

Sermon 18: Judges 20: Civil War

Going to war
Suffering losses
Administering 'justice'

INTRODUCTION

Terrible atrocities are committed in war, and some of the worst in civil war. The first recorded sin after the fall was the civil war between Cain and Abel, the first signs of living as sinners in a fallen world was brother killing brother. James 4:1 tells us that it is our sinful passions that give rise to all fights and quarrels. We will see this ongoing reality of sin and brother killing brother continuing as long as there is sin. Judges 20 is part of our looking at the some of the darkest chapters of Israel's history, life when each man is doing what is right in his own eyes and there being no godly king to enforce law and lead the people. We are looking at Israel's overreaction to Benjamin's sin; and Benjamin's unwillingness to deal with their sin. The sin of the last chapter was staggering, and sometimes terrible sin can lead to a terrible overreaction. Sin now leads to civil war, the great chaos and tragedy of brother killing brother. Israel has committed their greatest sins against God in idolatry and failing to drive out the Canaanite influence, that influence has shaped them into doing the terrible things we saw in the last chapter; now the ramifications of that are evident in how they treat each other. In this tragedy we will see a rarely united Israel, unaccustomed to doing God's will limping forward to attempt His will; we will see zeal in pursuing and punishing sin in other people's lives while being blind to our own sins; we will see the blood relation idolizing actions of Benjamin; God chastening and humbling the nation, and fratricidal revenge. We will look at this chapter under three heading, going to war; suffering losses; and administering justice.

Going to war

V1-3, 'Then all the people of Israel came out, from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembled as one man to the Lord at Mizpah. ² And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, 400,000 men on foot that drew the sword. ³ (Now the people of Benjamin heard that the people of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) And the people of Israel said, "Tell us, how did this evil happen?" It has been highlighted by many that this is an unusual moment in Israel's history during the period of the judges when the whole nation acts as one. The text underscores this observation, 'all the people'; 'all the tribes'; even Gilead on the other side of the Jordan responded; from Dan to Beersheba; 400 000 fighting men; 'the assembly of the people of God.' Gideon could not rouse so great a group; Deborah could not; this is a rare and unusual response, prompted by a compromised Levite posting body parts. After such a dark chapter you almost breathe a sigh of relief as it seems Israel is actually doing something right. They are gathered at Mizpah about 4-5 kms from Gibeah; and it says 'they assembled as one man to the Lord.' All of Israel but Benjamin are gathered before the Lord, but it is not for worship, but for war.

An account was asked for, and so the Levite gives his account, v4-7, 'And the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, "I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night. ⁵ And the leaders of Gibeah rose against me and surrounded the house

against me by night. They meant to kill me, and they violated my concubine, and she is dead. ⁶ So I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout all the country of the inheritance of Israel, for they have committed abomination and outrage in Israel. ⁷ Behold, you people of Israel, all of you, give your advice and counsel here.” What did you think of his account? Firstly, there is a glaring absence of any mention of his own sins, in that his marriage was in trouble, how he was a coward who did not defend her, nor any mention about who handed her over, nor any mention of his male servant who could have helped defend her. We do not see any sorrow for the loss of his concubine or any pity for what happened to her. Secondly, the words ‘they meant to kill me’ seem added to raise the guilt of the situation. If this is a legal trial where the evidence is to be presented truthfully in order to be properly weighed, the witness is telling lies. Thirdly, from a religious point of view the land is mentioned as Israel’s inheritance; the sins of the men of Gibeah are properly called an ‘abomination and outrage.’ These are some of the strongest terms for the most wicked of sins. But all talk about God, what God is doing in Israel, what these sins in Israel’s midst mean in regard to Israel’s holiness are sadly lacking. Seeing other people’s sin better than we see our own; talking about other people’s sins but hiding our own; embellishing the truth to get people emotionally investing in our version of the truth; presenting sin primarily as a sin against man and not God, presenting sin as a political problem polluting Israel rather than a spiritual problem alienating us from God. Sadly these tendencies when talking about sin are common today as well. This Levite who was supposed to know God’s word has a perfect opportunity to talk about this event as a symptom of a greater problem leading the whole nation of Israel who are all gathered together to collectively repent and recommit themselves to God, while also addressing the sin in Benjamin. Instead of allowing this terrible event to be a moment for self-reflection about the spiritual state of Israel, the general problem of sin and its consequences are lost as only the worst crimes are addressed.

