

Title: The gospel according to Judges
Text: Judges 20-21
Theme: The destination of lawlessness
Series: Judges
Prop Stmtnt: Life without God is suicide

I generally have a long introduction, then an even longer sermon and a fairly brief, but hopefully focused conclusion. Today, I have a very short introduction, an adequately sized sermon, but a lengthier conclusion. In fact, the points of the outline are actually the points of the conclusion.

Read Text: Judges 21.12, 25

Think of the last 5 chapters of Judges as boring samples that tell you what life in Israel was like during the days of the Judges. These stories do more than explain the history of why the tribe of Dan ended up in the U.P of Israel, or why the tribe of Benjamin was almost obliterated. These stories reveal the theological, moral, cultural and social conditions in Israel and what they reveal is moral decay about as disgusting and revolting as anything you have ever heard.

The book is like a song (more like a dirge) that has two verses. The first verse is: And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. This phrase repeated numerous times in the opening chapters is illustrated in the lives of the Judges whose stories we read about through chapter 16. The second verse of this dirge is chapters 17-21 and that verse reads: “In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” This final account shows us the destination of lawlessness. Life without God is suicide. Instead of being a light to the world, the story of Israel is in a civil war and like most civil wars, it is barbaric. This morning, I am going to summarize these final chapters, and then help us think through what we are supposed to do with this book. So, here is the sermon.

A Levite left his home in the hill country of Ephraim and traveled south to Judah to the city of Bethlehem to get his concubine back who had left him. After getting her from her father’s home, they were going back to Ephraim when they stopped for the night in the city of Gibeah that belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. They were given shelter in the home of an old man, but the men of the city surrounded the home and demanded that the Levite come out so they could sodomize him. The Levite forced his concubine to go out to the mob and they had their way with her all night. In the morning, the Levite found her lying on the ground next to the door. He put her on his donkey and went back to his home in Ephraim, where he cut her body up into 12 pieces and sent each piece to the territories of Israel. His plan to shock them worked. In fact, this nameless Levite was able to do something that no judge was able to accomplish. He was able to rally the entire nation for a cause. People from all of the tribes (except Benjamin) gathered at Mizpah, where the Levite told them what had happened conveniently leaving out the details that would have painted him in a bad light. This gathering of soldiers, 400,000 strong are roused to get revenge. Their plan is clear. We will attack Gibeah and kill these men and we will act immediately. We all agree, no one can go home (v.8).

They send an envoy to the tribe of Benjamin with a demand: Turn over the men of Gibeah to us or suffer the consequences. But the Benjamites would have none of that and 26,000 Benjamite

soldiers rally together to defend the men of Gibeah from the 400,000 soldiers from the rest of the nation. The 400,000-man army of Israel, after appealing to Yahweh for direction, attacks the army of Benjamin. Although outnumbered 15-1, the Benjamites are the decisive winners on the first day of battle. They kill 22,000 soldiers from Israel. On day two Benjamin is victorious again, and kill 18,000 Israelite soldiers. This means that after two days of battle, one tenth of the army of Israel has been killed. The army of Israel who had been asking God for direction, are stunned. They offer sacrifices, wail, pray, appeal to God for help and then get ready for day 3. Day 3 begins like days 1 and 2 with Benjamin experiencing initial victory. The battle takes place near Gibeah and this time the men of Israel fake a retreat in order to draw the Benjamites away from the city, and into the clutches of an ambush and it works. The result is, the entire city is destroyed, and the Benjamite army is devastated. After suffering terrible losses on days 1 and 2, the Israelite army is ready for revenge and they get it. The land allotted to the tribe of Benjamin is not that large, and the army goes into every city, town and village, killing and destroying everyone. The only people who survive of the entire tribe of Benjamin is 600 soldiers who are hiding out in a well-protected area called the rock of Rimmon where they stay for four months.

