

Episode 225

Shea Houdmann

Jeff and Kevin are joining me today to continue our series of difficult passages in the Bible. Difficult, not difficult in terms of difficult to interpret, like New Testament passage, difficult to understand verses, but difficult is in the sense of what in the world is going on in this passage. Why do the people behave the way that they did?

Shea Houdmann

Today, we're actually going to be covering the story of the Levite and his concubine from Judges chapter 19. And then the story kind of continues on into chapters 20 and 21. So there's a lot going on in this passage.

I'm not going to read the entire chapter. I'll try to give you the gist of the story. So a Levite, which is someone from the tribe of Levi, who was supposed to be the helpers of the priests, the servants in the temple, was traveling with his concubine. They arrived into a Jebusite city. The Jebusites were one of the nations that God commanded Israelites to kick out of the to completely eradicate. They were not supposed to be there anymore. But here in the land of Benjamin was a city filled with Jebusites. So a man and his concubines are staying in the city.

Shea Houdmann

And then we'll talk more about this later. And very similar to Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, a man comes in and warns them, don't stay out in public here. Please come stay at my house where you'll be safe. Well, they do that. And then the people from the city, the Jebusites, come to the door and say, basically, send the man out. We want to gang rape him. And the man says, don't do this evil thing. And the Levite actually says, no, here, you can have my concubine. He actually sends her out. And then she is mercilessly gang raped all night long.

Shea Houdmann

The Levite wakes up in the morning, discovers his concubine is dead, puts her on his donkey, takes her home, I presume, and then proceeds to cut her into 12 pieces. And then, evidently, with whatever FedEx UPS service there was in ancient Israel, sends different parts to her to all the different tribes of Israel saying, look what these people did to my concubine. What are we going to do about it?

Shea Houdmann

So then, super briefly, chapter 20 describes the tribes of coming to basically destroy the Jebusite city. And for some reason, the tribe of Benjamin decides

to defend the people who wickedly did this. The people who weren't even supposed to be there at all, Benjamin says, no, you can't attack the city that's on our land. So the Israelites are fighting amongst themselves. Lots of deaths eventually. The other tribes are victorious over Benjamin. Most of the tribe of Benjamin is wiped out. The few that are left, they're like, no, we can't have a tribe cut off from Israel. We need to find the remaining men, wives.

Shea Houdmann

And then the story of how they found these wives, they went and basically attacked the city, didn't participate in the battle, kill everyone, take all of the virgin women and offer them as wives to the remaining Benjamites. And there still weren't enough, so then they had the Benjamites visit this other city who was having a festival and say, basically, kidnap all the girls as they're out there dancing.

Shea Houdmann

So I think now you understand why we're describing this as a difficult passage in the Bible. Let me say to start off, absolutely nothing in this passage honors God. Absolutely nothing in this passage is done in the way that God would have had it done. And I think the most apt description I can find comes in two different places in Judges. Judges 17.6 and then Judges 21.25, where it says, in those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. So Kevin, please help me out here. What are we missing this passage? What's going on? And what are we supposed to do with this text?

Kevin Stone

Well, I don't know how much I can help you out, Shea. I mean, it's a horrible, horrible set of circumstances here. There's no light really to be seen here in this series of events. It's a dark, dark time in Israel's history. And it does go back to those verses that you mentioned, Shea, about how every man was doing what was right in his own eyes. That is kind of the theme of the book of Judges. That statement's repeated several times, and it's repeated, I think, right here in this chapter as well, or I guess a couple chapters previous, it's mentioned in Judges 17 and verse 6, then in Judges 21 and verse 25 as part of the story. But Israel needed some help. They were despising God's word. They were not following the law at all. And this is what happens when people turn their backs on God and start going their own way, things like this. And so in this story, we see concubinage, adultery, homosexuality, failure to protect the innocent, the protection of the guilty, rape, murder, dismemberment, the slaughter of women and children, civil war, kidnapping. I mean, it is a dark, dark passage.

Kevin Stone

Now, Shea, you were talking about the people, the Jebusites. I'm thinking, though, that the Levite and his concubines were passing through an area that was still being held by a lot of Jebusites. But they stop in the city of Gibeah, which was held by, it seems like it was being held by the tribe of Benjamin. And in fact, as they're coming through in verse 11, they're near Jebus, that was later on going to be called Jerusalem. And the servant who's traveling with them says to the Levite, let's stop here. It's getting dark. Let's find a place to stay. And his master replies in verse 12, no, we won't go to any city whose people are not Israelites. So he doesn't want to stop in the place where the Jebusites are. He says, well, let's go on to Gibeah. And so they do, they reach Gibeah and they spend the night there. And then that's where all the trouble happens. And the people of Benjamin who are Israelites are the ones who are causing all this trouble and doing the attacking and the murder and all the rest. And it's kind of ironic to me, it's one of the things that really stood out to me in this passage, how there was more safety, probably, among the Jebusites than there were among the people of Israel. That kind of shows how far the Israelites had gone. And it was just not a safe place, not at all.

