

The People Without a King

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 August 2017

Preacher: Simon Attwood

[0 : 0 0] so grim and so dark and so utterly bleak, how do we respond? Do we wish that our Bibles just didn't contain this? Or, well, what do we do with a story like this? Well, the first thing I want to say is that this is also the word of the Lord. God has something to say to us through this or it wouldn't be in his word. So let's just pray as we start to thank him for it and ask him to speak through it to us. Father, please give us ears to hear you as you speak through your word. Give us minds that are able to grapple with your word and soft hearts to respond rightly to you, our King. Amen. What can we expect from people that reject God? What should our expectations be of humanity when it chooses to live under its own rule? We might be tempted to have an overly high view of people without God if it were not for passages like this. What we find is that the Bible is entirely clear about the bleak state of humanity outside of God's law. It is honest about the state of the human heart and is often much more honest than we are. What we'll find in this passage is that it has a lot to teach us about what happens when people stop listening to God and start taking morality and justice into their own hands. This is the very last part of Judges and at the start and end of this passage we'll find the phrase, in those days Israel had no king. But to understand that I think we need to refresh our minds on the book of Judges as a whole. So in the previous book,

Joshua, Israel has been sent to take over the pagan land of Canaan. That conquest, however, and in spite of God's warning, is never entirely complete with small pockets of Canaanites being left all over the land. And because of this, things don't go well for Israel. The time of Judges is a downward spiral where the people become less and less faithful and more and more like the Canaanites they were supposed to remove from the land. If you were to turn back to Judges chapter 2, you would read this.

Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived. For the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to their ways and were even more corrupt than those of their ancestors. Following other gods and serving and worshipping them. They refuse to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. And with that, we get the pattern of judges. It's a downward spiral of increasing evil and stubborn refusal to turn back to the Lord. So if you go back to that phrase, there was no king. Yes, in purely human terms, there was no king. There is no one ruling Israel. There's no guiding authority. But behind that lies the real problem. In the time of judges, the people have given up their real king, Yahweh, the Lord. They have rejected his rule, his command, his authority. Without God, they have become no different to, if not worse than, the Canaanites they were supposed to drive out.

God's people, when they live as if they have no ruler, under no authority but their own, turn to utter depravity. And that's what it means for these people to have no king. So with that in our minds, we can start to make sense of this particularly ugly episode in Israel's history.

What happens if you decide to play by your own rules? There are many things in life that are only good because of external rules. Football would be rubbish if you could just pick up the ball and lob it into the net yourself. It just wouldn't be fair. The reason the houses are safe is because they're building regulations. If someone decides to ignore them, then actually that house could seriously injure or even kill a person. We are safe walking around the streets of Glasgow, relatively, because there are laws protecting our safety. But if people do as they wish and take the law into their own hands, then we're no longer safe and we live in fear. Often things are only good if they have an external authority to guide them. When people live with a DIY attitude to morality, things start to turn dark. We had the first half of our passage read out, and it's a pretty horrible story. But because of that, we might miss some of the detail that explains why it's here in our Bibles and why we can understand this horrible affair. Before we get into this, though, notice that the characters are not referenced by name. This entire passage from start to finish is anonymous. I think the implication of this is, yes, this event is unique, but this could have been anywhere in Israel. The hearts of an entire nation aren't good.

[5 : 13] This could have come from anyone. But who do we have? Well, first we meet a Levite, and he's thoroughly slimy all the way through this entire story. As a Levite, he should have been a spiritual guide to Israel, but this guy is seriously dodgy. First, he takes a concubine and note, not a legitimate relationship. One day, she runs away back to her family, so he goes to get her bag.

And that is how we meet her father, who is almost wonderfully comically kind. Anyone with overly friendly in-laws might be tempted to sympathize with the Levite trying to get away from his father-in-law.

But actually, in that, we need to see that this is a real rejection here. In a Middle Eastern culture, hospitality was huge, and to turn around and reject good hospitality doesn't speak much of this Levite's integrity. So they leave the good hospitality, and that really is the end of the only good thing in this entire passage. They pass the nearest pagan town because, well, they don't want to stay there. And they end up in Gibeah, a Benjaminite town, where nobody welcomes them.

No one from that town will have these people into their home until an old man, who is not actually from that town, invites them to stay. But notice in verse 20 of chapter 19, that worrying little comment about not staying outside at night. The alarm bells are already beginning to ring at that point.

Then the narrative takes a truly dark turn, a pounding knock at the door, and our travelers find themselves truly not safe in the land of Israel. A gang from the tribe of Benjamin demand to rape the Levite. So what do the old man and the Levite do? Do they valiantly defend the women and protect them?

[7 : 05] Well, no, they offer them up as objects to be abused. In the end, the concubine is thrown outside, and a gang of rapists abuse her through the night. And all we can say is that this episode in Israel's history is truly horribly awful. In this passage, the good hospitality of the father is in sharp contrast to the horrific abuse of the people in Gibeah. But actually, doesn't this event sound a little familiar?

