

**DOWNWARD SPIRAL, PART 15: “THE ESCALATION OF EVIL”
JUDGES 19:1-21:25**

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 15 of our sermon series called “Downward Spiral,” where we're going through the book of Judges together.

And today's sermon is titled: “The Escalation of Evil.”

So let's get right into it.

Sermon Introduction

John Wick. Kill Bill. The Godfather.

These are *three* movies with a *similar* premise.

In John Wick, a former assassin is brought out of retirement when his dog is killed and his car is stolen. The rest of the movie is him basically killing everyone in the criminal underworld.

In Kill Bill, a betrayed assassin is left for dead and loses her unborn child, and the rest of the movie is her basically killing her former assassin teammates and her ex-lover.

In The Godfather, there's an assassination attempt on a mafia boss, and the rest of the movie is basically a series of retaliatory killings between multiple mafia families.

All three of these movies are *huge* movie franchises.

There seems to be something in us that resonates with taking matters into our own hands, dishing out our own version of justice, and doing what is “right” in our own eyes.

In the back of our minds, we *know* that killing people to get even is *wrong* and even *evil*, but by the end of the movies, these fictional characters don't really have to deal with the aftermath of what they've done. The movie credits roll, we feel entertained, and we don't give it much thought.

But what happens when this same premise plays out in real life—and you can't just walk away from the aftermath of escalating conflict?

What happens when we *really* do what is right in our own eyes?

That's what we're going to look at more today.

The One Thing

When we do what is right in our own eyes, evil only escalates.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Judges 19-21.

I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open to this passage and look down at verses that are referred to throughout the sermon. It will help you follow along more easily.

I'd highly recommend using a physical Bible, but if you don't have one, you can download the ESV Bible app, or just ask someone next to you, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share with you.

<pause>

Today, we are finishing the *third* and *final* section of the book of Judges.

- The *first* section was the two-part introduction (1:1-2:5; 2:6-3:6).
- The *second* section was the main body of the book, which told the narratives of 12 judges—or military leaders that God raised up to deliver his people from foreign oppressors (3:7-16:31),
- and this *third* section is the two-part conclusion of the book (17:1-18:31; 19:1-21:25).

These concluding chapters are basically “rock bottom” in the downward spiral that we’ve been seeing throughout the book. It’s a description of the *corruption* of the people of Israel.

If the previous sections gave us the *big picture*, this two-part conclusion is a *zoomed-in, on-the-ground* look at that *one* phrase that was repeated throughout the book—“And the people of Israel did [or “again did”] what was *evil* in the sight of the LORD” (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

And we’ll see that “what was *evil* in the sight of the LORD” was “what was *right* in [their] own eyes” (17:6; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1).

And that’s where we are as we begin today’s passage.

Scripture Reading

Since this is a longer passage, we’ll read and summarize *portions* at a time and unpack them as we go.

Overview

We’ll look at this passage in three parts, where we’ll see how evil escalates as people do what is right in their own eyes.

- I. The death of one woman (19:1-30)
- II. The destruction of one tribe (20:1-48)
- III. The depravity of an entire nation (21:1-25)

I. The death of one woman (19:1-30)

Look at chapter 19, verses 1-3.

[^{19:1} In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. ² And his concubine was unfaithful to him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months. ³ Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. And she brought him into her father's house. And when the girl's father saw him, he came with joy to meet him.]

In verse 1, we see the *beginning* of the repeated refrain we’ve already heard *twice* in this two-part conclusion—“In those days, when there was no king in Israel” (cf. 17:6; 18:1).

And it’s meant to call to mind the *second* part of that refrain as well: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6; 21:25).

This triggers us to understand that the following narrative is all a terrible *example* of everyone doing what is *right* in their own eyes, which is what is *evil* in the sight of the LORD.

<pause>

The narrative begins with a Levite from Ephraim who goes to Bethlehem¹ to get a *concubine*, which was basically like a second-class wife.²

In verse 2, his concubine is “unfaithful” to him, and she returns to her father’s house in Bethlehem.

In verse 3, after four months, the Levite finally pursues her with his servant, and it says that he means “to speak *kindly* to her and bring her back.” When the Levite arrives, her father *welcomes* him and begins to showcase *lavish* hospitality.

Look at verses 4-10.

[⁴ And his father-in-law, the girl's father, made him stay, and he remained with him three days. So they ate and drank and spent the night there. ⁵ And on the fourth day they arose early in the morning, and he prepared to go, but the girl's father said to his son-in-law, “Strengthen your heart with a morsel of bread, and after that you may go.” ⁶ So the two of them sat and ate and drank together. And the girl's father said to the man, “Be pleased to spend the night, and let your heart be merry.” ⁷ And when the man rose up to go, his father-in-law pressed him, till he spent the night there again. ⁸ And on the fifth day he arose early in the morning to depart. And the girl's father said, “Strengthen your heart and wait until the day declines.” So they ate, both of them. ⁹ And when the man and his concubine and his servant rose up to depart, his father-in-law, the girl's father, said to him, “Behold, now the day has waned toward evening. Please, spend the night. Behold, the day draws to its close. Lodge here and let your heart be merry, and tomorrow you shall arise early in the morning for your journey, and go home.”

¹⁰ But the man would not spend the night. He rose up and departed and arrived opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). He had with him a couple of saddled donkeys, and his concubine was with him.]

