

Judges

Chapter 21

Wives Provided for the Tribe of Benjamin

Now the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, “No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin.” 2 And the people came to Bethel and sat there till evening before God, and they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. 3 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?” 4 And the next day the people rose early and built there an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. 5 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 to Mizpah, saying, “He shall surely be put to death.” 6 And the people of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother and said, “One tribe is cut off from Israel this day. 7 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?” 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. 9 For when the people were mustered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there. 10 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. 11 This is what you shall do: every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction.” 12 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. 13 Then the whole congregation sent word to the people of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon and proclaimed peace to them. 14 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. 15 And the people had compassion on Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. 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?” 17 And they said, “There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel. 18 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.” 19 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 Lebonah.” 20 And they commanded the people of Benjamin, saying, “Go and lie in ambush in the vineyards 21 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. 22 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.’” 23 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. 24 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. 25 In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

21:1–25 Second thoughts about the slaughter of their Benjamite brothers caused the Israelites to grieve over the loss. Only 600 Benjamites were left alive, and the men of Israel decided to provide wives for them in order to keep the tribe from disappearing. After slaughtering most of the people of Jabesh Gilead, the Israelites took 400 girls from the survivors and gave them to 400 Benjamites. Shortly afterward, each of the remaining Benjamites seized a wife from the girls of Shiloh, and Benjamin began to be restored. (CSB)

21:1 *had sworn.* This vow, probably taken in the name of the Lord, was not an ordinary vow but invoked a curse on oneself if the vow was broken (v. 18; see also Ac 23:12–15). (CSB)

21:2 *wept bitterly.* Earlier the Israelites wept because they were defeated by the Benjamites (20:23, 26). Now they weep because the disciplinary action against the Benjamites has nearly annihilated one of the tribes (see v. 3). (CSB)

After the heat of battle, the enormity of what they had done sank in. To avenge one murder, 40,000 men of Israel died on the battlefield, and a whole tribe of their kinsmen was all but exterminated. (TLSB)

21:5 *had not...in the assembly.* The tribes had a mutual responsibility in times of military action. Those who failed to participate were often singled out and sometimes punished (5:15–17, 23). (CSB)

great oath. Complicating the situation for Israel was the fact that they had taken a second oath, calling for the death of those who did not participate in the battle. (CSB)

21:7 *not give them ... wives.* In their anger, the 11 tribes had made a rash vow not to allow any intermarriage with the tribe of Benjamin, but this meant that one of the 12 tribes of Israel must face extinction. (TLSB)

21:8 *Jabesh-gilead.* A city c 8 mi E of the Jordan River, in the territory of Manasseh. (TLSB)

21:10 *twelve thousand.* A thousand from each tribe (see Nu 31:6), with 1,000 supplied to represent the tribe of Benjamin. (CSB)

The Israelites legalistically fulfilled one vow in order to circumvent another. The inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead arguably shared in the guilt of Benjamin for not taking part in the war and for violating the covenant unity of the rest of the tribes, but there is no indication that God commanded this punishment, which can be seen instead as an act of lovelessness. (TLSB)

21:11 What Moses commanded that the Israelites do to the pagan Midianites (Nu 31:1–18). (TLSB)

devote to destruction. The punishment of Jabesh Gilead seems brutal, but the covenant bond between the tribes was extremely important. Even though delinquency on some occasions was not punished (5:15–17), the nature of the crime in this case, coupled with Benjamin's refusal to turn over the criminals, caused Israel to take this oath (v. 5). (CSB)

21:12 of *Canaan.* Emphasizes the fact that the women were brought across the Jordan from the east. (CSB)

Shiloh. Location of the tabernacle. (TLSB)

21:15 *compassion*. Again, we see the Israelites' selective morality in having compassion on the tribe of Benjamin, whom they had just nearly exterminated, but no compassion for the city of Jabesh-gilead. (TLSB)

the LORD had made a breach. God is blamed for the tragedy, though the perpetrators acted mostly on their own initiative. (TLSB)

21:19 *feast of the LORD*. In light of the mention of vineyards (v. 20), it is likely that this reference is to the Feast of Tabernacles, though it may have been a local festival. (CSB)

north of Bethel ... south of Lebonah. This detailed description of Shiloh's location may indicate that this material was written at a time when Shiloh was in ruins, perhaps after its destruction during the battle of Aphek (1Sa 4:1–11). (CSB)

highway. The highland trade route through the central hill country. (TLSB)

Lebonah. Just off the main highway between Jerusalem and Bethel, at practically the geographic center of Israel. (TLSB)

21:21 Where the tabernacle would periodically be set up and thus a shrine and place of pilgrimage for all of the tribes of Israel. (TLSB)

snatch a wife. With the Benjamites securing wives in this manner, the other tribes were not actually "giving" their daughters to them. (CSB)

21:22–23 The fathers would not have violated the vow (v 1) because they did not intentionally "give" their daughters to Benjaminites; the Benjaminites just took them. As in vv 8–12, we see the Israelites' legalistic manipulation of the letter of the law. Ironically, what began as an attempt to punish the rape and murder of one woman ended with the punishers engineering the rape of 600 women and the murder of thousands. (TLSB)

21:22 *When their fathers or brothers complain*. It was customary for the brothers of a girl who had been abducted to demand satisfaction (see Ge 34:7–31; 2Sa 13:20–38). It was therefore important that the elders anticipate this response and be prepared to get cooperation from the girls' families. (CSB)

did not take ... wife in battle. Excuses. The fathers need not feel the dishonor of losing their daughters due to defeat in war. (TLSB)

21:24 *went out*. These soldiers had probably been away from home at least five months (see 20:47). (CSB)

21:25 *right in his own eyes*. Lest anyone think this moral chaos is sanctioned by God, Jgs closes with this refrain, stressing the horrific consequences of the lack of social authority and the practice of moral relativism. (TLSB)

Ch 21 After the carnage against the Benjaminites, the Israelites begin to mourn the near eradication of one of their kindred tribes. They have compassion for the 600 survivors and hope to restore the tribe. So the elders devise a plan to come up with wives for the Benjaminites. These manipulations of morality are a final example of the moral degradation that comes from everyone doing what is right in his own eyes. God pours out His wrath on sinners, but He saves a remnant by His grace. • O Lord, Your Word reveals

the depths of my sin, including my misguided attempts at righteousness. Forgive me by the Word of my King, Jesus, who gave His life to rescue me from sin. In His name I pray. Amen. (TLSB)