Kevin Stone

But there are some elements in this story that are just horrendous. If you recoil in horror to this passage, as I think most people do, then it's kind of the point because the nation is without any godly leadership at this point. I mean, God was raising up judges periodically. And during that time of the judge, then there would be a certain amount of unity and people being called back to God's word, following God's law, keeping the covenant. But then after the time of that judge, then they would go right back to their more pagan ways. It's amazing how much paganism had crept into the nation of Israel by this time.

Shea Houdmann

So, Kevin, thank you for that correction. I must have missed that as I studied this passage. But no, I was looking it up briefly as you described. It was the city of Gibeah. I'm not sure why they mentioned the Jebusites so much in the beginning of the passage, but you are absolutely correct. It was a Benjamite city that actually was guilty of committing the acts against the Levite concubine and wanting to do those horrible things to the Levite himself. So, thank you for clarifying that for me.

Jeff Laird

Tons of stuff that's weird and wrong with this. I think we now understand that Game of Thrones did not invent the concept of people doing really, really nasty things to each other over a long period of time. And that is definitely the point of the passage.

Jeff Laird

There's so many places in the Old Testament where there are bad things that happen or they happen over a period of time and details are less. So, the very fact that you get more detail, so to speak, in this passage than you do elsewhere is something to take note of. And that's meant to be part of the point of this.

Jeff Laird

One of the things I think is interesting about this is not only do you see this complete breakdown of what's supposed to happen in society. Kevin, as you were saying, you've got basically every major crime and moral failure you can think of all rolled up into one there. But that even extends to the way that society reacts to things. So, even as far as they had fallen from God, somewhere in there, there's still this sense of right and wrong. And when this Levite sends these body parts out everywhere, all of Israel says, that is too far. That is too much. This is crazy, which is sort of a good thing.

Jeff Laird

But then you see that there's even a corruption in the way that they respond to this. They want to go and attack the entire city. And then one of the tribes says, well, no, we're not going to do that. And you wind up with a civil war. And then that causes problems. How do they solve those problems? With more things that are completely morally backwards and bankrupt. So, I think there's a lesson in there about the idea that when you drift away from God, you not only see all of these awful things happening, but you wind up with a culture that is so unhinged from God's intent and God's purposes that even when that culture tries to correct what is wrong or tries to correct the things that are evil, they just wind up doing things that are almost worse on a broad scale, maybe not worse on a individual scale, but worse in terms of they're not really solving the problem. They're just extending it and kicking some of it down the line. So, I think you can see that on different levels.

Jeff Laird

One of the things that really strikes me about this is the level of coldness that this Levite has towards his concubine. I'm sure we'll talk about some of the parallels between this and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and they're deliberate, but there you have an offer that's made here. Well, you have an offer, but then this gentleman basically opens the door and kicks this girl out into the middle of a crowd to let them do whatever they're going to do. That is, I think, the low point of the entire story. And what you see coming after that is more symptoms of the same thing. But for me, that's the worst part. So, I think looking at this as a broader scale, it really is that commentary on the idea that Israel was so fallen so far from God that everything from top to bottom, front to back of what they were doing was just totally corrupted and totally unholy.

Kevin Stone

Just to amplify that cold factor of this story, and the Levite should have been a spiritual leader in Israel. He was from the tribe that was selected to be temple helpers, or I guess at this point, tabernacle helpers, and he should have been a teacher and a model for the rest of the nation. He is anything but that here in this story. And just the coldness of kicking his concubine out to the mob to let them have her way with her, that's horrible. But then the next morning, I mean, and how did he sleep that night? Did he have a good night's rest that night? I'm wondering. But he gets up in the morning, he comes out there, he finds that his concubine, after being abused all night, has crawled back to the door and she is lying there with her hands on the threshold. And he goes out there and he says to her, get up, let's go. That has to be one of the coldest statements in all of scripture. That is so low. Get up, let's go. And there's no response. She's probably unconscious. She's definitely dying at this point, if not already dead. And then for him to pack her up and cut her up and send her off, it's just such coldness, such callousness in a man that should have been a spiritual leader.