After three days of eating and drinking, the Levite is ready to leave with his concubine and servant, but as the good host, her father *insists* that he stay longer, and the Levite politely *accepts* his hospitality.

This keeps going on for an additional *two* days, until the Levite feels like he’s been delayed long enough.

So on the *fifth* day, even though it’s already late in the afternoon and he won’t get very far, the Levite feels like if he doesn’t leave now, he’s probably never going to leave.

So in verse 10, he declines staying another night, and he leaves with his concubine and servant.

Look at verses 11-15.

[¹¹ When they were near Jebus, the day was nearly over, and the servant said to his master, “Come now, let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites and spend the night in it.” ¹² And his master said to him, “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.” ¹³ And he said to his young man, “Come and let us draw near to one of these places and spend the night at Gibeah or at Ramah.” ¹⁴ So they passed on and went their way. And the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin, ¹⁵ and they turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah.

¹ In the previous chapters, we had a Levite from Bethlehem going to Ephraim (17:7-8), but here, we have a Levite from the Ephraim going to Bethlehem—in the reverse direction. It doesn’t matter which direction you go—top down or bottom up—the people of Israel are *corrupt*.

² NET footnote on Judges 8:31 says: “A *concubine* was a slave woman in ancient Near Eastern societies who was the legal property of her master, but who could have legitimate sexual relations with her master. A concubine’s status was more elevated than a mere servant, but she was not free and did not have the legal rights of a free wife. The children of a concubine could, in some instances, become equal heirs with the children of the free wife. After the period of the Judges concubines may have become more of a royal prerogative (2 Sam 21:10-14; 1 Kgs 11:3).” As an aside, the Bible does not condone polygamy; whenever we see multiple wives and/or concubines in the Bible, it’s never pictured positively—it always leads to all kinds of problems.

And he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, for no one took them into his house to spend the night.]

As it's nearing sunset, the servant suggests that they spend the night in the city of *Jebus* (which would later become Jerusalem, but it was still a *Canaanite* city at this time).

But the Levite *refuses* to stay with “foreigners” (or *non-Israelites*).

He's probably thinking, “Who *knows* what could happen to us in such a *dangerous* city?”³

So they go a little further and enter the city of *Gibeah*, which belonged to the tribe of *Benjamin*, so it was a city full of fellow *Israelites*.

But in verse 15, in *contrast* to the *warm* welcome and *lavish* hospitality they received in *Bethlehem*, in *Gibeah*, “no one took them into his house to spend the night.”

In the ancient near east, this would have been extremely *odd*, if not *offensive*, because offering hospitality to such travelers, especially fellow *Israelites*, was understood to be a sacred *duty*.⁴

Look then at verses 16-21.

[¹⁶ And behold, an old man was coming from his work in the field at evening. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was sojourning in Gibeah. The men of the place were Benjaminites. ¹⁷ And he lifted up his eyes and saw the traveler in the open square of the city. And the old man said, “Where are you going? And where do you come from?” ¹⁸ And he said to him, “We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to the house of the LORD, but no one has taken me into his house. ¹⁹ We have straw and feed for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and your female servant and the young man with your servants. There is no lack of anything.” ²⁰ And the old man said, “Peace be to you; I will care for all your wants. Only, do not spend the night in the square.” ²¹ So he brought him into his house and gave the donkeys feed. And they washed their feet, and ate and drank.]

Suddenly, an old man comes from his work in the field and sees them in the open square of the city, and *he* offers to host them for the night.

None of the *local* Benjaminites offer any hospitality, but only this *non-local* from Ephraim offers them hospitality.

In verse 21, the Levite, his concubine, and his servant enter the old man's house—and they wash up, eat, and drink.

All seems to be well now.

<pause>

But as the reader, we're left wondering what the old man meant by his ominous warning in verse 20: “Only, do not spend the night in the square.”

Sure, not everyone here is as *hospitable* as they expected, but they aren't in any real *danger* here, right? After all, this *is* an *Israelite* city.

But we—along with the Levite, his concubine, and his servant—are all about to be *horrified* by what comes next.

³ John Currid, “Judges,” The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/judges>.

⁴ Arthur E. Cundall (*Judges*, TOTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: “The Levite and his party sat down in the open place of the city, probably just inside the gate, which served as the meeting-place for social, business and judicial purposes, waiting for the expected hospitality which was not forthcoming. This failure to offer hospitality, a sacred duty in the East, was downright boorish on the part of the Benjamites, for the two laden asses gave the assurance that no great liability would be incurred (cf. verse 19). Such a breach of etiquette was an indictment of the men of Gibeah and an ominous warning of what was to come.”

<pause>

Before I read this next section, I want to warn you that these are some of the most gruesome and evil events described in the entire Bible.

There's homosexuality, terrible failures of a father and a husband, rape, abuse, murder, and bodily dismemberment.

[We announce our sermon text each week ahead of time, and we encourage you to read it on your own beforehand, so hopefully none of us are caught *completely* off guard. Still...]

There may be some of you who are here today, who have past experiences—like sexual abuse—that may make this next part particularly painful to read.

If that's the case, I want you to know that, in some way, the fact that such horrific evil is acknowledged in the Bible should be a source of *comfort*.

God does *not* ignore your painful experiences; but given that this is “rock bottom” of the downward spiral in the book, we see how God *exposes* and *condemns* such evil, and he *will* one day *judge* every act of evil and bring about his *perfect* justice.

