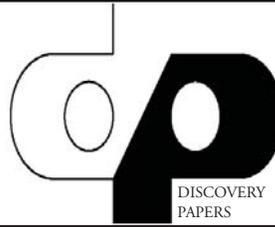


WHAT A MESS

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Judges 21
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Scott Grant
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Many years ago, I used to take a thirteen-year-old boy golfing. He was just learning to play, and most of his shots didn't go where he was aiming. In fact, sometimes he'd swing and miss completely. On one such occasion, after following through on a whiff, he pulled the club back in frustration and actually hit the ball. Of course, with the club heading in the wrong direction, the ball also went in the wrong direction: backward. That's one stroke for attempting to hit the ball, and that's another stroke for actually hitting the ball. Two strokes later, he was farther from the hole than from where he started. His response to his miss compounded the problem.

That sorry little episode on the golf course explains all the world's problems. Well, not exactly. But consider this: the way that we respond to a problem, far from solving the problem, often makes things worse.

In Judges 21, the Israelites make things worse. In Judges 20, they went to war against one of their tribes, Benjamin, because some residents of Gibeah, a city of Benjamin, raped a woman, the concubine of a Levite. Although the Israelites suffered losses in the first two battles, they crushed Benjamin in the third battle, razed Gibeah, and destroyed the entire tribe except for six hundred fugitives. The Israelites did to their brothers what they were supposed to do to their enemies, the pagans of the land. Then, in Judges 21, the Israelites try to solve the problem they created ... and make things worse. They create a mess. In similar fashion, we humans have created a mess, haven't we? Is there any hope for us?

Shifting the blame

Judges 21:1-4:

¹The men of Israel had taken an oath at Mizpah: "Not one of us will give his daughter in marriage to a Benjamite."

²The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly. ³"LORD, God of Israel," they cried, "why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel

today?"

⁴Early the next day the people built an altar and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings.

The Israelites, when deciding what to do in response to the rape of Gibeah, had gathered in the city of Mizpah. In Mizpah, they decided to attack the Benjamites. Now the narrator informs us that the Israelites, in the interest of rallying the troops, had also vowed to keep any of their women from marrying a man of Benjamin. Earlier in the book of Judges, the Israelites disobeyed the law and married outside of Israel (Deuteronomy 7:1-5). They have no problem making up their own law, however, and prohibiting what the Lord allowed: certain marriages inside of Israel. Much like Jephthah, who vowed to sacrifice whatever, or whoever, emerged from his house if the Lord granted him victory in battle, the Israelites made their vow in the fever-pitch of the buildup to war (Judges 11:30-31). Like Jephthah, who regretted his vow after victory was won, when his daughter emerged from his house, the Israelites weep in the wake of victory.

Why weep? They were successful, weren't they? Yes, they were successful—too successful, it turns out. The Israelites sought to punish the Benjamites for the rape of Gibeah, but they've taken things too far—so far that the tribe of Benjamin totters on the brink of extinction. The Israelites have treated their brothers like enemies and all but wiped them off the face of the map. In Judges 2:4, the Israelites wept because they had failed to obey the Lord and destroy their enemies; now they weep because they have succeeded in destroying their brothers. Alas, in this case they weep for their loss but not for their sins.

Earlier, on three occasions, the Israelites asked the Lord for direction in their campaign against the Benjamites. Now they inquire of the Lord in the aftermath of victory—but not for direction. They want to know the reason for Benjamin's demise. The answer is apparent enough: it all has to do with sin and the multiplication of sin—the sin of the Levite, who handed over his concubine to the rapists of Gibeah and then lied about it; the sin of the rapists; the sin of the Israelites, who first believed the Levite and then overreacted to the sin of Gibeah; and the sin of the

Benjamites, who tolerated and defended the rapists. The Israelites, however, don't want to take responsibility for their actions; instead, they all but accuse the Lord in their question to him. True, the Lord had led the Israelites into battle against the Benjamites. He responded to sin, but he's not responsible for sin, and none of his answers instructed the Israelites to destroy the Benjamites.

A better question would begin not with "why" but with "how": how has it come about that one tribe is missing from Israel today? The Israelites also never bother to ask the Lord whether the tribe of Benjamin should continue. They seem more interested in saving Benjamin than saving their covenant with the Lord. If the Israelites had asked different questions, perhaps the Lord would have answered them. As it is, he remains silent. In the wake of the Lord's silence, the Israelites sacrifice to him, just like when they sought his direction after suffering defeat in their first two battles with Benjamin. Back then, the Lord answered them and even promised them victory (Judges 20:26-28). This time, he remains silent. The Israelites need to weep for their sin, not their loss, before considering what to do about their loss.

