

Judges

Chapter 20

Israelites Fight the Benjamites

Then all the Israelites from Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead came out as one man and assembled before the LORD in Mizpah. ² The leaders of all the people of the tribes of Israel took their places in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand soldiers armed with swords. ³ (The Benjamites heard that the Israelites had gone up to Mizpah.) Then the Israelites said, "Tell us how this awful thing happened." ⁴ So the Levite, the husband of the murdered woman, said, "I and my concubine came to Gibeah in Benjamin to spend the night. ⁵ 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. ⁶ I took my concubine, cut her into pieces and sent one piece to each region of Israel's inheritance, because they committed this lewd and disgraceful act in Israel. ⁷ Now, all you Israelites, speak up and give your verdict." ⁸ All the people rose as one man, saying, "None of us will go home. No, not one of us will return to his house. ⁹ But now this is what we'll do to Gibeah: We'll go up against it as the lot directs. ¹⁰ We'll take ten men out of every hundred from all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred from a thousand, and a thousand from ten thousand, to get provisions for the army. Then, when the army arrives at Gibeah in Benjamin, it can give them what they deserve for all this vileness done in Israel." ¹¹ So all the men of Israel got together and united as one man against the city. ¹² The tribes of Israel sent men throughout the tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What about this awful crime that was committed among you? ¹³ Now surrender those wicked men of Gibeah so that we may put them to death and purge the evil from Israel." But the Benjamites would not listen to their fellow Israelites. ¹⁴ From their towns they came together at Gibeah to fight against the Israelites. ¹⁵ At once the Benjamites mobilized twenty-six thousand swordsmen from their towns, in addition to seven hundred chosen men from those living in Gibeah. ¹⁶ Among all these soldiers there were seven hundred chosen men who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. ¹⁷ Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand swordsmen, all of them fighting men. ¹⁸ The Israelites went up to Bethel and inquired of God. They said, "Who of us shall go first to fight against the Benjamites?" The LORD replied, "Judah shall go first." ¹⁹ The next morning the Israelites got up and pitched camp near Gibeah. ²⁰ The men of Israel went out to fight the Benjamites and took up battle positions against them at Gibeah. ²¹ The Benjamites came out of Gibeah and cut down twenty-two thousand Israelites on the battlefield that day. ²² But the men of Israel encouraged one another and again took up their positions where they had stationed themselves the first day. ²³ The Israelites went up and wept before the LORD until evening, and they inquired of the LORD. They said, "Shall we go up again to battle against the Benjamites, our brothers?" The LORD answered, "Go up against them." ²⁴ Then the Israelites drew near to Benjamin the second day. ²⁵ This time, when the Benjamites came out

from Gibeah to oppose them, they cut down another eighteen thousand Israelites, all of them armed with swords. ²⁶ Then the Israelites, all the people, 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. ²⁷ And the Israelites inquired of the LORD. (In those days the ark of the covenant of God was there, ²⁸ with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, ministering before it.) They asked, “Shall we go up again to battle with Benjamin our brother, or not?” The LORD responded, “Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands.” ²⁹ Then Israel set an ambush around Gibeah. ³⁰ They went up against the Benjamites on the third day and took up positions against Gibeah as they had done before. ³¹ The Benjamites came out to meet them and were drawn away from the city. They began to inflict casualties on the Israelites as before, so that about thirty men fell in the open field and on the roads—the one leading to Bethel and the other to Gibeah. ³² While the Benjamites were saying, “We are defeating them as before,” the Israelites were saying, “Let’s retreat and draw them away from the city to the roads.” ³³ All the men of Israel moved from their places and took up positions at Baal Tamar, and the Israelite ambush charged out of its place on the west of Gibeah. ³⁴ Then ten thousand of Israel’s finest men made a frontal attack on Gibeah. The fighting was so heavy that the Benjamites did not realize how near disaster was. ³⁵ The LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel, and on that day the Israelites struck down 25,100 Benjamites, all armed with swords. ³⁶ Then the Benjamites saw that they were beaten. Now the men of Israel had given way before Benjamin, because they relied on the ambush they had set near Gibeah. ³⁷ The men who had been in ambush made a sudden dash into Gibeah, spread out and put the whole city to the sword. ³⁸ The men of Israel had arranged with the ambush that they should send up a great cloud of smoke from the city, ³⁹ and then the men of Israel would turn in the battle. The Benjamites had begun to inflict casualties on the men of Israel (about thirty), and they said, “We are defeating them as in the first battle.” ⁴⁰ But when the column of smoke began to rise from the city, the Benjamites turned and saw the smoke of the whole city going up into the sky. ⁴¹ Then the men of Israel turned on them, and the men of Benjamin were terrified, because they realized that disaster had come upon them. ⁴² So they fled before the Israelites in the direction of the desert, but they could not escape the battle. And the men of Israel who came out of the towns cut them down there. ⁴³ They surrounded the Benjamites, chased them and easily overran them in the vicinity of Gibeah on the east. ⁴⁴ Eighteen thousand Benjamites fell, all of them valiant fighters. ⁴⁵ As they turned and fled toward the desert to the rock of Rimmon, the Israelites cut down five thousand men along the roads. They kept pressing after the Benjamites as far as Gidom and struck down two thousand more. ⁴⁶ On that day twenty-five thousand Benjamite swordsmen fell, all of them valiant fighters. ⁴⁷ But six hundred men turned and fled into the desert to the rock of Rimmon, where they stayed four months. ⁴⁸ The men of Israel went back to 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.

