

Immorality in the Land

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Alistair. Can I just add my welcome this evening? I'm Tim. I'm one of the interns here at Brunsfield. And my job just at this moment is just to give you three minutes of introduction of where we've been.

In chapter one of Judges, way back at the start of the summer, we began with such hope for the fledgling nation of Israel. Israel seemed to be living up to its high calling as a light among the nations.

Remember how God, we've been singing and reading about how God took them from Egypt and brought them into this land to give it to them. And in the first chapter, there was teamwork and collaboration.

The people were inhabiting the land and all seemed well. But even as we looked at that first chapter, there were issues bubbling beneath the surface.

And as we've gone through the whole cycle of the Judges, we've seen time and time again that Israel did not match up to what it was meant to be. And as we've seen God striving for His people, bringing them to their senses through hostile neighbours and then raising up from among them deliverers.

[1 : 19] At this stage in the cycle, I am just awestruck that God has continued to have dealings with these people. Even though it seems that every chance they get, they err.

Yet God still follows them, pursues them, looks after them, cares for them, longs to draw them back to Himself. But even in our wonder of God's faithfulness, we ought to be perturbed with where Judges has been leading us.

From the flawed Gideon to Jephthah to Samson, the last few Judges that we've looked at in the book, they're given a lot of space and a great deal of material is taken up with the stories of their flawed manners.

And so as we round off our studies in the book tonight, we find that our subject matter for this evening is harrowing. It's difficult.

It is not comfortable. Much of what is described in our passage may well be distressing for many of us and painful.

[2 : 31] There is little light or joy in the narrative that we're going to study. But in all that, I am utterly convinced and I believe that we are utterly convinced that all of Scripture is God-breathed and that it is profitable to us.

And so as we think and as we pray and as we read, would God be made glorious among us even tonight, even in the dirty, hard, troubling parts of the Word of God that we have to deal with.

I'm just going to hand back to Alistair now. Can we come and pray to begin with and ask God to help us to engage with this challenging portion of God's Word this evening?

Let's pray. Father God, we come before you this evening and we come as those who are your children, as those who know you as Savior.

And we long that you would come and meet with us here this evening. That you would give us humility as we deal with your Word.

- [3 : 53] That you would give us love and honour and honesty. Father, would you help me?
 Would you take my words? And would you ensure that nothing that is against your glory would be said? And would you help all of us as we hear your Word?
 That we would understand. That we would apply it to our lives. And that we would go away changed men and women. Father, help us, we pray.
 In Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to read tonight. We're not going to read the whole passage as we've done most of the other weeks. We're just going to read a scattering of verses through the few chapters.
 So we're starting in Judges chapter 19. And we're just going to take out a scattering of verses. Before us, we have three chapters that form three acts in a story.
- [5 : 09] In chapter 19, we find act 1. That is the spark that starts a war. Then in chapter 20, we find that civil war itself and how it plays out.
 Finally, in act 3 in chapter 21, we find something of a reconciliation narrative. And so that's where we're reading from this evening. So chapter 19, and just the first kind of half line there, begins, In those days, Israel had no king.
 And then we'll skip down to verse 29, down to the end of the chapter. And it says, When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine limb by limb into 12 parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel.
 Everyone who saw it was saying to one another, Such a thing has never been seen or done. Not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Just imagine.
 We must do something. So speak up. Then all Israel and from Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead came together as one and assembled before the Lord in Mizpah.
- [6 : 31] The leaders of all the people of the tribes of Israel took their places in the assembly of God's people. 400,000 armed men with swords.
 The Benjamites had heard that the Israelites had gone up to Mizpah. Then the Israelites said, Tell us how this awful thing happened. So the Levite, the husband of the murdered woman, said, I and my concubine came to Gibeah in Benjamin to spend the night.
 During the night, the men of Gibeah came after me and surrounded the house intending to kill me. They raped my concubine and she died.
 I took my concubine, cut her into pieces and sent one piece into each region of Israel's inheritance because they committed this lewd and outrageous act in Israel.
 Now all you Israelites, speak up and tell me what you have decided to do. Skipping down to verse 12. The tribes of Israel sent messengers throughout the tribe of Benjamin saying, What about this awful crime that was committed among you?
- [7 : 53] Now turn those wicked men of Gibeah over to us so that we may put them to death and purge the evil from the land. But the Benjamites would not listen to their fellow Israelites.
 From their towns, they came together at Gibeah to fight against the Israelites. Down again to verse 17. Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered 400,000 swordsmen, all of them fit for battle.
 The Israelites went up to Bethel and inquired of God. They said, Who of us is to go up first to fight against the Benjamites?
 The Lord replied, Judah shall go first. Down to verse 26 then. Then all the Israelites, the whole army, went up to Bethel and there they sat weeping before the Lord.
 They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the Lord. And the Israelites inquired of the Lord. In those days, the Ark of the Covenant was there with Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, ministering before it.

