

Judges 19-21

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[0 : 00] Amen.

Coming to the end of Judges this morning, next couple of Sundays, Ruben Hunter is going to preach, start a series on the Beatitudes. And we've got Johnny Gibson back from the States and James Chu from Manila are going to be preaching with us too.

Not all on the same Sunday. Judges 19 to 21, I hope you read it before. It raises, doesn't it, some very, very difficult issues.

And for some of you, these might be personal issues. And I want to really encourage you, if you're affected by these passages, please feel free to speak to one of our elders.

But also, one of the joys of this church family is there are many, many godly older women. And I would really encourage you, if you are affected by some of the things that I've got to say, I've got to be careful with how I say it with children here.

[1 : 22] And please do speak to one of those older women, or if you felt you could speak to one of the elders, we would be happy to speak to you. And let's turn to God in prayer.

Grant, O God, that in the written word, and through the spoken word, we may behold the living word, our Lord and our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

And so, Heavenly Father, we ask for the help and the enabling of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Sometimes, it's difficult, isn't it, to put a name to a face.

I have that problem all the time. It's kind of an occupational hazard for a minister. You know my face, but I don't necessarily know your face. And I may not instantly recognise you.

And if that happens, please do embarrass me. And tell me your name. And tell me your name. And make sure I register it. If you can give me something that I can remember your name by, that would be very, very helpful.

[2 : 28] But it happens, isn't it? There's a funny story of Sir Thomas Beecham, who's the famous orchestral conductor. He's shopping one day in London, in Fortnum's and Mason. That posh shop.

And Thomas Beecham sees a woman waving at him. He knew her face, but he couldn't quite remember her name. So he tried to make a quick guide away, only he was too late.

Good morning, Sir Thomas, she said. How are you? I'm very well, thank you. And how are you?

She said, I'm fine, she said, but my brother's been unwell a couple of days.

He's back at work now, though, thankfully. Still struggling to put a name to the face. He asks her, tell me again, what does your brother do with himself these days?

Oh, he's still the king, she said. Forgetting who the king is, it would be extraordinarily embarrassing, wouldn't it? But that's exactly what's happened in the book of Judges.

[3 : 30] It's all summed up, isn't it, in the very last verse of the book. It's certainly our text for this morning. In those days, there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

Everyone did what was fit, not in God's eyes, but in their own eyes. And so God's children have forgotten God's law, and they've turned to other gods, despite the fact that God is the one who brought them out of Egypt.

Despite the fact that God is the one who entered into a covenant with them and gave them his law, which was meant to form them into an alternative society. God's law was meant to show the world what the grace of God can do in a people's lives.

And despite the fact that there were laws in Israel that should have prevented something like this happening, despite this, a young woman is attacked by a group of men, and she is murdered in an Israelite city.

These chapters are filled with men particularly doing what was right in their own eyes. Not what is right according to God's law. They've forgotten who is king, and everyone was a law unto themselves.

[4 : 45] And this dreadful, dreadful story shows us what it is like to live in a world where we make the rules, not God. And we've seen it repeatedly, haven't we, in the book of Judges, that it keeps going from bad to worse, doesn't it?

It keeps spiraling down, and here we are at rock bottom. Someone has called this episode the sewer of scripture, and I don't think that's overstating it.

These are the most degrading and disgusting stories in the whole of the Bible. And just in case you and I are tempted to take the high moral ground, let me ask you about the films that you might have watched.

Let me ask you about the TV dramas you might have binge watched. Nothing could more eloquently describe the deep sickness of our society. It's shocking beyond words that these things can happen.

That evil like this can be found, but evil can be found in Israel, in the people of God of all places. But it's infinitely worse, isn't it, that you and I not only practice these things, but sometimes we're entertained by them.

[5 : 56] And we become blasé about it. Women attacked by men, sexual abuse by the clergy, domestic violence in the church, ethnic cleansing in the name of God.

And such things are repeated, aren't they, daily on our news headlines. They're delivered in sound bites on morning TV. Indispersed with trivialities and childish banter.

Not so long ago, the Bishop of Winchester, he wrote to the newspaper and he said, We live in a society where it doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you believe it doesn't matter. And isn't that where we are today?

That's what happens when you forget who is king. When you forget that God is king and you are not. And it's a very confronting chapter, isn't it?

Chapter 19. There's a sexual attack by a group of men which leads into a civil war in chapter 20, in which thousands of people die.

