

CHAPTER 20

Into the book of the wars of the Lord the story of this chapter must be brought, but it looks as sad and uncomfortable as any article in all that history; for there is nothing in it that looks in the least bright or pleasant but the pious zeal of Israel against the wickedness of the men of Gibeah, which made it on their side a just and holy war; but otherwise the obstinacy of the Benjamites in protecting their criminals, which was the foundation of the war, the vast loss which the Israelites sustained in carrying on the war, and (though the righteous cause was victorious at last) the issuing of the war in the almost utter extirpation of the tribe of Benjamin, make it, from first to last, melancholy. And yet this happened soon after the glorious settlement of Israel in the land of promise, upon which one would have expected every thing to be prosperous and serene. In this chapter we have,

- I.** The Levite's cause heard in a general convention of the tribes (v. 1-7).
- II.** A unanimous resolve to avenge his quarrel upon the men of Gibeah (v. 8-11).
- III.** The Benjamites appearing in defence of the criminals (v. 12-17).
- IV.** The defeat of Israel in the first and second day's battle (v. 18-25).
- V.** Their humbling themselves before God upon that occasion (v. 26-28).
- VI.** The total rout they gave the Benjamites in the third engagement, by a stratagem, by which they were all cut off, except 600 men (v. 29-48). And all this the effect of the indignities done to one poor Levite and his wife; so little do those that do iniquity consider what will be the end thereof.

◀721▶ JUDGES 20:1-11

THE COMBINATION AGAINST GIBEAH

Here is,

I. A general meeting of all the congregation of Israel to examine the matter concerning the Levite's concubine, and to consider what was to be done upon it, v. 1, 2. It does not appear that they were summoned by the authority of any one common head, but they came together by the consent and agreement, as it were, of one common heart, fired with a holy zeal for the honour of God and Israel.

1. The place of their meeting was *Mizpeh*; they gathered together unto the Lord there, for Mizpeh was so very near to Shiloh that their encampment might very well be supposed to reach from Mizpeh to Shiloh. Shiloh was a small town, and therefore, when there was a general meeting of the people to represent themselves before God, they chose Mizpeh for their headquarters, which was the next adjoining city of note, perhaps because they were not willing to give that trouble to Shiloh which so great an assembly would occasion, it being the resident of the priests that attended the tabernacle.

2. The persons that met were all Israel, from Dan (the city very lately so called, ▶7189▶ Judges 18:29) in the north to Beersheba in the south, with the land of Gilead (that is, the tribes on the other side Jordan), all *as one man*, so unanimous were they in their concern for the public good. Here was an assembly of the people of God, not a convocation of the Levites and priests, though a Levite was the person principally concerned in the cause, but an assembly of the people, to whom the Levite referred himself with an *Appello populum* — *I appeal to the people*. The *people of God* were 400,000 *footmen that drew the sword*, that is, were armed and disciplined, and fit for service, and some of them perhaps such as had *known the wars of Canaan*, ▶7031▶ Judges 3:1. In this assembly of all Israel, the chief (or corners) of the people (for rulers are the corner-stones of the people, that keep all together) presented themselves as the representatives of the rest. They rendered themselves at their respective posts, at the head of the thousands and hundreds, the fifties and tens, over which they presided; for so much order and government, we may suppose, at least, they had among

them, though they had no general or commander-in-chief. So that here was,

(1.) A general congress of the states for counsel. The chief of the people presented themselves, to lead and direct in this affair.

(2.) A general rendezvous of the militia for action, all that drew sword and were men of war (v. 17), not hirelings nor pressed men, but the best freeholders, that went at their own charge. Israel were above 600,000 when they came into Canaan, and we have reason to think they were at this time much increased, rather than diminished; but then all between twenty and sixty were military men, now we may suppose more than the one half exempted from bearing arms to cultivate the land; so that these were as the trained bands. The militia of the two tribes and a half were 40,000 (~~(v. 13)~~ Joshua 4:13), but the tribes were many more.

