

Judges 20B

- In our last study, we stopped at the moment in chapter 20 when the tribes of Israel were organizing to go to battle against one of their own: Benjamin
 - The tribes conducted an inquiry into the matter of the Ephraimite and his concubine
 - They determined that the Benjamites were guilty of extreme sin
 - And so they determined to do something about it
 - As we studied these events last time, we noted that the tribes are still doing what is right in their own eyes
 - They aren't apply God's Law nor were they seeking justice from their appointed judges
 - Instead, they were applying justice selectively according to their own wisdom and desires
 - They overlooked their own sin and the sin of the Ephraimite to deal with the sin of the Benjamites
 - While the Benjamites were willing to protect perverse men within their tribe in order to maintain independence and pride
 - In fact, self-dependence seems to be the chief value among all the tribes
 - The Law Moses gave them was suppose to unite the people of Israel into a single nation that followed the Lord
 - Instead, we have thirteen tribes doing what each feels is right in their own eyes
 - And none are showing any regard for God
- As we ended last week, the tribes approached the tabernacle in Bethel and inquired of God the text said in v.18
 - But remember, the word for God in that verse was Elohim, not Yahweh, His personal name
 - Elohim is the generic word for god, any god

- Which means that the people approached seeking “a” God without a personal understanding of the God
- They
 - That subtle detail was the clue to tell us this nation approached Yahweh as pagans approach their gods, in ritual only
 - They came seeking a superstitious blessing from a distant God
 - The only question they asked was which tribe should enter battle first
 - To which God answered “Judah”
 - His answer was a allusion to the day when Judah will produce the King Who will lead Israel out of sin
 - So with that answer, the tribes ready for battle against Benjamin
 - The Lord answered their question
 - But that doesn’t means He supports their actions
- On the contrary, the Lord is going to use the pride and independence of these tribes against them to teach them a lesson

Judg. 20:19 So the sons of Israel arose in the morning and camped against Gibeah.

Judg. 20:20 The men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel arrayed for battle against them at Gibeah.

Judg. 20:21 Then the sons of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and felled to the ground on that day 22,000 men of Israel.

Judg. 20:22 But the people, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and arrayed for battle again in the place where they had arrayed themselves the first day.

Judg. 20:23 The sons of Israel went up and wept before the Lord until evening, and inquired of the Lord, saying, “Shall we again draw near for battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin?” And the Lord said, “Go up against him.”

Judg. 20:24 Then the sons of Israel came against the sons of Benjamin the second day.

Judg. 20:25 Benjamin went out against them from Gibeah the second day and felled to the ground again 18,000 men of the sons of Israel; all these drew the sword.

- Twice the people of Israel went against Benjamin and twice they were defeated
 - You might think that the Lord would have allowed these tribes to defeat Benjamin, since he gave them instructions on how to enter the battle

- That's the what these tribes thought too
- But the Lord's first concern wasn't the outcome of the battle
- In all situations the Lord's first concern isn't our happiness...it's our holiness
- And there's a need for a whole lot of holiness in this story
- For example, Benjamin was acting in evil and certainly deserved to be defeated in battle
 - They needed to see that their play at independence wasn't going to be a successful strategy
 - But humbling one tribe wasn't going to solve the problem of the other 12 tribes
 - The rest were just as disobedient in their own ways
- In fact the entire nation is acting in disobedience to the Lord
 - Overall, the problem in Israel is their lack of submission to the Lord's authority and to His Law
 - So the Lord desires to correct the other tribes even as prepares to bring justice to Benjamin
 - And the process begins by putting the sons of Israel to the test
- Notice in the first engagement they lost 22,000 men and in the second battle, they lost another 18,000
 - The total is 40,000, and 40 is the number of testing
 - What the text is telling us is the Lord set Israel against itself to teach the tribes a lesson
 - He allowed one tribe to defeat 12 tribes so communicate his displeasure at their arrogance, independence and disobedience
 - He tested their hearts by allowing defeat
 - So that each time they returned to Him, they learned to submit to His authority a little more
 - Notice the first time, they asked merely who should go up first
 - They didn't even use God's personal name

- After the first defeat, the tribes were perplexed and saddened
- They expected a victory simply because God answered them
- They never asked the Lord if He wanted them to fight or even if He would grant victory
 - He gave them the answer they asked for and nothing more
 - But then He led them into defeat to make a point
- The Israelites were treating God like a genie in a bottle
 - They acted as if they controlled the relationship, what little relationship they had
 - They approached God when they needed something, and they asked the questions
 - God merely answers and grants blessing
- Let's take note of how God responds to those who approach Him in a superficial way
 - If we reduce our relationship with the Lord to merely a relationship of convenience, then we should expect to see similar consequences
 - The Lord is not our genie
 - We can't control the conversation nor demand certain outcomes as if our agenda is His agenda
 - He has made a way for us to know Him so that we might become more like Him
 - If try to turn things around thinking the relationship is about making God meet our desires, then the Lord is likely respond to us as he does these Israelites
 - We may find our plans in ruins wondering why the Lord let us down
 - God frustrates plans to get our attention so we'll stop treating Him as a genie
 - He'll brings us to a point where we humble ourselves and seek Him