Now, reality begins to set in as the nation comes to grip with the fact that one entire tribe is almost gone. Benjamin has been a tribe for over 500 years and it is on the verge of extinction. Israel is now mourning the fact that Israel as it was known is on the verge of being changed, permanently. But instead of asking, "what have we done?" And taking responsibility for the mess, the question to God is, "Why has this happened?" The point should be obvious. This is not a Gibeah problem or a Benjamin problem, this is an Israel problem. That is what Judges has shown over and over. God does not answer. The next morning, they offer sacrifices, but there is still no answer from God, so they take matters in their own hands. To complicate matters, the men of Israel made a vow to God back at Mizpeh that no one would give their daughters to a Benjamite, ever again. So, now you have 600 Benjamite men, who have no families because they have all been killed and no obvious options for a wife within Israel. Chapter 21 tells us how Israel addressed that problem. They discovered that no one from the area of Jabesh-Gilead had sent any soldiers to help field the army of Israel against Benjamin. That was all the justification that the rest of the army needed. So, they sent 12,000 of the finest soldiers from the Israelite army who went to Jabesh-Gilead and killed every person except girls of marriageable age who were still virgins. There were 400 virgin girls who remained. These 400 were herded back to Shiloh where they were taken and given to the soldiers from Benjamin. So, that took care of 400 of the Benjamite soldiers. What about the other 200? These guys were told, "look, every year there is a festival at Shiloh, and as part of the festivities is the dance of the virgins. You guys hide in the nearby vineyards, and when the dance begins, just come and grab one of the girls. If their dad or brothers complain, we'll take care of it." So, that is what the remaining 200 did. They hid in the vineyards at the time of the dance and each grabbed a girl and took her back with them to Benjamin, and started rebuilding the towns that had been destroyed. Meanwhile, the rest of the Israelites went back to their homes. And that is how the book ends.

The Levite is lost to history. The tribe of Benjamin barely survives being wiped out. The people of Jabesh-Gilead don't survive. And the soldiers of Benjamin who fought almost to the point of death defending their brothers who gang-raped a girl are now told to go and grab a girl from the festival at Shiloh. But, proving that legalism was alive and well back then, the elders of Israel find a way to make certain that this is all legal because technically, no father is giving his

daughter away, she is being stolen. Israel may have conquered portions of Canaan, but it is very clear that at this point, Israel has been Canaanized. In fact, v. 12 identifies Shiloh (the place where the tabernacle was) as being in the land of Canaan! That was not a Freudian slip. The most religiously significant place in Israel looks just like Canaan. That is how this nation is living.

This final chapter is a disastrous account masterfully written. The author writes this with deep sympathy for these women and the reader cannot help but feel their plight. The women from Jabesh-Gilead have had their entire families killed by their own countrymen, so they could be taken hostage and given against their wills to the accursed Benjamites. The girls at Shiloh, while in the midst of a celebration are suddenly kidnapped and ripped away from their families and forced to live with their captors as their wives. Thus, the gang-raping of 1 girl has now lead to the rape 600. Israel is cutting herself apart and standing at the end of the story, the reader can only assume that within a few years, the nation of Israel will cease to exist. No people can long survive like this, can they?

So, what are we supposed to do with this? Well, at the very least this book explains a few things historically. When you live near an enemy, there are more opportunities to put fuel on the fires of hatred than if you lived far away. Ohio State vs. MI. Red Sox vs. Yankees. Duke vs. N.C. UK vs. Louisville, Hatfields vs. McCoys. It would therefore be a very long time before the hatred to and from Benjamin by the rest of Israel would simmer down. Benjamin would live with the label of being a cancer on the nation, but in reality, the entire country is infected. This tribe, already small would now be on the verge of extinction. Therefore, we can understand the collective pride of this tribe when one of her own, a man named Saul would be chosen to be the first king of Israel. We can also understand the hesitancy of some in the nation to accept him as king, particularly when we find out that he was from Gibeah, of all places. We are not therefore surprised to read of the fierce loyalty of Benjamin to one another, particularly to Saul. But, those details, while interesting and helpful to a degree are not really the main point. We can also certainly benefit from some teachable truths, personally such as:

- there is no honor in defending your own people when your own people are wrong.

The people of Benjamin defended the men of Gibeah. There was no defense for their sin. In being loyal to their own, they were disloyal to God's law. Standing in defiance of God's law means that you will always be on the wrong side of history, no matter what your culture is screaming at you at the moment. We can also rightfully acknowledge that...

- without God's law both sin and justice are out of control

A girl is abused by the men of a city, and the entire city, then almost an entire tribe is slaughtered as a result. A few days later the men, most of the women and all of the children of a region that did not participate in the battle are slaughtered. The 26,100 soldiers who died were probably a fourth of the number of overall citizens who would die. This is crazy! The OT law says, "eye for eye" and "tooth for tooth." That is generally seen as harsh. In reality it is kind because it limits the tendency of revengeful reaction.

