

JUDGES—WEEK 17

NO ONE IS INNOCENT



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

A war between Benjamin and the other tribes of Israel starts, and Benjamin wins at first. Then the other tribes pray properly to the LORD about what to do. He blesses them, and the tide turns.

The result is a horrifying wipeout.

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Joshua, Week 17 — No One Is Innocent
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1 Judges 20:8–13a

So all the people arose as one man, saying, “None of us will go to his tent, nor will any turn back to his house; but now this is the thing which we will do to Gibeah: We will go up against it by lot. We will take ten men out of every hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, a hundred out of every thousand, and a thousand out of every ten thousand, to make provisions for the people, that when they come to Gibeah in Benjamin, they may repay all the vileness that they have done in Israel.” So all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, united together as one man.

Then the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, “What is this wickedness that has occurred among you? Now therefore, deliver up the men, the perverted men who are in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and remove the evil from Israel!”

They will take ten percent of *all the tribes of Israel*. They will be chosen *by lot*. That’s a draft. In fact, as we’ll see at the end of Judges, failure to respond to this call-up will have serious consequences.

Israel is making deliberate preparations for war—a war with their own people. It’ll be the people of Gibeah (actually Benjamin) vs. all the other tribes.

And this is all over what they did to a single concubine.

Normally, a war of this kind would be some kind of civil war, or maybe a war of liberation, independence, or secession. The stakes would be high.

But not this time. Here, a small-town crime is enough to start a war over. A single death may lead to many more deaths. Why?

They’re acting like this is a sin that must be purged from the land—like Achan’s sin.

But the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed things; so the anger of the LORD burned against the children of Israel. — Joshua 7:1

The only problem is that this isn’t like Achan’s sin. Achan’s sin was a specific violation of a specific command God gave about the conquering of Jericho. God responds to that sin by causing Israel to lose a battle in which many Israelite soldiers are killed.

The crime committed by the men of Gibeah is horrible, and should be punished severely, but it’s not analogous to Achan’s sin. The mobilization of an entire army is out of proportion. This crime is a matter for the courts, not an army.

Oh, right. They don’t have any courts.

That’s part of what *everyone did what was right in his own eyes* means.

2 Judges 20:13b–17

But the children of Benjamin would not listen to the voice of their brethren, the children of Israel. Instead, the children of Benjamin gathered together from their cities to Gibeah, to go to battle against the children of Israel. And from their cities at that time the children of Benjamin numbered twenty-six thousand men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who numbered seven hundred select men. Among all this people were seven hundred select men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair's breadth and not miss. Now besides Benjamin, the men of Israel numbered four hundred thousand men who drew the sword; all of these were men of war.

Why would the Benjamites *not listen to the voice of their brethren*?

The brethren make a credible accusation of a horrible crime committed by a gang of a dozen or so men. Surely an investigation is in order. It's not like that isn't even possible. Why not at least check it out?

But they're totally not interested. The text goes on to detail how the Benjamites are greatly outnumbered. Their warriors are highly skilled, but their choice to go to war over this is bizarre.

One might enter a conflict against such superior numbers for a just cause, but to do it in defiance of justice is nuts. The hooligans they're defending are an embarrassment. What's going on here?

They don't care about justice. They don't care about truth. The only thing they care about is us-versus-them.

And "them" doesn't even have to mean Gentiles.

Note that the other tribes tried to reason with the Benjamites first—to their credit—even though they had already raised an army. But it seems that they knew that the Benjamites wouldn't listen. How?

It's hard to imagine the mindset of a population where *everyone did what was right in his own eyes*, but there's a clue in the Levite's ill-fated decision to not lodge with the Jebusites.

It's not surprising that he wouldn't trust them, but his stated reason for not lodging with them was that they aren't his kinsmen. In other words, the Levite based his decision on an us-versus-them mentality. That attitude seems to be universal.

This hints at the answer to the question of how the other tribes knew that the Benjamites wouldn't listen. The us-versus-them mentality is everywhere. Everyone expects it.

This connects with the attitude of doing what's right in one's own eyes. "Doing what's right" includes "thinking what's right." In other words, everyone thinks that they're right. Being right all the time means being closed-minded. No one listens. They don't think they need to.

Hmmm. Maybe that's not so hard to imagine after all. I see that a lot—even in the mirror.

3 Judges 20:18–25

Then the children of Israel arose and went up to the house of God to inquire of God. They said, “Which of us shall go up first to battle against the children of Benjamin?”

The LORD said, “Judah first!”

So the children of Israel rose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah. And the men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel put themselves in battle array to fight against them at Gibeah. Then the children of Benjamin came out of Gibeah, and on that day cut down to the ground twenty-two thousand men of the Israelites. And the people, that is, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and again formed the battle line at the place where they had put themselves in array on the first day. Then the children of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until evening, and asked counsel of the LORD, saying, “Shall I again draw near for battle against the children of my brother Benjamin?”

And the LORD said, “Go up against him.”