Parents, if your kids are here, I'd encourage you to also have a follow-up conversation with them afterwards to help them process through the *extent* and the *kind* of sin that is mentioned here.

Now, with that in mind, verses 22-26 say this:

²² As they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house, beating on the door. And they said to the old man, the master of the house, “Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him.” ²³ And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing. ²⁴ Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out now. Violate them and do with them what seems good to you, but against this man do not do this outrageous thing.” ²⁵ But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and made her go out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. ²⁶ And as morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.

In verse 22, the men of the city *surround* the house, *beat* on the door, and *demand* that the old man bring out the Levite, so that they may “know” him.

The word “know” was a common expression for sexual intercourse (Gen. 4:1; 19:5; Num. 31:17; 1 Kings 1:4), so the intention of these “worthless fellows” is homosexual gang rape.⁵

In verse 23, the old man goes outside to try to stop them from “act[ing] so *wickedly*” and from “do[ing] this *vile* thing.”

But in verse 24, he does something that is just as *wicked* and *vile*; he offers up his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine as *substitutes* for the Levite—and he even *encourages* the men to “*violate* them and do with them what seems *good* to you” (or more literally, “what is good in your *eyes*”).

<pause>

Before moving on, we need to see that what happens here in *Gibeah* sounds eerily *similar* to what happened earlier in Genesis 19 in *Sodom*.

- In both accounts, there are *travelers* that arrive to the town in the *evening* (Gen. 19:1; Judg. 19:14-15).

⁵ John Currid, “Judges,” The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/judges>.

- In both accounts, a host—who is a *sojourner* rather than a *local* of the city—urges the guests *not* to spend the night in the town square (Gen. 19:2-3; Judg. 19:16, 20)
- In both accounts, the men of the city *surround* the house and make the *same* demand, almost *word-for-word*, to engage in homosexual gang rape (Gen. 19:4-5; Judg. 19:22).
- In both accounts, the host goes out to *plead* with the men *not* to do this *wicked* thing (Gen. 19:7; Judg. 19:23).
- In both accounts, the host offers *two women* as substitutes for the guests (Gen. 19:8; Judg. 19:24).

But that's where the similarities *stop*.

In the *Sodom* account, the two guests were *angels*, and they struck the men of the city blind, so that they could *not* sexually abuse anyone.

But here in *Gibeah*, in verses 25-26, when the men wouldn't listen to the old man, the Levite "seized" his concubine and *forced* her out to these men, and they raped and abused her all night until the morning.

And then, she comes and falls at the doorstep of the old man's house.

She cannot speak, she cannot stand, she cannot knock. She just lays there, *lifeless*.

<pause>

Let me pause here and just comment on the *horrific* treatment of *women* in this passage.

First, there shouldn't have been any *concubines*—or second-class wives—to begin with.

In *creation*, God is clear that marriage is between *one* man and *one* woman in an *exclusive* covenant relationship. In *redemption*, it becomes even *clearer* because that understanding of marriage is meant to picture *Christ's* exclusive covenant relationship with his *Church*.

And Christ has *no* concubines, but he is *exclusively* committed to his *one* bride, the Church.

So the fact that a *Levite*, who was supposed to *teach* God's law (Deut. 33:10; Neh. 8:9), has taken for himself a *concubine* is already not only *wrong* but also a terrible treatment of *her* and whoever was his *actual* wife.

<pause>

Second, the *devaluing* and *objectifying* of women here is *evil*.

In verse 24, what the *old man* does in offering his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine and encouraging the men of the city to *violate* them is nothing short of *evil*.

In utter *distortion* and *abuse* of his authority and responsibility as a *father*, he encourages men to rape his daughter.

And in verse 25, what the *Levite* does to his concubine and what the *worthless men* of the city do to her is *also* just as evil.

And the *root* that allowed them to *justify* all these acts of evil was their *devaluing* and *objectifying* of women.

Notice that when the *men* wanted to commit *homosexual* gang rape, the old man doesn't offer the *male* servant. I'm not saying that's any better, but the fact that he doesn't do that shows that he saw the *women* in the house as *lesser* than the *men* in the house.

And the men of the city obviously only saw the woman as an *object* to be used for their own pleasure, leaving her for dead when they were done with her.

None of these atrocities would have been committed if they *truly* believed what God's word teaches—that men and women are created *equally* in the image of God, and they should both be treated with equal *dignity* because they have equal *value* to God (Gen. 1:27).

Essentially, this was a *dehumanization* of women.

Yes, this happens to *men* as well, but since the text here is more regarding *men* mistreating *women*, that's what I'm primarily applying now.

So *men* [and young *teenage* men], if we only look at the *act*, we may think that this doesn't pertain to us.

But look at the *root* and ask yourself some honest but hard questions:

- What *thoughts* am I indulging in my mind about women?
- How do I *speak* about women? What jokes am I making at the expense of women?
- What am I *viewing*, and what is it teaching me about how I view women?
- How am I *interacting* with women—whether that's my spouse, girlfriend, friend, co-worker, or stranger?

And moving from reflection to application:

- What do I need to *repent* of in the way I've thought about and treated women?
- What do I need to *stop* doing?
- What do I need to *start* doing?
- How do I need to better *protect* and *speak up* for women, even at my own expense?

These would be some good questions to consider later today.