Those historical and personal things are true, but there are deeper issues we need to grapple with. If this book was a movie and this was the end of the movie and we watch the credits roll while the nation packs up and leaves Shiloh and goes back home, back to business as usual, back to life with the smoke from Jabesh-Gilead still ascending and with the Benjamite soldiers dragging their girls with them back to their smoldering towns, you would be disgusted, confused and above all unsettled. Why? Again, when you read your bibles, ask the question why. Why is this included? What am I supposed to see and feel so that I might think differently? The author leaves us unsettled, he wants us to see something and feel something.

Imagine that you are standing on the ridge that overlooks Emmetsburg Road, its expansive valley just south of Gettysburg, PA. 155 years ago over 165,000 union and confederate soldiers fought on this ground resulting in over 51,000 casualties. In an effort to understand the magnitude of that battle and the loss of life, you could ask, “what was the confederate army doing up here in PA, anyway?” or “why did Picket charge the center of the Union defense with 12,000 men marching over 1 mile of open ground?” But, if you are walking through the rows of grave markers on that very hill, or you were a Gettysburg citizen tasked with burying the bodies left on the fields of battle you are probably asking deeper questions, such as, “why would a nation such as ours, or any nation for that matter turn on itself in such a violent manner?” “what kind of a people are we, that we have come to this?” “was this worth it?” “did it really have to come to this?” “how did we get here?” Those are the kinds of questions that I think the author of Judges wants us to ask as we walk through the battlefields in Benjamin, and review the entire account of Judges. And that is what I really want you to consider. I entitled this sermon; The gospel according to Judges and here is why. This is the conclusion.

Romans 15.4, *“For whatever was written in the former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.”*

I. **What is it about these people that God would choose them?**

Are they morally superior to others? Is there any fundamental, intrinsic or inherent righteousness in these people that would capture God’s attention? Did God, from eternity past chose to place his affection upon them because, well, quite frankly, the Israelites were just plain smarter, bigger, and better than anyone else? No. Over and over and over, we have read how the nation of Israel appears to be hellbent on destroying itself.

When you read the account of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 you realize that apart from Lot and his two daughters, no one survived. God’s righteous judgment was poured out and no one made it out alive. So, why did the tribe of Benjamin survive and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah didn’t? It was not because the people of Benjamin were better. The book of Judges and this account in particular removes all boasting for Israel. They are fundamentally no different than any other people. They are just as rebellious and just as prone to idolatry as anyone else. If all things were equal, Benjamin and Israel for that matter would not have survived. But Benjamin did and Sodom didn’t. Let that tension grip you for a minute. I will come back to it.

II. **What is it about you, that would motivate God to choose to save you?**

If you are going to understand the gospel to the level that God intends for you to, you need to have the courage and the humility to grapple with this question. Are you fundamentally different than anyone else? Are you smarter, better, stronger, wiser, and more capable than others who do not trust in Christ? You may remember these verses from Romans 3.

(v.10) *“as it is written: None is righteous, no not one; no one seeks for God.”*

(v.23) *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”*

You may remember those verses, but do you remember their context? Do you know the point that Paul is making with those verses? The book of Romans begins with the ground-shaking, earth-scorching, ego-devastating news that if you are from an immoral background, you are a sinner who is under the just, infinite and righteous wrath of God. If you are from a moral background, you are a sinner who is under the just, infinite and righteous wrath of God. If you are from a religious background, you are a sinner who is under the just, infinite and righteous wrath of God. “What then? Are we Jews any better off? (Paul asks, as a Jew, ironically, from the tribe of Benjamin) *NO* (He answers), *not at all. For we have already charge that ALL, both Jews and Greeks are under sin, as it is written: None is righteous, no not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God.”*

A few verses later he repeats this same truth when he says, “there is no distinction” (end of v.22). That is there is no fundamental, intrinsic or inherent righteousness in anyone as opposed to another. *“There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

So, how do we answer question 2? What is it about you, that would motivate God to choose to save you? The answer is, absolutely nothing. So, if your salvation is not based on any fundamental, intrinsic or inherent goodness on your part, then that must mean that is ultimately based upon God! So, #3...