The Levite has called for a response, how should the people of God seek God’s will at this moment? v8-11, ‘And all the people arose as one man, saying, “None of us will go to his tent, and none of us will return to his house. ⁹ But now this is what we will do to Gibeah: we will go up against it by lot, ¹⁰ and we will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand of ten thousand, to bring provisions for the people, that when they come they may repay Gibeah of Benjamin for all the outrage that they have committed in Israel.” ¹¹ So all the men of Israel gathered against the city, united as one man.’ The people of Israel cannot be criticized for failing to act. They are zealous to do what is right. They are rightly outraged by the evil things that have happened. But in their zeal to act they act amiss. We know how this is going to play out Israel is going to be defeated several times until, they weep; fast; and offer sacrifices in v26. They are assuming God is on their side, that they are the side of righteousness, that they cannot fail. Instead of reflecting on the sin of Israel in general and any guilt they may have before applying justice to a brother, they make battle plans. They rush to their battle plans not their knees. This is not merely a trite lesson on ‘pray before you do anything else’ but a lesson on humbling yourself, seeing your own sin and culpability in any situation before you rush in as judge to punish another’s sin. Here we see their wisdom in preparing 10% of their forces to protect the supply lines as they engage in war. They had foresight when it came to the difficulty that lay ahead of them expecting a difficult battle that may be prolonged due to Benjamin’s position. But when it came to seeing their own sins they are weak.

They are united to take the action of war but not repentance and prayer. It is always easier to be hard on another's sin than our own. It is interesting that when Jesus talks about this he characterizes the sin in our own eye as a log and the sin in another's eye as a speck. Usually it is the reverse isn't it, our sin is small and others sins are big. For this reason we always feel very proud of ourselves for being angry at other people's sins. We count it a mark of spiritual health if we are angry and outspoken and are an activist against the sin of others. I am all for seeing injustices addressed, but we need to see here the impulsive way we can easily miss the forest for the trees. That application of this text is not how can we unite to stand against same sex sins in our nation, but how can we let this sin point us to the greater sin problem in all of our hearts. The lesson here is not how can we become more active against political sin, but how does this public sin highlight the personal sin problem that we all have.

Suffering losses

V12-13, 'And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What evil is this that has taken place among you? ¹³ Now therefore give up the men, the worthless fellows in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and purge evil from Israel." But the Benjaminites would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the people of Israel.' We move from the unself-reflecting zeal of Israel to the idolatrous blood loyalty of Benjamin. Israel rightly ask for the men who have committed this sin to be given up by Benjamin, but they refuse. Israel rightly want to put them to death, for this is what their sin deserves. But Benjamin will not listen to their brothers. Benjamin no doubt resented the military threat that stood nearby and no doubt stubbornly dug in their heels instead of reflecting on their own guilt and complicity. Instead of loyalty to God, and righteousness, they chose to be loyal to their blood relatives and defended them no matter what. Instead of arming themselves against Gibeah they armed themselves to stand against God's people, making common cause with Gibeah even fighting alongside them, v14-16, 'Then the people of Benjamin came together out of the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle against the people of Israel. ¹⁵ And the people of Benjamin mustered out of their cities on that day 26,000 men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who mustered 700 chosen men. ¹⁶ Among all these were 700 chosen men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.' So much of our sinfulness is reflected here. Even when we can see wrong we refuse to admit it taking offense at how something is said or done rather than focusing on the elephant in the room. Even when the odds are against us we insanely stand by our sin. Even when judgement is looming and the consequences of our choices are going to obviously end in our destruction we arm ourselves to defend our sins not to root them out. The stubbornness of our sinfulness is also seen in the way we make idols of our relatives by not addressing their sins. Parents can refuse to discipline children for sin because they want to keep their approval. A spouse can refuse to address a sin in their marriage to keep the peace being scared of the fallout, or because they get some sinful benefit from it. We can turn a blind eye to the sins of our nation. This is a tendency we all have. Have you ever been guilty of falsely accusing a referee of penalizing your team while letting the transgressions of the other team go? We have an idol in our family if our family makes us mad at God, so sad we would kill ourselves if we lost them, being willing to be bad in breaking God's law; and if they make us more glad than God and His salvation can make us. When we look to our family for ultimate satisfaction, security, identity, worth, and purpose. When our family defines us more fundamentally than God we have made an idol of our family.