<pause>

Verses 27-30 then say this:

²⁷ And her master rose up in the morning, and when he opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, behold, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. ²⁸ He said to her, "Get up, let us be going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey, and the man rose up and went away to his home. ²⁹ And when he entered his house, he took a knife, and taking hold of his concubine he divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. ³⁰ And all who saw it said, "Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day; consider it, take counsel, and speak."

In verse 27, the fact that the Levite "*rose up* in the morning" means that he was *sleeping* while his concubine was being raped and abused all night. And it seems like he's totally *forgotten* her because he's ready to "go on his way."

But as he opens the doors to leave, he sees her lying there "with her hands on the threshold," as if she was reaching for the help of her husband, his servant, the old man—*anyone*—but no help ever came.

In verse 28, the Levite opens his mouth and says the *first* words he's spoken to her throughout this entire narrative—and they *aren't* the "kind" words that he originally intended when he first pursued her (v. 3).

Rather, after she's been raped and abused all night in *his* place, these are the cold, heartless words of a *horrible* husband: "Get up, let us be going."

But when there's no answer, he puts her on a donkey and goes home—and he continues to *dishonor* her even in her death.

Rather than giving her a proper burial, in verse 29, he takes a knife and he butchers her into 12 pieces and sends her limbs throughout all the territory of Israel, letting the people know what the men of Gibeah have done.

And in verse 30, all the people of Israel are *appalled* by such *evil* done against this woman and they intend to do something about it—and that's when things begin to *escalate*.

<pause>

So first, the death of one woman; and second...

II. The destruction of one tribe (20:1-48)

Look at chapter 20, verses 1-7:

[^{20:1} Then all the people of Israel came out, from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembled as one man to the LORD at Mizpah. ² And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, 400,000 men on foot that drew the sword. ³ (Now the people of Benjamin heard that the people of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) And the people of Israel said, "Tell us, how did this evil happen?" ⁴ And the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, "I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night. ⁵ And the leaders of Gibeah rose against me and surrounded the house against me by night. They meant to kill me, and they violated my concubine, and she is dead. ⁶ So I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout all the country of the inheritance of Israel, for they have committed abomination and outrage in Israel. ⁷ Behold, you people of Israel, all of you, give your advice and counsel here."]

In verses 1-3, all the people of Israel (minus the Benjaminites) assemble at Mizpah, and they ask how this evil happened.

In verses 4-7, the Levite steps up to this assembly of 400,000 armed soldiers, and he retells the story of what happened in Gibeah, but with *questionable* additions and omissions

In verse 5, he says that "the *leaders* of Gibeah" rose against him, but the narrator earlier said they were "*worthless fellows*" in the city (19:22).

He also says that "they meant to *kill* me," but the narrator earlier said they meant to "know" (or have sex with) him (19:22).

Now, it's *plausible* that the "worthless fellows" *included* the leaders of the city, and that they *intended* to kill him, but given what the Levite says *next*, it's more likely that he just means to elicit more *sympathy* from the people of Israel.

He says, "and they violated my concubine, and she is dead." This is a true statement, but what does he *omit*?

He leaves out his *own* act of seizing and forcing his concubine *out* of the house to be raped and abused.

He *spins* the story to make the *Benjaminites* look as *bad* as he can, and to make *himself* look as *good* as he can.

And in verse 6, he says that the *reason* he cut his concubine into pieces and sent her throughout Israel is because "*they* [the *leaders* of Gibeah] have committed *abomination* and *outrage* in Israel."

Again, this is a true statement, but he conveniently omits his *own* contribution to that abomination and outrage.

In short, this was a *manipulative* retelling of the story.

In *his* version of the story, he's 100% the victim; he's done absolutely *nothing* wrong.

The men of Gibeah are *evil* beasts. He's the *guiltless* saint.

And in verse 7, the Levite essentially demands *justice* for his murdered concubine, asking what the people of Israel will do about this great evil that has happened to him.

Oh, but if the people of Israel only knew the *full* story...

- if they saw him seize her and push her out,
- if they saw him sleeping peacefully while she was being raped and abused,
- if they heard his cold, heartless words as she lay there on the doorstep the following morning,
- if they saw her bloody limbs and intestines on the table as he butchered her corpse...
- I wonder if they would have had so much *sympathy* towards him.

<pause>

And I wonder, do *we* sometimes retell stories with this kind of bent?

It may not be our *conscious* intention, but by *slight* assumptions and *slight* omissions, do we end up painting a *tainted* picture of what *really* happened, where the *other* person looks as *bad* as they can be and where *we* look as *good* as we can be?

Does our version of the story conveniently *omit* anything *we* may have done or said to contribute to the situation?

These would be good questions to reflect on later.⁶

<pause>

Look now at verses 8-11.

[⁸ And all the people arose as one man, saying, "None of us will go to his tent, and none of us will return to his house. ⁹ But now this is what we will do to Gibeah: we will go up against it by lot, ¹⁰ and we will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand of ten thousand, to bring provisions for the people, that when they come they may repay Gibeah of Benjamin for all the outrage that they have committed in Israel." ¹¹ So all the men of Israel gathered against the city, united as one man.]

All the people "arose as one man," and they basically vow *not* to return home until they've brought justice upon "Gibeah of Benjamin."

Notice, *three* times in this chapter, all the people of Israel are referred to as being united "as *one* man" (vv. 1, 8, 11).

