

Institution Over People

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name's Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today.

A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good, they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word.

We are finishing this morning our series in the book of Judges, and you'll remember that the book of Judges is about a number of things. It's about the need for constant renewal and revival among God's people.

It's about the need for a faithful and true king, a king who can do what no human can do, which is to change the hearts of men. It's about the power of Spirit-filled leadership, and it's about God's mercy to hard-hearted people, people like you and me.

[1 : 14] As we come to the very last chapter together, we're continuing and really finishing the theme of the very last few chapters of Judges, which is this.

This is how it all ends when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. And so we've been looking at this horrific portrait of Israel and how gruesome and really gross things become when God is abandoned by His people.

We've been seeing that from a number of angles. We saw the worst of all in Judges chapter 19, but then last time in Judges chapter 20, we saw what happens when people refuse to deal with sin, which is that at the end, it really does grow and grow.

It doesn't just lie dormant. We're going to see one more angle this morning as we turn to Judges chapter 21. We'll see once again who gets trampled on as people pursue their own way.

And so I invite you to turn with me to Judges chapter 21. You can turn in your Bible. You can turn in your worship guide. You can turn on your phone.

[2 : 25] No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's Word. God tells us that His Word is more precious than gold. Even the finest gold. And it's sweeter than honey. Even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb.

And so that's why we read now Judges chapter 21, starting at verse 1. Now the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, no one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin.

And the people came to Bethel and sat there till evening before God. And they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. And they said, O Lord, the God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?

And the next day the people rose early and built there an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. And the people of Israel said, Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly to the Lord?

For they had taken a great oath concerning Him who did not come up to the Lord at Mizpah, saying, He shall surely be put to death. And the people of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother and said, One tribe is cut off from Israel this day.

[3 : 42] What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the Lord that we will not give them any of our daughters for wives? Verse 8.

And they said, What one is there of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah? And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-Gilead to the assembly. For when the people were mustered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead was there.

So the congregation sent 12,000 of their bravest men there and commanded them, Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead with the edge of the sword, also the women and the little ones. This is what you shall do. Every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction. And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead 400 young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him.

And they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan. Then the whole congregation sent word to the people of Benjamin who were at the Rock of Remen and proclaimed peace to them.

[4 : 51] And Benjamin returned at that time. And they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh-Gilead, but they were not enough for them. And the people had compassion on Benjamin because the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.

Verse 16. Then the elders of the congregation said, What shall we do for wives for those who are left? Since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin.

And they said, There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel. Yet we cannot give them wives from our daughters.

For the people of Israel had sworn, Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin. So they said, Behold, there is the yearly feast of the Lord at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem and south of Lebanon.

And they commanded the people of Benjamin, saying, Go and lie in ambush in the vineyards and watch. If the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and snatch each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh and go to the land of Benjamin.

[6 : 07] And when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, Grant them graciously to us, because we did not take for each man of them his wife in battle. Neither did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.

And the people of Benjamin did so and took their wives according to their number from the dancers whom they carried off. Then they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and lived in them.

And the people of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family. And they went out from there, every man to his inheritance. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you this morning for bringing us together.

And we thank you that you haven't left us to figure out what is right in our own eyes. But instead, you've given us your word to guide us and to direct us. And so we ask that you would do that again this morning.

[7 : 19] That you would pour out your spirit here now in this congregation. That you would open up our eyes. You'd unstop our ears. You'd clear our minds. You'd soften our hearts.

That we would be able to see and hear and understand and believe everything that is written about you in your word. We ask most of all that you'd show us Jesus. That we would see his glory and beauty and power and love and mercy and grace.

And we ask all of these things in his mighty name. Amen. Amen. To understand what's happening in chapter 21, you have to remember how the story ended in chapter 20.

We had two important verses that came at the very end of the attempted destruction of the people of Benjamin, the tribe of Benjamin. You'll remember in chapter 19, the men of Gibeah had committed this great crime and the most terrible chapter in all of the Bible.

And so in chapter 20, Israel unites as one. We're told one man, one tribe, one people over and over again so that they can move against the people of Benjamin.

