

JUDGES SESSION #26

In this fascinating set of 4 stories in the epilogue of Judges, we have seen...

- the thief Micah hiring a personal priest,
 - the tribe of Dan moving from one end of the country to the other and stealing Micah's idols and priest along the way,
 - and then the brutal rape & murder of another Levite's concubine
- ...which led to the decimation of nearly the whole tribe of Benjamin.

The 4th and final story is recorded in chapter 21 – another strange narrative arising directly out of the war against Benjamin. One title for this unusual story could be “*How to Catch a Wife!*” ...or perhaps for the ladies we should we call it “*How to Run!*”! You'll see what I mean shortly.
...First, let's see what happened here

A. Wives for Benjamite Survivors

- three times in this chapter, the people of Israel express their great grief and then ask a question
- in fact, they end up asking **6 questions** in this chapter ...the nation is in a dilemma, and nobody knows what to do
 - the moral paralysis we noted in Session 23 continues to plague Israel
- the first question sets the tone:

Judg 21:2b-3

They lifted up their voices and wept bitterly, ³ and said, "O Lord God of Israel, why has this come to pass in Israel, that today there should be one tribe *missing* in Israel?"

- "Oh God, why has this happened?"
- strange question, isn't it? ...surely the answer is obvious: out of their own distorted moral outrage and then angry revenge Israel itself virtually destroyed one of their own tribes – they went to war against them and killed them!
- but now they act as if somehow this is all a mystery for which God is somehow responsible
- it reminds me of **Susan Smith**, an American mother who was convicted of murdering her two children by rolling their car into a lake and letting them drown
 - in her official confession she wrote: "I took off [after the car] running and screaming, 'Oh God! Oh God, no! What have I done? Why did **you** let this happen?'"
- when **Princess Diana** died in that auto crash in Paris, Philip Yancey got a phone call from a tv producer asking Philip to appear on their show – "We want you to explain how **God** could possibly allow such a terrible accident."
 - Philip writes that his immediate response was, "Could it have had something to do with a drunk driver going ninety miles an hour in a narrow tunnel? How, exactly, was God involved?"
- as human beings with free will to make our own choices, we have responsibility for those choices – we **cannot blame God** for everything

- Israel had made their choice long before to ignore God, disobey his commands, disregard his principles... and the results have included moral, spiritual and national disasters
- one of those disasters is the near-elimination of the entire tribe of Benjamin, as we read in chapter 20
- now, chapter 21 describes how they deal with this serious problem

1. Stage 1 – Jabesh Gilead destruction

Judg 21:1

Now the men of Israel had sworn an oath at Mizpah, saying, "None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife."

Why had they sworn not to give their daughters to Benjamin?

- it was OK to marry different tribes within Israel ...but not to marry the Canaanites
- however, Benjamin had behaved like the **Canaanites** in the crimes committed in Gibeah, and so this tribe was now being treated like the Canaanites

Judg 21:5-14

The children of Israel said, "Who *is there* among all the tribes of Israel who did not come up with the assembly to the Lord?" For they had made a great oath concerning anyone who had not come up to the Lord at Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death." ⁶ And the children of Israel grieved for Benjamin their brother, and said, "One tribe is cut off from Israel today. ⁷ What shall we do for wives for those who remain, seeing we have sworn by the Lord that we will not give them our daughters as wives?"

⁸ And they said, "What one *is there* from the tribes of Israel who did not come up to Mizpah to the Lord?" And, in fact, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh Gilead to the assembly. ⁹ For when the people were counted, indeed, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead *was* there. ¹⁰ So the congregation sent out there twelve thousand of their most valiant men, and commanded them, saying, "Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead with the edge of the sword, including the women and children. ¹¹ And this *is* the thing that you shall do: You shall utterly destroy every male, and every woman who has known a man intimately." ¹² So they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead four hundred young virgins who had not known a man intimately; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

¹³ Then the whole congregation sent *word* to the children of Benjamin who *were* at the rock of Rimmon, and announced peace to them.

- it is easy to see how **one thing leads to another** when **sin** gets the upper hand
- the whole dismal set of disasters started with too much interest in **feasting** & enjoying a party at the home of the Levite's father-in-law in Bethlehem, who kept detaining the man and his concubine until it was too late for them to start their journey safely

- it led to their choice of **Gibeah** for their overnight stay
...which led to the concubine's **murder**
...then the Levite sent those 12 terrible packages to the tribes of Israel intending to stir up their emotions
...it worked! and Israel assembled a huge army to war against Benjamin
...that war resulted in almost a complete destruction of the tribe of Benjamin
...and now another Israelite town – Jabesh Gilead – is decimated, not because it is a Benjamite town but because the men from here refused to join the battle against Benjamin!