- Because holiness is the goal, and holiness brings true, eternal happiness
- Notice the effect the Lord's testing had on the Israelites
 - After the first loss, the people got their wake up call
 - They knew something wasn't right because they assumed the Lord would deliver them
 - But the shock didn't correct their hearts entirely
 - Notice in v.22 the people respond by encouraging themselves
 - Literally, the text says the people "made themselves strong"
 - Despite the setback, they are determined to depend upon their own strength
 - They assume they simply need to try harder
 - But the loss has shaken their confidence, so before the second battle, the people return to the Lord again in Bethel
 - The text says this time the people wept and inquired of Yahweh
 - This time the people use the personal name of God
 - That's is an improvement from the previous visit at Bethel
 - They moved from a people who believe a god exists but who don't have the need or interest in pursuing a real relationship
 - To a people who recognize that the Lord God of Israel is their God and He is present in the tabernacle
 - Nevertheless, their weeping is nothing more than a response to the deaths of their brethren, it's not a sign of repentance before the Lord
 - And until they are repenting and ready to humble themselves, the Lord isn't done testing them
 - They are still showing self-dependence, declaring they must make themselves strong again
 - And they are have made no attempt to acknowledge much less address the sin that separates them from the Lord

- So the Lord tells them to go up against Benjamin again, but once more the Lord withholds victory
- In v.24 the people attack a second time, and a second time they are defeated
 - After the second attack, 40,000 have died
 - Maybe from the shock of the loss
 - Or maybe from the coded meaning of the number 40
 - Somehow the people get the point of God's testing and return to Him with the proper perspective

Judg. 20:26 Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel and wept; thus they remained there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.

Judg. 20:27 The sons of Israel inquired of the Lord (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days,

Judg. 20:28 and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, Aaron's son, stood before it to minister in those days), saying, "Shall I yet again go out to battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?" And the Lord said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand."

- Once again the people return to Bethel
 - But notice how they approach the Lord this time
 - First they weep and fast before the Lord until evening
 - Weeping by itself isn't always a sign of repentance, but there's no mistaking the meaning of fasting
 - Secondly, they offer burnt offerings and peace offerings
 - These were required under the Law before a person could approach the Lord
 - Where before the people approached arrogantly without acknowledging sin, now they confirm to the Law
 - Finally, they approach the Lord through the High Priest
 - It's not clear that the High Priest was involved in the earlier encounters

- If they weren't making sacrifices, there would have been no role for the priest in interceding for the people
- But now the people recognize they need an intercessor before they can expect the Lord to consider their petitions favorably
- This marks a bright moment in an otherwise dark season for the nation
 - They have moved from arrogance to repentance
 - From independence to submission to the Lord
 - But it required the deaths of 40,000 men to accomplish this outcome in their hearts
 - Don't underestimate how much the Lord desires our obedience,
 - Consider what He was willing to do here
 - He allowed 40,000 disobedient Jews to perish in order to impress upon His people that they must address sin and seek for holiness
 - And this comes before the Lord has even begun to address the sin of the Benjamites!
 - Once again the point in our relationship is holiness, not self-satisfaction
 - Now that the people have approached Yahweh in humility, the Lord tells them what they've been waiting to hear
 - He tells them to go up again and then He adds that this time they will be successful
 - Though the Lord sent them twice before, only now He is willing to grant them victory
 - If we want to work in God's will and receive His blessings, we must first approach Him on His terms
 - In Israel's day, the Lord demanded the people approach Him according to the Law and through the Levitical priests
 - Today, the Lord has open the way to Himself for all people through His Son, Jesus Christ

- We approach the Father through His Son and only through His Son
- And like Israel, if we try to approach the Lord some other way apart from Christ, then we will be sorely disappointed
- We'll lose in the end
- Moving forward, the Lord has granted the other tribes the opportunity for victory in battle against the Benjamites
 - Because there is still the matter of judging that tribe just as the Lord did the other tribes
 - The other tribes have lost 40,000 men because of the stubbornness of their hearts
 - Not it's Benjamin's turn to suffer God's wrath for their sin under the Law
 - And to be clear, Benjamin's chief sin was not their sexual sin in Gibeah
 - It was rebellion against the Lord by siding with those evil men over preserving unity with the other tribes of Israel
- So then the Israelites enter battle a third time, this time with the Lord's blessings for a good outcome

[Judg. 20:29](#) So Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah.

[Judg. 20:30](#) The sons of Israel went up against the sons of Benjamin on the third day and arrayed themselves against Gibeah as at other times.

[Judg. 20:31](#) The sons of Benjamin went out against the people and were drawn away from the city, and they began to strike and kill some of the people as at other times, on the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, and in the field, about thirty men of Israel.

[Judg. 20:32](#) The sons of Benjamin said, "They are struck down before us, as at the first." But the sons of Israel said, "Let us flee that we may draw them away from the city to the highways."

[Judg. 20:33](#) Then all the men of Israel arose from their place and arrayed themselves at Baal-tamar; and the men of Israel in ambush broke out of their place, even out of Maareh-geba.