[8 : 30] Because Benjamin refuses to give up Gibeah, they decide to stand with their brothers rather than to stand with what is right. And so it's those two verses that help us understand how serious the situation is now.

Now, chapter 20, verse 47, we're told there are 600 men hiding out in the Rock of Rimen, and they've been hiding there for four months.

In other words, Israel has been so successful in their campaign against the tribe of Benjamin that all that is left are these 600 men. And it's not just that they're left, it's that they are trapped in this one place.

Even more than that, the very next verse, the last verse of chapter 20, tells us that everyone and everything else has been destroyed.

It's not just that there are only 600 men left, it's that there are no cities, women, children remaining. Israel has Benjamin on the ropes.

[9 : 35] And of course, that's the purpose, right? The purpose, the goal, the end state all along was that they would obliterate the tribe of Benjamin. Something so terrible has happened in Israel, something so bad that no one can remember a worse event, that it is time for one of the 12 tribes to cease to exist.

In fact, this is what God had told them to do. Remember, chapter 20, they'd asked God three times for guidance and three times he tells them, go up against the tribe of Benjamin.

Very last time he says, go up for tomorrow, I will give them into your hand. And in fact, God does. God honors his promise to Israel.

They have great military success. And what should we expect at this point as we head into chapter 21, but that they would finally finish the job.

You've got 600 men. They've been trapped for four months. This does not seem like a complicated problem to solve. until, faced with the grief of losing their brothers, having four months to reflect on what it actually means to lose one of the 12 tribes, Israel also loses her courage.

[11 : 03] They don't actually have the nerve to follow through with the plan that God has given them. And so, instead of finishing the job that they've been given, they suddenly reverse course and decide they're going to reverse it.

The goal is no longer to destroy Benjamin. No. The goal is now to restore Benjamin. And so, right as they are about to have what God has sent them to do, they grab defeat from the jaws of victory. Of course, they run into a problem here because restoring Benjamin turns out to be much harder done than said. There were some things that we didn't learn last week about their plan and their gathering to go up and purge this evil from God's people.

And the important details that we were not shared were about the two vows that they had taken. Now, we find out that there was an elaborate plan even more than we know.

Vow one shows up twice here, verse one and verse 18. Verse one, they say, no one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin. And then in verse 18, cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin.

[12 : 22] This vow is a feature, not a bug. In fact, this is part of the plan. They are trying to accomplish what now they work to undo, which is to end Benjamin definitively.

In fact, they're preparing, right, for the scenario they now face. What if there's some Benjamites left? Well, we'll make sure there's no one for them to marry. If a few men make it, they will not be able to produce another generation.

There's another vow that we find out about that we were not aware of, which is the vow to also go after anyone who didn't join them. So verses five and eight, we find out if someone failed to join this gathering against Benjamin, they are also going to be wiped out.

Verse five, he shall surely be put to death. And then in verse eight, we find out, oh, Jabesh Gilead didn't show up. Guess what's going to happen to Jabesh Gilead?

They are going to be destroyed. And so they put up this elaborate plan. The elaborate plan is meant essentially to accomplish two things. First, they need to honor the vows that they've taken.

[13 : 36] And second, they need to restore Benjamin. 600 men of Benjamin, no women. What has to happen? They have to find some wives for these men so that the generations of Benjamin will continue.

And as they face this problem of wives, they find the solution of Jabesh Gilead. Oh, there's this group in Israel. We vowed that we're going to destroy them. So let's go destroy them with one exception.

We will not destroy any of their marriageable women. So we'll take them. We'll give those women to the Benjaminites. Problem solved. And so that is, in fact, what they do.

Verses 10 through 15, they go and they kill everyone in Jabesh Gilead except the virgins. And then they present those 400 women to the 600 Benjaminites. Now, if you can do basic math, at this point, you realize there's a little bit of a challenge.

400 is, in fact, 200 short of 600. If you figured that out on your own, congratulations. So there is a 200 wife deficit, which means they need to go again and find another solution.