[6 : 57] And it ends in chapter 20 with state-sponsored imprisonment of 600 young girls. So never, never let it be said that the Bible is out of touch with the real world.

Never let it be said that the Bible is a book of fairy stories. So this is a story, first of all, about men attacking women. About revenge.

And reaping the consequences. It begins in chapter 19 with this concubine who is attacked. It is a disgusting, sickening story.

But it is brilliantly told. It's one of the hallmarks of good storytelling, of good writing. It's that it gives you the experience of an event. It tells you how you ought to experience it.

So C.S. Lewis gives advice to would-be writers. And he says this. He says, don't tell me it was delightful. Don't tell me it was terrifying. Describe it in such a way so that I am terrified.

[8 : 03] And that's Judges 19 to 21. The story is told, isn't it? It is gut-wrenchingly graphic.

You are meant to read Judges 19 to 21. And you are meant to be sickened by it to the pit of your stomach. And you might be saying to yourself, I didn't come to church to hear this this morning.

I didn't come to be disgusted. Well, I'm sorry. This is what God wants you to experience this morning. The disgust and the horror that such things can happen in this world.

Steve Larson wrote the book called The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo. It's a whole series of Scandinavian crime novels. And the original title of that book was Men Who Hate Women.

When he was 15, Larson went camping with three friends. And while they were away, those three friends attacked a 15-year-old girl. And Larson said her screams were heart-rending and I didn't do anything.

[9 : 08] That girl's name, Elizabeth, is one of the main characters in his book. And he said, I needed to write that book. I needed to write that book to expose the reality of violence against women.

We don't know who the author of Judges is. We don't know who wrote it. But I reckon he would say something similar. I need to write that book.

I need to tell this woman's story. Because when there is no king on the throne and people do what it is right in their own eyes, amongst the first to suffer are women.

It is unbearable that anyone should have to go through the experience that this woman did 3,000 years ago. But it is a real experience. And many women have experienced something similar. We know, don't we, in the last decade that thousands, hundreds of thousands of women have shared their stories just as horrific as this. According to statistics, I'm told that at least half of all women admit to at least one exposure of physical violence, up to half.

[10:25] One in every three women admits to experience of sexual abuse and sexual violence. The leading cause of death and disability amongst women aged 15 to 45 in this country is domestic violence.

And we are very naive to think that this isn't happening in churches. Because do you remember in Judges 19 to 21, this is Israel, this is God's people.

These are people God has brought out of Egypt, whom he has entered into covenant with. This isn't the world, these are the people that have God's law. And this man is a Levite with the calling of God upon him to be holy.

The whole book of Leviticus, for the Levites. Be holy as I am holy.

That's the strap line. That's what the Levites were meant to be about. And so he is a minister, for goodness sake. He is an elder. This inhumane, cold monster is a minister.

[11:33] He's a spiritual leader in Israel. He may even be the grandson of Moses if he's the same Levite as we looked at last time. Jonathan, the grandson of Moses. Indeed, it's even worse than that.

I don't know if you picked up the echoes there. We're with another part of the Bible. But don't you understand this has happened before? When you read Judges 19, you immediately think of Genesis 19.

All this has happened in Sodom and Gomorrah, but now it's happening in Israel, in the people of God. And surely this has got something to say to us in today's church about how we treat women. We are in the midst of culture wars and conservative, evangelical, reformed Christianity, which we believe. It's really under fire. It's one of the areas that is being attacked.

I don't like the word, but we hold to a complementarian view of the different roles between men and women. Men and women, boys and girls, are created equally in the image of God. But they have different roles.

[12:40] We're unashamed of that. It's what the Bible clearly teaches. And yet we are a target in the cultural battles. And we have to say, don't we, we have to be honest and say, often in the way that we've expressed that, we've not helped ourselves.

And we've been laid wide open to criticism. Rodney Stark, in his fascinating book, *The Rise of Christianity*, he's not a Christian himself.

He's a sociologist. And he wrote a book describing how Christianity took off in the early centuries. It's a brilliant book. And he identifies a number of reasons why that was.

It's quite phenomenal. He identifies a number of reasons why Christianity really took off. And one of them was because of Christianity's appeal to women. You see, in that world, in the Roman Empire, women were despised.

In fact, there were more men than women in Rome because baby girls were killed. Infanticide was common. Sometimes baby girls were left out like the rubbish in the street.

