

March 25

Judges 19-21

Welcome back to March 25 of Project 4:4. I'm Lori Eccleston, Executive Assistant at Christ Community Church. Today we finished what surely must be one of the most depressing books in the Bible. There is much that we can and should learn from the Book of Judges, but I cannot pretend that reading it is an exciting and uplifting experience because frankly it shows people -- even the people who bear the name of God -- in a very unflattering light -- selfish, shortsighted and full of sin. One thing that I am sure that you have noted by now is the fact that the Bible never tries to cover up the truth or to mask the ugliness of sin. It is a very straightforward record of who man is, warts and all, and of what he has done -- evil as well as good.

Judges 19-21 contains a particularly ugly and gruesome account of how bad things had gotten in Israel just a few generations after the time of Joshua. The last several chapters of Judges, following the account of Samson's death, do not appear to be meant to follow chronologically after the account of the twelfth judge, Samson. In fact there are some reasons for placing them chronologically much closer to the beginning of the period of the Judges than the end. In any case the story of Micah and his personal priest, and of the Levite and his concubine, are fairly representative of the low state of morality and the incredible ignorance regarding the one true God that characterize the entire period of the Judges.

Did you notice that our reading today began and ended with the same simple statement, "In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as he saw fit." That is a literary device which sets off this material as a discrete unit, but it also is as good a summary statement as we might find of the age. As we have noted, as a theocracy, Israel had no earthly king, but the Lord was the King. The sad reality is that each time Israel forgot Him and walked away from God, it looked very much like there was no king, therefore no rule of authority, and that led again and again to anarchy.

The story of the Levite and his concubine is very similar in many respects to the story of the rescue of Lot. The visitors who come under the protection of a household, the attack of the depraved men of the town, the homosexual appetites of the crowd, and the horrifying compromise proposed by the master of the household, are all the same in both stories. The difference comes only in that Lot's guests were angelic with supernatural powers, while the Levite had no such power or conviction. Another difference, of course, is that the divine judgment fell upon Sodom in the form of a supernatural firestorm, whereas here it came from an attack by the other tribes of Israel. Finally, it should be noted, that in Sodom such a crime was condoned by the race and culture, whereas in Israel, at least, there was enough conscience left to denounce it and take up arms against Gibeah.

There are some other points of interest in this concluding story of the Book of Judges. The incredible lengths to which the other tribes of Israel were willing to go to remedy the plight of Benjamin, without breaking the oath that they had taken against giving any of their daughters to Benjamin, is interesting in the extreme. It shows us once

again the degree of sacredness attached in ancient Israel to the taking of an oath, serves as a powerful rebuke to us who do not often cringe at all at the prospect of breaking our vows, and gives us a bit more understanding of the tragic story of Jephthah, who kept his oath at such a terrible price. No wonder the Word of God counsels us to be slow to speak and very careful about what we agree to do.

One last specific observation is in order. The Benjaminites, according to this account, had a whole regiment of men who were lethal in their accuracy with a sling. That little reference is interesting because of the story of David and Goliath, which will be encountered in the writings of Samuel, which occurs in the time immediately following that of the Judges.

The most important thing about the entire Book of Judges though is the pattern of sin, judgment, repentance, deliverance and forgetfulness. It is a repetitive, cyclical pattern in the life of Israel and, I fear, of the Church of God down through the ages. This pattern is far more normative than we would like to admit. We need to recognize the wonderful flip side of that terrible cycle. It is best expressed by a brief but potent New Testament phrase -- "Though we are faithless yet He remains faithful." In the midst of Israel's continual failings, God never forgot His covenant promises, and He kept every single one!!

Praise be to our Faithful God!