Israel with the odds in their favour move on with their plan, v17-18, 'And the men of Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered 400,000 men who drew the sword; all these were men of war. The people of Israel arose and went up to Bethel and inquired of God, "Who shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin?" And the Lord said, "Judah shall go up first." We have here a reminder of the opening chapter of judges where Israel ask God who should go up first. The difference is that Israel should be dealing with their sins before they seek to do God's will. God answers their prayer, but this is not necessarily a sign of their godliness but the means by which He advances His purposes.

V19-23, 'Then the people of Israel rose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah. ²⁰ And the men of Israel went out to fight against Benjamin, and the men of Israel drew up the battle line against them at Gibeah. ²¹ The people of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and destroyed on that day 22,000 men of the Israelites. ²² But the people, the men of Israel, took courage, and again formed the battle line in the same place where they had formed it on the first day. ²³ And the people of Israel went up and wept before the Lord until the evening. And they inquired of the Lord, "Shall we again draw near to fight against our brothers, the people of Benjamin?" And the Lord said, "Go up against them." The first battle ends in failure. They still have the odds in their favor, they array themselves for battle. Weep before the Lord and then ask whether they should do what they have already decided to do. It does raise the question as to what sort of weeping this is. Are they weeping over their defeat and losses? Are they weeping over the sins of Gibeah? We see by the absence of sin offerings that they are not weeping over their own sins in any serious way.

V24-28, 'So the people of Israel came near against the people of Benjamin the second day. ²⁵ And Benjamin went against them out of Gibeah the second day, and destroyed 18,000 men of the people of Israel. All these were men who drew the sword. ²⁶ Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. ²⁷ And the people of Israel inquired of the Lord (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, ²⁸ and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, ministered before it in those days), saying, "Shall we go out once more to battle against our brothers, the people of Benjamin, or shall we cease?" And the Lord said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand." Here we see an emphasis on the whole army and all the people weeping and drawing near to God at the tabernacle which appears to be brought to Bethel for this purpose. They fast and weep as an outward sign of their repentance and we see burnt offerings for sin as well as peace offerings being made. Here we see Israel acknowledging that their hands are not clean that they have sins that need addressing and this time God answers that He will grant them the victory. It is important to note another aspect of this scene. God allowed His people to go into a losing situation. The fact that they are told to go does not guarantee that everything will be up to our expectations. God had purposes for Israel's holiness through loss, and God has many ways of accomplishing His will and this often includes suffering. We must get the notion out of our minds that if we are doing God's will we will not suffer, this is nonsense. Paul was sent by God and suffered much. Being 'in God's will' does not mean success, happiness and a suffering free life. We in giving our lives to God and obeying His will and fulfilling the great commission may experience hardship, this is not a sign that God is not with us, He has many

purposes and taking some time to reflect on the sin in our own lives is a fruitful way to process any suffering.