II. Notice given to the tribe of Benjamin of this meeting (v. 3): *They heard that the children of Israel had gone up to Mizpeh.* Probably they had a legal summons sent them to appear with their brethren, that the cause might be fairly debated, before any resolutions were taken up upon it, and so the mischiefs that followed would have been happily prevented; but the notice they had of this meeting rather hardened and exasperated them than awakened them to think of the things that belonged to their peace and honour.

III. A solemn examination of the crime charged upon the men of Gibeah. A very horrid representation of it had been made by the report of the messengers that were sent to call them together, but it was fit it should be more closely enquired into, because such things are often made worse than really they were; a committee therefore was appointed to examine the witnesses (upon oath, no doubt) and to report the matter. It is only the testimony of the Levite himself that is here recorded, but it is probable his servant, and the old man, were examined, and gave in their testimony, for that more than one were examined appears by the original (v. 3), which is, *Tell you us*; and the law was that none should be put to death, much less so many, upon the testimony of one witness only. The Levite gives a particular account of the matter: that he came into Gibeah only as a traveller to lodge there, not giving the least shadow of suspicion that he designed them any ill turn (v. 4), and that the men of Gibeah, even those that were of substance among them, that should have been a protection to

the stranger within their gates, riotously set upon the house where he lodged, and *thought to slay him*; he could not, for shame relate the demand which they, without shame, made, ^{<07922>}Judges 19:22. They declared their sin as Sodom, even the sin of Sodom, but his modesty would not suffer him to repeat it; it was sufficient to say they would have slain him, for he would rather have been slain than have submitted to their villany; and, if they had got him into their hands, they would have abused him to death, witness what they had done to his concubine: They have *forced her that she is dead*, v. 5. And, to excite in his countrymen an indignation at this wickedness, he had sent pieces of the mangled body to all the tribes, which had fetched them together to bear their testimony against the *lewdness and folly committed in Israel*, v. 6. All lewdness is folly, but especially lewdness in Israel. For those to defile their own bodies who have the honourable seal of the covenant in their flesh, for those to defy the divine vengeance to whom it is so clearly revealed from heaven — Nabal is their name, and folly is with them. He concludes his declaration with an appeal to the judgment of the court (v. 7): *You are all children of Israel*, and therefore you *know law and judgment*, ^{<07013>}Esther 1:13. “You are a holy people to God, and have a dread of every thing which will dishonour God and defile the land; you are of the same community, members of the same body, and therefore likely to feel from the distempers of it; you are children of Israel, that ought to take particular care of the Levites, God's tribe, among you, and therefore give your advice and counsel what is to be done.”

IV. The resolution they came to hereupon, which was that, being now together, they would not disperse till they had seen vengeance taken upon this wicked city, which was the reproach and scandal of their nation. Observe,

1. Their zeal against the lewdness that was committed. They would not return to their houses, how much soever their families and their affairs at home wanted them, till they had vindicated the honour of God and Israel, and recovered with their swords, if it could not be had otherwise, that satisfaction for the crime which the justice of the nation called for, v. 8. By this they showed themselves children of Israel indeed, that they preferred the public interest before their private concerns.

2. Their prudence in sending out a considerable body of their forces to fetch provisions for the rest, v. 9, 10. One of ten, and he chosen by lot,

40,000 in all, must go to their respective countries, whence they came, to fetch bread and other necessaries for the subsistence of this great army; for when they came from home they took with them provisions only for a journey to Mizpeh, not for an encampment (which might prove long) before Gibeah. This was to prevent their scattering to forage for themselves, for, if they had done this, it would have been hard to get them all together again, especially all in so good a mind. Note, When there appears in people a pious zeal for any good work it is best to strike while the iron is hot, for such zeal is apt to cool quickly if the prosecution of the work be delayed. Let it never be said that we left that good work to be done to-morrow which we could as well have done to-day.

3. Their unanimity in these counsels, and the execution of them. The resolution was voted, *Nemine contradicente* — *Without a dissenting voice* (v. 8); it was one and all; and, when it was put in execution, they were *knit together as one man*, v. 11. This was their glory and strength, that the several tribes had no separate interests when the common good was concerned.