20:1–48 All Israel (except Jabesh Gilead; see 21:8–9) assembled before the Lord to deal with the moral outrage committed by the men of Gibeah. Having first inquired of God for divine direction, they marched against Gibeah and the Benjamites as the disciplinary arm of the Lord (see Jos 22:11–34), following him as their King. (CSB)

20:1 *Dan to Beersheba.* A conventional way of speaking of all Israel from north (Dan) to south (Beersheba); see 1Sa 3:20; 2Sa 3:10; 24:2; 1Ch 21:2; 2Ch 30:5. The use of this expression, however, does not mean that the events of this chapter occurred after Dan's move to the north (18:27–29); rather, it indicates the author's perspective at the time of writing (Judges was probably written after the Davidic dynasty was fully established; see Introduction: Author and Date). Here the expression refers to the disciplinary action of all Israel (except Jabesh Gilead; see 21:8–9) against Gibeah and the rest of the Benjamites. Such a united response must have occurred early in the time of the judges, before the period of foreign domination of various parts of the land. (CSB)

From the northernmost settlement in the land of Israel to the southernmost. (TLSB)

Gilead. Land east of the Jordan that was occupied by Israelites. (TLSB)

as one man. Cf. vv. 8, 11; 1Sa 11:7. (CSB)

All of Israel (except, of course, for Benjamin) united against the Benjaminites, in the first such collective action since the time of Joshua. (TLSB)

assembled ... in Mizpah. A gathering place of the tribes during the days of Saul (1Sa 7:5–17; 10:17). (CSB)

This point of assembly was in the land of Benjamin, not Gilead, as in 10:17. (TLSB)

20:2 *chiefs.* Family leaders or elders, who often also served as military leaders. (TLSB)

20:4–5 The Levite's account is self-serving, since he downplayed his own role in the woman's death. His emphasis on how his own life was at risk may accurately illustrate the fear that motivated his cowardly behavior. Details in 19:22–29 indicate that other witnesses had a chance to report the matter.

20:6 *outrage.* The Levite characterized well the sin of the Benjaminites, but in failing to confess his own sin, he may have stirred up the Israelites to a harsher response than may have been warranted. (TLSB)

20:9 *lot.* Casting lots was a common method of determining the will of God (see notes on Ex 28:30; Jnh 1:7; Ac 1:26). (CSB)

Each tribe had its men cast lots to determine who would fight in the army and who would supply provisions for the campaign. (TLSB)

20:10 *ten men*. Support for the large army had to be well organized and efficient. One man was responsible for providing food for nine men fighting at the front. (CSB)

20:13 *surrender those wicked men*. The demand of Israel was not unreasonable. They wanted to punish only those directly involved in the crime. (CSB)

The Benjaminites had already prepared to resist. (TLSB)

wicked men. See note on Dt 13:13. (CSB)

put them to death. The sin of the men of Gibeah called for the death penalty, and Israel had to punish the sin if she was to avoid guilt herself (see Dt 13:5; 17:7; 19:19–20). (CSB)

20:14 Organized for formal engagement. (TLSB)

20:15 *26,000*. Benjamin was one of the smallest tribes. (TLSB)

chosen. The best. (TLSB)

20:16 *left-handed*. The Benjamite Ehud was also left-handed (3:15). (CSB)

Because most soldiers held their sword in their right hand and would have trained to fight right-handed combatants, left-handed soldiers were esp treacherous. (TLSB)

sling a stone. Cf. Zec 9:15. The sling was a very effective weapon, as David later demonstrated in his encounter with Goliath (1Sa 17:49). A slingstone, weighing one pound or more, could be hurled at 90–100 miles an hour. (CSB)

miss. In other contexts the Hebrew for this verb is translated “to sin.” (CSB)

Vivid description of the Benjaminites’ prowess and accuracy with the sling. (TLSB)

20:18 *Bethel*. At this time the ark of the covenant and the high priest Phinehas were at Bethel (see vv. 26–28). (CSB)

Location of the tabernacle. (TLSB)

inquired of God. Probably by priestly use of Urim and Thummim (see notes on Ex 28:30; 1Sa 2:28). *Who of us shall go first ... ?* See 1:1–36. (CSB)

Judah. See note on 1:2. (CSB)

In the hilly terrain of Benjamin, Israel’s advantage in numbers could not be fully exploited against the defenders. Judah was selected to lead the attack against its fellow Israelites, just as it was selected to lead the attack against the Canaanites (1:2). This also foreshadowed the later civil war, in which David with his tribe of Judah fought Saul’s tribe of Benjamin (2Sm 3:1). (TLSB)

20:21 *twenty-two thousand Israelites.* A rousing victory for the Benjamites, who numbered 25,700 and therefore had slain nearly one man apiece. (CSB)

22,000 men. Horrible losses. Judah had the “honor” of leading the attack, but, judging from the casualties, the other tribes also took part in the combat.

