

JUDGES—WEEK 18

SINFUL MATCHMAKING



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*

The Benjamite soldiers are defeated in battle, and the other tribes take their revenge out on all of Benjamin. In the end, the only ones left are 600 soldiers who successfully hid out at the rock of Rimmon.

After a while, everyone cools off and the other tribes wonder how to find wives for the 600 so as to keep Benjamin from going extinct. Their plan abuses everyone, especially the women, horribly. The end.

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Joshua, Week 18 — Sinful Match Masking
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1 Judges 20:38–46

Now the appointed signal between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of smoke rise up from the city, whereupon the men of Israel would turn in battle. Now Benjamin had begun to strike and kill about thirty of the men of Israel. For they said, “Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle.” But when the cloud began to rise from the city in a column of smoke, the Benjamites looked behind them, and there was the whole city going up in smoke to heaven. And when the men of Israel turned back, the men of Benjamin panicked, for they saw that disaster had come upon them. Therefore they turned their backs before the men of Israel in the direction of the wilderness; but the battle overtook them, and whoever came out of the cities they destroyed in their midst. They surrounded the Benjamites, chased them, and easily trampled them down as far as the front of Gibeah toward the east. And eighteen thousand men of Benjamin fell; all these were men of valor. Then they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon; and they cut down five thousand of them on the highways. Then they pursued them relentlessly up to Gidom, and killed two thousand of them. So all who fell of Benjamin that day were twenty-five thousand men who drew the sword; all these were men of valor.

While the hilly terrain helps the Benjamites by limiting the number of troops they have to fight at the same time, it also limits the number of escape routes. When they see Gibeah on fire behind them, they panic. Panic is the ultimate military nightmare; it’s the key to how the Israelites defeated the Midianites.

Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers—they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing—and they cried, “The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!” And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled. — Judges 7:20–21

A panicked, disorganized retreat turns an army into a bunch of individuals. Each one is easy pickings.

The Benjamite soldiers try to flee to the *wilderness* (מְדִבְרָה, meed-bar). This Hebrew word literally means anything that isn’t a cultivated field. It’s usually translated as “desert” or “wilderness,” but it can mean “forest” if there are enough trees.

So, depending on how much vegetation cover they have, some will do better than others.

This is why the other tribes *pursued them relentlessly*. Unfortunately, “*relentlessly*” means they didn’t just want to defeat the Benjamites; they wanted to wipe them out.

That doesn’t make any sense here. Wiping out, say, the Canaanites means they (and their religion) can’t be a problem in the future. The people aren’t the real problem; it’s their religion. Conversely, the war with the tribe of Benjamin isn’t about competing religions; it’s about the people.

This is sin in full bloom. They’re angry over what happened in Gibeah, and the Benjamite decision to go to war rather than enact justice, but their response is just as sinful—if not more so.

2 Judges 20:47–48

But six hundred men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they stayed at the rock of Rimmon for four months. And the men of Israel turned back against the children of Benjamin, and struck them down with the edge of the sword—from every city, men and beasts, all who were found. They also set fire to all the cities they came to.

Once an army dissolves, escape is the only way to survive. If you can't run beyond the reach of your pursuers, hiding is how you stay alive. Six hundred Benjamite soldiers manage to do that for four months *at the rock of Rimmon*.

Meanwhile, the rest of Benjamin is being systematically destroyed. Like Sherman's march through Georgia, the soldiers burn everything in their path. But unlike Sherman, they also kill everybody.

This isn't rational; it's revenge. They're right to want to punish the hooligans who killed the concubine—and even the soldiers who chose to go to war rather than allow justice to be served—but killing everybody in the entire region is evil. Many of the people they're killing had nothing to do with the crime they're reacting to.

But because of the 600 men who hid out, the tribe of Benjamin isn't totally exterminated. We aren't told how they were able to hide there, nor how they were able to find enough food to survive, but somehow they did.

This feels like divine intervention.

This incident will long live as an example of how bad things can get.

*They are deeply corrupted,
As in the days of Gibeah.
He will remember their iniquity;
He will punish their sins. — Hosea 9:9*

*“O Israel, you have sinned from the days of Gibeah;
There they stood.
The battle in Gibeah against the children of iniquity
Did not overtake them.” — Hosea 10:9*

But notice that these verses refer not just to Gibeah but to *the days of Gibeah*. Great sins were committed by everyone (in those days).

But, most importantly, we see God's hand acting—even to protect soldiers who don't deserve protecting.

Thus, yet again, we see how the Old Testament points to Christ.

Everyone has lost their way.

3 Judges 21:1–7

Now the men of Israel had sworn an oath at Mizpah, saying, “None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife.” Then the people came to the house of God, and remained there before God till evening. They lifted up their voices and wept bitterly, and said, “O LORD God of Israel, why has this come to pass in Israel, that today there should be one tribe missing in Israel?”

So it was, on the next morning, that the people rose early and built an altar there, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. The children of Israel said, “Who is there among all the tribes of Israel who did not come up with the assembly to the LORD?” For they had made a great oath concerning anyone who had not come up to the LORD at Mizpah, saying, “He shall surely be put to death.” And the children of Israel grieved for Benjamin their brother, and said, “One tribe is cut off from Israel today. What shall we do for wives for those who remain, seeing we have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them our daughters as wives?”