If you were to turn back to Genesis 19, you have almost the exact same event, but it's in the pagan town of Sodom. In fact, if you were to go back and compare the language of that chapter with the language of this chapter, it matches up almost entirely. The writer of Judges is getting us to see that these people are no better, if in fact not worse, than the pagans they have driven out of the land. Israel have become like people without a god, and they are similarly deserving of judgment to the people of Sodom in that day. So what happens next? The morning comes and the concubine is found lying on the doorstep. So the Levite picks her up and takes her home, and horribly, it's just not clear whether she's dead at the point that he carves her body into 12 pieces and sends the parts across Israel.

And at this point, we think, has this just become a horror film? The body parts serve as a call to war against the Benjaminites, and the response in verse 30, such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came out of Egypt.

And it's just not clear whether that refers to the demands of the men, the rape of the concubine, or her dismemberment. It's all truly grim. So Israel assembled to figure out how to respond, and the Levite seems entirely callous to this whole thing, not particularly fussed so that he just carved up his concubine, and actually gives a not entirely accurate account of the events that happened.

Thankfully, that's the last we see of that shady character. But the question is, what are Israel going to do? Are they going to turn to the Lord and pray and ask for judgment and for peace? Well, no, they just take justice into their own hands. They just decide to go for vengeance instead.

[9 : 32] Do the Benjaminites repent? No, instead they choose to defend the rapist. When you do morality your own way, when you invent it for yourself well, you may as well offer up the concubine to save your honor of an important man like a Levite, because, well, that's just logical.

Why not hack her to pieces as a message? It's certainly provocative, isn't it? And we see that when man makes his own decisions, his own rules, people end up being treated like sex objects. The weak are abused and killed in horrible ways, and all from men with a warped sense of their own honor and importance. This is a truly deplorable episode.

And we might be left thinking, how can God tolerate these people any longer? They're so horrible. But I would ask, is our culture really that different? An overly sexualized culture in which people are treated as objects?

Sexual violence is endemic? It sounds unpleasantly familiar. The pornography industry has never grown faster in history than in the last decade. Or consider the amount of films in recent years that glorify the dismemberment and violence against people.

We might not look the same from the outside, but at its core, our society is similarly dark. And I think this story cuts frighteningly deep into our present. When man invents his own morality, things can go very badly indeed.

[11 : 00] But as I said at the start, we might wish this wasn't here. But I would argue that I'm very glad this is in our Bible. It's honest about human nature.

If this event and others like it weren't recorded, we would maybe ask, does God understand people at all? But with episodes like this, we can truly face the reality that this is human nature without God.

We are not good. We need help. So Israel is poised to strike. Now what? Well, before we find out what happens next, we're going to have a small break and a song as a time to reflect on what we've read so far.

For Israel, the Benjaminites are incredibly skillful warriors. The first two battles with Benjamin, Israel loses 40,000 troops.

It's utter decimation. A tenth of all the fighting men of Israel are wiped out in this battle. And Israel goes and weeps before the Lord and performs sacrifices.

[12 : 05] But at no point do they repent. At no point do they ask for God's judgment on the situation. Instead, they just get crafty.

They perform an ambush against the Benjaminites and slaughter 25,000 Benjaminites in one go. In fact, they're so effective that they leave only 600 men left to run and hide.

We've had DIY morality. We're now on to DIY justice. So let's see what happens. Alien's going to come and read the second part of our passage for us. There was no king.

And everyone did as they saw fit. I mean, that pretty much explains this entire section. There's no uniting authority in Israel. Nobody administering true justice.

So instead, we get DIY justice from Israel. And it's about as unpleasant as the first part of this story was. First off, we get complete overkill. To punish the sins of the men of one town, they wipe out almost an entire tribe of people.

[13 : 14] The women, the children, even the cattle. And that's not justice. That's just a massacre. And all that to innocent people. Notice, importantly, this was in no way commanded by God.

God does, nor does it match up with anything from his law. This is squarely on the shoulders of Israel. And see the irony here, too. They were meant to be clearing a land of pagans, which they didn't manage to do.

But that leads to them almost wiping out part of their own tribe, which they are managing to do quite effectively. This entire chapter is chaotic and disturbing.

Their second act of sham justice is to make an oath that nobody will give their daughters in marriage to the surviving Benjaminites. An ode of that clearly provides an obvious problem.

Because in one generation, that will kill the entire tribe. And that's a problem because they just think, well, 11 tribes doesn't sound as good as 12.

[14 : 12] We need to keep this tribe alive. We can't have 11 tribes of Israel. So who do they expect to deal with this? Well, look at verse 3. Lord, God of Israel, they cried.

Why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today? And they seem totally willfully blind of their own culpability in this mess.

They perform sacrifices, but God remains silent, which is his judgment in itself. So how will Israel try to dig themselves out of the pit that they have dug?

Well, first they find someone who didn't turn up to the assembly. And as retribution for their mere absence, they clear the entire town. They send 12,000 men to massacre everyone.

Again, women and children. And they just leave the virgin daughters, who can be given to the Benjaminites. And notice the irony again. They were meant to avoid marriage with the Canaanites.