This is the *most* *unity* among the people of Israel that we've seen throughout the entire book.

But they're united *not* against *Canaanites* or any other foreign *oppressor*, but they're united against the *Benjaminites*—their own "brothers" (19:23; 20:13, 23, 28; 21:6).

The sad reality is that the *only* time the people of Israel are *this* united in the book is to destroy *themselves*.

But it didn't *have* to be that way.

For a moment, there seems to be a *peaceful* way of settling this.

⁶ As a general principle, do your best not to *assume* you know the *intentions* of another person. They may have done something foolish or wrong, but don't assume that their *intentions* were as *bad* as they could be—just like you wouldn't want someone to assume the *worst* of you.

Look at verses 12-17.

[¹² And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, “What evil is this that has taken place among you? ¹³ Now therefore give up the men, the worthless fellows in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and purge evil from Israel.” But the Benjaminites would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the people of Israel. ¹⁴ Then the people of Benjamin came together out of the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle against the people of Israel. ¹⁵ And the people of Benjamin mustered out of their cities on that day 26,000 men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who mustered 700 chosen men. ¹⁶ Among all these were 700 chosen men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. ¹⁷ And the men of Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered 400,000 men who drew the sword; all these were men of war.]

In verses 12-13, the people of Israel go to the Benjaminites and demand that they “give up the men, the worthless fellows in *Gibeah*, that we may put them to death and purge evil from Israel.”

The people of Israel only want a specific *subset* of Benjaminites—just the men in *Gibeah*—to be brought to justice.

That seems reasonable.

But the Benjaminites *refuse* to give up the men of Gibeah. Their *blood* relations seem more important to them than *justice*, and so they double-down on protecting their *guilty* relatives.

<pause>

We see this happen a lot, don't we?

- A *child* does something wrong, but rather than allowing them to experience natural consequences for their actions, parents go to their *defense* and even start *attacking* teachers and other parents who would dare say that their child did anything wrong.
- A close *relative* does something damaging to someone else, but rather than ensuring justice for the one wronged, other family members rally to support their own *guilty* relative.
- A *pastor* does something scandalous, but instead of the other elders *exposing* and *disciplining* the pastor for his sin, they go to his defense and cover it up.

All of these are terrible *perversions* of God's righteousness that we are called to reflect and uphold.

<pause>

In verses 14-17, all the Benjaminites gather at Gibeah to defend the city and go to war with the rest of their fellow Israelites.

But it's a *terrible* ratio for them. The Benjaminites may be skilled left-handed slingers, but they're still outnumbered by the Israelites by a ratio of 15 to 1.

And the bloody civil war begins.⁷

Look at verses 18-28.

[¹⁸ The people of Israel arose and went up to Bethel and inquired of God, “Who shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin?” And the LORD said, “Judah shall go up first.”

¹⁹ Then the people of Israel rose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah. ²⁰ And the men of Israel went out to fight against Benjamin, and the men of Israel drew up the battle line against them at Gibeah. ²¹ The people of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and destroyed on that day 22,000 men of the Israelites. ²² But the people, the men of Israel, took courage, and again formed the battle line in the same place where they had formed it on the first day. ²³ And the

⁷ After the Levite *starts* this war, he completely *disappears* from the narrative—perhaps he's looking for another concubine. He stirs up this whole thing, and he just conveniently slips away, leaving the people to destroy themselves.

people of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until the evening. And they inquired of the LORD, “Shall we again draw near to fight against our brothers, the people of Benjamin?” And the LORD said, “Go up against them.”

²⁴ So the people of Israel came near against the people of Benjamin the second day. ²⁵ And Benjamin went against them out of Gibeah the second day, and destroyed 18,000 men of the people of Israel. All these were men who drew the sword. ²⁶ Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. ²⁷ And the people of Israel inquired of the LORD (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, ²⁸ and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, ministered before it in those days), saying, “Shall we go out once more to battle against our brothers, the people of Benjamin, or shall we cease?” And the LORD said, “Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand.”]

In verse 18, the people of Israel go to inquire of God, “*Who* shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin?”

Notice, the Israelites don’t ask the LORD *whether* they should engage in this battle, but they *assume* it and are simply asking *who* should lead them into battle.⁸

And the LORD responds, “*Judah* shall go up first.”

In verses 19-22, the people of Israel fight against the Benjaminites, but 22,000 Israelites are killed.

In verses 23-25, the people weep before the LORD, and they inquire of him again. But this time, they ask the more *fundamental* question of *whether* they should fight against the Benjaminites again.

And the LORD responds, “Go up against them.”

But similar to the first day, 18,000 Israelites are killed on the second day.

So in verses 26-28, the people weep, fast, and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings to the LORD—and they inquire of him again.

And the LORD responds, “Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand.”

<pause>

Now, perhaps a few questions come to mind here.

- Why does the LORD respond the way he does these three different times?
- Aren’t the Benjaminites the *bad* guys here? How could the LORD grant them *victory* the first two days?
- And why do the Israelites suffer *defeat* the first two days if they were just following what the LORD *told* them to do?

Let me offer *three* anchor truths to help us think about this.

First, *nobody* is a *good* guy here.

Both the Benjaminites and the rest of the Israelites were those who did what was *right* in their own eyes, which was *evil* in the Lord’s sight.