Administering justice

We come now to a very detailed breakdown of the victory, it is structured in a very strange way as the focus is swapped in an almost cinematic way from Israel to Benjamin moving between the way things appear and the way they are. Some verses take us back in time to another perspective. As the reader we are being given the inside scoop while this is contrasted with Benjamin's false hope, v29-47, 'So Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah. ³⁰ And the people of Israel went up against the people of Benjamin on the third day and set themselves in array against Gibeah, as at other times. ³¹ And the people of Benjamin went out against the people and were drawn away from the city. And as at other times they began to strike and kill some of the people in the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, and in the open country, about thirty men of Israel. ³² And the people of Benjamin said, "They are routed before us, as at the first." But the people of Israel said, "Let us flee and draw them away from the city to the highways." ³³ And all the men of Israel rose up out of their place and set themselves in array at Baal-tamar, and the men of Israel who were in ambush rushed out of their place from Maareh-geba. ³⁴ And there came against Gibeah 10,000 chosen men out of all Israel, and the battle was hard, but the Benjaminites did not know that disaster was close upon them. ³⁵ And the Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel, and the people of Israel destroyed 25,100 men of Benjamin that day. All these were men who drew the sword. ³⁶ So the people of Benjamin saw that they were defeated.

The men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin, because they trusted the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah. ³⁷ Then the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush moved out and struck all the city with the edge of the sword. ³⁸ Now the appointed signal between the men of Israel and the men in the main ambush was that when they made a great cloud of smoke rise up out of the city ³⁹ the men of Israel should turn in battle. Now Benjamin had begun to strike and kill about thirty men of Israel. They said, "Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle." ⁴⁰ But when the signal began to rise out of the city in a column of smoke, the Benjaminites looked behind them, and behold, the whole of the city went up in smoke to heaven. ⁴¹ Then the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were dismayed, for they saw that disaster was close upon them. ⁴² Therefore they turned their backs before the men of Israel in the direction of the wilderness, but the battle overtook them. And those who came out of the cities were destroying them in their midst. ⁴³ Surrounding the Benjaminites, they pursued them and trod them down from Nohah as far as opposite Gibeah on the east. ⁴⁴ Eighteen thousand men of Benjamin fell, all of them men of valor. ⁴⁵ And they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon. Five thousand men of them were cut down in the highways. And they were pursued hard to Gidom, and 2,000 men of them were struck down. ⁴⁶ So all who fell that day of Benjamin were 25,000 men who drew the sword, all of them men of valor. ⁴⁷ But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon and remained at the rock of Rimmon four months.' As with the city of Ai, Israel use a fake rout to draw the men away from the city and an ambushing force move in behind and took the city of Gibeah the original target of this attack. But it does not stop there, as the Benjaminites are fleeing Israel pursues until there is nothing but 600 fighting men left. And it does not stop there, v48, 'And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, the city, men and

beasts and all that they found. And all the towns that they found they set on fire.' Israel treats Benjamin as if they are Canaanites and not one of the tribes with a promised inheritance. There is no instruction from God to do this act, it appears an overzealous revenge. Many have commented how we can leverage unjust situations to exact revenge. Benjamin were wrong and no doubt some consequences should have come their way, but to exterminate nearly a whole tribe is beyond reasonable. We see in this action, in an apparently justified holy war how sin creeps in and hijacks the right turning it into evil. Revenge and unforgiveness travel most comfortably on the back of righteous anger, and constantly seek out homes in the hearts of the wounded and the persecuted. Adding revenge to justice tips the scales to injustice. We too face this temptation. When we are wronged we seek to make our pain felt through anger and revenge, and we find an opportune door in righteous anger and justice. We build up the resentment in our hearts and nurture the grudge until it is a well stoked fire. The lesson we need to learn is forgiveness, to give it before we feel it, to take unforgiving thoughts captive, and to remind ourselves that we have been granted grace and forgiven much and must give as we have received.

This chapter reminds us that sin deserves punishing, but when we pursue the addressing of sin with justice that gives vent to anger it causes destruction. We must contrast this with the justice that God has demonstrated. God poured out His unrelenting wrath upon His Son not us, we are now called to forgive as we have been forgiven, to pursue mercy and not give way to sinful anger. Unlike the armies of Israel we are not in any position to administer God's justice against sin but to model the grace that has saved us. We begin by seeing our own sin, addressing the sinner with a humbled attitude, calling them to repentance and the real hope of forgiveness. We do not play the role of judge but call sinners to a God who is willing to receive those who will turn from their sin and put their trust in Christ.