

Lectures on the Book of Judges

Judges 19–21 — Appendix: The Levite and Benjamin

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But there follows a second tale of excessive atrocity in a moral way, which begins in Judges 19. in terms expressly similar to the beginning of Judges 18: "And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite sojourning on the side of mount Ephraim, who took to him a concubine out of Beth-lehem-judah." The fact which comes out first is that Gibeah of Benjamin was scarce better than Sodom or Gomorrah, on which Jehovah rained fire and brimstone for their uncleanness. I need not dwell on the deplorable details. Suffice it to say that even in such a state the immediate feeling of the common conscience in Israel (roused, it is true, by an awful appeal to the twelve tribes) could not but reply that "there was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds." So it was. "Then all the children of Israel went out, and the congregation was gathered together as one man." Be it remarked, that what drew out their unanimous condemnation was not an outrage done to God's name. Where was the just horror at the idolatry of Micah? Contrariwise it was courted and continued down to the captivity. Men then, as now, feel not for a lie or a libel of God; they are sensitive when their own rights are touched. But He knows how to wake them up from such disgraceful insensibility. Therefore does the second part of the appendix (Judges 19, 21) find a place directly afterwards. And we see that those who cared not for the injured name of Jehovah have all their feelings drawn out when man was wronged. But God takes means to make them feel what such a state comes to. O what a mercy it is to have God to take care of our walk! But, in order for us to know the sweetness of that care, it becomes us to care for Him, His name and glory. Not as if He could not care for His own; but our strength, comfort, and blessing are in His name. In Him we may confide, who loves us to the end. Should we not then rejoice in the Lord? The truest deliverance from self is in that work where all was judged, and evil put away for ever. Then can we joy in Him, and it is our strength for all service, and is the spring of worship. There is nothing good without His name. Alas! how the very thought of Jehovah's name seems lost at this time among the children of Israel. Their keenest feelings were in favour of the Levite and his concubine, wounded to the quick by the abominations of the men of Gibeah; and therefore, whatever of

human affection may be in evidence, we certainly learn how little faith Jehovah could then find in the land of Israel. As man then was so prominent before their minds, so also their revenge was merciless to the bitter end. God was in none of their thoughts. They spread abroad the revolting tale; they readily respond to the call for their advice and counsel. The result is that "the people rose as one man, saying, We will not any of us go to his tent, neither will we any of us turn into his house. But now this shall be the thing which we will do to Gibeah; we will go up by lot against it; and we will take ten men of an hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and an hundred of a thousand, and a thousand out of ten thousand, to fetch victual for the people, that they may do, when they come to Gibeah of Benjamin, according to all the folly that they have wrought in Israel. So all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, knit together as one man. And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, What wickedness is this that is done among you? Now therefore deliver us the men, the children of Belial, which are in Gibeah, that we may put them to death, and put away evil from Israel. But the children of Benjamin would not hearken to the voice of their brethren the children of Israel: but the children of Benjamin gathered themselves together out of the cities unto Gibeah, to go out to battle against the children of Israel." Undoubtedly the iniquity was beyond measure on the part of the men of Benjamin, and an utter disgrace to God or even to Israel. But there can be no question that the course taken by the men of Israel was calculated to increase the difficulty a thousand-fold. It was purely human. Where was their humiliation and grief before the Lord? They decide on matters first, and the case becomes only another instance of man's folly in dealing with evil. Having decided out of their own heads, they then turn to God, and ask Him to bless them in their efforts to exterminate Benjamin. Thus, after having made all their arrangements, "the children of Israel arose and went up to the house of God, and asked counsel of God, and said, Which of us shall go up first?" Is not this an instructive as well as striking fact? Still more is what follows; for God fails not to deal with us on our own ground. According to our folly He may answer us, as well as withhold an answer. But in the end He acts in His own way, which will ever be what we little expect. Here God had to rebuke the people, even when morally right in the main, until the wrong their state and haste mixed up with it was purged out. In judgment He must have righteousness; but He remembers mercy. It is an instance of the same thing that we have often seen before in other forms. Thus He bids the men of Judah go; but the men of Judah were shamefully beaten, and were forced to weep before Jehovah. This, at least, was right. "Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up and wept before Jehovah until even, and asked counsel of Jehovah. saying,

Shall I go up again to battle against the children of Benjamin, my brother?" another point, still more important, going along with it. When we really are found in sorrow, and in circumstances that call for sorrow, before Jehovah, the heart is open to feel for the wrong-doer. They were filled with thoughts of destruction against Benjamin, and the remembrance that he was their brother had not even entered their minds before. Now, broken down before God who had ordered their defeat, they are made to feel for their brother, guilty as he was, no doubt. Still this became their relationship, yet the children of Israel have the answer from Jehovah, "Go up against him." Nevertheless they were beaten the next day; for they must be disciplined before the Lord before He could use them to deal with their brother. "Benjamin went forth against them the second day, and destroyed down to the ground of the children of Israel again eighteen thousand men; all these drew the sword. Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before Jehovah, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before Jehovah. And the children of Israel enquired of Jehovah, for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days." Here is the proof of the time when all this occurred. It has been already said to have been an early fact in the history of the "Judges," and not chronologically near the close of the book. The evidence is stated here very clearly. Phinehas, we know, was alive during the days of the wilderness, being the leader against Midian before Moses died, and one of those that crossed the Jordan. Yet he is still alive when the tragic deed was done which had nearly uprooted the tribe of Benjamin in its results. "And Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days, saying, Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And Jehovah said, Go up; for tomorrow I will deliver them into thine hand." They had been at length brought down to their right place before God; they had taken the shame to themselves; the Lord had chastised them, and they had needed and deserved it righteously. Now they could deal with guilty Benjamin. We are not in a position to deal with another until God has dealt with that which is contrary to His name in our own soul; and so it was that the men of Benjamin were utterly smitten and well-nigh exterminated. The last chapter of the book shows us the ways and means in which their hearts were drawn out, in order to repair the dismal gap which divine judgment had wrought in Benjamin, and indeed in Israel. —William Kelly