⁸ This is reminiscent of the opening two verses of the book. Judges 1:1-2 says: “After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the LORD, ‘Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?’ The LORD said, ‘Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.’” But there are a couple key differences here. First, they were fighting the *Canaanites* before; but here, they are fighting the *Benjaminites*. Second, the LORD had *commanded* them to fight the Canaanites, but he did *not* command them to fight the Benjaminites here—Israel just *assumed* it. Third, the LORD promised *victory* before, but no such promise of victory is given here.

That much is clear for the Benjaminites, and it will become clearer for the rest of the Israelites in the next chapter.

All of us are sinners by nature and by choice. This truth is repeated over and over again in Scripture.

- “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5).
- “None is righteous, no, not one... no one does good, not even one... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:10-12, 23).
- “No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18).

So *nobody* is good, but *all* are sinners before God.

<pause>

Second, the Lord is able to *sovereignly* use *sinful* people to carry out his *good* purposes.

He can use sinful *Benjaminites* to carry out his judgment on other sinful *Israelites*, and he can use sinful *Israelites* to carry out his judgment on sinful *Benjaminites*.

Again, we’ve seen this throughout Scripture as well.

- He used Joseph’s sinful brothers to sell him into slavery to save all of Israel from famine (Gen. 50:20).
- He used the sinful Assyrians and the sinful Babylonians to carry out his judgment on his sinful people.
- He used the sinful religious leaders and Roman authorities to crucify Jesus for the salvation of all who repent and believe in him.

He can sovereignly use sinful people to carry out his good purposes.

<pause>

Third, obeying the LORD doesn’t always mean immediate, visible success.

Sometimes, it does... like when the Lord explicitly promises it, as he does here with the promise of victory on the third day.

But *oftentimes*, obeying the Lord has the promise of *ultimate* vindication and victory in eternity but with no promise of *immediate*, visible success.

In fact, the biblical expectation for those who trust and obey the Lord seems to be *suffering*.

- “‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).
- “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12).
- “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Pet. 5:10).

Obeying the Lord doesn’t always mean immediate, visible success.

As questions come to mind not only here but in our own life experiences, hopefully those three biblical truths can serve as anchors for you.

<pause>

Going back, the LORD finally gives the promise of victory.

And so, the tide in the war begins to shift the next day.

Look at verses 29-48.

[²⁹ So Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah. ³⁰ And the people of Israel went up against the people of Benjamin on the third day and set themselves in array against Gibeah, as at other times. ³¹ And the people of Benjamin went out against the people and were drawn away from the city. And as at other times they began to strike and kill some of the people in the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, and in the open country, about thirty men of Israel. ³² And the people of Benjamin said, "They are routed before us, as at the first." But the people of Israel said, "Let us flee and draw them away from the city to the highways." ³³ And all the men of Israel rose up out of their place and set themselves in array at Baal-tamar, and the men of Israel who were in ambush rushed out of their place from Maareh-geba. ³⁴ And there came against Gibeah 10,000 chosen men out of all Israel, and the battle was hard, but the Benjaminites did not know that disaster was close upon them. ³⁵ And the LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel, and the people of Israel destroyed 25,100 men of Benjamin that day. All these were men who drew the sword. ³⁶ So the people of Benjamin saw that they were defeated.

The men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin, because they trusted the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah. ³⁷ Then the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush moved out and struck all the city with the edge of the sword. ³⁸ Now the appointed signal between the men of Israel and the men in the main ambush was that when they made a great cloud of smoke rise up out of the city ³⁹ the men of Israel should turn in battle. Now Benjamin had begun to strike and kill about thirty men of Israel. They said, "Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle." ⁴⁰ But when the signal began to rise out of the city in a column of smoke, the Benjaminites looked behind them, and behold, the whole of the city went up in smoke to heaven. ⁴¹ Then the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were dismayed, for they saw that disaster was close upon them. ⁴² Therefore they turned their backs before the men of Israel in the direction of the wilderness, but the battle overtook them. And those who came out of the cities were destroying them in their midst. ⁴³ Surrounding the Benjaminites, they pursued them and trod them down from Nohah as far as opposite Gibeah on the east. ⁴⁴ Eighteen thousand men of Benjamin fell, all of them men of valor. ⁴⁵ And they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon. Five thousand men of them were cut down in the highways. And they were pursued hard to Gidom, and 2,000 men of them were struck down. ⁴⁶ So all who fell that day of Benjamin were 25,000 men who drew the sword, all of them men of valor. ⁴⁷ But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon and remained at the rock of Rimmon four months. ⁴⁸ And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, the city, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns that they found they set on fire.]

We're given *two* accounts of the *same* battle that takes place on the third day.

From verse 29 to the beginning of verse 36, a *general* account of the battle is given.

And from the end of verse 36 to verse 48, a more *detailed* account of the battle is given.

We won't go over all the details, but here's the gist of it:

- By setting up an ambush, the Israelites defeat the Benjaminites.
- And as the Benjaminites flee, they suffer heavy losses.
- In verse 47, only 600 of them are left, hiding at the rock of Rimmon.⁹

And in verse 48, the Israelites go to every Benjaminite town they could find to destroy and set fire to everyone and everything in them.

