

September 16

Scriptures: Read Judges 20

Key Verse: “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! ...” (20:13)

Overview

The tremendous response that the Levite received from his call for support and retribution gives evidence that the majority of Israelites still held high moral values and were greatly disturbed by what had happened. This terrible incident awoke them from their attitude of indifference to reveal that, even though they had sunken into degeneracy in many areas concerning the Law of God, they still had deep inner religious convictions.

This is the only time we see a united military effort in the book of Judges. The fact that the tribes united and that Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, was still high priest indicates that this event took place early in the period of the judges. Unfortunately, all Israel had not rallied together in the same way to rid the land of the equally wicked Canaanites, as God had ordered; but because this wickedness happened among their own brethren, they felt all the more responsible to take immediate disciplinary action against them.

All Israel (except the men from Jabesh Gilead; 21:8-9) gathered before the Lord at Mizpah, the central meeting area (cf, 1 Sam.7:5) within the territory of Benjamin, about 5 kilometers from Gibeah. Before they took any action against Gibeah, they first inquired concerning the details of the crime. The Levite retold the story in such a way that he appeared without any blame, yet the inspired writer of Judges made it known that he was not blameless (19:25-28).

The Israelites, by a solemn oath, determined that none would return to his home until the men of Gibeah were repaid for “the vileness” that they had done in Israel (v.10). Restitution and atonement was to be made because the Law of God had been broken. Innocent blood had been split upon God’s land in a violent and cruel sex crime; therefore, blood guiltiness, or collective guilt, came upon all Israel, just as it had with the sin of Achan (Josh.7:11-15). The people all took upon themselves the responsibility of the blood avenger. As Moses commanded: “Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with you” (Deut.19:10-13).

The Israelites were acting in accordance to God’s law when they first asked the Benjamites to hand over only those responsible for the crime, that they alone might be punished in order to “remove the evil from Israel” (v.13). Some of the men involved in the crime were probably leaders or important men in the city, because the whole tribe was unwilling to hand them over and they protected them,. The people of Benjamin did not humble themselves and confess their sin, nor did they feel shame and remorse; rather, they were proud and met the challenge with violent force as “a ravenous wolf” (the prophecy of Jacob concerning Benjamin; Gen.49:27). Their reaction signified that they condoned the actions of the men of Gibeah; therefore, they were just as guilty and morally repaved. So the battle began and not just against those directly involved, but the whole tribe was the target.

It was not until after the united forces lost the first battle that they sincerely sought guidance and the help of the Lord. It appears that beforehand they were relying on their own strength and the strength of Judah, whom the Lord told to go out first (v.18; cf.1:2). After two defeats, they sought the Lord more seriously and along with weeping, as they had done before, they displayed humility by fasting at the house of God (v.26). This showed they were earnestly waiting on God to know His will, as well as to receive comfort, strength, and deliverance from Him; they were now totally dependent upon God. Most importantly, they sacrificed both peace and burnt offerings to the Lord. Before they could successfully do His work, they needed to make peace with God through confession of sin and the needed to make peace with God through confession of sin and the restoration of fellowship with Him and consecrate themselves to God as signified by the burnt offering. Finally, with the sweet aroma of the sacrifices, the Lord was satisfied and gave them the assurance: “Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand” (v.28).

The Lord did indeed give the men of Israel the victory with the same military strategy Joshua had used at Ai (Josh.8:14-21). Sadly, however, the tribe of Benjamin was almost exterminated—only six hundred men escaped by the grace and providence of God, so that from this remnant they might be built up again.

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank You for the privilege of doing Your work here on Earth. But help us to see that You cannot use us until we’ve made our own hearts right with You.