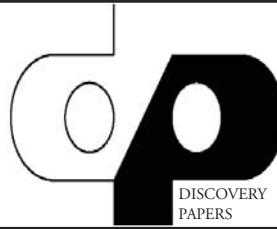


# RUSH TO JUDGMENT

*SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING*



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Judges 20:1-17  
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Scott Grant  
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Returning to college from Christmas vacation, I was shocked to find a letter in my mail slot, written by the recently hired advisor of the student publications, informing me that I would no longer be allowed to work for any of the publications because of “insubordination.” I soon discovered that four other students received the same letter. True, the five of us, and several other journalism majors, had not been supportive of the new advisor because we perceived him to be an unqualified lackey who was bent on restricting freedom of the press. But insubordinate? Dismissed without a hearing?

When we received our letters, we were outraged. We took our case to the media in Southern California, and some newspapers covered the story. (The media are usually up for a freedom of the press issue.) Some called us “The Pepperdine Five.” We were right, the advisor was wrong, and we were going to do everything we could to right the wrong.

Judges 20 is a cautionary tale that warns us against rushing to judgment. As we read about the Israelites who press their case against Benjamin, one of their tribes, we’re reading about ourselves—or at least about our tendency to throw truth to the wind and rush to judgment. As usual, if we’re looking for help, we won’t find much of it in the book of Judges. The narratives identify our sinful tendencies but they don’t help us overcome them, except to suggest that a king is coming who can help us. Today, in addition to considering the book of Judges, we’ll hear from that king.

## The back story

Judges 20 is a continuation of the narrative that began in the previous chapter. In Judges 19, a Levite, from the priestly tribe in Israel, traveled from the region of Ephraim in the north to the city of Bethlehem, in the region of Judah in the south to win back his concubine, who had returned to her father’s house after becoming angry with her partner. On the return trip, the Levite came to the town of Gibeah, populated by Israelites from the tribe of Benjamin. At first, no one took him in, but finally, an old man from the tribe of Ephraim, who was living in Gibeah, offered hospitality to him, his concubine, and his servant. However, some men from Gibeah demanded that the old

man hand over the Levite so that they could gang-rape him. The old man refused, and the Levite mollified them by throwing them his concubine, whom they raped and beat all night long.

The next morning, when the Levite was preparing to leave, he all but tripped over his concubine, who was lying at the doorway of the old man’s house. The Levite placed his concubine on a donkey and brought her back with him to Ephraim, where he cut her into twelve pieces and sent her body parts throughout the land of Israel as a call to arms against the perpetrators of the crime. The narrator doesn’t say, or perhaps doesn’t know, when the woman died: immediately after she was raped, during the journey back to Ephraim, or when the Levite took a knife to her. How Israel responds to the gruesome call to arms is the subject of the opening verses of Judges 20.

## The Levite’s story

Judges 20:1-7:

**<sup>1</sup>Then all Israel from Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead came together as one and assembled before the LORD in Mizpah. <sup>2</sup>The leaders of all the people of the tribes of Israel took their places in the assembly of God’s people, four hundred thousand men armed with swords. <sup>3</sup>(The Benjamites heard that the Israelites had gone up to Mizpah.) Then the Israelites said, “Tell us how this awful thing happened.”**

**<sup>4</sup>So the Levite, the husband of the murdered woman, said, “I and my concubine came to Gibeah in Benjamin to spend the night. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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 outrageous act in Israel. <sup>7</sup>Now, all you Israelites, speak up and tell me what you have decided to do.”**

The Levite does what no leader in the period of the judges was able to do: he unites Israel. Representatives from all the tribes of Israel, from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south, travel to Mizpah, a town belonging to the southern tribe of Judah, to consider what to do in response to the atrocity of Gibeah. Even representatives from the land of Gilead, east of the Jordan, who had a testy relationship with their brothers to the west, come to the meeting. The Israelites literally gather as “one man” to take counsel. The unity would be promising if it were for the sake of worship, or even if it were for the sake of addressing such an atrocity in Israel, as long as the meeting didn’t include four hundred thousand soldiers, who put the Benjamites on the defensive and made military action all but inevitable.

The Israelites want to know “how this awful thing happened.” How? If the narrator were to answer the Israelites himself, he might say, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit”—literally, everyone did “what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6). He might emphasize the need for a righteous king—especially, the need for the divine king, the Lord, whom the Israelites have rejected in favor of other gods. Absent the Lord, and absent a king who worships the Lord and upholds the law, each member of Israel makes up his or her own morality. What you get, in such an environment, is the atrocity of Gibeah, perpetrated by men who only did what was right in their own eyes.