[13:48] And Christians would collect the rubbish and raise those children. And they cared for the marginalized. And they cared for the poor. And they cared for the widows. And they cared for children. And in the early church, women were treated with respect and with dignity.

And were given responsibility and heard of in the Roman Empire. And so Christian girls were not forced into underage marriages in the early churches. They were allowed to grow up and marry later.

All of this can be documented. Because those early Christians followed the example of the Lord Jesus. And because they were following the example of the Lord Jesus, they set the bar high as to how women were to be treated.

You see, when there is a king in Israel, when Jesus reigns in his church through his word, women are emancipated. And that's what happens when you come here on a Sunday morning.

Jesus is speaking. Jesus speaks and rules through his word. And in his church, women are emancipated. And set free and allowed to flourish. And lives are changed.

[14 : 54] And hard hearts are softened. And wounds are healed. Ironically, in Judges 19, this woman would have been safer in the world than in the church.

Isn't that right? Verse 12. In verse 12, His master said to him, We will not turn aside into the city of foreigners.

He's talking about Jerusalem. Who do not belong to the people of Israel, but we will pass on to Gibeah. We'll be safe there. It's exactly the kind of thing people say today about the church.

Tragically, sometimes people are safer in the pub, aren't they, than in the church? Let's go to Gibeah. We're not safe in these Canaanite villages.

And that's where the nightmare unfolds. During the night, men gather at the doors, a frenzy of lust. They threaten to attack the Levite man.

[15 : 55] But instead of him going out to face them, to fight them, he sends out his concubine. He throws her out to the mob, and they use her and abuse her and leave her for dead. If ever a human being endured a night of utter horror, it was that woman that night.

And while all this is going on, he sleeps like a baby. And he wakes up the next morning, and he opens the door, and he finds her dead on the doorstep. He picks up the corpse, throws it over the donkey.

He cuts up her body and sends 12 pieces to the 12 tribes of Israel. It's a horror movie, isn't it? You hear it, I say it with revulsion.

Except that it happened. It happened to a young woman 3,000 years ago in Israel, just like it happens in our city, in our country. It's what happens when there is no king in Israel.

Our people do what's right in their own eyes. And sometimes these events are so horrific, aren't they, that they trigger a national outcry. And that's exactly what happens if you look at verse 30 at the end of the chapter.

[17 : 06] And all who saw it said, such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day of the people of Israel coming out of the land of Egypt until this day. Consider it, take counsel, speak. They're saying, we can't imagine how this, how has this happened?

We must do something about it. When Alice Gross was murdered just those years ago in Hanwell, that was the reaction, wasn't it, of all of us.

How has this happened? In verse 30, can somebody speak up and tell us what we're to do? It happens when there's a national scandal. A public outcry across the city from the nation, from Dan to Beersheba.

Something's got to be done about this. Community leaders, political leaders from all parts of the spectrum. When Sarah Everard was walking home in Clapham, and that young lady, and what happened to her, it was unacceptable, wasn't it?

And something had to be done, and thousands of people went to vigils, voicing the horror.

Something's got to be done. But what is there to be done?

[18 : 18] How are we to address the issue of domestic violence, especially violence against women? It seems endemic in our society. How do we make our streets safer at night?

Is the answer law and order? Tougher penalties against the perpetrators of such obscenities? Is it education? Is it re-educating?

Teaching boys who will grow up to be men who will respect women? Do we need better role models in our rugby clubs and in our football clubs? The answer to that is yes, of course.

Come with me to chapter 20. There's a report commissioned by the government. There's a national gathering. It's a bipartisan show of solidarity.

The leaders of the tribes come together. 400,000 of them gather at Mizpah to take revenge on the Benjamites for allowing this atrocity to take place in one of their towns. Let me read it to you.

[19 : 19] Verse 1. Note that one man. And the chief priests of all the people of all the tribes of Israel presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God.

400,000 people on foot drew the sword. And the people of Israel said, Tell us, tell us, how did this evil happen? And then this dreadful man, the Levite, tells his side of the story and he glosses over all the things that might incriminate him.

It's sickening, isn't it? The sheer hypocrisy. And we haven't got time to look at all the details. But you'll see that his story in chapter 20 is very different to the reality of what happened in chapter 19.