⁹ NET footnote on Judges 20:46 says: "The number given here (25,000 sword-wielding Benjaminites) is an approximate figure; v. 35 gives the more exact number (25,100). According to v. 15, the Benjaminites numbered 26,700 (26,000 + 700). The figures in vv. 35 (rounded in vv. 44-46) and 47 add up to 25,700. What happened to the other 1,000 men? The most reasonable explanation is that they were killed during the first two days of fighting. G. F. Moore (*Judges* [ICC], 429) and C. F. Burney (*Judges*, 475) reject this proposal, arguing that the narrator is too precise and concerned about details to omit such a fact. However, the account of the first two days' fighting emphasizes Israel's humiliating defeat. To speak of Benjaminites would diminish the literary effect. In vv. 35, 44-47 the narrator's emphasis is the devastating defeat that Benjamin experienced on this final day of battle. To mention the earlier days' casualties at this point is irrelevant to his literary purpose. He allows readers who happen to be concerned with such details to draw conclusions for themselves."

The evil committed by the men in *Gibeah* had escalated...

- to the evil of the *Benjaminites* refusing to hand over the guilty parties,
- and to the evil of the *Israelites* going on a killing rampage among all the remaining Benjaminite towns.

When the *three*-day civil war was all said and done, over 66,000 Israelites died—and that's *not* including all the Benjaminites that were killed in the remaining towns afterwards.

By the end of this civil war, tens of thousands of Israelites had been killed, and the only Benjaminites still alive were the 600 men hiding at a rock.

But it's still not over. Evil will *continue* to escalate.

<pause>

So first, the death of one woman; second, the destruction of one tribe; and third...

III. The depravity of an entire nation (21:1-25)

Look at chapter 21, verses 1-7.

[^{21:1} Now the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, "No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin." ² And the people came to Bethel and sat there till evening before God, and they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. ³ And they said, "O LORD, the God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?" ⁴ And the next day the people rose early and built there an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. ⁵ And the people of Israel said, "Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly to the LORD?" For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the LORD to Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death." ⁶ And the people of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother and said, "One tribe is cut off from Israel this day. ⁷ What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them any of our daughters for wives?"]

Here, we find out that, *before* the battle began, the people of Israel made a *rash* vow at Mizpah that *none* of them would give their daughter in marriage to a Benjaminite.

But now that there are only 600 Benjaminite *men* and no Benjaminite *women* to marry and have kids with, the people of Israel suddenly realize that the tribe of Benjamin is going to die off.

And so, they "weep bitterly" and, in verse 3, they question the LORD, "*Why* has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?"

It seems like they're almost *blaming* the LORD for something that they have caused *themselves*.

They *already* know why this has happened.

First of all, if they didn't go on a rampage on all the Benjaminite towns, killing all the Benjaminite men, women, and children who were *not* soldiers in the battle, then this problem would not exist.

Second of all, the LORD made a provision in his law to substitute a *sacrifice* for a rash vow, so that a person can be released from a rash vow.¹⁰

Leviticus 5:4-6: or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.

¹⁰ We heard this earlier in the account of Jephthah who also *ignored* this provision and foolishly followed through on his rash vow of sacrificing his daughter (Judg. 11:30-40).

So if the people of Israel are concerned that the tribe of Benjamin is going to die out, they can “undo” their rash vow of not giving their daughters to any Benjaminite. The Lord has *already* made provision for that.

But instead of doing *that*, in verse 5, they remember *another* vow they made—that any Israelite who did not assemble with them at Mizpah before the battle would be put to death.

And so, they end up pursuing *that* possible “solution” to their problem.

Look at verses 8-14.

[⁸ And they said, “What one is there of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the LORD to Mizpah?” And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead, to the assembly. ⁹ For when the people were mustered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there. ¹⁰ So the congregation sent 12,000 of their bravest men there and commanded them, “Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead with the edge of the sword; also the women and the little ones. ¹¹ This is what you shall do: every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction.” ¹² And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead 400 young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him, 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 people of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon and proclaimed peace to them. ¹⁴ And Benjamin returned at that time. And they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh-gilead, but they were not enough for them. ¹⁵ And the people had compassion on Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.]

In verses 8-9, they find out that none of the Israelites from *Jabesh-gilead* assembled with them at Mizpah before the battle, which is *convenient* because that means that *none* of them swore the oath of *not* giving their daughters to any Benjaminite.

So in verses 10-12, the people of Israel send 12,000 soldiers to Jabesh-gilead and they slaughter all their fellow *Israelites* there, except the young virgin women, whom they kidnap and bring to Shiloh.

In verses 13-15, they proclaim peace to the 600 Benjaminite *men* at the rock of Rimmon, and they give them these 400 kidnapped *women* to marry, but they’re still 200 women short.

So they try to figure something else out.

Look at verses 16-24.

[¹⁶ Then the elders of the congregation said, “What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin?” ¹⁷ And they said, “There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel. ¹⁸ Yet we cannot give them wives from our daughters.” For the people of Israel had sworn, “Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin.” ¹⁹ So they said, “Behold, there is the yearly feast of the LORD at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.” ²⁰ And they commanded the people of Benjamin, saying, “Go and lie in ambush in the vineyards ²¹ and watch. If the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and snatch each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. ²² And when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, ‘Grant them graciously to us, because we did not take for each man of them his wife in battle, neither did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.’” ²³ And the people of Benjamin did so and took their wives, according to their number, from the dancers whom they carried off. Then they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and lived in them. ²⁴ And the people of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and they went out from there every man to his inheritance.]