How did this awful thing happen? The assembly is not reported as addressing anyone in particular, but the Levite is only too happy to step forward. Yes, he is too happy. And the assembly is too eager to listen to him. The Levite’s testimony features half-truths, distortions, and a concern for himself instead of his concubine. He bears false witness, violating one of the Ten Commandments.

He and his concubine came to Gibeah of Benjamin to spend the night? Yes, but only after he decided against spending the night in Jebus. During the night the men of Gibeah came after him and surrounded the house, intending to kill him? No, not the “men,” a word that can also be translated “nobles,” just “some of the wicked men of the city.” They intended to kill him? No, they intended to rape him. They raped his concubine and she died? Yes, they raped her, but only after he, in order to protect himself, gave her to them. Yes, she died, but when? After they raped her or after he took a knife to her? He took his concubine, cut her to pieces, and sent one piece to each region of Israel’s inheritance because “they” committed this lewd and outrageous act in Israel? Yes, he took his concubine, but not for the first time. He neglects to report the first time, when he took his concubine and threw her

to the men. Yes, some men of Gibeah committed a lewd and outrageous act in Israel, but what about the Levite? He sacrificed his concubine, all but tripped over her in the morning, and commanded her to get up and go—all with chilling callousness. Outrageous!

The Levite exhorts “all you Israelites” to “speak up,” but he doesn’t want every Israelite to speak up, for if his servant and the old man of Gibeah were to testify, they would tell a different story. He wants the assembly to tell him what they’ve decided to do without consulting any other witnesses, of course, thus violating the law, which requires at least two witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15). First, the Levite was willing to sacrifice his concubine to protect himself; now he’s willing to sacrifice however many of his countrymen in battle are necessary for the sake of personal revenge.

## Stretching the truth

Like the Israelites, we may want to ask, when we hear of some atrocity, how “this awful thing happened.” One man opens fire in a movie theater in Colorado. Another man does so in a Sikh temple in Wisconsin. A college football coach in Pennsylvania molests young boys, and the men he reports to give him a pass. A man and a woman kidnap and sexually assault an eleven-year-old girl and keep her in a concealed area behind their Antioch home for eighteen years. Why? How did these awful things happen? The common explanation usually has something to do with the psychological makeup of the perpetrators or those complicit with them. Sure, on one level, psychology offers an explanation. On a higher level, however, the book of Judges offers a better, and fuller, explanation: we have thrown over the divine king, thereby creating a world, and particular societies, in which men and women are encouraged to do what is right in their own eyes, not God’s eyes. Such a world will produce, and fail to stop, at least some mass murderers, rapists, and pedophiles.

It’s easy for us, having read Judges 19 and the first seven verses of Judges 20, to sit in judgment of the Levite. Without question, he deserves rebuke. But think about the times when you covet a certain result. Might you be inclined to stretch the truth to influence the outcome? Might you be inclined to withhold certain facts that could hinder your cause if they were known? Might you be inclined to embellish your record while at the same time demonizing your opponent? Might you be inclined to dissuade your listeners from soliciting testimony from those who would tell a different story? If the Levite was willing to sacrifice the lives of his countrymen for the sake of personal vengeance, what might we be inclined to sacrifice, and for what cause?

Many of our political leaders, by the way, walk in the way of the Levite. In order to get elected, they stretch the truth, withhold certain facts, embellish their records, demonize their opponents, conceal certain testimony, and, in some cases, sacrifice others for their cause. What the Levite did is a recipe for running a modern political campaign in the United States. The sad truth is that if candidates didn't do such things, we wouldn't elect them. We don't allow them to tell the truth, to be honest about their weaknesses or the strengths of their opponents, for example. One of John McCain's biggest "gaffes," when he was running for president in 2008, was admitting that the economy was not his "strong suit." Our leaders fudge the truth; we won't elect them unless they fudge the truth. Is it any wonder that we fudge the truth, too?

In the next sequence, the Israelites, having listened to the shady testimony of the Levite, decide to challenge Gibeah.