[9 : 11] They asked, Shall we go up again to fight against the Benjamites, our fellow Israelites, or not? The Lord responded, Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands.

Skipping down to verse 46, the end of the chapter. On that day, 25,000 Benjamite swordsmen fell, all of them valiant fighters.

But 600 of them turned and fled into the wilderness to the Rock of Rimmon, where they stayed for four months. The men of Israel went back into Benjamin and put all the towns to the sword, including the animals and everything else they found.

All the towns they came across, they set on fire. The men of Israel had taken an oath at Mizpah. Not one of us will give his daughter in marriage to a Benjaminite.

The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly, Lord God of Israel, they cried.

[10 : 26] Why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today? And finally, just down to the end of the chapter again, down to 23.

So that is what the Benjamites did. While the young women were dancing, each man caught one and carried her off to be his wife.

Then they returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and settled in them. At that time, the Israelites left that place and went home to their tribes and clans, each to his own inheritance.

In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. Apologies for skipping through the reading.

It's one of the longest readings in the whole of Judges and it would have taken an awfully long time to have gone through the whole section. We begin our passage in Act 1, the spark of the Civil War.

[11 : 34] And we began our passage this evening with the return of a motif that turned up last time when Ian was taking us through. There was no king in Israel.

And that ought to be something of a warning sign to us as we have read about Israel's idolatry over the past couple of chapters and here no less than before.

As the curtain comes up on the stage, we're met again with a nameless Levite. We should note that only one character in all three chapters is given an identity and that he merely helps us to date the events.

It's early in the Judges period and he concretizes this whole narrative as real, true history. The rest of the characters have no identity, no names, no lineages, nothing.

The writer, it's as if he's generalizing them, dehumanizing them. It's a ploy to pull us in. Another Levite, just like the last story which Ian led us through.

[12 : 47] We're introduced to one of these men who should have been leading the people of Israel in covenant obedience towards God. This man should have known the law and he should have been doing it.

but his initial action in the chapter is startling. He takes a concubine to himself, a second class wife.

It isn't overtly stated, very little is in these chapters because we're meant to infer from the story what is going on and this ought to be a second warning sign that something is going badly wrong.

And then she leaves and there's a four month gap before our friend the Levite goes off in search of her and we see no motivation in this.

Perhaps this is honorable. Perhaps he is doing the right thing and we find him greeted by his wife and welcomed into his father-in-law's house in Bethlehem.

[13 : 57] All seems well. Celebrations are had and everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. The father-in-law, notice, is a lavish host.

But notice again that the son-in-law wants to get home. Down in verse 8 and beforehand even. He tries to leave on day 4 only to be coerced into another day of his father-in-law's feasting.

On day 5 he gets up to go but again isn't treated by his father-in-law's generosity. But as the day drags on on day 5 the Levite decides he'll stay no more and he leaves.

I wonder can you almost feel for the Levite detained and coerced by his father-in-law just wanting to get home. Perhaps you've been to some Christmases like that.

