

# Judges

## Chapter 21

### *Wives for the Benjamites*

The men of Israel had taken an oath at Mizpah: “Not one of us will give his daughter in marriage to a Benjamite.”<sup>2</sup> The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly.<sup>3</sup> “O LORD, the God of Israel,” they cried, “why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today?”<sup>4</sup> Early the next day the people built an altar and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings.<sup>5</sup> Then the Israelites asked, “Who from all the tribes of Israel has failed to assemble before the LORD?” For they had taken a solemn oath that anyone who failed to assemble before the LORD at Mizpah should certainly be put to death.<sup>6</sup> Now the Israelites grieved for their brothers, the Benjamites. “Today one tribe is cut off from Israel,” they said.<sup>7</sup> “How can we provide wives for those who are left, since we have taken an oath by the LORD not to give them any of our daughters in marriage?”<sup>8</sup> Then they asked, “Which one of the tribes of Israel failed to assemble before the LORD at Mizpah?” They discovered that no one from Jabesh Gilead had come to the camp for the assembly.<sup>9</sup> For when they counted the people, they found that none of the people of Jabesh Gilead were there.<sup>10</sup> So the assembly sent twelve thousand fighting men with instructions to go to Jabesh Gilead and put to the sword those living there, including the women and children.<sup>11</sup> “This is what you are to do,” they said. “Kill every male and every woman who is not a virgin.”<sup>12</sup> They found among the people living in Jabesh Gilead four hundred young women who had never slept with a man, and they took them to the camp at Shiloh in Canaan.<sup>13</sup> Then the whole assembly sent an offer of peace to the Benjamites at the rock of Rimmon.<sup>14</sup> So the Benjamites returned at that time and were given the women of Jabesh Gilead who had been spared. But there were not enough for all of them.<sup>15</sup> The people grieved for Benjamin, because the LORD had made a gap in the tribes of Israel.<sup>16</sup> And the elders of the assembly said, “With the women of Benjamin destroyed, how shall we provide wives for the men who are left?”<sup>17</sup> The Benjamite survivors must have heirs,” they said, “so that a tribe of Israel will not be wiped out.<sup>18</sup> We can’t give them our daughters as wives, since we Israelites have taken this oath: ‘Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to a Benjamite.’<sup>19</sup> But look, there is the annual festival of the LORD in Shiloh, to the north of Bethel, and east of the road that goes from Bethel to Shechem, and to the south of Lebonah.”<sup>20</sup> So they instructed the Benjamites, saying, “Go and hide in the vineyards<sup>21</sup> and watch. When the girls of Shiloh come out to join in the dancing, then rush from the vineyards and each of you seize a wife from the girls of Shiloh and go to the land of Benjamin.<sup>22</sup> When their fathers or brothers complain to us, we will say to them, ‘Do us a kindness by helping them, because we did not get wives for them during the war, and you are innocent, since you did not give your daughters to them.’ ”<sup>23</sup> So that is what the Benjamites did. While the girls were dancing, each man caught one and carried her off to be his wife. Then they returned to their

**inheritance and rebuilt the towns and settled in them.** <sup>24</sup> **At that time the Israelites left that place and went home to their tribes and clans, each to his own inheritance.** <sup>25</sup> **In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.**

**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** *taken an oath.* 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** *Bethel.* See 20:18, 26–27. (CSB)

*weeping 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** *failed to assemble.* The tribes had a mutual responsibility in times of military action (see note on 5:13–18). Those who failed to participate were often singled out and sometimes punished (5:15–17, 23). (CSB)

*solemn 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** *did not come ... to Mizpah.* Cf 20:1. (TLSB)

*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.* (TLSB)

*Kill every male.* 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** *in 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** *festival of the LORD.* In light of the mention of vineyards (v. 20), it is likely that this reference is to the Feast of Tabernacles (see note on 1Sa 1:3), 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)

*seize a wife.* With the Benjamites securing wives in this manner, the other tribes were not actually “giving” their daughters to them (see note on v. 22). (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 home.* These soldiers had probably been away from home at least five months (see 20:47). (CSB)

**21:25** *Israel had no king.* See note on 17:6. (CSB)

*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)