But don't miss the significance of what's happening. All Israel. And so what you have here is an unprecedented display of national unity. The Levite, with his gruesome calling card, the severed

body of the concubine.

This Levite has managed to do what none of the other judges managed to do in the book of Judges. He's united Israel. He's united Israel.

[20 : 34] Only this time, who are they going to fight? Not the Midianites or the Amorites or the Philistines. Who are they going to fight? They're going to fight the tribe of Benjamin. They couldn't unite to drive out the Canaanites, which was what they were supposed to do.

God had served notice on the Canaanites. He'd given them 400 years in order to repent. He'd served that notice that he was going to come and judge them. And the Israelites were meant to have driven out the Canaanites out of the land.

But they couldn't do that. They couldn't unite for that. But now they unite as one man. It's emphasized in verse 1, verse 8 and verse 11. They come together. And so vengeance is unleashed.

And what happens is they almost succeed in wiping out one of the tribes of Israel. And so what begins as a national outcry, what begins as a police action against the hooligans, turns into a vigilante and a civil bloody war that threatens to reshape Israel.

Benjamin refuses to punish the men responsible for their terrible crime. It's our country, right or wrong, there are people. That's the attitude they take.

[21 : 40] And they refuse to do anything about it. They won't extradite the criminals. And so they make themselves liable to judgment. And as a result, Benjamin, the tribe of Benjamin, is almost exterminated. Day 1, Benjamin wins.

We're told the death toll is 22,000 Israelites. Day 2, Benjamin wins again. The death toll is 18,000. Day 3, Israel wins. The death toll is 25,000.

Benjamites are killed. 25,000 of them. And that is only the military. It doesn't count the civilians. If you look at the end of the chapter, in verse 48, we're told that Israel went back to Benjamin and the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword.

The city, the men, the beasts, and all that they found. And all the towns they found they set on fire. It gets worse and worse. And so the problem is compounded. The tribe of Benjamin is all but wiped off the map.

And the 12 tribes of Israel almost become 11. I can't unravel all the twists and the turns of the chapter. If you think chapter 19 is confronting, chapter 20 and 21 is worse.

[22 : 43] I've just not got the time. It would get too complicated. And I can't unravel all the twists and turns. Except to say that their anger and their outrage, which is quite understandable, makes things a hundred times worse.

And it's what happens when you take the law into your own hands, isn't it? It's what happens when there's no king in Israel. And everyone does what is right in their own eyes. And everybody forgets what God has actually said in his word to these people.

That God has given his law to these people. And God has given them laws that would have shaped them into an alternative society that would have displayed the mercy and the grace and the justice of God.

But they were not listening. And so the whole story ends in chapter 21. And they reap a whirlwind. 600 years, 600 girls kidnapped, made into slaves, sacked slaves.

The tribe of Benjamin, so that it won't be wiped out. It is horrible, horrible, horrible. It's a horrible story. But it's one that's been repeated down history again and again.

[23 : 52] In Nigeria today. In Syria. And even in the UK. And if the statistics are to be believed, even in a congregation like this.

And so what is the answer? What is to be done about this? Is there an answer? Is law and order the answer? Tough against crime.

Tough against the causes of crime. Tough against crime. Tough against crime. Tougher penalties against the perpetrators. And I'm not saying that we shouldn't do those things. The trouble is this. Those are human solutions to what is essentially a spiritual problem. The intractable problem of evil. No military campaign.

No government policy. No protest movement can solve the problem. The problem which resides in the human heart. Listen to what Jesus says.

[24 : 51] Of course, no one is listening to Jesus, are they? People patronise Jesus and they say, oh what a lovely person he was. He had some good things to say. But no one listens to him. And this is what Jesus says.

Do you want to hear what he says about this? He says, he says it is from within. He says, out of a person's heart that these things come. Sexual immorality. Theft. Murder.

Adultery. Greed. Malice. Deceit. Lewdness. Envy. Slander. Arrogance and folly. All those things come from where? They come from inside. Inside your heart and inside my heart.

These harsh and horrid stories in the Bible are there to show us ourselves. And to show us how we need help from outside of ourselves.

I was reading this week about the Presbyterian Church of Wales. Around the time I was going on, just a bit before, well just around when I was born, there was an old blue hymn book.

[25 : 58] Which is full of the most wonderful hymns. But the denomination decided to change the hymn book. And they updated lots and lots of the hymns in the late 1970s.