I can sympathize with this and perhaps in our British mindset we might wonder if there's some ulterior motives in the father-in-law's generosity and his constant desire to keep him.

[15 : 07] Oh maybe he'll move closer. Maybe we can build a house next door as an add-on. But don't be too quick to jump to those conclusions. They leave Bethlehem and we have the Levite and his concubine and a servant and a couple of donkeys and within a couple of hours they approach Jebus the city that we will come to be very familiar with as Jerusalem but it's still in the hands of the Canaanites.

It's still enemy territory and it seems like too much of a risk to seek hospitality there. Goodness only knows what might befall a good Israelite among those pagans.

It would be like if some of us east coast folk were driving across the M8 and you saw the Hilton for Glasgow and you thought well I don't know Glasgow can any good thing happen in Glasgow to an Edinburgh man.

We'll keep on going until we reach more hospitable territory. And so they keep on going until they reach Gibeah. It's Benjamite territory.

It's a walled city so it should be safe and secure and it should be filled with Israelites who will be friendly to this little band of weary travellers. Worth a late walk surely.

[16 : 32] They come through the gate into the square and they wait for someone to offer hospitality. This would have been the normal custom and it would have been an absolute shame on the city if they didn't offer hospitality to strangers.

In any of the nations never mind Israel and in the context of the father-in-law's lavish generosity in Bethlehem this is meant to scream volumes to us that there's something awfully wrong to us in Gibeah.

And then a new character is brought into the story this sojourner late from his work and he notices these strangers in the square and it turns out that they're from the same clan and he invites them in and it seems to make the point that it wouldn't be wise for them to stay in the square.

Isn't it odd that in this city it takes an outsider to do the decent thing? And they go and they join him and soon they're comfortable and the party is off to a great start but soon there is a noise and the party is interrupted.

Not a group of well-wishing neighbours bringing pots of food but a mob. They throw themselves against the door of the house that the word used in the NIV is weak.

[18 : 09] They throw themselves against the door of the house and they demand that this traveller be given into their hands. We've heard what the Levite said they wanted to do with him and this is a horrendous request and our minds ought to instantly recognise this as what happened to the visitors that came to Lot in Genesis 19 in Sodom and Gomorrah and notice the host tries to bargain with them.

He offers them his own daughter as well as the Levite's concubine. It does exactly what Lot did or very very similar. But the men of this city are insatiable in their evil desire and they are utterly depraved.

And do you notice that we see here the characters are tested. We see what makes up these people and what we discover is dark.

The host is so twisted in thinking that he's willing to offer even his own daughter and the concubine to save himself and his guest.

But then up steps the Levite and without any hint of love or anything that drove him to go and win back his concubine he takes her and he throws her out to this mob.

[19 : 49] Out to this pack of ravenous wolves. And she is taken and she is tortured. And meanwhile he goes to bed.

And after the horror of what you see in those verses 26, 25, 26, in 27 we ought to be utterly staggered because it seems that the Levite has lost no sleep whatsoever.

He seems to have gone to bed and slept soundly and risen again in the morning without a second thought. And he rises and opens the door and finds the concubine lying basically across the threshold.

She's lying on the welcome mat grasping for shelter and for protection. temptation. But as he steps over her body, the only words that we hear from him are those of impatience and callousness.

Come on, get up. Do you hear it? You're holding me back down there. What's wrong with you? And there's no response.

[21 : 16] And his callousness is gut wrenching. There's no remorse. There's no sorrow. Just a desire to go on and get back home and be done with it.

And when he arrives home, he takes his concubine and cuts her into pieces like he would have done with an animal and he sends them throughout the land.

The levels of depravity exhibited here are off the charts. This poor woman is treated with no respect either in life or in death.

We can't even tell when she died from the Hebrew whether it's due to the mob's violence while she is waiting at the daybreak or whether on the journey home or even at the hands of her master.