~~0212~~ JUDGES 20:12-17

THE WAR WITH THE BENJAMITES

Here is,

I. The fair and just demand which the tribes of Israel, now encamped, sent to the tribe of Benjamin, to deliver up the malefactors of Gibeah to justice, v. 12, 13. If the tribe of Benjamin had come up, as they ought to have done, to the assembly, and agreed with them in their resolution, there would have been none to deal with but the men of Gibeah only, but they, by their absence, taking part with the criminals, application must be made to them all. The Israelites were zealous against the wickedness that was committed, yet they were discreet in their zeal, and did not think it would justify them in falling upon the whole tribe of Benjamin unless they, by refusing to give up the criminals, and protecting them against justice, should make themselves guilty, *ex post facto* — *as accessaries after the fact*. They desire them to consider how great the wickedness was that was committed (v. 12), and that it was done among them: and how necessary it was therefore that they should either punish the malefactors with death

themselves, according to the law of Moses, or deliver them up to the general assembly, to be so much the more publicly and solemnly punished, that evil might be put away from Israel, the national guilt removed, the infection stopped by cutting off the gangrened part, and national judgments prevented; for the sin was so very like that of the Sodomites that they might justly fear, if they did not punish it, God would rain hail from heaven upon them, as he did, not only upon Sodom, but the neighbouring cities. If the Israelites had not made this reasonable demand, they would have had much more reason to lament the following desolations of Benjamin. All methods of accommodation must be used before we go to war or go to law. The demand was like that of Joab's to Abel, ^{<1110>}2 Samuel 20:20, 21. "Only deliver up the traitor, and we will lay down our arms." On these terms, and no other, God will be at peace with us, that we part with our sins, that we mortify and crucify our lusts, and then all shall be well; his anger will be turned away.

II. The wretched obstinacy and perverseness of the men of Benjamin, who seem to have been as unanimous and zealous in their resolutions to stand by the criminals as the rest of the tribes were to punish them, so little sense had they of their honour, duty, and interest.

1. They were so prodigiously vile as to patronise the wickedness that was committed: They *would not hearken to the voice of their brethren* (v. 13), either because those of that tribe were generally more vicious and debauched at this time than the rest of the tribes, and therefore would not bear to have that punished in others of which they knew themselves guilty (some of the most fruitful and pleasant parts of Canaan fell to the lot of this tribe; their land, like that of Sodom, was *as the garden of the Lord*, which perhaps helped to make the inhabitants, like the men of Sodom, wicked, and *sinner before the Lord exceedingly*, ^{<1130>}Genesis 13:10, 13), or because (as bishop Patrick suggests) they took it ill that the other tribes should meddle with their concerns; they would not do that which they knew was their duty because they were reminded of it by their brethren, by whom they scorned to be taught and controlled. If there were any wise men among them that would have complied with the demand made, yet they were overpowered by the majority, who thus made the crime of the men of Gibeah their own. Thus we have *fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness* if we say *A confederacy* with those that have, and make ourselves guilty of other men's sins by countenancing and defending them. It seems there is no cause so bad but it will find some patrons, some

advocates, to appear for it; but *woe be to those by whom such offences come*. Those will have a great deal to answer for that obstruct the course of necessary justice, and strengthen the hands of the wicked, by saying, *O wicked man! thou shalt not die*.

2. They were so prodigiously vain and presumptuous as to make head against the united force of all Israel. Never, surely, were men so wretchedly infatuated as they were when they took up arms in opposition,

(1.) To so good a cause as Israel had. How could they expect to prosper when they fought against justice, and consequently against the just God himself, against those that had the high priest and the divine oracle on their side, and so acted in downright rebellion against the sacred and supreme authority of the nation.

(2.) To so great a force as Israel had. The disproportion of their numbers was much greater than that, ~~<4248>~~ Luke 14:31, 32, where he that had but 10,000 durst not meet him that came against him with 20,000, and therefore desired conditions of peace. There the enemy was but two to one, here above fifteen to one; yet they despised conditions of peace. All the forces they could bring into the field were but 26,000 men, besides 700 men of Gibeah (v. 15); yet with these they will dare to face 400,000 men of Israel, v. 17. Thus sinners are infatuated to their own ruin, and provoke him to jealousy who is infinitely stronger than they, ~~<6072>~~ 1 Corinthians 10:22. But it should seem they depended upon the skill of their men to make up what was wanting in numbers, especially a regiment of slingers, 700 men, who, though left-handed, were so dexterous at slinging stones that they would not be a hair's breadth beside their mark, v. 16. But these good marksmen were very much out in their aim when they espoused this bad cause. *Benjamin* signifies *the son of the right hand*, yet we find his posterity left-handed.