## Mobilizing against Gibeah

Judges 20:8-11:

**<sup>8</sup>All the men rose up together as one, saying, "None of us will go home. No, not one of us will return to his house. <sup>9</sup>But now this is what we'll do to Gibeah: We'll go up against it in the order decided by casting lots. <sup>10</sup>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 this outrageous act done in Israel." <sup>11</sup>So all the Israelites got together and united as one against the city.**

Without taking any more testimony, and without inquiring of the Lord, the Israelites believe the lying Levite and literally mobilize as "one man" against Gibeah. The Spirit of the Lord has come upon many leaders in the book of Judges, but none of them was able to generate the level of response that the Levite generated with his false testimony. Furthermore, although the judges for the most part led the Israelites into battle against the pagans, the Levite incites the Israelites to take up arms against their countrymen. The Israelites manage to unite only to fight their own, not their enemies.

Are four hundred thousand soldiers, in addition to ten percent of the male population for supply lines, really necessary to punish the rapists of Gibeah? Is it really necessary to unite against an entire city, when only a few of its residents are guilty? What about giving diplomacy

a try before marching on a city? Who can stop the march toward war once men hear the drums and start smelling blood?

## Jumping to conclusions

The human tendency, once the blood starts boiling and the drums start beating, is to jump to conclusions and shut our ears to further information. Caiaphas, the high priest who prosecuted Jesus, asked the rest of the Jewish council, "Why do we need any more witnesses?" In actuality, they had much need for more witnesses, but they had no interest in calling any. In point of fact, the outcome was predetermined; Caiaphas only wanted to listen to witnesses who told him what he wanted to hear. Like the Israelites, and like Caiaphas and the council, might we tend to overreact? "Behold, you have heard the blasphemy," Caiaphas said to the council. "What do you think?" The members of the council answered, "He is worthy of death!" (Matthew 26:65-66) Death? Death is not what Jesus deserved. Furthermore, once opponents are identified, those connected with them often become guilty by association, the way all the people of Gibeah, not just the rapists, became guilty in the eyes of the Israelites.

We, on the other hand, must be willing to listen longer, to hear more than one side, and to suspend judgment. Watch out for when your blood starts boiling and the drums start beating, so to speak, because the truth often gets drowned out on such occasions. We must guard against believing lies, like the Israelites, and mobilizing for the wrong causes.

When I was a reporter (yes, I survived my ignominious dismissal as a college journalist), it was my job to listen to both sides, or as many sides as necessary, when covering a story. It's easy to do so when you don't have a stake in an issue other than to cover it in a fair and compelling way. I listened to a source for as long as I needed to. I listened to second source who differed from the first source for as long as I needed to. It was much more difficult, however, for the two sources to listen to each other. In fact, in many cases, that's what made the issue a story: the two sources weren't listening to each other and were in conflict with each other. Nevertheless, we must strive to listen to the other side.

## Deafness in the church

Why is, by the way, that so many in the church of Jesus Christ, in the manner of the Israelites, can't seem to listen to each other? Might we have a spiritual enemy who wants us to see each other as the enemy? Certainly, there

is a place for discussing theological differences to listen, sharpen, and persuade, and to determine, in some cases, whether we belong in the same worshiping community, but too often such differences become intensely personal. In many cases, the theological disagreements provide cover for underlying animosity. For many involved in such disputes, the real issue isn't theology; the real issue is personal. But if we blame the dispute on theological differences, we can convince ourselves that our purpose is to stand up for the truth.

Beware of the evil one, Satan, who wants to turn us against each other in order to hinder our witness and our mission (2 Corinthians 2:11). If we're fighting each other, we're probably not fighting who we should be fighting: Satan and his ilk. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12).

Let us, therefore, as followers of Jesus, come together as one person, like the Israelites. After all, Christ died to create "one new humanity"—literally, "one new person" (Ephesians 2:15). Unlike the Israelites, let's come together to worship, to bring the healing love of God to the world, and, if we must, to discipline someone among us who sins willfully and refuses to repent, but let us do so in love, to win him back to the Lord, and with humility, lest we be tempted (Matthew 18:15-20, Galatians 6:1).

I remember reading about one scholar who was asked if he was going to write a book to counter a book that was written against a position of his. He responded, "I'd rather be fighting the pagans"—by which, I presume, he meant pagan ideas. Indeed, let's unite to take the fight to the dark powers that hold men and women captive.

In the next sequence, the Israelites back the Benjamites into a corner.