The callousness and the cold-heartedness and the depravity of everyone involved is brutal. These people who were meant to be the shining light of God's goodness to the nations are living out the very worst of the Canaanites sin.

[22 : 44] And so debauched have they become that anyone in Gibeah who walked past them in the square they maybe didn't take part in the sin but they just walked on past these soon to be victims of the mob.

But notice that in every case it comes back to the same stem. Every person is just doing what is right in their own eyes.

Those words are even put into the mouth of the host while he's bartering with the crowd. In verse 24 he talks about bringing out these women.

I will bring them out for you now and you can it's not clear that it's the same phrase but it's the same phrase as at the end of the chapter that you could do whatever you want to them.

Whatever is right in your eyes. This is the moral system of their lands. This is the overriding idea behind this people's culture.

[24 : 01] And isn't it sickening to behold? But can we take a moment maybe to consider our own land and even our own culture?

Because the mantra of our age is not so very far from this repeated refrain in these chapters. The people do what is right in their own eyes.

perhaps that is part of the reason why women are objectivized and dehumanized and attacked even on our streets and in our parks.

lives. If you want a startling reminder of the barbarianism of our culture, go and look at some of the statistics of sexual crime in this country.

and do we wonder that the culture shapers, that the people that we allow to speak into our lives through culture are revealed to be sexually immoral and that they're displayed to be.

[25 : 20] Oddly, I noticed a message on my Twitter just today of a Christian commenting on it and saying, isn't it strange how all these things can be done in films and yet when one of their own does it in real life they're all ashamed.

The body parts of this poor woman are sent throughout the land and all who look on it are horrified and so they should be. And so we transition into the next act of the story.

Act two, the civil war. It's an odd thing at the start of chapter 20 because these horrific acts manage to produce something positive that we haven't seen ever.

The people are united. The whole of Israel, the author makes a very telling point from Land O'Groats to, I'm going the wrong way now, am I?

Land's End to John O'Groats and even to Straban, you could say, if you want to include Northern Ireland in our collection. The people are united, but this is so bitter in the mouth because their unity is based on such horrific circumstances.

[26 : 53] And it isn't for the worship of God or for the fulfilling of God's purposes. It's for retribution and to fight within each other. The man is called to give his account and we read it.

Did you notice how airbrushed the tale was? Something that I was taught recently. never trust what comes out of people's mouths in the Bible.

Trust what the narrator says, but don't always trust what the person says of his own actions. And here's a perfect case. The man airbrushes his account and it's a masterpiece of playing the victim.

Nothing is mentioned about his own culpability. Nothing is mentioned about his own pardon, the murder or the death of his concubine. And instantly the people hear this and they respond in verses 8 to 10.

They know what they should do. Or at least they think they do. The passage again isn't clear, but I wonder if even this decision, which many of us would think of positively, I wonder if this is the people just doing what's right in their own eyes.

[28 : 18] Notice that they don't inquire of God at this stage. There's no mourning, no sorrow, no repentance, merely outrage in a plan. But if the eleven tribes that met are rash and foolish, perhaps we should go on to consider the Benjamites.

They're called to give over their guilty men to be punished. But Benjamin chooses those rapists over the nation of Israel. Blood seems to be thicker than all else here.

And rather than dealing with the sin of Gibeah, Benjamin musters its army and prepares for full-scale civil war. The camera pans back to the camp of Israel in verse 18.

And if we're not careful, we may misinterpret what we see and hear. The Israelites go to God with their plan and ask who should attack first.

And the response from God is that Judah should go up first. And in that we get this little poignant reminder of what happened way back in the start of Judges again.

[29 : 40] Judges 1 it says, after the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, who of us should go up first to fight against the Canaanites? The Lord answered, Judah shall go up.

I have given the land into their hands. And do you notice how similar it is, but yet how different. Judah was meant to go up first.

but not in this way, not to lead a civil war. Again, the passage isn't clear here, but it's my view that Israel is merely seeking God to rubber stamp their own plans.