~~<07208>~~ JUDGES 20:18-25

THE WAR WITH THE BENJAMITES

We have here the defeat of the men of Israel in their first and second battle with the Benjamites.

I. Before their first engagement they asked counsel of God concerning the order of their battle and were directed, and yet they were sorely beaten. They did not think it was proper to ask of God whether they should go up at all against Benjamin (the case was plain enough, the men of Gibeah must be punished for their wickedness, and Israel must inflict the punishment or it will not be done), but “Who shall go first?” (v. 18), that is, “Who shall be general of our army?” for, which soever tribe was appointed to go first, the prince of that tribe must be looked upon as commander-in-chief of the whole body. For, if they had meant it of the order of their march only, it would have been proper to ask, “Who shall go next?” and then, “Who next?” But, if they know that Judah must go first, they know they must all observe the orders of the prince of that tribe. This honour was done to Judah because our Lord Jesus was to spring from that tribe, who was in all things to have the pre-eminence. The tribe that went up first had the most honourable post, but withal the most dangerous, and probably lost most in the engagement. Who would strive for precedency that sees the peril of it? Yet though Judah, that strong and valiant tribe, goes up first, and all the tribes of Israel attend them, *little Benjamin* (so he is called, ~~Psalm~~ Psalm 68:27), is too hard for them all. The whole army lays siege to Gibeah, v. 19. The Benjamites advance to raise the siege, and the army prepares to give them a warm reception (v. 20). But between the Benjamites that attacked them in the front with incredible fury, and the men of Gibeah that sallied out upon their rear, they were put into confusion and lost 22,000 men, v. 21. Here were no prisoners taken, for there was no quarter given, but all put to the sword.

II. Before their second engagement they again *asked counsel of God*, and more solemnly than before; for they *wept before the Lord until evening* (v. 23), lamenting the loss of so many brave men, especially as it was a token of God's displeasure and would give occasion to the Benjamites to triumph in the success of their wickedness. Also at this time they did not ask who should go up first, but whether they should go up at all. The intimate a reason why they should scruple to do it, especially now that Providence had frowned upon them, because Benjamin was their brother, and a readiness to lay down their arms if God should so order them. God bade them go up; he allowed the attempt, for, though Benjamin was their brother, he was a gangrened member of their body and must be cut off. Upon this they encouraged themselves, perhaps more in their own strength than in the divine commission, and made a second attempt upon the forces

of the rebels, in the same place where the former battle was fought (v. 22), with the hope of retrieving their credit upon the same spot of ground where they had lost it, which they would not superstitiously change, as if there were any thing unlucky in the place. But they were this second time repulsed, with the loss of 18,000 men, v. 25. The former day's loss and this amounted to 40,000, which was just a tenth part of the whole army, and the same number that they had drawn out by lot to fetch victuals, v. 10. They decimated themselves for that service, and now God again decimated them for the slaughter. But what shall we say to these things, that so just and honourable a cause should thus be put to the worst once and again? Were they not fighting God's battle against sin? Had they not his commission? What, and yet miscarry thus!