Many of us refuse to take responsibility for the predicaments we create or help to create and instead blame others or, like the Israelites, God. The classic biblical example is the story of the first humans. Who was responsible for partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? The woman blamed the serpent, who tempted her, and the man blamed the woman, who gave him the fruit, and even God, who gave him the woman who gave him the fruit.

I've noticed a tendency in myself, when things go wrong, to immediately look for someone to blame. But after a while, if I've considered things more objectively, I agree with Jimmy Buffet, who at first wonders whether he should blame someone for his problems but concludes, after "wasting away again in Margaritaville," that "it's my own [darn] fault."¹

Having shirked responsibility for creating their problem, how will the Israelites go about addressing it?

Looking for answers

Judges 21:5-7:

⁵Then the Israelites asked, "Who from all the tribes of Israel has failed to assemble before the LORD?" For they had taken a solemn oath that anyone who failed to assemble before the LORD at Mizpah was to be put to death.

⁶Now the Israelites grieved for the tribe of Benjamin, their fellow Israelites. "Today one tribe is cut off from Israel," they said. ⁷"How can we provide wives for those who are left, since we have taken an oath by the LORD not to give them any of our daughters in marriage?"

When the Israelites inquired of the Lord, he was silent. Now they ask another question, but to whom: the Lord again? In any event, if the Lord won't answer their questions, the Israelites will find their answers wherever they can get them. The question this time concerns attendance at the aforementioned assembly at Mizpah. Now the narrator gives us yet more information about that assembly. The people not only vowed to keep their daughters from marrying the men of Benjamin, they also swore to kill those who failed to attend the assembly—again, in the interest of rallying the troops. Now the implications of the first vow come into view: how will the tribe of Benjamin survive without wives for the few men who remain?

On the one hand, the Israelites, like Jephthah, are to be commended for taking their vows seriously. On the other hand, the law made provision for rash vows, and the Israelites, like Jephthah, refuse to relent (Leviticus 5:4-6). Jephthah, in fulfillment of his vow, sacrificed his daughter, and the Israelites, in fulfillment of their vow, will not give their daughters to the men of Benjamin. That's where the implications of the second promise—the so-called "solemn oath"—come into play.

Once we realize that some sort of mistake was made to create some sort of predicament, how might we go about addressing the predicament? Sometimes, it seems, we have to figure things out on our own, finding our answers where we can get them. After all, the Lord doesn't answer all our questions. Let's see what the Israelites do.

Ingenious solutions

Judges 21:8-14:

⁸Then they asked, "Which one of the tribes of Israel failed to assemble before the LORD at Mizpah?" They discovered that no one from Jabesh Gilead had come to the camp for the assembly. ⁹For when they counted the people, they found that none of the people of Jabesh Gilead were there.

¹⁰So the assembly sent twelve thousand fighting men with instructions to go to Jabesh Gilead and put to the sword those living there,

including the women and children. ¹¹“This is what you are to do,” they said. “Kill every male and every woman who is not a virgin.” ¹²They found among the people living in Jabesh Gilead four hundred young women who had never slept with a man, and they took them to the camp at Shiloh in Canaan.

¹³Then the whole assembly sent an offer of peace to the Benjamites at the rock of Rimmon. ¹⁴So the Benjamites returned at that time and were given the women of Jabesh Gilead who had been spared. But there were not enough for all of them.

Who didn't attend the assembly at Mizpah? Who cares? The Israelites do. Why? Because they're looking for a way to ensure the continuance of the tribe of Benjamin without violating their vow, and they've found such a way in the oath they took to kill those who failed to attend the assembly. Turns out that none of the residents from Jabesh Gilead, a city east of the Jordan River, attended the assembly. Why did Jabesh Gilead stay home? It doesn't matter—at least not to the rest of the Israelites, so the narrator doesn't even entertain the question. At least the Israelites, before mounting an attack against the Benjamites, gave them an opportunity to respond to the charges. No such courtesy is extended to the people of Jabesh Gilead.

Ingeniously, and perversely, the Israelites reason that they can keep their vow to prevent their women from marrying the men of Benjamin by exploiting their oath to kill those who didn't attend the assembly in Mizpah. But wait, if they keep their oath and kill all the residents of Jabesh Gilead, how does that help them keep their other promise, and, more to the point, how does that help the tribe of Benjamin? Ah, the Israelites instruct their soldiers to kill everyone but the virgin women; then the Israelites can offer the virgins of Jabesh Gilead to the men of Benjamin. But wait, if they swore to kill everyone who didn't attend the assembly, and they don't kill everyone who didn't attend—the virgins, for example—aren't they violating their oath? Who can be bothered with technicalities, except, of course, for technicalities that serve one's purposes?