And there are three battles that then follow between Israel and Benjamin. The first two days, there are harrowing losses incurred by the Israelites.

Israelites. Israel is literally decimated with one in ten men falling to the Benjamites. But on the second night, they seek God with seemingly a fresh zeal.

[30 : 51] They're assured of victory, and on the third day, they lay an ambush, very similarly to what the children of Israel did against Ai, way back in Joshua.

and they utterly defeat the army of Benjamin. The defeat is given in two formats, but the overview is that 25,000 Benjamites die, and only 600 men of the whole of Benjamin survive.

But notice what happened. We read it in verse 48. The men of Israel, chapter 20, verse 48, the men of Israel went back to Benjamin, and put all the towns to the sword, even the animals, and everything else they found.

Not content with the defeat of the Benjamites, it seems that the army of Israel, because of the losses they incurred, turned to genocide, and they wipe out the tribe.

This is vicious retribution, and this is totally unnecessary. And I wonder if we could step back a little and consider this chapter, because I confess that on my first reading of this chapter, I completely missed what was going on here.

[32 : 24] In fact, I missed it on my second and my third reading, and it wasn't until I read someone else's work on it that I started to piece together what was actually going on. And I wonder if at the end of our series of judges, whether some of us are maybe realizing that this incredible book, it does not give up its treasure to an idle glance.

And I wonder if among the horrors of these chapters, we might find that we need to approach our Bibles with a fresh resolve, to come with open minds, and to wrestle with this book that will challenge our presuppositions and demolish our cultural assumptions.

Because the sad reality is, I can be far too familiar with this book, not in the good way, but in the way that allows me to skim a passage and not actually get what it's saying.

There was an author who famously asked of a man who read his Bible, he said, does the Bible read you back?

And I wonder if that's true for many of us anymore who have been Christians for quite some time. And here at the end of chapter 20 and the end of this second act, we're forced to stop and to look back at the wreckage of the past two chapters, which go from societal breakdown to personal troubles, to a lack of hospitality, to raw and blatant evil, to cowardice, to treachery, to rape, to murder, to callousness, to horror, to civil war, to the decimation of the nation, to the genocide of a tribe.

[34 : 19] and dare we turn on our television and claim that we live in a world that has progressed beyond this.

Alistair in his prayer very poignantly brought out some of what happens in our world today. This is brutal. And as we look back across everything that has happened, the key that I see is that everyone has done what seems right in their own eyes.

There is no king, there is no moral authority, and God seems very far away from these situations. Yet there is one more chapter.

Perhaps we will end with a silver lining. Perhaps something will turn around good out of all of this. And I have kind of called this the reconciliation.

And the chapter seems to begin well given the circumstances. Israel comes to their senses, they realise what has happened, and there is mourning at the destruction of Benjamin.

[35 : 32] At least, but notice how it is set up. Notice what the people say in verse 3, another translation puts it this way. Why, O Lord, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel so that one tribe should be missing in Israel?

Perhaps the obvious answer was that your own army went on a scorched earth policy. I mean, isn't that fairly obvious?

And it seems that the Israelites are completely unwilling to take responsibility for their actions. servants. And so there's this problem.

These 600 men of Benjamin are without families, and if only there were some way to furnish them with wives, so that the tribe of Benjamin can be restored.

But the men of Israel have sworn this oath that none of them would give their daughters another rash oath like one we've seen before.

[36 : 40] And do you see this recurring theme? They've hastily done what they see to be right in their own eyes, and now there's another problem. And so they hatch another harebrained idea.

To heal the wounds of this unfortunate civil war, they're going to send an army to go and to massacre a town who hadn't contributed to the army.

Doesn't that sound like a wonderful way to create reconciliation and peace in your land? Not only that, but in response to the evil of Gibeah, which centered around the mistreatment and abuse of a woman, they're going to go and become a state sponsor of human trafficking and forced marriages.

Oh, wonderful, you men of Israel, how clever of you to work out that plan. it's so twisted and so perverted that we read this and we almost don't comprehend the immensity of the evil that is going on.