- 1.** God's judgments are a great deep, and his way is in the sea. *Clouds and darkness are often round about him, but judgment and justice are always the habitation of his throne.* We may be sure of the righteousness, when we cannot see the reasons, of God's proceedings.
- 2.** God would hereby show them, and us in them, that *the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong*, that we are not to confide in numbers, which perhaps the Israelites did with too much assurance. We must never lay the weight on an arm of flesh, which only the Rock of ages will bear.
- 3.** God designed hereby to correct Israel for their sins. They did well to show such a zeal against the wickedness of Gibeah: but *were there not with them, even with them, sins against the Lord their God?* Those must be made to know their own iniquity that are forward in condemning the iniquity of others. Some think it was a rebuke to them for not witnessing against the idolatry of Micah and the Danites, by which their religion was corrupted, as they now did against the lewdness of Gibeah and the Benjamites, by which the public peace was disturbed, though God had particularly ordered them to levy war upon idolaters, ^{<61312>}Deuteronomy 13:12, etc.
- 4.** God would hereby teach us not to think it strange if a good cause should suffer defeat fore a while, nor to judge of the merits of it by the success of it. The interest of grace in the heart, and of religion in the world, may be foiled, and suffer great loss, and seem to be quite run down, but judgment will be brought forth to victory at last. *Vincimur in praelio, sed non in bello* — *We are foiled in a battle, but not in the whole campaign.* Right may fall, but it shall arise.

THE DEFEAT OF THE BENJAMITES

We have here a full account of the complete victory which the Israelites obtained over the Benjamites in the third engagement: the righteous cause was victorious at last, when the managers of it amended what had been amiss; for, when a good cause suffers, it is for want of good management. Observe then how the victory was obtained, and how it was pursued.

I. How the victory was obtained. Two things they had trusted too much to in the former engagements — the goodness of their cause and the superiority of their numbers. It was true that they had both right and strength on their side, which were great advantages; but they depended too much upon them, to the neglect of those duties to which now, this third time, when they see their error, they apply themselves.

1. They were previously so confident of the goodness of their cause that they thought it needless to address themselves to God for his presence and blessing. They took it for granted that God would bless them, nay, perhaps they concluded that he owed them his favour, and could not in justice withhold it, since it was in defence of virtue that they appeared and took up arms. But God having shown them that he was under no obligation to prosper their enterprise, that he neither needed them nor was tied to them, that they were more indebted to him for the honour of being ministers of his justice than he to them for the service, now they became humble petitioners for success. Before they only consulted God's oracle, *Who shall go up first? And, Shall we go up?* But now they implored his favour, fasted and prayed, and *offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings* (v. 26), to make an atonement for sin and an acknowledgment of their dependence upon God, and as an expression of their desire towards him. We cannot expect the presence of God with us, unless we thus seek it in the way he has appointed. And when they were in this frame, and thus sought the Lord, then he not only ordered them to go up against the Benjamites the third time, but gave them a promise of victory: *Tomorrow I will deliver them into thy hand*, v. 28.

2. They were previously so confident of the greatness of their strength that they thought it needless to use any art, to lay any ambush, or form a

stratagem, not doubting but to conquer purely by a strong hand; but now they saw it was requisite to use some policy, as if they had an enemy to deal with that had been superior in number; accordingly, they set *liers in wait* (v. 29), and gained their point, as their fathers did before Ai (Joshua 8), stratagems of that kind being most likely to take effect after a previous defeat, which has flushed the enemy, and made the pretended flight the less suspected. The management of this artifice is here very largely described. The assurance God had given them of success in this day's action, instead of making them remiss and presumptuous, set all heads and hands on work for the effecting of what God had promised.

(1.) Observe the method they took. The body of the army faced the city of Gibeah, as they had done before, advancing towards the gates, v. 30. The Benjamites, the body of whose army was now quartered at Gibeah, sallied out upon them, and charged them with great bravery. The besiegers gave back. retired with precipitation, as if their hearts failed them upon the sight of the Benjamites, which they were willing to believe, proudly imagining that by their former success they had made themselves very formidable. Some loss the Israelites sustained in this counterfeit flight, about thirty men being cut off in their rear, v. 31, 39. But, when the Benjamites were all drawn out of the city, the ambush seized the city (v. 37), gave a signal to the body of the army (v. 38, 40), which immediately turned upon them (v. 41), and, it should seem, another considerable party that was posted at Baal-tamar came upon them at the same time (v. 33); so that the Benjamites were quite surrounded, which put them into the greatest consternation that could be. A sense of guilt now disheartened them, and the higher their hopes had been raised the more grievous was this confusion. At first *the battle was sore* (v. 34), the Benjamites fought with fury; but, when they saw what a snare they were drawn into, they thought one pair of heels (as we say) was worth two pair of hands, and they made the best of their way *towards the wilderness* (v. 42); but in vain: *the battle overtook them*, and, to complete their distress, *those who came out of the cities of Israel*, that waited to see the event of the battle, joined with their pursuers, and helped to cut them off. Every man's hand was against them.

