

October 4, 2020

THE DARKNESS OF SIN AND THE SAVING MERCY OF GOD

Judges 17:1-21:25

(3 of 3 in a series through Judges)

In one of my first classes at Southern Seminary the professor told a story of doubt and struggle soon after being hired under the new leadership of Albert Mohler in the mid-nineties. Mohler's hiring signaled that the seminary was on a trajectory of moving back to a more theologically conservative position on several issues. This meant, however, that as professors were required to espouse their beliefs on things like the Bible being inerrant or the office of pastor being only for men, many of the present (more liberal) faculty wouldn't be able to do so and would end up resigning or being fired. The professor told my class that day that this meant his early years were a time of unrest and upheaval on campus. Students were mounting protests in the halls. Professors were holding strategy meetings, attempting to take the seminary back in a liberal direction. One day when chapel was about to start, those entering the building walked past a dummy made to look like Dr. Mohler, with a noose around his neck, hanging from a tree. It was indeed a difficult time to be on campus in Louisville.

And one day, as my professor told us, his knees began to buckle. He believed in Mohler's vision. He wanted Southern Seminary to get back to teaching the Scripture and training pastors who would uphold God's Word. But the pressure and stress were mounting, so he decided he would go to Dr. Mohler's office and ask him if he felt their fight at the seminary was still worth it. After all, the pushback and struggle were more than he had anticipated. The professor entered Dr. Mohler's office and was about to ask his question, when Dr. Mohler blurted out, "I just walked through the first floor of Norton Hall and saw one of my faculty members presiding over a lesbian wedding." And my professor said that in that instant, he responded, "Sir, that's why we can't grow weary in our battle to teach the battle!" Getting that glimpse of how far the seminary had wandered from the Scripture was all he needed to be reminded of why everything they were going through was worth it. It was a wakeup call, warning him not to grow weary in doing good.

I think that's part of the purpose of the end of Judges, which we're looking at today in chapters 17-21. As I mentioned in week 1, I think this book was originally written so that a generation of Israelites could look at what had been done by their fathers and not go down the same evil path. We know for us, years removed, this narrative serves to highlight Israel's failures so that we might not desire evil as they did. But just in case your resolve to fight sin and cling closely to God's Word is growing weak or you find your vision for how terrible sin is growing dim, then the author gives us the conclusion of his book, which contains what is probably the most painful and grotesque story in all of Scripture.

Whereas the main section of the book focused on the judges and their downward spiral into greater and more perverse sin, these concluding chapters of the book give us a glimpse into the normal life of the people of Israel. We see the author signaling to us that this is what he is doing in two ways. First, he introduces the last two narratives simply by speaking of individuals. He

starts chapter 17 writing, “There was a man,” and then begins chapter 19 by taking about “a certain Levite.” This is his way of showing that he’s taking simply a sampling of what was happening in the land. But in case we don’t recognize it, he does a second thing, by bracketing these stories with this statement (in 17:6 and 21:25)—“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” In other words, these are glimpses of what everyone else was doing as well as each was doing right in his own eyes. So what I want to do this morning is take these two larger episodes (17-18 and 19-21) and walk through them under the category of Israel’s religious and spiritual failings and Israel’s ethical and moral failings, and then reflect on how we should respond. Let’s start with the first.

The religious and spiritual darkness in Israel

Chapters 17-18 begin with a story of a man named Micah who steals 1,100 pieces of silver from his mother. It’s an odd place to drop into a story, but (again) it’s a glimpse at the depravity of the people. The mom responds by calling down a curse on whomever stole from her, and because she does this within the hearing of her son, he decides that he should confess and hopefully avoid this curse. Sure enough, the mom responds to his confession, saying, “Blessed be my son by the LORD” (17:2), which is her way of asking the Lord to lift her called upon curse and instead bless her son.

Then, in apparent thanksgiving, the mother decides she will dedicate the money to the Lord, but here is where things get interesting. She says, “I dedicate the silver to the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a metal image” (17:3). In other words, she dedicates the money to the Lord *by giving it to a silversmith to make a carved image*. Now, if you’re thinking, “But wouldn’t that be a violation of God’s command to make no graven image?” you’re absolutely right. This is a picture of such ignorance of the law that they think that they will honor the Lord *by violating his direct command*. And it gets worse.

Micah gets the carved image and metal image that cost 200 pieces of silver (who knows what happened to the other 900 pieces?) and sets them up in his house as his gods. He’ll later even acknowledge that they’re his gods (18:24). And he makes his son a priest to carry out his cultic worship in his home—which violated both the fact that the Lord had a specific place designated for worship (and it wasn’t Micah’s home) and that only the sons of Aaron could be priests (and Micah’s son didn’t qualify).