20:22–23 *Shall we.* Cf v 18. The great losses shook their confidence.

20:25 *destroyed 18,000 men.* 40,000 Israelites had been killed in two days, 10 percent of the entire force. Cf vv 17, 21.

20:26 *Bethel.* Location of the tabernacle. (TLSB)

fasted ... offerings. Acts of repentance and atonement. (TLSB)

20:27 *ark.* The only mention of the ark in Judges. (CSB)

20:28 *Phinehas.* Phinehas was the priest in the tabernacle in the days of Joshua (Jos 22:13), and the fact that he was still serving is further evidence that these events took place early in the days of the judges (see notes on v. 1; 18:30). (CSB)

The grandson of Aaron, Phinehas was the priest who struck down the leaders of the apostasy at Peor during the exodus (Nu 25:7–8) and who negotiated peace with the Transjordan tribes in the time of Joshua (Jsh 22:10–34). That means this war with Benjamin must have taken place quite early in the period of the judges, even though it is described, out of sequence, at the very end of the Book. (Some Jewish interpreters held that God rewarded Phinehas with immortality because of his faithfulness.) The focus on Benjamin prepares the reader for the events of 1Sm. (TLSB)

I will give them into your hand. On the first two days, the Israelites fought their “brothers” in a spirit of self-righteousness and confidence. But then the whole army went to the tabernacle at Bethel, where they wept, fasted, and offered sacrifices. Now that the Israelites confessed their own sinfulness and turned to God, He would bless their sad work of executing judgment and, for the first time, promised them victory. (TLSB)

20:29–32 *ambush.* Not the frontal attacks as on the first two days. This time the Israelites, helped by God, employed strategy. When the allied tribes were driven back by the Benjaminites, as on the other days, they retreated on purpose. This drew the main force of the Benjaminites away from their city, making it vulnerable to the Israelites’ second force. (TLSB)

Benjamin went out. Essentially the same strategy and results employed when the Israelites took the Canaanite city of Ai (Jsh 8:3–28). (TLSB)

highways. The battle moved along the roads that led out from the city.

20:29 *set an ambush.* See 9:32; Jos 8:2. (CSB)

20:33 *Baal Tamar.* Location unknown. (CSB)

Means “possessor of palms,” referring to a region not far from Gibeah. This is where the main force was in battle formation. (TLSB)

Maareh-geba. Means “the plains of Geba,” located a few mi northeast of Gibeah (Geba). Troops stationed for the ambush were hiding here. (TLSB)

20:35 *the LORD defeated.* God punished the Benjaminites by means of the other 11 tribes, fulfilling His promise. Virtually their entire force was destroyed. (TLSB)

20:36b–45 Details of the account in vv. 29–36a. (CSB)

20:36–43 Parallel account of the battle fills in the details, e.g., the use of signals. (TLSB)

20:36 *they trusted.* They relied on the ambush they had set up. (TLSB)

20:37 *all the city.* The city of God’s own apostate people was devoted to total annihilation, as if it were a city of the Canaanites when Joshua led the people to first occupy the land. (TLSB)

20:42 *the direction of the wilderness.* Toward the northeast and the desert between Jericho and the mountains of Bethel. (TLSB)

20:43 *Nohah.* Lit, “resting place.” Could be either the proper name of a city or a place where the Benjaminites had temporarily halted to rest. (TLSB)

20:46 *twenty-five thousand.* A round number for 25,100 (v. 35). (CSB)

Evidence that the Bible sometimes employs round numbers, since the more precise number is given in v 35 as 25,100. (TLSB)

20:47 *six hundred men.* If these had not escaped, the tribe of Benjamin would have been annihilated. The same number of Danites went to Laish (18:11). (CSB)

rock of Rimmon. Survivors fled to this rock in the desert, located just beyond the border of the settled lands. Such places were esp difficult to attack. (TLSB)

20:48 *turned back.* The Israelites halted the pursuit of the remnants of the Benjaminites and turned back to destroy and slaughter everyone throughout the land. It is not clear whether the Lord intended this action or the people planned it. In self-righteous indignation, the Israelites treated their apostate brothers like pagan Canaanites, virtually eradicating them. (TLSB)

Ch 20 The Levite tells the Israelites about the abomination committed by the Benjaminites, so the shocked tribes, unified for the first time since Joshua’s day, resolve to punish their kindred tribe. But only when the Israelites repent and come before God in brokenness, humility, and with blood sacrifices does God save them. He is a God of justice and compassion. • O Lord, we tremble at Your wrath against sin. Forgive us when we condemn the sins of others but do not indict ourselves. We repent in brokenness and weeping. Our only recourse is to cling to the sacrifice of Jesus, whose blood covers all our sin. Amen. (TLSB)