

Judges

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19 ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

Such A Thing Has Never Happened

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Judges 19

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Judges chapter 19.

We included a warning in our e-blast, but for those of you who are not signed up or who perhaps failed to read it this week I want to give you a heads up: Our passage for this morning is disturbing. It describes a grotesque sexual assault. If you have your children with you and you'd rather not expose them to this story today then, by all means, feel free to slip out in just a moment as I pray. No one here will think less of you. All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable, but sometimes wisdom would have us defer certain conversations for an age-appropriate time. Let's take a moment now and pray for wisdom and discernment before we jump into this story.

Amen.

Now, before we read this passage, let's remind ourselves where it stands in the book of Judges. We are now in the conclusion of this book, and the author has chosen two stories that vividly depict everything that was wrong with Israel in the days of the Judges. Four times in this conclusion he repeats the refrain:

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

That detail right there helps us to understand what we are meant to see in this story. It signals to us that this is a BAD story. It was handpicked by the author to illustrate how VILE – how DEPRAVED – Israel became when everyone was left to do what was right in their own eyes.

There are no good guys here. There is no justification for the wicked acts on these pages. There's just an ugly, honest story about a people who desperately need a righteous king.

This story is about Israel. But, it is also a timeless illustration of what humanity is capable of when we remove all moral restraint and order. This story provides us with a sobering glimpse of the trajectory of a people who do what is right in their own eyes.

The Trajectory Of A People Who Do What Is Right In Their Own Eyes

We're going to make our way through this passage scene by scene, and we will draw out four lessons along the way. In the opening verses, we see that when everyone does what is right in their eyes:

1. Leaders increasingly become takers

Look with me at verses 1-7:

In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. ² And his concubine was unfaithful to him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months. ³ Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. And she brought him into her father's house. And when the girl's father saw him, he came with joy to meet him. ⁴ And his father-in-law, the girl's father, made him stay, and he remained with him three days. So they ate and drank and spent the night there. ⁵ And on the fourth day they arose early in the morning, and he prepared to go, but the girl's father said to his son-in-law, "Strengthen your heart with a morsel of bread, and after that you may go." ⁶ So the two of them sat and ate and drank together. And the girl's father said to the man, "Be pleased to spend the night, and let your heart be merry." ⁷ And when the man rose up to go, his father-in-law pressed him, till he spent the night there again. (Judges 19:1-7 ESV)

Here we meet an unnamed Levite. Before we focus in on his story, let's stop and notice that both of these concluding stories in Judges – our story this morning and the story in chapters 17-18 – prominently feature a Levite. Why do you think that is?

The first readers would have known *exactly* why this detail was highlighted. The first readers remembered that the tribe of Levi was not like the other tribes. The Levites were chosen by God and set apart for holy service. They were to be the priests and ministers who would lead Israel in worship. In the days of the exodus, we read:

At that time **the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi** to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord to stand before the Lord to minister to him and to bless in his name, to this day. (Deuteronomy 10:8 ESV)

So, the Levites were set apart to lead the Israelites in holiness.

But, in the days of the Judges – the days when there was no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes – even the Levites were corrupted. In chapters 17-18, we met a Levite who led his people in idol worship and who was willing to break his word whenever the price was right. He was a *taker*.

And here, in chapter 19, we meet a Levite who has a concubine. A concubine was an officially recognized mistress – something of a second wife, but with fewer rights and privileges. She never speaks in this story. In fact, she is treated more like expendable property than a person. Tim Keller notes:

It is a deeply ominous opening that this Levite, who was supposed to be set apart as holy, has instead been swept into pagan culture, taking a concubine.¹

Just like the Levite in chapters 17-18, this Levite is also a taker. In the days when everyone did what was right in their own eyes, there was no moral authority. There was no fear of the Lord. There was no leadership that could be trusted.

¹ Timothy Keller, *Judges For You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 182.

We go on to read that this concubine has an affair on her Levite partner (again, there are NO good guys in this story), and she flees to her father's house. But, when the Levite comes to reclaim his mistress, rather than finding refuge with her father, she discovers that he is eager to send her back!