So the children of Israel approached the children of Benjamin on the second day. And Benjamin went out against them from Gibeah on the second day, and cut down to the ground eighteen thousand more of the children of Israel; all these drew the sword.

The Benjamites are hopelessly outnumbered, but they have one ace in the hole—their land is in the hill country, far from the Mediterranean coast.

<https://mapcollection.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/map-of-the-12-tribes-of-israel.jpg>

The hilly terrain means the battles are fought in hills and valleys. If they were on an open plain, they could easily be surrounded, but in the mountains, that’s difficult. The other tribes are almost constrained to fight the Benjamites with only a portion of their total forces. Thus, they ask, “*Which of us shall go up first?*” Then their second inquiry of the LORD doesn’t occur until they’ve already arrayed for battle.

They assume too much.

This is the classic error in prayer—assuming too much. In every prayer that asks for help or wisdom or any other kind of assistance, we should first pray, “Lord, what should I be praying about?”

We, like the Israelite tribes in today’s passage, get too focused on our agenda and just go with that in prayer. At least their prayer is asking for guidance—instead of just asking for victory—but they’re still thinking “inside the box.”

Even though God answers their prayers, everything is a bust. The prayers aren’t open-ended enough to allow for the full range of possible responses.

This oversight will lead to a major teaching moment.

4 Judges 20:26–29

Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening; and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. So the children of Israel inquired of the LORD (the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, 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 my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?”

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

Then Israel set men in ambush all around Gibeah.

At last! This Israelites get a clue and come humbly before the LORD. This time they don't presume anything.

And the LORD's response is totally different. They don't do anything before asking and they don't ask who should go up first. So the LORD doesn't say anything about who goes up—first or otherwise.

Instead, they ask if they should go at all (for real this time). God says, “yes” and, most importantly, says they'll win. Now they have His blessing.

They didn't specifically ask for His blessing, but holding off until He gives them a green light implies it.

Then they implement a new strategy. They surround Gibeah, which was where this whole nightmare started. An ambush is set.

We aren't told how they arrived at this new approach, but overconfidence and assumptions clearly didn't get in the way this time. Maybe they recalled how Ai was defeated.

So Joshua arose, and all the people of war, to go up against Ai; and Joshua chose thirty thousand mighty men of valor and sent them away by night. And he commanded them, saying: “Behold, you shall lie in ambush against the city, behind the city. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready.” — Joshua 8:3–4

So their new strategy isn't particularly clever; it's not even new. It's the stupidity of their old strategy that's noteworthy. Someone in their group should have remembered what happened with Ai. They didn't turn their brains on.

Intellectual laziness and spiritual laziness tend to go hand in hand. When there are no challenges, we tend to not give things our best effort.

That's a pretty good reason for God to give us challenges.

5 Judges 20:29–37

Then Israel set men in ambush all around Gibeah. And the children of Israel went up against the children of Benjamin on the third day, and put themselves in battle array against Gibeah as at the other times. So the children of Benjamin went out against the people, and were drawn away from the city. They began to strike down and kill some of the people, as at the other times, in the highways (one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah) and in the field, about thirty men of Israel. And the children of Benjamin said, “They are defeated before us, as at first.”

But the children of Israel said, “Let us flee and draw them away from the city to the highways.” So all the men of Israel rose from their place and put themselves in battle array at Baal Tamar. Then Israel’s men in ambush burst forth from their position in the plain of Geba. And ten thousand select men from all Israel came against Gibeah, and the battle was fierce. But the Benjamites did not know that disaster was upon them. The LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel. And the children of Israel destroyed that day twenty-five thousand one hundred Benjamites; all these drew the sword.

So the children of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. The men of Israel had given ground to the Benjamites, because they relied on the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah. And the men in ambush quickly rushed upon Gibeah; the men in ambush spread out and struck the whole city with the edge of the sword.

The ambush works, and the whole city of Gibeah is put to the sword. Between that and the 25,100 Benjamite soldiers killed in battle, all the men who were guilty of killing the Levite’s concubine have received their just deserts.

But everyone else is killed too. Once again, we see everyone bear the consequences of the sins of a few.

The standard explanation is that everyone bears some guilt for the evil in their midst. *“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”* This apocryphal quote is often attributed to Edmund Burke, though he never said it. It’s really just a paraphrase of John Stuart Mill’s line, *“Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.”*

Of course, the whole tribe of Benjamin decided to defend the hooligan rapist-murderers militarily, so some guilt is pretty widespread. Yeah, but what about the innocent people who are attacked by evil people? What about the concubine?

This is where the Bible provides the answer. No one is innocent.

I know, that sounds canned. The concubine was unfaithful, but does that justify what was done to her? How do we connect the dots between guilt, which is universal, and punishment in this life, which isn’t?

We can’t. The key words are, “in this life.” God connects all the dots, but not in this life.

And He provides a solution.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When is war justified?

2. Where/when is our "not listening" problem worst?

3. How can we pray better?

4. What challenges have proved useful?

5. Is everyone equally guilty?

Items for prayer: