

THE LEAST TRIBE IN ISRAEL (PART 2)

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Judges chapter 19 describes the tragic events that led to civil war within Israel, between eleven of her tribes and the tribe of Benjamin. The concubine of a Levite from mount Ephraim was abused and killed by the natives of the Benjamite city of Gibeah when they had stopped to spend the night there on a journey from Bethlehem to Ephraim. The Levite divided her remains into twelve pieces which he sent throughout Israel (Judg 19:29). The effect? *“And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds”* (Judg 19:30).

An effort to make peace

Judges 20:1-2 says, “Then all the children of Israel went out, and the congregation was gathered together as one man, from Dan even to Beersheba, with the land of Gilead, unto the Lord in Mizpeh. And the chief of all the people, even of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand footmen that drew sword.” They heard firsthand the Levite’s account of what happened, and he asked for their advice and counsel (Judg 20:3-7). The tribes of Israel prepared for war against Gibeah (Judg 20:9-10), and were *“gathered against the city, knit together as one man”* (Judg 20:11). But before going to war, they questioned the tribe of Benjamin and demanded that they deliver the guilty men of Gibeah (Judg 20:11-13). Israel was following God’s commands to establish the certainty of the truth of the matter from the mouth of two or more witnesses before putting to death those worthy of that punishment (Deut 17:6; 19:15). They were also not “jumping to conclusions,” but searching for the truth of the matter (Prov 18:17). These remain proper principles for Christians to follow today in handling accusations against brethren (Matt 18:16; John 7:51; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19-21). Benjamin now had her opportunity to choose to follow righteousness in this matter, and to avoid war. Sadly, Judges 20:13 says that *“the children of Benjamin would not hearken to the voice of their brethren the children of Israel.”* Instead, they *“gathered themselves together out of the cities unto Gibeah, to go out to battle against the children of Israel”* (Judg 20:14). They committed the same error that many people still do today: they chose their family over God. If we do that, we are not worthy of the Lord (Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26). War was now inevitable between Israel and Benjamin.

Israel’s first civil war

Gibeah had 700 men ready to join the fight, along with another 26,000 from the rest of Benjamin (Judg 20:15). Of these men, there were 700 left-handers who could each “sling stones at an hair breadth, and not miss” (Judg 20:16).

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They were facing 400,000 men from Israel, all of whom were “men of war” (Judg 20:17). Before engaging in battle, even though they had an overwhelming advantage in numbers, the Israelites wisely chose to first gather at the tabernacle to ask counsel of the Lord (Judg 20:18). God instructed Judah to fight first (Judg 20:18), and on that day, 22,000 Israelites fell before Benjamin (Judg 20:19-21). Israel wept before the Lord, and again asked counsel of Him, and they were told to go fight against Benjamin (Judg 20:22-23). On the second day, another 18,000 Israelites fell before Benjamin (Judg 20:24-25). Israel then wept and fasted, and offered sacrifices to God and asked His counsel yet again (Judg 20:26-28). This time, the Lord said, “*Go up; for tomorrow I will deliver them into thine hand*” (Judg 20:28). On that third day of battle, “The Lord smote Benjamin before Israel: and the children of Israel destroyed of the Benjamites that day twenty and five thousand and a hundred men,” and they also slaughtered the city of Gibeah and burned it, along with all the other cities of Benjamin (Judg 20:29-46). Only 600 men of Benjamin survived, and they fled to the wilderness unto the rock Rimmon, and hid there for four months (Judg 20:47). Besides these 600 survivors, the entire tribe of Benjamin was completely wiped out. Judges chapter 21 explains how wives were obtained for these men in order to preserve Benjamin’s inheritance in Israel. But this tribe was starting over with 600 families. This is why in king Saul’s time, Benjamin was still the smallest tribe in Israel (1 Sam 9:21). Interestingly, Saul’s home town was Gibeah (1 Sam 10:26).

A lesson for God’s church

What happened to Benjamin serves as an excellent lesson for God’s people of the New Testament. The church of Christ is spiritual Israel (Rom 2:28-29; Gal 6:16; 1 Pet 2:5-9; Heb 12:22-23), and God has commanded the church to discipline its erring members, those guilty of sin and who are unrepentant. God has commanded the church to make as a heathen man and a publican those who trespass against their brother and do not repent (Matt 18:15-17; Luke 17:3). God has commanded the church to rebuke and then deliver to Satan (withdraw from) those who are guilty of moral transgressions and do not repent (1 Cor 5; 2 Cor 2:6-9; 7:7-12; 12:20-13:2; Gal 6:1; 2 Thes 3:6-15; 1 Tim 1:20; 5:19-20). God has also commanded the church to mark and avoid unrepentant false teachers (Rom 16:17-18; 1 Tim 6:3-5; Titus 3:10-11). These situations are not at all pleasant to have to face, but when they do arise, we must *obey God’s commandments* to handle them properly. These difficult commandments have been written to us as a test of whether or not we will be obedient to God “*in all things*” (2 Cor 2:9).