But it gets worse. A Levite comes along on a trip, and he and Micah run into each other. Micah shows him his gods he’s fashioned and asks him to be his new priest, for which Micah will pay him “ten pieces of silver a year and a suit of clothes and [his] living” (17:10). Now, the Levites were God’s appointed ministers to go and instruct people in the law. This should have been an opportunity for the Levite to rebuke Micah, but instead he agrees to the deal. Again, this might be the equivalent of a pastor attempting to help facilitate your illegal drug business—if only you pay him handsomely. Those responsible for spiritual and religious instruction are participating with and leading the people into forbidden practices.

And the story ends with the tribe of Dan coming along. You may remember back in 1:34-36 that though Dan had been allotted a portion of land as their inheritance, they weren't ever actually able to drive out the Amorites, and so they're still scouting out land for themselves. But instead of stopping and repenting, saying to the Lord, "We didn't obey you and now we want to trust you to empower us to drive out the Amorites and give us the land you have allotted for us," they spot another piece of land with an isolated unsuspecting people and destroy them to take their land. But on their way to settle into that now-conquered land, they stop by Micah's house, take his gods, convince the Levite to come be their priest, and go on their way, thus simply transporting the religious idolatry that was taking place at Micah's house to the new territory of Dan. We see the pathetic end of this story in 18:25-26, "And the people of Dan said to him, 'Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest angry fellows fall upon you, and you lose your life with the lives of your household.' Then the people of Dan went their way. And when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his home."

In other words, Israel is a people who have either become so ignorant of God's Word that they are attempting to worship God by doing the very things he's forbidden, not knowing he's forbidden them, or they have become so rebellious that they're intentionally doing that which God has forbidden and suggesting that God recognize it as legitimate and acceptable worship. And this is not simply happening among the people—exhibited by Micah and the entire tribe of Dan—but even among the supposed spiritual leaders as well, as we see with this Levite. And so we see the spiritual and religious darkness in Israel. Then, in 19-21 we see the ethical and moral darkness in Israel.

The moral and ethical darkness in Israel

Judges 19 begins a story that is one of the most painful to read in all of Scripture. It begins with a Levite who took a concubine for himself. We don't know whether this is because he has another wife or simply sees her as something less than a wife. Regardless, we are told that she was unfaithful to him (or it might read "became angry with" him) and left and went to her father's house, and he decided to go after her. Interestingly, as the Levite arrives at his father-in-law's house, he is shown great hospitality, which actually leads to the Levite leaving too late one evening and finding himself unable to make it home by nightfall. Consequently, he has to find somewhere to stay.

The first place they come to is a town called Jebus, but the Levite refuses to stay there, saying, "We will not turn aside into the city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel, but we will pass on to Gibeah" (19:12). But little did he know, this decision would be tragic, as he finds greater evil in Gibeah than he could have imagined.

As he gets to Gibeah, the Levite and his concubine find that the hospitality they had hoped for is completely absent. There is nowhere to stay, and so they decide they'll just stay in the town square for the night. But soon a man comes along, telling them they must not do so, which tips us off that this man may know something about the town that he isn't saying. And sure enough, in short order our suspicions are confirmed.

Some men of the city show up at the man's door demanding that they hand his guest over to them so that they might rape him. It is shocking, and it's supposed to be shocking. This image of homosexual rape by the men of the town sends us back in our minds to Genesis 19 and Sodom, where a similar narrative was played out there—only angels stopped it before it got terrible. This narrative will see no rescue. We're supposed to see that Israel is beginning to look like Sodom.

Anyway, instead of handing over the Levite to them, the host and the Levite shove the concubine out the door so that the men end up raping and abusing her all night, leaving her for dead. And in one of the saddest images found in Scripture, the Levite decides to set out on his way the next morning. The text says that he "went out to go on his way" (19:27) showing complete disregard for what may have happened to his concubine overnight. But as he opens the door, there she is, with her hand on the threshold of the door. He callously says to her, "Get up, let us be going" (19:28), but she doesn't answer, and he realizes she's died. So he takes her body, cuts it up—"limb by limb"—into twelve pieces and sent her throughout all of Israel so that the people throughout Israel might know what had taken place among their own people. Again, Israel has become like Sodom.

Well, the tribes come together and want to know what happened, and the Levite gives them a version of the story, conveniently leaving out the note that he handed this woman over rather than sacrificing himself for her. And the tribes determine that judgment must happen, so they demand the people of Benjamin hand the men of Gibeah over to them. And, surprisingly, the people of Benjamin refuse. They actually decide to defend this heinous act, and so the tribes declare a holy war, taking up arms against Benjamin, and taking a vow that if Benjamin survives they will not allow any of their daughters to intermarry with any from that tribe.

Now, once again, the reader is supposed to see the irony here. This is what Israel was supposed to have done with the Canaanites. Wipe them out and don't intermarry. Instead they spared them and intermarried with them. And now they've become like the Canaanites. Nonetheless, the tribes fight against Benjamin, and in the first two battles the Benjaminites are victorious. Thousands of Israelites are killed without the mention of there being one casualty among the tribe of Benjamin. And so the tribes cry out to the Lord, asking what they should do, and the Lord answers, "Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand" (20:28), and they do, setting up an ambush and killing all the people of Benjamin except 600 men.