Now, why would he do that?

Because he was thinking about himself. In an honour culture, a certain degree of shame would have fallen on his home when his adulterous daughter came home. If the Levite would take her back, then that would save his family from humiliation. So, in spite of the fact that his daughter was seeking to escape this Levite, the father rolls out the red carpet for his guest and prepares to thrust his daughter back into his arms.

Woe to a society when its leaders – spiritual leaders, political leaders, leaders in the home – become takers. When we reject the rule and reign of God – when we pretend that we are gods unto ourselves – the people at the top of the pecking order inevitably embrace the lie that they answer to no one. And, when leaders believe that they answer to no one, they become comfortable taking from those whom they ought to be protecting.

If you want to make your nation great again, then you need to appoint leadership that recognizes and trembles before the authority of King Jesus. Because King Jesus has set the perfect example in leadership. His is the example of gentle courage, servant leadership, lion-hearted and lamb like, laying down everything for the sake of others. That is where greatness is found.

That is how you make a nation great. That is how you make a church great. That is how you make a family great. If you want to set a different example in your home than the one that you grew up in, take your eyes off of Andrew Tate or whoever the latest influencer is these days and fix them directly on Jesus. His is the example to follow.

King Jesus transforms leaders into gifts and blessings to those under their care. But when there is no king, leaders become takers. Second, we learn from this story that, when everyone does what is right in their eyes:

2. People tend only to look out for themselves

We see this in verses 8-15:

⁸ And on the fifth day he arose early in the morning to depart. And the girl's father said, "Strengthen your heart and wait until the day declines." So they ate, both of them. ⁹ And when the man and his concubine and his servant rose up to depart, his father-in-law, the girl's father, said to him, "Behold, now the day has waned toward evening. Please, spend the night. Behold, the day draws to its close. Lodge here and let your heart be merry, and tomorrow you shall arise early in the morning for your journey, and go home."

¹⁰ But the man would not spend the night. He rose up and departed and arrived opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). He had with him a couple of saddled donkeys, and his concubine was with him. ¹¹ When they were near Jebus, the day was nearly over, and the servant said to his master, "Come now, let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites and spend the night in it." ¹² And his master said to him, "We will not turn aside into the city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel, but we will pass on to Gibeah." ¹³ And he said to his young man, "Come and let us draw near to one of these places and spend the night at Gibeah or at Ramah." ¹⁴ So they passed on and went their way. And the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin, ¹⁵ and they turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. **And he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, for no one took them into his house to spend the night.** (Judges 19:8-15 ESV)

The concubine's father delayed the Levite's departure until late into the afternoon. This meant that the travel party is still on the road as the evening drew near, and they need to find a place to stay. The Levite's servant suggests that they stay in the city of Jebus – a city that was not under Israelite control at the time. But the Levite says no. He won't risk leaving his party at the mercy of foreigners. He opts instead to soldier on to the Israelite city of Gibeah because he feels *certain* that he will be met with hospitality. These are his *fellow Israelites* after all. This is *family*.

And yet, when the Levite and his travel party entered the city of Gibeah, we read:

And he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, **for no one took them into his house to spend the night.** (Judges 19:15b ESV)

This may seem like an insignificant detail to us, but it would have been scandalous to the first readers. As one commentator notes:

In a culture where inns or hostels were nonexistent, it was incredible that anyone would refuse hospitality to a stranger.²

And the Levite isn't even a stranger! He's FAMILY!

Yet, the entire city of Gibeah is content to leave him outside to face the dangers of the night. The Israelites had become a people who were content to turn a blind eye to the needs of those around them. They had become inherently selfish. That's what happens when everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

Do you see any of that in our world today?

I officiated a funeral a few weeks ago and I drove to the cemetery with the funeral director. As cars sped past us and passed in front of us, I asked, 'Do people ever pay respect to funeral processions anymore?' She answered, 'Not for years and years.' This feels like such an 'old man' thing to say, but when did we become so busy and self-absorbed that we decided that we couldn't be bothered to pull over for three minutes to pay our respect to a grieving family?