[14:46] And they come up with something even more creative this time. Verses 16 through 23, how about we do this? We don't have another tribe to wipe out and other people to wipe out.

So how about we do the very innocent and classic move of just kidnapping a bunch of people? That seems to be the correct solution in this situation.

And so they show up to this feast at Shiloh. These women are dancing. It's the perfect kidnapping scenario. They go in. They grab 200 women and go out.

And then we read this in verse 23. Everything is great, right? Isn't that sweet?

There is such a happy ending to the book of Judges. You know, they found some solutions. They killed a bunch of people but protected the virgins. That solved part of the problem. And then they just kind of had a classic afternoon kidnapping.

[15:53] And then they went home and they rebuilt their towns and everyone lived happily ever after. And the inheritance was protected. And, you know, the book of Judges ends as every happy story does.

And then we just move on. Look at what a great job Israel has done. Aren't they so smart and clever, right?

Okay, it's not that funny. And then we find out that is, in fact, not the case. Right? There are two simple reminders here that things are very, very far from being okay.

Now, we find out one of them in verse 12. There's this very subtle, very devastating indictment of Israel. And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead 400 young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him.

And they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan. Is Shiloh in the land of Canaan? Shiloh's in what used to be the land of Canaan.

[17:08] Shiloh is now God's land. The conquest has already happened. The book of Joshua has already occurred. This is no longer the land of Canaan.

In fact, this, I believe, is the only time after the conquest of the promised land that this phrase is used to refer to God's land. And so the narrator is telling us in this very subtle but clear way, God's people are just like the pagans.

God's land is just like the Canaanite land. Do you want to know what Israel is doing here in this episode? They're behaving like God's enemies.

They are acting as if they were the ones who were opposed to God. It's not the only hint we get, though. We have something a little bit more explicit.

Verse 25 also reminds us things are not okay. In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

[18:23] And in case that wasn't clear enough, do you notice what God says and does in this chapter? God says and does nothing.

Notice verses 2 through 4. They are working so hard to engage with him. Verse 2. They're sitting before God and they lift up their voices and weep bitterly.

Verse 3. They're crying out about why this has happened. Verse 4. They even go so far as to build an altar and offer burnt offerings. And how does God respond to them?

He doesn't. God's people have walked so far away from God's ways. And so we see Israel is too clever for her own good.

Israel is doing and only doing what is right in her own eyes. She's doing the opposite of what God's people should be about.

[19:31] We see the same theme we've seen for the last several chapters, which that is, in fact, everything that God's people are doing is upside down. Verse 3. They say, Oh, Lord, the God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel?

In other words, God, this is kind of your fault. What have you done here? And, of course, we know the answer. Why has this happened in Israel?

This has happened because of her rebellion and apostasy. This has happened because of what happened in chapter 19 with the Levite and his concubine. This has happened because all the way back in chapter 1, Israel refused to finish the job that God had given them.

Why has this happened? God's silence says everything. Israel, this has happened because of you. Not only do they shift the blame, they then seem to lose track of what is more and less serious.

They forgive Benjamin for what is a heinous crime. Remember what Benjamin is doing. They're protecting the men of Gibeah who did unspeakable things in chapter 19.

[20 : 45] But Benjamin somehow gets off the hook. Who does get punished? Jabesh Gilead. Who did something wrong, not something heinous.

So those who did the heinous thing get off the hook. Those who do the wrong thing get wrecked. They don't wipe out Benjamin, and then they completely destroy Jabesh Gilead. Then they talk about this festival at Shiloh, which sounds great because it's a festival of the Lord.

The only problem is this. There is no record of this type of festival in the Old Testament law. We don't know about a festival where women come out and dance. Even more than that, it's happening at the time of the harvest, which is a way of hinting that this is, in fact, a pagan celebration. Done under God's name. And then if that were not enough, they continue the pattern we've seen for the last several chapters and really much of the book, the pattern of incredible respect and honor towards women.

And they do that by kidnapping, abducting, and raping them. Everything in Israel is upside down. The point is this.

[22 : 04] Israel prays on the vulnerable, the daughters of Shiloh, and they pray on the vulnerable so that they can preserve the institution, the men of Benjamin.