Shea Houdmann

I look at the book of Judges. I mean, Deuteronomy goes through so many warnings about if you don't destroy the people who are currently inhabiting the land, you will become like them. You will adopt their practice. You will worship their false gods. You will do the horribly evil things that they do. The book of Joshua, by and large, obviously there's some mistakes in Joshua as well, but the Israelites were obeying God's law for the most part. They had Joshua as the leader. For the most part, they were victorious. But even at the end of Joshua, he starts talking and they didn't kick these Canaanites out of the land. They didn't kick the Jebusites, all these different nations that were still in the land. Then we get to Judges, and then we start seeing the Israelites adopting the pagan, evil, wicked practices of the nation.

Shea Houdmann

So the fact that Judges 19 mentions that the Jebusites were in this area, the Jebusites weren't supposed to be there at all. They were supposed to be one of the nations the Israelites were to either completely kick out of the land or eradicate from the land. And so we could see the Israelites were being influenced by the nations that were not supposed to be there at all.

Shea Houdmann

And that leads me to the story of what Jeff and I have both mentioned in passing, with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, so many parallels. So here we have an Israelite town doing the exact same thing that the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah did. Where, perchance, did they get

the idea of raping a guest who's come into the city? Well, probably from the pagan nations around. That seems to have been a fairly common way of showing dominance of those sorts of things. So Jeff, in comparing these two passages, what were some of the other things that you noticed, some parallels and some differences between the two?

Jeff Laird

Yeah, it's a handy mnemonic device that you've got, Judges 19 and Genesis 19. Now, just remember, chapter numbers are not inspired. That's just a happy coincidence. I don't know if we want to call it happy, but it's just a coincidence. But you do see parallels. I think it's likely that the writing of Judges was done intentionally to echo some of the framework that you see in Genesis, because the story is still told as it happened, but you can see that the beats, the moments that are in there seem to hit the same high points as what you read when you go through Genesis 19. There's the travel, wanting to stay in the square. Somebody comes by and makes a big deal about how you can't do that. They go home, crowd shows up, they're banging on the door. There's negotiation until that's where things deviate at that point, is instead of angels being there and blinding everybody and taking the good guys out, you have all of these awful things that happen after that.

Jeff Laird

So I think that there's a deliberate sense of Judges recording this in order to say the ultimate standard for wickedness that we constantly see brought up in the Old Testament is Sodom. I mean, almost every time that the Bible wants to make a reference to something that's just depravedly evil, Sodom or Sodom and Gomorrah gets brought up at some point in there. So here you're seeing something that's not mentioned overtly or directly, but all of those points and bits are there as a way of saying for all of what Israel had with God and all the things that they were supposed to know and do, they have actually fallen so far that we're seeing echoes of a culture that God destroyed with fire because of what they were doing.

Jeff Laird

So I think you can see a lot of those things in there. I think the deliberateness of that helps to emphasize this idea that nothing that's being recorded in Judges is meant to be a how-to or even a positive lesson. There really isn't any good spiritual lesson per se in this, other than just look at the awful things that happen when people turn away from God.

Jeff Laird

And you can also look at this from different perspectives. One of the places that you can sort of see that there are some differences with Sodom and Gomorrah and this, for example, is we brought up the idea of the negotiation

per se. I don't know what Lot meant really when he said something about his daughters. The Levite here makes the same comment about concubine. That sounds like a more legitimate offer. He was really saying, no, really, you can take her and do whatever you want with her. And the closest thing I have ever heard of a defense to the decision that was made there is the idea that if the men who are there are saying, we're going to come in the house and we'll just kill everybody. We'll just kill everybody and whatever we want to everybody, unless you send somebody out that there could have been that triage sort of a thing that the Levite was thinking, this is the only way for all of us to survive is to offer somebody in order to make this stuff go away.

Jeff Laird

Now, hard choices are hard choices, and we know that, but we're all still responsible for the choices that we make. So even if that is something of the mindset behind that, now you're basically talking about a backwards version of human sacrifice, where it's okay for me to deliberately kill this one person in order to have the benefit for everybody else. So there again, you can see parallels to the idea that the nation is just falling into this completely ungodly attitude, ungodly perspective on everything. And it's affecting literally everything they do and everything they think about.

Kevin Stone

Even in the judge's passage, judges chapter 19 is the Levite is offering his concubine, his host at the same time is offering his virgin daughter. And so the mob is being offered both of these women to do whatever with, and it's just a horrible thing. I kind of get the impression here from the story of Lot in Sodom and in this story with the Levite and his concubine, that the consideration was that sexual violation of women, as bad as that is, was less of an evil than the sexual violation of men. And that homosexual rape was considered to be very, very horrendous, so much so that these men were willing to offer up their own daughters or their own wives to this type of treatment. It's just a mindset that is just a hard for us to imagine, but it's actually seems to be what was going on.