In verses 16-18, the elders (or the leaders) of Israel repeat the same problem of getting wives for the remaining 200 Benjaminite men.

In verses 19-21, they remember that there's a yearly feast at Shiloh in Ephraim, where the daughters of Shiloh will come out to dance. So they command the Benjaminites who *still* need wives to wait in the vineyards to *ambush* and *steal* the daughters of Shiloh as they come out dancing to be their wives.

And in verse 22, if the fathers and brothers of Shiloh come to them, they've *already* worked out their justification for all this.

They'll just say something to the effect of, "Do us a favor and just let them be. After all, we couldn't provide enough wives for them through destroying Jabesh-gilead. And don't worry about breaking your oath. You'd *only* be guilty if you had *voluntarily* given them your daughters, but since they were *kidnapped*, it's all good."

In verses 23-24, the Benjaminites act according to the plan and kidnap wives for themselves. They return to their inheritance and rebuild the towns that the rest of the Israelites has previously set on fire.

So once the problem is "solved," all the people of Israel go back to their tribe and family... except the *captured* women of Jabesh-gilead and the *kidnapped* woman of Shiloh.

<pause>

Consider the *escalation* of evil that has gone on here.

This civil war began with the terrible injustice that *one* woman experienced by the Benjaminites.

And now, in order to get wives for the Benjaminites, they *slaughter* an entire *Israelite* city, *capture 400* women (whose families they've killed), *kidnap 200* women (who will probably never see their families again), and basically have them *all* raped (for they *never* agreed to marry these Benjaminites to begin with).

They have only *multiplied* the "abomination" and "outrage" that they cried out against the Benjaminites.

They have *done* what they have *condemned*.

All the while, the Israelites *think* they're being *obedient* to their vows to the LORD, and they declare themselves *innocent* of *any* guilt.

We see the *depravity* of the *entire* nation of Israel on display.

This truly is "rock bottom" of the downward spiral.¹¹

And so, verse 25 says this:

¹¹ Amidst this "rock bottom" of the downward spiral, there are still some glimmers of *hope*. By the end, all the people of Israel look just like the *Benjaminites*, which is really to say that they all look like *Sodomites*. But what did the Lord *do* to the Sodomites in Genesis 19 when they committed nearly *identical* evil that we read about here? As a *preview* of the *final* day of judgment, the Lord rained sulfur and fire from heaven and completely destroyed them. Sin deserves judgment—and that's *exactly* what the Benjaminites and all of Israel *deserved*. Yet, after *twelve* iterations of the downward spiral and, by the end of the book, as we see the people of Israel look more like the pagan *Sodomites* than the people of God, in verses 23-24, it is a wonder that the tribe of Benjamin and all the people of Israel still *exist* at all. Even when they hit "rock bottom," he persists and sticks with them because of his promises to them. We saw that even earlier in chapter 20, verses 27-28, with presence of the ark of the covenant and Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, as the high priest. There are glimmers of hope in the midst of such dark times in Israel. The Lord has not left them and not all of them have been corrupted. Arthur E. Cundall (*Judges*, TOTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: "Phinehas was one of Israel's truly great and devoted men. As a young man his resolute action had saved the situation at Shittim, an action which won him a unique commendation from the Lord (Num. 25:1-15). He had taken a prominent part in the campaign against Midian (Num. 31:6) and an equally prominent part when the tribes east of Jordan were suspected of disunity and apostasy in the erection of their memorial altar (Josh. 22:9-34). . . . The *ark of the covenant* (27) is not mentioned elsewhere in the book of Judges."

²⁵ In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

This refrain is not only the end of this *narrative* but the end of the *entire book* of Judges.

The *world* increasingly says that the *highest* form of love and happiness is found in the freedom and acceptance of everyone doing whatever is right in their own eyes, but this passage shows us the *reality*.

It doesn't lead to freedom, love, and happiness but to all kinds of immorality, oppression, and chaos.

When we do what is right in our own eyes, evil only escalates.

Conclusion

As we close, I want us to see that this passage is *meant* to give *hope* to sinners.

And it does that by *first* helping us to see just how *hopeless* we really are when we're left to ourselves.

The Christian message is *not* that we're all basically good, and everyone makes mistakes from time to time, and how we just need a bit of religion or God to make us better people.

No, the good news of Jesus Christ begins by showing us just how *sinful* and *evil* we are in our hearts, and how we are *all* capable of doing *exactly* what we read here in these final chapters of Judges.

If we do not understand the depths of our *sin*, then Jesus' horrific *death* on our behalf will not make a lot of sense to us. *Why* did Jesus have to *die*? Couldn't he just *teach* me to be a better person?

The good news is that Jesus doesn't just *teach* but he *substitutes* himself in our place.

- He exchanges his *righteous* record with our *sinful* record.
- He bears the *punishment* for all *our* sins, and he gives us the *reward* of all *his* righteousness.

Jesus is not like the cold and cowardly husband who sends out his unfaithful bride to save himself, but he is the loving and faithful husband who suffers the *worst* abuse and humiliation to save his unfaithful bride from all the ravages of sin and death.

All who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior are forgiven their sins, declared righteous in God's sight, and increasingly conformed into his likeness.

Jesus is the *hope* that this passage points to.

He's the true King who has come to rescue us from this downward spiral.

Only when we fix our eyes on *him* and trust *him* as our faithful King do *true* freedom, love, and joy escalate.

Let's pray.