Seven, sorry, 400 young women, probably no older than 14 or 15, are brought to this remnant of Benjamin, seeing their families slaughtered and so peace is made between Israel and Benjamin.

[38 : 03] And notice the audacity of verse 15. The people were sorry for Benjamin. Why?

Because the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. They blamed God for this mess. And you notice there were 600 and they only got 400 of these women.

There's not enough, there's still lack. And so they come up with a second plan, a yet another plan. This time the Benjamites are instructed to go up and kidnap children as they take part in the local gala.

Doesn't that sound like a wonderful plan? And the army would smooth it over with their fathers and brothers under the threat of another town massacre. And so ends the book of Judges.

with the Benjamites going home to rebuild their cities with these children for women, for wives, and the rest of the people of Israel returning to their inheritance.

[39 : 19] These are dark days indeed. And we see how utterly twisted the minds of the Israelites have become. them. They're full of this sort of loophole logic.

They claim to do everything by the book. They claim to do this for God's, and yet what they do is utterly vile. they are so far from the light that they were meant to be to the nations.

Because they have well and truly conformed to the pattern of this world. Merely using God's name as a convenient shield for their immorality and idolatry and their evil practices.

And I wonder if for a moment we can just focus in on the refrain of these chapters which topped and tailed our passage for tonight.

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Because as Alistair pointed out thankfully a king has come.

[40 : 34] not David or Solomon who were but types and shadows and yet they solved so much of this. No, they were only forerunners of a greater king.

No, the answer to these horrific acts and sins is found in Jesus Christ. Because only in Jesus Christ can we find how a perfectly holy God can be continually gracious to such an atrociously vile nation as this.

Far beyond the point that we would have given up hope. Only in the atoning death of Christ is there any way that these men, any way that this nation can be brought around.

and yet also in Christ we find the one who is the king that brings us into obedience with God's will.

It was interesting this morning, we were hearing of one who demands our decision making to be determined by cross bearing rather than by comfort.

[41 : 49] I wonder if that's another way of representing what's said here, that their decision making is determined by what was right in their own eyes, when actually they should have been determining it by the law that God gave them as a nation.

Now when I say that we look forward to Christ, I'm not making light of the pain that have been caused by these men nor by those even of God's family in our day and age who have done what is right in their own eyes.

It is maybe only a slight comfort to some of us that our Saviour knows and cares that he lived on this earth with all of its pains, that he even died taking the wrath of God and feeling the pain of every sin.

As Hebrews puts it, we have a great high priest who cares for us and he is our king. And so as we finish Judges, this incredible catalogue of Israel's failures, mingled with the utterly amazing grace of God in preserving his people, despite their being conformed to the patterns of the prevailing society, may we never be so foolish as to think that we will not fall as the Israelites did.

But would we be filled with a fresh zeal to seek God anew and to be conformed to the image of his son, the king of kings who leads us in being salt and light among dark and dying generations.

[43 : 54] May we see even in the darkness of the horrors of judges that God is light and that his love and his mercy shine even in the muck and the mire of these tragic accounts.

And as we live in this world, would we be able to minister that grace to others who are so entangled by the darkness that only the God of judges is relatable for them?

Let's pray just before we close this evening. Father, we look at what went on there in those days in Gibeah and the surrounding area and our question must be why?

We are horrified by the sin of your people. and we wonder how it could ever have happened that way with all that they had of you, with all that they had seen of your goodness, with all that they must have heard of your law.

And in our day and age, we would pray that we would not become like them. either like the men who just walked past those sojourners in the square waiting for the eventual mob to come upon them, nor like any of the other characters who acted with callousness and evil in their hearts.

[45 : 56] men. But would we be those who, gazing at your son, would be like him, who would be transformed from the image of this world into the image of him, and who would be of great use in this world, pointing sinners back to you.

Father, only you can do this by your spirit, and only in Jesus' name. So we pray in his name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.