(2.) Observe in this story,

[1.] That the Benjamites, in the beginning of the battle, were confident that the day was their own: *They are smitten down before us*, v. 32, 39. Sometimes God suffers wicked men to be lifted up in successes and hopes,

that their fall may be the sorer. See how short their joy is, and their triumphing but for a moment. *Let not him that girdeth on the harness boast*, except he has reason to boast in God.

[2.] Evil was near them and they did not know it, v. 34. But (v. 41) they saw, when it was too late to prevent it, *that evil had come upon them*. What evils may at any time be near us we cannot tell, but the less they are feared the heavier they fall. Sinners will not be persuaded to see evil near them, but how dreadful will it be when it comes and there is no escaping!
^{<318B>} 1 Thessalonians 5:3.

[3.] Though the men of Israel played their parts so well in this engagement, yet the victory is ascribed to God (v. 35): *The Lord smote Benjamin before Israel*. The battle was his, and so was the success.

[4.] They *trod down the men of Benjamin with ease* when God fought against them, v. 43. It is an easy thing to trample upon those who have made God their enemy. See ^{<304B>} Malachi 4:3.

II. How the victory was prosecuted and improved in a military execution done upon these sinners against their own souls.

1. Gibeah itself, that nest of lewdness, was destroyed in the first place. The ambush that entered the city by surprise *drew themselves along*, that is, dispersed themselves into the several parts of it, which they might easily do, now that all the men of war had sallied out and very presumptuously left it defenceless; and they smote all they found, even women and children, *with the sword* (v. 37), and set fire to the city, v. 40. Sin brings ruin upon cities.

2. The army in the field was quite routed and cut off: 18,000 men of valour lay dead upon the spot, v. 44.

3. Those that escaped from the field were pursued, and cut off in their flight, to the number of 7000, v. 45. It is to no purpose to think of out-running divine vengeance. *Evil pursues sinners*, and it will overtake them.

4. Even those that tarried at home were involved in the ruin. They *let their sword devour for ever*, not considering that *it would be bitterness in the latter end*, as Abner pleads long after, when he was at the head of an army of Benjamites, probably with an eye to this very story, ^{<402S>} 2 Samuel 2:25, 26. They put to the sword all that breathed, and set fire to *all the cities*, v.

48. So that of all the tribe of Benjamin, for aught that appears, there remained none alive but 600 men that took shelter in the rock Rimmon, and lay close there four months, v. 47. Now,

(1.) It is difficult to justify this severity as it was Israel's act. The whole tribe of Benjamin was culpable; but must they therefore be treated as devoted Canaanites? That it was done in the heat of war, that this was the way of prosecuting victories which the sword of Israel had been accustomed to, that the Israelites were extremely exasperated against the Benjamites for the slaughter they had made among them in the two former engagements, will go but a little way to excuse the cruelty of this execution. It is true they had sworn that whosoever did not come up to Mizpeh should be *put to death*, ^{<02K6>}Judges 21:5. But that, if it was a justifiable oath, yet extended only to the men of war; the rest were not expected to come. Yet,

(2.) It is easy to justify the hand of God in it. Benjamin had sinned against him, and God had threatened that, if they forgot him, they should *perish as the nations* that were before them perished (^{<88K>}Deuteronomy 8:20), who were all in this manner cut off.

(3.) It is easy likewise to improve it for warning against the beginnings of sin: they are *like the letting forth of water, therefore leave it off before it be meddled with*, for we know not *what will be in the end thereof*. The eternal ruin of souls will be worse, and more fearful, than all these desolations of a tribe. This affair of Gibeah is twice spoken of by the prophet Hosea as the beginning of the corruption of Israel and a pattern to all that followed (^{<309>}Hosea 9:9): *They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah*; and (^{<309>}Hosea 10:9), *Thou hast sinned from the days of Gibeah*; and it is added that *the battle in Gibeah against the children of iniquity did not* (that is, did not *at first*) overtake them.