Jeff Laird

And it's hard to say anything positive about the view for women in that specific circumstance, because again, this woman's a concubine, which means she's not a wife. She doesn't have all the status of a wife. She's something like a combination of a bedroom companion and a servant, but she doesn't have all of the things that come along with that. And yeah, the way that she's treated makes it very clear that this was not a person that the Levite would have held in significant esteem. So you're right. There's that to tack on top of it that, I mean, you can keep peeling away the layers. It's a Shrek situation here. It's

layers and layers and layers. You keep pulling it down and it's just bad, bad all the way down.

Shea Houdmann

That's for sure. Understatement of the year. When I look at some of the questions we've received about this passage, most of them seem to be working under the assumption that this was normal. This was good. This is just how things worked. It was normal for men to treat women this way. It was normal for townspeople to treat visitors this way. It was normal to murder everyone in the city and steal their daughters and kidnap people. We read in chapter 21, and I just want to emphasize again, this is a book of Judges that's describing how the Israelites utterly failed by the second generation to remember God's law, to obey God's law, to follow the faithfulness of their ancestors in any sense than to them adopting the evil practices of the people they were supposed to get out of the land. I think that's the point. This passage is so wicked.

Shea Houdmann

I love how Kevin described it. Basically, they violated all 10 of the Ten Commandments and many of the 613 other commandments in the law in the things that they did and the way they operated in this passage. There's nothing redeemable in the passage other than perhaps in chapter 20, they were seeking the Lord as regarding which tribe should go first in the battle. That's really the only time this passage anyone is seeking the Lord for anything whatsoever.

Shea Houdmann

For anyone who reads this passage and thinks, well, this is what God wants. This is how God expects people to behave, that could not be further of the truth. This passage, Judges 19-21, is a story of Israelites falling so far away from his law, away from how God wanted them to live, that they were doing these absolutely horrendously horrible things.

Kevin Stone

As the historian was writing the book of Judges, and he's just giving the history of things, he wants to really emphasize that it was a tumultuous time. It was a very difficult time. He ends the book with a couple things ripped from the headlines of his day. He starts off with talking about the brutality of the Danites and the idolatry in the household of Micah. Then he gives this story of the Levite and his concubine and all the aftermath of that. Just two prime examples of why this time of history was such a brutal and tumultuous time. Israel's basic problem was that they were indifferent to God's law, and they saw themselves as independent of God. They acted like they didn't need him. Of course, the truth is, they needed him desperately. They needed God

to intervene. They needed God's law to be followed so that they could have order and not chaos in their society.

Kevin Stone

Isaiah 8 and verse 20, Isaiah has to remind the people of his day to consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. They're walking in darkness, Isaiah says, if they are departing from the word. You got to get back to the Bible, Isaiah says. Get back to the word. Consult the doctrine. Consult the commandments that God has given. If you're not in the word, then you're stumbling in the darkness. That's what we see here in the book of Judges. At the end of the book, they're just stumbling in the darkness. God help them. God help us all if we get away from the word.

Jeff Laird

I want to reemphasize the point that we also see that pattern that this applies on a cultural and societal level, not just on a personal level, but it applies even to the things that we think are right. It is possible for a society that's unhitched itself from what God wants. There's this tendency we want to see something that we instinctively recognize is wrong. We have that attitude that says somebody should do something. There's times where that's how we try to soothe our moral conscience is by doing something or letting somebody do something. It's entirely possible that even the way we try to correct that thing is in and of itself also horrifically wrong and sinful. It's something for us to consider, especially in cultures where we have a lot of freedom in deciding who does and doesn't do certain things or represent certain things. Even how we communicate with those is just to remember that just getting on a bandwagon to let's do a thing is not necessarily the same thing as doing the right thing or the moral thing. In Judges, you see that even when society tries to do right, it's so far down the spiral that at that point in time, there's basically nowhere to go but down.

Shea Houdmann

Exactly. Well said, both of you. Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me in this conversation. How about next one? Let's find a passage not quite this bad, something a little easier for us to find something redeemable in the story. I'll work on that and get back to you guys.

Jeff Laird

We're not making Sunday school banners for this story anytime soon.

Shea Houdmann

Don't want to put this one on the flannel graph, that's for sure. Again, Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me for this conversation, Judges 19-21. I think what ultimately describes this best, Judges 19-21, is what happens when

everyone does what is right in his own eyes. Hope our conversation today has been helpful for you in understanding this passage, what's going on and how we're supposed to view it, which is all bad. Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.