- in this case Israel is now justifying their **wrong actions** to correct **past mistakes**

- their oath in vs. 1 was evidently too harsh & too hasty, something they dreamed up on their own at a time of high national emotion
- but having made it, now they are forced to fiddle their way around it by doing yet another thing wrong: they slaughter the inhabitants of the town of Jabesh Gilead

- a few years ago Time magazine reported this story:
“Like many teenagers on a Friday night, James Cooney needed a car to pick up his girlfriend. He & his good friend Barry borrowed Barry’s father’s car, and banged it into a light pole causing \$900 worth of body damage. To come up with the money, the two N.Y. City young people hatched a bizarre robbery scheme. Over the next 48 hours, youngsters who had never been in trouble played out every parent’s nightmare. A minor scrape gave way to panic, then to terror. All judgment vanished.
...using a rifle, they held up a grocery store owner & got \$140...but that wasn’t enough money so they rode around looking for someone else to rob...they saw a couple in a parked car, and demanded the man’s wallet...he turned out to be an off-duty policeman who drew his pistol & fired at them
At the end, Cooney, 18, was dead, and four other lives lay in ruins.”

- **sin** naturally sucks us down in a sickening spiral to disaster and eventually death

- don’t let it get a constant grip on your life!

2. **Stage 2** – Shiloh dances

Judg 21:13-24 (New Living Translation)

¹³ The Israelite assembly sent a peace delegation to the remaining people of Benjamin who were living at the rock of Rimmon. ¹⁴ Then the men of Benjamin returned to their homes, and the 400 women of Jabesh-gilead who had been spared were given to them as wives. But there were not enough women for all of them.

¹⁵ The people felt sorry for Benjamin because the Lord had made this gap among the tribes of Israel. ¹⁶ So the elders of the assembly asked, "How can we find wives for the few who remain, since the women of the tribe of Benjamin are dead? ¹⁷ There must be heirs for the survivors so that an entire tribe of Israel is not wiped out. ¹⁸ But we cannot give them our own daughters in marriage because we have sworn with a solemn oath that anyone who does this will fall under God's curse."

¹⁹ Then they thought of the annual festival of the Lord held in Shiloh... ²⁰ They told the men of Benjamin who still needed wives, "Go and hide in the vineyards. ²¹ When you see the young women of Shiloh come out for their dances, rush out from the vineyards, and each of you can take one of them home to the land of Benjamin

to be your wife! ²² And when their fathers and brothers come to us in protest, we will tell them, 'Please be sympathetic. Let them have your daughters, for we didn't find wives for all of them when we destroyed Jabesh-gilead. And you are not guilty of breaking the vow since you did not actually give your daughters to them in marriage.'

²³ So the men of Benjamin did as they were told. Each man caught one of the women as she danced in the celebration and carried her off to be his wife. They returned to their own land, and they rebuilt their towns and lived in them.

²⁴ Then the people of Israel departed by tribes and families, and they returned to their own homes.

- their original dilemma has only been partly solved by destroying Jabesh Gilead and taking those 400 girls, because it still left 200 Benjamite men without wives
- so they come up with another 'solution'
 - and once again it is apparent that decisions are reached by Israel *talking to herself* (as we find the elders of Israel doing here)
 - ...rather than talking with *God* & obeying His directions
 - therefore this solution is a strange one again: kidnapping girls from the festival at Shiloh!
 - ...apparently, this dance was a common custom at Shiloh during the time of a "yearly feast/festival", probably the Feast of Tabernacles
 - note the important meanings of two words used here
 - "**Shiloh**" means 'peace'
 - ...so, this is not describing a violent rape scene at all
 - and the word for "**dance**" conveys an artistic depiction of writhing in childbirth (this is the only place in the Bible where this Hebrew word is translated "dance")
 - in other words, the point of these dances was to **catch husbands!**
 - ...by their dance, the girls from Shiloh are effectively saying, "I would be a good mother & have a fruitful womb"
- the men of Shiloh would be upset, not because their daughters found husbands, but because the husbands were **Benjamites** & they had promised – in verse 1 – **not** to give their daughters to them as wives
 - but **this 'kidnapping' technique gets around the problem**, providing a solution of wives for the remaining 200 Benjamites
- but as we look at the whole story it looks quite obvious that Israel is simply twisting arguments around in order to fit the needs of their troubled situation, a dilemma brought about by their own sinfulness
- in our next – and final session – we will summarize some important principles we've seen throughout this study