[15 : 08] They are now avoiding marriage within Israel. Israel, at this point, have become a sick cartoon of themselves. Wanting to save a tribe, they are responsible for wiping out.

They murder an entire town full of people because of an oath that they made, purely for the sake of their own pride. These women are given as a peace offering to Benjamin. But what's that?

There aren't enough of them. They only captured 400 women. And there are 600 Benjaminite men. Well, this fake justice didn't even work. So they just come up with yet another reprehensible scheme for stealing women.

Pause there. Notice what's happening. They are democratizing fake justice. But they're doing it very rationally. This isn't an irrational, crazy Israel.

They haven't gone mad. They've gone bad. But look at verse 15. It was the Lord who brought this about. Letting Israel get away with its schemes as a judgment on the nation itself.

[16 : 12] Things should not be like this. God's judgment reminds them that if they turn away from him, his patience with their evil ways will not last forever. The final event in verses 20 to 24 of chapter 21 involves Israel essentially forcing a dodgy deal on some people by letting the Benjaminites cart off some virgin women at a festival.

They even reinvent their own oath to make it work. The Benjaminites steal women from families and take them forcibly to be their wives. And all Israel, dejected and sad, walk back to their own inheritance.

What happens when people do DIY justice? Women are treated as property to be stolen, forcibly married and abused. Innocent people are massacred for barely legitimate political reasons.

People's pride comes before their humanity. And men use their positions for power rather than responsibility. Lawless and groundless justice takes over. And the people become altogether warped and perverse.

Without God's guidance and law, Israel goes from bad to worse, becoming no better than the people around them. This is a dark end to a particularly dark book. And what's the moral of the story?

[17 : 33] This is what happens when there is no king, and everyone does as they see fit. Judges doesn't end on a hopeful note, which leaves us asking, where is the hope?

Where is the light in this story? In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. Those are the last and most chilling words of this story.

Words that we have to face up to. When everyone rejects the king and does as they see fit, you end up with whole-scale depravity. So my question for us is, should we be surprised when we see horrible things on the news?

When we see wars and lies and violence and crime? Yes, we should weep for the state of our world. And yes, we should be rightly angry about injustice and atrocity.

But should we be surprised? Well, I would say no. As Christians, we should, out of all people, be most clear on what humanity turns out to be when it rejects God.

[18 : 38] Take any number of historical or present regimes that live without God's word to see how quickly they dehumanize people. But that's all out there.

It's far away. What about us here in the UK, in Glasgow, in our church? When we invent our own morality, our own idea of what justice is, we get people campaigning for even post-birth abortion, women's rights at the expense of children's lives.

We get power politics taking little to no notice of the poor and destitute in our society. We get churches ignoring the world of God and siding with culture on issues of sexuality.

And it will always be the weak and the dejected who lose out. You might ask, isn't this just pessimism? Are things really that bad? But I would argue that the Bible is just much more clear and more honest about human nature than we are.

Stories like this fly right in the face of our modern sensibilities of everyone being essentially wonderful and lovely. Just think that the only reason that things in our culture aren't as bad as this is because of the grace and mercy of God.

[19 : 50] He is restraining sin. But just like in Judges, we can't presume that his patience would last forever. But finally, there is hope. And that hope exists right next to the darkness.

Back to verse 25. In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. In those days. This story is being told retrospectively.

But those days didn't last forever. If you're to turn one page on, you will find the book of Ruth. Another page after that, the book of Samuel. And in those days, the king came.

There was hope. And that hope comes in the form of King David, who would truly unite the tribes together under God. David would rule under the law and in obedience to the Lord.

Into the darkness comes a king as light. But even David failed and messed up. Because there is only one true king. And that is God.

[20 : 51] The ruler of those people and ours. And that gives us an answer to the darkness of our own culture. Please turn with me to Romans. Chapter 5.

The New Testament is just as clear as the Old Testament on the state of humanity. Earlier in Romans, we will hear that we have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity.

The list goes on in Romans chapter 1. But when we turn to Romans chapter 5, we find this at verse 6. You see, just at the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Jesus doesn't come in a good time when things are okay. He doesn't come for those who are all cleaned up. He comes for those in the mess.

[21 : 55] Those in the darkness. Those who are struggling with lives that look bad. Jesus comes to save. The righteous king comes to die for the sinful people.

We're not left alone to struggle, but given Christ that we may live. There is hope because the king has come. And there is still hope because the king will come again.

That being true, then, we must seek to live under the rule of King Jesus now. Rejecting man-made morality and living under his authority. So we must think, what are we doing that is right in our own eyes?

And ignoring the word of God. Is it in our families, in our work, in our friendships, our marriages, even in this church? We must be led by God and his word under the rule of King Jesus.

And not under the rule of ever-changing culture. We must live in the light and not turn back to the darkness. So let's pray that we might do so. Father, help us when we think that we are right in our own eyes.

[23 : 04] Rebuke us and show us your way. Father, show us how to live under the rule of our true King Jesus. And we ask that you would help us to spread his rule and his love to many more people.

That they may receive your saving grace. And it is in the name of our King Jesus that we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.