[Judg. 20:34](#) When ten thousand choice men from all Israel came against Gibeah, the battle became fierce; but Benjamin did not know that disaster was close to them.

[Judg. 20:35](#) And the Lord struck Benjamin before Israel, so that the sons of Israel destroyed 25,100 men of Benjamin that day, all who draw the sword.

[Judg. 20:36](#) So the sons of Benjamin saw that they were defeated.

- This section gives us an overview of the battle
 - The basic battle plan is to draw the Benjamite army away from the city where they can be ambushed and surrounded
 - Initially, the tribes send a small force against the Benjamites in Gibeah
 - The Benjamites respond by killing some of their attackers in an skirmish outside the city
 - They assume they are due another easy victory
 - But this was merely a diversionary tactic on the part of the other tribes to draw Benjamin out into the open
 - The tribes ultimately plan to ambush Benjamin
 - When the smaller force retreats from the battle, a large army of Benjamites chase after them
 - In the process, the Benjamites leave the city unguarded just as the tribes expected
 - With the city vulnerable, a larger army of 10,000 elite troops descend upon the city and defeat it
 - Notice in v.35 we're told that the Lord delivered a victory to the tribes as He promised
 - This success wasn't due to superior military prowess
 - It was the result of the Lord determining the outcome to suit His purposes
- But of course, we're still in the time of Judges, and so even when the people of Israel follow God, nevertheless they still find a way to do what was right in their own eyes
 - So in the next section we get a detailed description of the battle, where we find the people going beyond the needs of the battle

[Judg. 20:36](#) ... When the men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin because they relied on the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah,

[Judg. 20:37](#) the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush also deployed and struck all the city with the edge of the sword.

[Judg. 20:38](#) Now the appointed sign between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of smoke rise from the city.

[Judg. 20:39](#) Then the men of Israel turned in the battle, and Benjamin began to strike and kill about thirty men of Israel, for they said, "Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle."

[Judg. 20:40](#) But when the cloud began to rise from the city in a column of smoke, Benjamin looked behind them; and behold, the whole city was going up in smoke to heaven.

[Judg. 20:41](#) Then the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were terrified; for they saw that disaster was close to them.

[Judg. 20:42](#) Therefore, they turned their backs before the men of Israel toward the direction of the wilderness, but the battle overtook them while those who came out of the cities destroyed them in the midst of them.

[Judg. 20:43](#) They surrounded Benjamin, pursued them without rest and trod them down opposite Gibeah toward the east.

[Judg. 20:44](#) Thus 18,000 men of Benjamin fell; all these were valiant warriors.

[Judg. 20:45](#) The rest turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, but they caught 5,000 of them on the highways and overtook them at Gidom and killed 2,000 of them.

[Judg. 20:46](#) So all of Benjamin who fell that day were 25,000 men who draw the sword; all these were valiant warriors.

[Judg. 20:47](#) But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they remained at the rock of Rimmon four months.

[Judg. 20:48](#) The men of Israel then turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, both the entire city with the cattle and all that they found; they also set on fire all the cities which they found.

- This detailed account repeats the story, but this time we hear the gory details
 - Specifically, once the Benjamite city is taken, the tribes begin to sack and burn the city
 - The plan had been to use the burning of the city as a sign to the fleeing decoys to stop and begin driving the Benjamites back home
 - Sure enough, when the Benjamites saw their city burning, they turned and fled toward the wilderness hills seeking refuge

- By then, the army in the city came out and together with the smaller decoy force, they closed in on the Benjamites and killed all the soldiers
 - A total of 18,000 were killed
 - But that wasn't enough for the tribes
 - They ran after those fleeing and killed many of them
 - And after that, we read in v.48 that the people kept the fight up,
 - Eventually, they burned every single city in the entire territory of Benjamin
- They were seeking the total annihilation of the tribe it would seem
 - This kind of severe treatment was excessive and likely violated the Law against taking revenge
 - After taking the city, there was no reason to continue on in the pursuit
 - But this seemed right in the eyes of the people of Israel, so in the process, they kill all but 600 of the men in the entire tribe of Benjamin
- This introduces a new problem in Israel
 - The potential extinction of one of the tribes of Israel
 - The 600 men who are hiding in the rock of Rimmon are the last men descended from Benjamin
 - If these men die without producing heirs, the promises of God are in jeopardy
 - The entire nation is in jeopardy
 - That's how serious this sin is in the nation
 - That's why the writer places this story at the end of the book
 - It's the climactic conclusion of all the sin and all the rebellion taking place in the nation during these days
 - The very existence of Israel is at risk because the nation has become so disobedient

- Just a few generations earlier, they were entering the land triumphantly under Yeshua, the man Joshua who pictures Jesus
 - And now they are tearing each other apart
 - Barely acknowledging God or each other
 - And without a concern for God's law or for righteousness
 - Each doing what was right in his own eyes
- We have one chapter remaining, to see how Benjamin is rescued from certain destruction
 - And then we'll move on to the final story in the three-part ending to this book
 - The story of Ruth