And why is it that, in the midst of a housing crisis, every rental apartment costs twice as much as a monthly mortgage payment? Why is it that as our culture moves away from our supposedly archaic and oppressive Christian history, we are becoming more divided and less compassionate? As it turns out, it is NOT liberating to release ourselves from the leadership of a King who's self-proclaimed most important commandment is:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37b-39 ESV)

Love God. Love the people around you who are made in His image. When a people are led by a king who keeps first things first, they flourish. But when everyone goes their own way, people tend only to look out for themselves.

² Herbert Wolf, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Deuteronomy - 1, 2 Samuel)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 3, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 491.

However, there is one person in Gibeah who shows concern for his neighbour. Ironically, the only person in Gibeah who cares is someone who doesn't actually LIVE in Gibeah. An visiting Ephraimite who was in the city for work catches notice of the travellers. We read in verses 16-21:

¹⁶ And behold, an old man was coming from his work in the field at evening. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was sojourning in Gibeah. The men of the place were Benjaminites. ¹⁷ And he lifted up his eyes and saw the traveler in the open square of the city. And the old man said, "Where are you going? And where do you come from?" ¹⁸ And he said to him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to the house of the Lord, but no one has taken me into his house. ¹⁹ We have straw and feed for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and your female servant and the young man with your servants. There is no lack of anything." ²⁰ And the old man said, "Peace be to you; I will care for all your wants. Only, do not spend the night in the square."²¹ So he brought him into his house and gave the donkeys feed. And they washed their feet, and ate and drank. (Judges 19:16-21 ESV)

With that, the Levite and his party are finally safe. They make their way into the generous Ephraimites house and prepare to spend the night before their long journey in the morning. But that brings us to what is arguably one of the darkest moments in Israel's history. Before I read this passage, listen to the way that later Israelites referred to it. The prophet Hosea wrote:

They have deeply corrupted themselves
as in the days of Gibeah: (Hosea 9:9a ESV)

This episode was so terrible – so vile – that 'the days of Gibeah' became popular shorthand for the 'days of wickedness'. So, what happened? We read in verses 22-26:

²² As they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house, beating on the door. And they said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him." ²³ And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing. ²⁴ Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out now. Violate them and do with them what seems good to you, but against this man do not do this outrageous thing." ²⁵ But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and made her go out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. ²⁶ And as morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light. (Judges 19:22-26 ESV)

Here, we learn that when everyone does what is right in their own eyes:

3. Sexual desire is given free rein to direct the moral compass

How do you decide what is 'good'? If you are following King Jesus, then the answer is pretty straightforward: HE declares what is good and right, and my contrary desires must fall in alignment with his direction.

But what happens when a culture decides that there is no voice with the moral authority to direct our moral compass? Well, then we each follow our own moral compasses. And, when everyone is following their own individual moral compass, it doesn't take long for a culture to elevate sexual desire as the primary good that all should pursue. 'True freedom' the thinking goes, 'is freedom to express ourselves sexually without any prudish restraint.'

Sex is one of the sweetest, purest gifts that God gave to us as people. We should not be surprised then that it is one of the first things that the enemy twists and distorts when he gets his hooks into a culture. Paul says exactly that in his letter to the Romans. He describes what happens to a people when they deny God and suppress the truth. He writes:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶ **For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.** For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:24-27 ESV)

Isn't this what we see in our passage this morning? The men of Gibeah pound on the door and demand that the visiting men be surrendered to them for their pleasure.

The Levite, selfish and terrified, pushes his concubine out the door in hopes that this might satiate the crowd. It works.

They abuse her until the morning. They mistreat her so terribly that, by the time the daylight breaks, she is only able to crawl back to the door of her ‘husband’ before she dies quietly on the front step.

When everyone does what is right in their own eyes sex is king and countless victims lie in the wake.

Do you see any of that in our world today?

When we pushed aside the ‘oppressive restraints’ that King Jesus placed on sex and chose to give free reign to every desire, did that lead to more happiness? Or less?