## Isolating the Benjamites

Judges 20:12-17:

**<sup>12</sup>The tribes of Israel sent messengers throughout the tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What about this awful crime that was committed among you? <sup>13</sup>Now turn those wicked men of Gibeah over to us so that we may put them to death and purge the evil from Israel."**

**But the Benjamites would not listen to their**

**fellow Israelites. <sup>14</sup>From their towns they came together at Gibeah to fight against the Israelites.**

**<sup>15</sup>At once the Benjamites mobilized twenty-six thousand swordsmen from their towns, in addition to seven hundred able young men from those living in Gibeah. <sup>16</sup>Among all these soldiers there were seven hundred select troops who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.**

**<sup>17</sup>Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand swordsmen, all of them fit for battle.**

The Israelites had already put the tribe of Benjamin on the alert when they gathered in Mizpah. Now they further isolate the Benjamites by sending men throughout the entire tribe—and not to solicit testimony but to level an accusation and to demand that they turn the rapists over to them. If the Israelites want to "purge the evil from Israel," however, they might want to start with the slimy Levite, who turned his concubine over to the rapists and lied about it.

Not surprisingly, the Benjamites don't take well to their brothers' saber rattling. They go to Gibeah, not to turn over the rapists to their brothers but to mobilize for war. The soldiers from the other eleven tribes outnumber the soldiers of Benjamin by almost fifteen to one. A slaughter would seem to be in the offing, but the Benjamite army includes seven hundred elite soldiers. Perhaps, in view of the Israelites' ill-advised rush to judgment and the presence of a few hundred crack soldiers, the Benjamites have a puncher's chance.

## What are we missing?

If we accuse and demand before listening, like the Israelites, we back the other party into a corner. We leave the other person or group with little choice but to defend themselves.

Perhaps, though, there's something we're missing. The Israelites saw evil in Gibeah and wanted to punish Gibeah, but they couldn't see the evil in the one who persuaded them to punish Gibeah. And, of course, they couldn't see the issues with their own response—jumping to conclusions, refusing to listen, overreacting, and deeming others guilty by association. What are we missing?

Jesus Christ, the human and divine king anticipated by the book of Judges, famously said, "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You

hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:4-5). First, you don't notice the obvious: the plank in your eye. Second, with a plank in your eye, you can't see what you're doing. With a plank in their eyes, the Israelites who pressed their case against Gibeah couldn't see what they were doing. Jesus, of course, is not denying a place for removing specks from brothers' eyes, or punishing rapists, for that matter, but he is telling us to look in the mirror before we begin.

When I was a boy, I had a male beta, a Siamese fighting fish. I enjoyed putting a mirror in front of the beta, for when the fish looked into it, he often assumed that he was looking at another male. What do Siamese fighting fish do? They fight! When the fish caught sight of its reflection in the mirror, it flared its fins and got ready to rumble. In reality, though, the fish itself was the problem. Often times, when we flare our fins, so to speak, the real problem is in our own hearts. Look in the mirror. Looking in the mirror will purify our hearts and clarify our vision.

## Withering into the truth

As the church, we have much to say in the public square, but too often we are not heard because we are perceived to be hypocrites who thunder from on high. Perhaps such perceptions are inevitable in a society in which those who believe that God favors heterosexual marriage and frowns on homosexual relationships and who believe that a child inside a woman's womb has a right to life are automatically labeled and sometimes demonized, but that's no excuse for refusing to look in the mirror or for closing our ears to those who differ from us. On the other hand, I'm impressed with, and inspired by, what I see from the Community Pregnancy Center in our area, whose staff and volunteers listen carefully to women who are intent on getting abortions.

For my part, I now see, thanks in large part to my involvement with the scriptures and the people of God, that I rushed to judgment when I was in college. My blood was boiling, the drums were beating, and my fins were flaring. Now I can see: the advisor was mostly right, and I was mostly wrong. Instead of rushing to judgment, I should have looked in the mirror. If I had, I would have seen a lot of arrogance. Instead of rushing to judgment, I should have listened to the advisor who had dismissed me. He spoke, to be sure, but convinced of the rightness

of my cause, I didn't listen. If I had listened, I would have heard from a man who was doing his best to do his job as well as he could under adverse circumstances, some of which I helped to create.

I resonate with W.B. Yeats' poem "The Coming of Wisdom With Time":

*Though leaves are many, the root is one;*

*Through all the lying days of my youth*

*I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;*

*Now I may wither into the truth.*

Ah, the truth!