Now here it can be a little confusing. It seems that the Lord is with the people of Israel against Benjamin. Perhaps the Lord is supporting them for finally being willing to make war against sin—sadly it's just against their own people instead of the Canaanites. At the same time, though, we can ask, "If the Lord is with them, why does he allow them to lose in the first two battles with Benjamin before the scheme to ambush them and conquer them as they do?" Well, perhaps there's a clue in how all of this unfolds. This battle against Benjamin looks a lot like an earlier battle Israel fought against Ai right after Joshua led them into the promised land. In the battle against Ai, Israel had just come off the victory at Jericho and turned to battle Ai, and they lost the

initial battle, losing a number of their men. Then, they ultimately conquered Ai in their next battle through the exact same scheme of ambushing them that plays out with the battle with Benjamin. So why had they lost their initial fight with Ai? It was because they had disobeyed the Lord. The Lord had told them not to take any treasure from Jericho after they conquered it, but a man named Achan did. And because Israel itself was now sinful the Lord couldn't give them victory until they saw it and dealt with it. It may well be then that the reason the Lord allows Israel to suffer defeat in their first two battles before ultimately overcoming Benjamin is because he was sending the message to them that though Benjamin is grievously wicked, they are as well. It wasn't just Benjamin doing what was right in their own eyes; all of Israel was. And the reader needs to see this before seeing the conquest of the tribe of Benjamin, reducing the tribe to 600 men.

But at this point the other tribes have pity on the men of Benjamin. They don't want to kill all of them, and they want them to continue on. The problem is that they'd made that vow not to give their daughters to them in marriage. And now they need 600 women for this remnant of men. But they don't consult the Lord at this point. They simply try to figure it out. They first recognize that there was a group that never showed up to fight and make the vow against Benjamin, so they kill the people of Jabesh-Gilead, only sparing 400 virgin women to give to Benjamin. But they still need 200 women, so they kidnap 200 virgin women from another group, telling them that since they're kidnapping their daughters, these men are not violating the vow not to give their daughters in marriage, and so the tribe of Benjamin is spared. And this leads to our conclusion in 21:25, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

What then should we see and take to heart from this book? Let me list three things briefly.

Recognize the danger of compromised obedience and tolerating sin

We started our study seeing Israel make small compromises in regards to obedience and then tolerating their sin without repenting. I mentioned then that this is the author's answer to, "How could they get this bad?" Sin isn't content, but it hardens, deceives, and leads to greater and more perverse sin. Perhaps if there's anything we should gather from the book of Judges it is the need to make war on sin, as Owen famously noted, "Be killing sin or sin will be killing you." Second, commit to renewing our minds to God's Word.

Renew our minds according to God's Word

The refrain, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" as an explanation for why they're religiously and morally rebellious is a reminder that the Lord hasn't made us to function independently of him. You could trace this theme throughout the Scripture, starting with Eve in the garden doing what seemed right in her own eyes on to the end. And the reality is that God never made human beings to function independently of him, making judgments about what is good on our own. But neither has he remained silent. He has spoken. His Word is given to us so that we might know who he is, who we are, what he demands of us, and how we can know him.

The Scripture is sufficient for us to know what is right and good. And so one thing the book of Judges should do is remind us of the importance of staying in the Word. Let's make a habit of reading God's Word, hearing it preached, and reflecting on it as we seek to obey it. Apart from it, we will show ourselves to be as foolish as those in Judges 17-18 and potentially as wicked as those in 19-21. But finally, one more word.

Remember the mercy and grace of our God

The last line of the book of Judges reminds us that there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It sets you up simply to think that if they had a king all would be well. And soon they would indeed have a king, but he would come from this very tribe of Benjamin that had aligned themselves with the wicked men of Gibeah. And Saul the Benjamite did little to steer Israel away from sin. So what this last line is really saying is that Israel needed an *ideal* king, and the glorious news is that he came. God the Son took on flesh so that he might serve as the king of his people, showing us in his life what obedience should look like. But he did more than provide a model for us. He died for our sins and rose from the dead so that people like us—people who might even look more like those in this last section of Judges than we wish—might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

And there is nothing—no matter how dark your sin—that can keep you from his mercy is grace. You simply must repent and believe. He has done everything necessary to pay for sin. We just believe. And he delights in showing grace to sinners like you and me. Interestingly there was one other individual who came from this tribe of Benjamin, and he was a bad guy as well, even persecuting the church. But one day Paul saw the risen Christ, who changed his heart and told him to go and preach the good news all over the world. Eventually that led to you and me hearing the gospel. In other words, the grace the Lord showed to these undeserving people at the end of Judges was grace for you and me, who are also undeserving. Let us then run to our Lord, rejoice in his forgiveness and grace, and obey the one who loves us so much. Amen.