III. **What is it about God’s love that God would choose you?**

Now, I am going to warn you. This is hard to get our arms around, in fact, probably impossible, but it is so good for us to try. This is so good and I would argue necessary for us to try. I maintain that it is easier to understand the righteousness, the justice and therefore the law of God, than it is to mine the depths of the love of God and the grace of God. But, we need to try. What is it about God’s love that God would choose you? Obviously if we are all sinners and we are all alike as sinners, then the only thing that we would do, if we were left to ourselves is try to outdo one another in our sinning. Why don’t we? Why do we want to hear God’s voice in his Word? Why do we want to love him? Why do we want to love others? Why do we want to give perfectly good money to send people to other nations, even nations that hate our nation, so that those people can know about Jesus? Why? We love God. Yea, but why? We love him because he first loved us. Yea, but why? Because God’s love is so powerful, so unstoppable, so unexplainable, so undeniable, so unfathomable, so remarkable, that God assaulted your unbelief and blew it up. God attacked and overwhelmed your rebellion. In the moment, you may have thought that you opened the door of your heart for God to come in, but the reality is, God kicked the door open and broke all of the hinges. God’s love is greater than your sin and greater than

your need and greater than your brokenness. Jesus really is a bigger Savior than you are a sinner. What is it about God's love? It is awesome. It is beautiful. It is powerful. It is sufficient. It wrecks rebels with repentance and unbelievers with faith. It is glorious in every detail as God's glorious love motivates God's glorious plan in a way that amazes us. What do I mean by that?

IV. **How can God gloriously redeem this mess?**

What did Israel's justice look like on Benjamin? Israel almost slaughtered the entire tribe. What did Israel's grace look like to Benjamin? Israel soldiers slaughtered Jabesh-Gilead and after destroying their families kidnapped 400 girls and assumed ownership of them and gave them away as wives. Later on, 200 more girls were simply stolen at Shiloh. Grace to Benjamin "required" grievous injustice to these girls.

That is our dilemma and it is fiercely personal. How do you show grace to a murderer without being unjust to the victim? Who matters more? The initial offender, or the latest victim? Wouldn't pure justice be the cleanest and easiest? It would be. Yea, but consider this. If all that God did was demonstrate justice, then no one would live. Also, God is just, but he is also gracious. The dilemma is, how can God be just and gracious at the same time? How can God's justice be satisfied, and yet, God demonstrate his grace? The dilemma at the end of Judges is not solved by Saul, or David, or Solomon or any of those kings. The dilemma is only a can that they keep kicking down the road. How can God's truth and righteousness embrace each other and not cancel each other out? This is what Christ did. He, the perfectly righteous Son of God, 2nd Person of the Trinity, took upon himself human nature and becoming one of us while still God, he became God, in the flesh of man. Jesus, therefore, the God-man, lived the life that we could not live. His perfect life became the absolutely perfect sacrifice that was offered up by his death on the cross to satisfy the wrath of God for the sins of every single person who would ever believe on him. Jesus, paid it all. Do you know that means? I can stand at the end of Judges and look over the battlefield as a witness of the violence. But God's love and God's redemption is even more violent. It is greater! And that is why God can out of the greatest mess, bring about an incredible salvation. His plan is not only worldwide, it is personal. In fact,

V. **God's plan is gloriously big because it is personally intentional.**

God's plan is macro because it is micro. Do you know how the book of Ruth begins? "in the days when the judges ruled." Do you know how the book of 1 Samuel begins? Just like Judges 17 and 19, "there's this guy from the hill country of Ephraim. In other words, in the midst of this colossal mess, God was on the move and he was on the move in Bethlehem and Ephraim. One girl, Ruth on one day changed the world. God pulled off a redemption in Bethlehem that no one saw coming. Then one girl, Hannah on one day changed the course of the nation. Before there was David the king, there was Ruth and before there was Samuel the prophet and priest there was Hannah. God's great big, world-wide, all glorious, and sovereign plan to save a people from every tribe, language and nation as a glorious kingdom for his glorious Son, includes people, just like you. It is a story of redemption, 2nd chances and amazing grace. Out ashes, God makes life. (Romans 15.5-7) His all-powerful, unstoppable plan is driven by his all-powerful, unstoppable, overwhelming and personal love. Judges is not the end of the story. Jesus is; the perfect prophet, priest and king.