The men of Benjamin are outlaws. Women of Shiloh are innocent. And so Israel chooses the guilty over the innocent.

For Israel, preserving their institution is much more important than protecting the vulnerable. More important than justice. More important than doing to Benjamin what God had told them to do. And so we see one final time, one final episode, the ongoing theme that we've had for the last several chapters, which is that women are sacrificed for the sake of men.

We saw it in Judges chapter 12. It's Jethpah's daughter, not Jethpah, who's sacrificed. We saw it in Judges 19. It is the Levite's concubine, not the Levite, who's violated.

[23 : 24] And so we come back to what we talked about all the way back then. This is how it all ends when everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

It is the vulnerable who always pay the price. This is how ugly and gross and degrading and dehumanizing our autonomy actually is.

This is what it looks like when we care about us and only us. Chapter 21 here presents that same theme, but it gives us a new angle.

It's not just that the vulnerable are the ones who pay. We're also shown here how they're going to pay. They pay because the powerful are going to choose the reputation and integrity of their institutions and they're going to choose those over vulnerable and helpless people.

Israel decided that Benjamin was too big to fail. and so what do they do? They find a bailout. And who gets to pay the bill for Benjamin's bailout?

[24 : 47] Who's going to save them from the destruction that's coming their way? Who is going to protect the pride and appearance of Israel? The bailout's going to be paid for and the pride will be protected by vulnerable and innocent women.

That's what happens when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. And so it shouldn't surprise us that as they cry out to God in verses 2 through 4 with their fake religion, God has no answer.

There is nothing else left to say. Of course, the same thing happens in the church and in our world today.

We can't expose the scandal of a pastor. We can't talk about the scandal in the church because, man, what would happen to the ministry, right?

And yet we forget that what really destroys a community is the cover-up, not the scandal. What really destroys it is when the powerful are chosen over the weak.

[26 : 03] What really destroys our society is when we protect the reputations of the rich because they're rich. What destroys our culture is when we show deference to the powerful because they're powerful rather than doing what's right.

And what's even more heartbreaking and shocking about the book of Judges and about chapter 21 is that this is not a story about the pagans. It is a story about Israel.

It raises this question for us. In the midst of God's silence and in the midst of Israel's apostasy and wickedness and sin, where is God's grace?

Grace. And God's grace is here. Verse 23 and 24, verse 24 makes it sound like everything is good and Israel goes on to live her life.

And that, my friends, is a miracle. Israel deserves to be destroyed. What should have happened to Benjamin should happen to all twelve tribes.

[27 : 26] Verse 12, they are at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan. God should treat Israel just like he's treated the other nations.

God should wipe out Israel just like he's wiped out the other nations and he doesn't. Why? Because and only because of God's great grace.

Because and only because God has made promises to Abraham and he will not violate his covenant. Because and only because God is faithful even if we are faithless for he cannot deny himself.

why doesn't he wipe Israel out?

Why doesn't he wipe us out? Because and only because of God's grace. And where does that grace come from? The grace comes because God chose to wipe out his son so that he could save us.

[28 : 40] that day in those days there was no king in Israel and the king is coming. The king is coming who is going to live the perfect life that Israel and God's people did not live.

The perfect king is coming who is going to take the punishment that Israel deserves. the king who is going to take the punishment that we deserve. And that's the message at the very end of the last chapter of the last book of Judges that God's grace is in fact more.

No matter how bad things get and no matter how bad and far God's people fall God's promise still remains.

He doesn't wipe out Israel He wipes out His Son instead. And that's the reason and it's the only reason that we can sing praise the Lord His mercy is more stronger than darkness new every morn our sins they are many His mercy is more.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven we do praise you and thank you for your great mercy to your people and to us. We ask that you would remind us of it.

[30 : 10] That you would stir up our hearts with love and obedience to you. That we would turn to you again and again not because we've earned anything from you, not because we deserve it, but because Jesus has earned and deserved it for us.

We ask all of these things in his mighty name. Amen. I invite you to stand for our closing hymn.