

Judges 21 — Without a King, Without Joshua

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The Most Troubled Chapter in Judges

Judges 21 may be the most troubled chapter in the entire book. Israel had been defeated by enemies at various points — the Midianites taking their crops, their armies destroyed, their people enslaved. But the trouble of chapter 21 is of a different and deeper kind: it is the trouble of Israel almost exterminating one of its own twelve tribes, and then scrambling in wholly human ways to undo what it had done. The heart of Israel was nearly cut out. To be a twelve-tribed nation was the very essence of what Israel was, and now Benjamin had nearly been destroyed — not by a Canaanite enemy but by Israel's own hand. That strikes to the center.

And the key to understanding why things were so bad stands at the very end of the chapter: in those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes. That is the summary verdict, and it explains everything that precedes it. The absence of a king in Judges corresponds to the absence of Joshua earlier in the book. Joshua was a type of Christ — the one who led Israel into the land, who gave them their inheritance, under whose leadership the victories were won. When Joshua was alive, things went one way. When Joshua was dead, they went another.

Seven Contrasts — Joshua 7 Against Judges 21

Placing Judges 21 beside Joshua 7 — the account of Achan's sin and its resolution — reveals seven moral contrasts that together show the full distance

between how Israel dealt with trouble under Joshua and how they dealt with it without him.

First: sanctification. When trouble came in Joshua 7, the Lord's first word to Joshua was: up, sanctify the people. The response was to draw near to God, to set apart from what was evil. In Judges 21 the first response is an oath: we will not give our daughters to Benjamin. The starting point was not holiness but a proud declaration of their own separateness. Up — toward God — contrasted with we are too good for that.

Second: the tribes. In Joshua 7, attention to the tribes was the methodical approach the Lord ordained — tribe by tribe, family by family, household by household, drilling down to find the guilty one. In Judges 21 they asked which tribe came not up, but then stopped at a city, Jabesh Gilead, rather than going family by family. They had forgotten the method.

Third: naming the folly. In Joshua 7 verse 15, before Achan's name was even known, Joshua could say: he hath wrought folly in Israel. That is, the nature of the sin — the denial that God sees, the acting as though there is no God — was identified and named. In Judges 21 the people ask: O Lord God of Israel, why is this come to pass? They did not know why. Or rather, they knew perfectly well — the preceding chapters told exactly what Benjamin had done — but they did not want to name it. Naming the folly, confessing it plainly, was what they avoided.

Fourth: give glory to God. In Joshua 7:19, before the confession was extracted, Joshua said to Achan: give glory to the Lord God of Israel. That was the posture — God's glory first. In Judges 21 there is repentance of a sort, but it is repentance because God has made a breach, as verse 15 says. Israel's aim and God's aim were in different directions. They were repenting of the damage done to the nation, not giving glory to God.

Fifth: no hiding. In Joshua 7 the instruction was plain — make confession, tell me now what thou hast done, hide it not from me. In Judges 21 the command given to the men of Benjamin was go and lie in wait in the vineyards. One says do not hide. The other says go hide. The moral contrast could scarcely be sharper.

Sixth: the messengers. Joshua sent messengers who were completely successful — they found the silver, the gold, the garment, everything. In Judges 21 the twelve thousand men sent to Jabesh Gilead came back with four hundred virgins for six hundred men. Two hundred short. The messengers of human scheming accomplish less than what is needed.

In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes. — Judges 21:25

Seventh: resolution. In Joshua 7, the trouble was resolved at the Valley of Achor — trouble named, sin judged, the Lord turned from His fierce anger. In Judges 21, the resolution offered was a feast — the young women dancing at Shiloh, the men of Benjamin hiding in the vineyards to catch themselves wives. This was not one of the feasts of Jehovah. None of the seven feasts of Leviticus involved young women going out to dance. This was a feast they had made up for themselves. It looks like Canaan, not like Shiloh.

The One Thing Missing

Every failure in Judges 21 traces back to the same absence. When Achan troubled Israel and Joshua was there, the Lord spoke to Joshua, gave him the steps, and the trouble was resolved according to the divine method. When Benjamin troubled Israel and Joshua was not there, every man did what was right in his own eyes, and the improvised solutions all came up short.

In the New Testament sense, Joshua is the Lord Jesus Christ — same name, same character as the one who leads His people into their inheritance. When He is the acknowledged head and His word is the guide, the method for dealing with

trouble is known, and it works. When every man does what is right in his own eyes, it is exactly Judges 21: real distress over real trouble, real desire to do the right thing, real offerings laid on a hurriedly built altar — and yet the solutions all fall short, because the one who is the true Prince of Peace is not consulted and not obeyed.

May God keep us from doing what is right in our own eyes. May we learn to take all our troubles to the Lord. He is the one who is able to solve all the troubles that arise, whatever they might be. We have enough to tell of him and of the peace that He made upon the cross — peace with God, peace of God, peace in the soul. That is what was missing from Judges 21. That is what is always missing when every man does what is right in his own eyes.