The answer is so self-evident that I don’t even need to make my case, do I? I don’t need to point to the mental health crisis, the societal fallout from porn addiction, the rising divorce rates and the objectification of women that has never been more demeaning than it is today – I don’t need to point to any of that. I don’t need to point to the child sex trafficking that is fuelled by the insatiable demand for pornography – a trafficking that is even beginning to rear its head in our own community. I don’t need to point to the studies showing that men in their twenties are showing significant sexual dysfunction because the part of their brain that speaks to arousal has been short-circuited by the deluge of pornography in our culture.

The sexual ‘freedom’ that we were promised is actually sexual ‘slavery’. And it is a clear sign of a society that has rejected her King. Contrary to the message of those who pushed the sexual revolution, if we want to reclaim good and healthy and vibrant sexuality, then we need to come back under the reign of King Jesus!

Now, this story is shocking and repulsive in its own right, but the most shocking detail for an Israelite would be how closely it resembled *another* story from their past. If you go home this afternoon and read Genesis 19, you will find that our passage for this morning bears a striking resemblance to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The only difference is that Sodom and Gomorrah were Canaanite cities. That was a story of how God rescued his people from the wickedness of the surrounding nations.

But this story is different. This is a story of how the wickedness of the surrounding nations has been surpassed by the wickedness of the people of God. Israel has *become* Sodom.

This is the pattern in Judges, and it is a pattern we would be wise to learn from. One generation ignores sin. The next generation plays with sin. The next generation is enslaved by sin. Only King Jesus can set us free.

Fourth, and finally, when everyone does what is right in their own eyes:

4. Everyone takes justice into their own hands

Look with me at verses 27-30:

²⁷ And her master rose up in the morning, and when he opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, behold, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. ²⁸ He said to her, “Get up, let us be going.” But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey, and the man rose up and went away to his home. ²⁹ And when he entered his house, he took a knife, and taking hold of his concubine he divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. ³⁰ And all who saw it said, “Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day; consider it, take counsel, and speak.” (Judges 19:27-30 ESV)

Here we see a calloused disregard for life. There is no compassion or concern from the Levite for his concubine. There is no semblance of guilt for having surrendered her to the mob. He comes out – after sacrificing her to a bloodthirsty mob – and feeling rested and refreshed himself, he commands her to get up. Seeing that she is dead, he heaves her body onto his donkey and carries her home where – rather than burying her – he chops her into twelve pieces and sends her remains to the twelve tribes of Israel in order to summon their support.

This grisly strategy worked, and we will spend the entire sermon next Sunday looking at the ‘justice’ that ensued in chapters 20-21.

But for now, with the time that we have remaining, I want to close where we started. What are these concluding stories all about? We see it very clearly in the repeating refrain of the conclusion:

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
(Judges 21:25 ESV)

Everything that we have been seeing throughout the course of this series in Judges is meant to drive us to this conclusion: We need a king.

We need someone who is wise enough to correct our wayward desires. We need someone who will teach us how to enjoy good things without transforming them into idols. We need someone who will teach us plainly what is objectively right and what is objectively wrong.

I would argue that this desire is growing in our current cultural moment. While there have been generations in the past that were eager to pursue *anarchy*, the younger generation today seems to have an appetite for *order*. They have caught a glimpse of where the road leads when everyone does what is right in their own eyes, and they are looking for an alternative. They are looking for the life that they were made to live.

If that's you this morning, then I want you to know that the freedom that you are looking for in life is only found when you surrender yourself to the God who made you. This sounds like an oxymoron, but it is true. The only way to be truly free is by willingly and joyfully accepting Jesus as your King and Master. The Apostle Paul writes:

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.
(Romans 7:16-18 ESV)

Would you be free this morning? Then renounce your sin. Renounce your old way of living life. Renounce your rebellion against God. Place your trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Invite him to teach you how to live. Believe in faith that his way is right and leads to life. There is no freedom to be found if Jesus is only your life coach. There is no freedom with Jesus as hobby. True freedom – true life – is only found when Jesus is KING. To that end, let's pray together.