And they took the word blood out of a lot of the hymns. Because no one likes to sing about the blood of Jesus. And they took out the words of many of the hymns.

Guilty, vile, and helpless we. Spotless Lamb of God was he. Vile? Are we vile? We don't love that word. We're Presbyterians, aren't we? We're respectable citizens.

Foul, I to the fountain fly. Wash me, save your oid. I'm not foul, how dare you? Yes you are.

And yes I am. And our problem is that we don't want to be ruled. We want to follow the devices and desires of our hearts. To quote Cramer's prayer book.

[26 : 59] In those days everyone did that. They followed the devices and the desires of their own hearts. They did what was right in their own eyes. It was a thoroughly individualistic, hedonistic society. Where sexual brutality and criminal violence prevailed.

People lived by the law of the jungle. And that is where we're at today. And we need a king. And to stop doing what is right in our own eyes.

And to stop doing what is right in his eyes. And we need Jesus to be king in our lives. We need Jesus ruling in his churches by his word.

It's no good coming to church, singing the hymns, mouthing platter, saying this was a nice sermon.

It wasn't a nice sermon. I hope you won't say that to me this morning. It's a horrible sermon, isn't it? It's a nasty sermon.

And God speaks to us through his word and we're meant to do something upon it. And this is the great need we have, isn't it? For Jesus to be ruling in his church. It doesn't mean the building. Jesus doesn't live in this building, but he rules in our lives through the word that is preached in this building.

[28 : 08] And so we are not going to solve this problem by educating boys or by demonizing men for that matter. We're not going to stop this by legislation or education or public opinion or by protest.

That won't stop men behaving badly. Only the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ can do that. Is that what we believe? Only the gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes.

And that's what healing needs and that's what London needs and that's what we all need. And so you can teach children, can't you, Christian values. But we can't change children's hearts.

Because it's the motivation. That's the problem. And people can admire Christian values and still live like monsters. And it's the gospel that we need to hear and the gospel that needs to be preached.

And that's what's hinted at here, isn't it? Particularly in that last verse. Because there is a king in Israel that is hinted at. And that's what we need to understand if we're reading our Bibles.

[29 : 16] There is a king. There is a king in Israel. There is a king in Israel who will bring justice for the oppressed and punishment for the wicked. There is such a king. There is a king who promises safety for all who take refuge in him.

And so let me say this to you. If you are a perpetrator of such wickedness in your home. You need to know this morning that there is a king in Israel.

And there is a king in Israel who you are accountable to. And who will call you to account on the last day. But you also need to hear this.

Even if you are the perpetrator of this, there is a king in Israel. Who offers forgiveness for the foulest of sins. The vilest offender who truly believes.

That moment from Jesus a pardon receives. And so men, if you have not been treating the women in your lives with the respect that is due to them.

[30 : 22] As those who have been made in the image and the likeness of God. Those who are partners with you and heirs of life. Then you need to do business with Jesus this morning, don't you?

And if you have been using the Bible to justify your behaviour, then shame on you. And you need to repent and face up to the evil of your sin.

And you need to come to Jesus for forgiveness. Because thank God there is a king in Israel. There is a king in Israel who has promised to wash away our sin.

And even though your sins, they be like scarlet. They should be white as snow. And there is a king who can do that for us.

And there is a king in Israel who promises to write his law on our hearts. That's what's needed, isn't it? I need God to write his law on my heart. And that is what Jesus does. That's what he promises.

[31 : 14] There is a king in Israel. Who will write God's law in our hearts. So that we want to do it. And we desire it. And that king is introduced to us right here. In this hellhole that has become Israel.

Right at rock bottom. Here is God bringing that king into the world. You turn over the page. And what's the next book in the Bible? It's the book of Ruth. The story of Ruth that is set in the time of the judges.

And you know who Ruth is? As you read your Bible, you find that Ruth is the great-grandma of King David. And God is already at work bringing his king into the world.

And just as he promised in Genesis 3 in the garden, you keep your finger on that fast-forward button. And you read right through the scriptures until eventually you find yourself with the shepherds in the field.

Outside a little town called Bethlehem. And you hear the angel sing. And to you is born this day in the city of David a saviour.

[32 : 17] Who is Christ the Lord. There is a king in Israel. Who is Christ the Lord. The saviour of the world. Let's pray.

Amen. Lord, we want to thank you that there is a redeemer.

Amen.