Notice that the discussion of wives for the Benjamites means that the men who hid at *the rock of Rimmon for four months* have been discovered. Had they been found earlier, they would have been killed.

But now everyone has cooled off and they’re having second thoughts about what they’ve done, and also about the oath they swore at Mizpah.

And let’s not kid ourselves. The oath had, as its goal, the extermination of Benjamin. The genocidal war that followed confirms this.

Now, the 600 Benjamites who *fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon* are all that’s left. So the rest of Israel grieves for Benjamin and makes great sacrifices to the LORD.

But notice what’s missing. They act as if someone else did this awful thing to Benjamin. There’s no repentance—no, “My God, what have I done?”

This lack of repentance sets the stage for the terrible things they’ll do to “fix” the problem.

Notice how all the pieces are coming together in this passage. If the Benjamites had driven out the Jebusites from Jebus (Jerusalem) like they were supposed to, then maybe the Levite would have lodged there and this whole mess wouldn’t have happened in the first place.

But they disobeyed the LORD’s command and everything ultimately went haywire. A gang of evil men in Gibeah commits a shocking crime. Then everyone responds sinfully and a war kills many more people. In fact, so many Benjamites are now dead that everyone’s worried that the whole tribe might go extinct.

On top of all that *the men of Israel* had, in their anger, sworn an oath against letting their daughters marry Benjamites.

And notice their absolute allegiance to this oath. All kinds of evil are okay, but not breaking an oath?

4 Judges 21:8–15 (ESV)

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. For when the people were mustered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there. 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. This is what you shall do: every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction.” 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.

Then the whole congregation sent word to the people of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon and proclaimed peace to them. 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. And the people had compassion on Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.

Oh, goody. They decide to solve the problem of having killed too many Benjamites by killing a bunch of Giliadites. Gee, what could possibly go wrong?

So they kill everyone but 400 virgins, whom they then declare will be the wives of the 600 remaining Benjamite soldiers. What began with the violation of one woman, now yields the violation of 400 women.

Sin seems to have an amazing ability to reproduce.

So, why are the folks from Jabesh-Gilead targeted?

Because they weren't involved in swearing the oath. So, let's get this perfectly straight. They decide that the death penalty is appropriate for anyone *who did not come up to the LORD to Mizpah*. That's where they swore the oath that everyone now regrets swearing. Seriously? How did things get that crazy?

They swore two oaths at Mizpah: one about their daughters and another about any no-shows.

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.” — Judges 21:5b (ESV)

So, unless they're willing to break their oaths, they're stuck. But, as we noted yesterday, oaths are their one absolute. We also saw this earlier when Jephthah sacrificed his daughter rather than break a vow.

And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.” — Judges 11:30–31 (ESV)

Thus, we reach an astonishing conclusion. False gods aren't the problem. Israel is worshipping and vowing to the real LORD, yet they act like they don't know Him at all.

5 Judges 21:16–25

Then the elders of the congregation said, “What shall we do for wives for those who remain, since the women of Benjamin have been destroyed?” And they said, “There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe may not be destroyed from Israel. However, we cannot give them wives from our daughters, for the children of Israel have sworn an oath, saying, ‘Cursed be the one who gives a wife to Benjamin.’ ” Then they said, “In fact, there is a yearly feast of the LORD in Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.”

Therefore they instructed the children of Benjamin, saying, “Go, lie in wait in the vineyards, and watch; and just when the daughters of Shiloh come out to perform their dances, then come out from the vineyards, and every man catch a wife for himself from the daughters of Shiloh; then go to the land of Benjamin. Then it shall be, when their fathers or their brothers come to us to complain, that we will say to them, ‘Be kind to them for our sakes, because we did not take a wife for any of them in the war; for it is not as though you have given the women to them at this time, making yourselves guilty of your oath.’ ”

And the children of Benjamin did so; they took enough wives for their number from those who danced, whom they caught. Then they went and returned to their inheritance, and they rebuilt the cities and dwelt in them. So the children of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family; they went out from there, every man to his inheritance.

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

This hideous kidnapping plan is devised to allow the last 200 Benjamite men to get wives without anyone breaking the oath to not “give” a daughter to a son of Benjamin.

Now the men of Israel had sworn an oath at Mizpah, saying, “None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife.” — Judges 21:1

This is demented. Once again, we see that not breaking an oath, even one taken in haste and anger, is more important than “doing the right thing” in any sane sense of the word.

And if that isn’t enough, they also think that leaving 200 Benjamites without wives is somehow worse than 200 kidnappings. Gee, I wonder how those 200 marriages worked out.

Probably no worse than the other 400 where the wives had watched their families get slaughtered.

The book of Judges ends by pointing out, yet again, the heart of this insanity—*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* They’ve totally lost touch with the LORD. They don’t need a king; they need a savior.

But God’s infinitely wise plan is to take them through a series of kings first. And that’s just the beginning.

So, as Buzz Lightyear might say, “To 1 Samuel and beyond!”

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How do we keep anger from causing us to sin?
2. Has this nation "lost our way"?
3. Have you seen people wondering how something happened, when it's their fault?
4. What's the key to "knowing God"?
5. How does a believer get this far off track?

Items for prayer: