew literally says - “I am one who walks in the *house of the Lord*, and yet no man will take me into *his house*.”
- hospitality was an expected feature of Middle Eastern culture; moreover it should have been an *honor* for any Israelite to host a Levite
- **Jesus** also identified it as a characteristic of those who belong to His Kingdom, His culture

Matt 25:34-35

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in...

- but the only hospitable person in Gibeah was a stranger living there
 - vs. 21 summarizes what hospitality involved in those days
 - So he took them home with him. He fed their donkeys while they rested, and afterward they had supper together.
 - ...and that description provides a shocking contrast with the next verse:
 - Just as they were beginning to warm to the occasion, a gang of sex perverts gathered around the house and began beating at the door and yelling at the old man to bring out the man who was staying with him, so they could rape him.

- but even this **host's actions** are shocking
 - on one hand he is very hospitable, so careful about the honor of his home (& his principal guest)
 - but he has no concern about the honor of a woman, not even his own daughter whom he offered to the gang!
- ...all these details help us see how utterly horrible the situation in Israel has become 'in the days of the judges'
 - the common decency of **social morality** has died in the land; and their sexual immorality has become utterly degraded
- in our next session we'll use this background to look at **characteristics of a degraded society**.