And what about the vow not to give the women of Israel to the men of Benjamin? Well, if all the parents of the virgins are dead, then the parents aren't actually giving their daughters away, are they? And if those parents were not present in Mizpah to make any vow in the first place, no vow is being violated, is it? And if the Israelites give the virgins to the men of Benjamin, after first taking

them from Jabesh Gilead, of course, they aren't giving their daughters in marriage, are they? They're giving other people's daughters in marriage. Indeed, some technicalities, apparently, are worth the bother.

The narrator spares us an account of the slaughter at Jabesh Gilead (thank you), but he leaves no doubt that the twelve thousand soldiers did to the Israelite city of Jabesh Gilead what the Israelite tribe of Dan did to the pagan city of Laish (Judges 18:27-28). In both cases, the cities were unsuspecting and defenseless. The Danites, who had not the faith to possess the land allotted to them, went outside the will of the Lord to fight for new territory, but at least they attacked Canaanites. In this case, the eleven tribes slaughter the unsuspecting and defenseless inhabitants of one of their own cities. The Israelites also do to Jabesh Gilead what they did to Gibeah—treating each of those cities as if they were pagan outposts that needed to be annihilated.

The Israelites, after seizing the virgins in Jabesh Gilead, take them to Shiloh, perhaps in sensitivity to the Benjamites, for both Mizpah and Bethel served as staging grounds for the attack against the Benjamites, and perhaps also to sanctify their solution, for Shiloh was the center of worship in Israel. However, the narrator identifies Shiloh as being in the land of Canaan. What? The Israelites have fallen so far from their God that even their center of worship is identified with the Canaanites.

In giving the remaining women of Jabesh Gilead to the remaining men of Benjamin, the Israelites recapitulate the sin of the Levite, who gave his concubine to men of Benjamin, who raped her. Now the Israelites give not just one woman but four hundred women to the men of Benjamin, who tolerated and defended the rapists. Some of the remaining Benjamites, for all the Israelites know, may have been among the rapists. One can only imagine what it's like for these young virgins to live with these men of Benjamin.

There are all sorts of moral difficulties with this solution, ingenious though it may be, but there's a practical problem also: turns out there aren't enough women to go around. There are six hundred men and only four hundred women.

It's amazing how smart sin makes us when we are serving its purposes. Like the Israelites, we can conjure up ingenious solutions to the predicaments we find ourselves in. We can remember technicalities that serve our purposes and forget those that don't. Isn't it amazing how we can be sticklers for laws we like but dismissive of laws we don't like? We can find ways to justify or even sanctify our sinful actions, as if taking the virgins to Shiloh makes things

right, or as if so-called spiritual activities give us cover for questionable behavior. We're so smart that we can absolve ourselves for the same sin we condemn in others, like the Israelites who condemned the rape in Gibeah but allowed for multiple abductions (after multiple murders) in Jabesh Gilead. This kind of reasoning, employed by the Israelites in Judges 20, was also employed by the Pharisees, who gave God a tenth of their spices but neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). Justice, mercy, and faithfulness are nowhere to be found in Judges 21.

Our ingenious efforts to mitigate the effects of sin, however, often leave us where they left the Israelites and the Pharisees: with more problems to solve. What do you do when you realize that your solution to the predicament falls short?

Creating more problems

Judges 21:15-24:

¹⁵The people grieved for Benjamin, because the LORD had made a gap in the tribes of Israel. ¹⁶And the elders of the assembly said, "With the women of Benjamin destroyed, how shall we provide wives for the men who are left? ¹⁷The Benjamite survivors must have heirs," they said, "so that a tribe of Israel will not be wiped out. ¹⁸We can't give them our daughters as wives, since we Israelites have taken this oath: 'Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to a Benjamite.' ¹⁹But look, there is the annual festival of the LORD in Shiloh, which lies north of Bethel, east of the road that goes from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah."

²⁰So they instructed the Benjamites, saying, "Go and hide in the vineyards ²¹and watch. When the young women of Shiloh come out to join in the dancing, rush from the vineyards and each of you seize one of them to be your wife. Then return to the land of Benjamin. ²²When their fathers or brothers complain to us, we will say to them, 'Do us the favor of helping them, because we did not get wives for them during the war. You will not be guilty of breaking your oath because you did not give your daughters to them.'"

²³So that is what the Benjamites did. While the young women were dancing, each man caught one and carried her off to be his wife. Then they returned to their inheritance and

rebuild the towns and settled in them.

²⁴At that time the Israelites left that place and went home to their tribes and clans, each to his own inheritance.

The Israelites come up with another ingenious solution to compensate for the shortfall of available women. They remember an annual worship festival in Shiloh and devise a way to exploit it. The festival, at least in name, features the worship of the Lord (YHWH), the God of Israel, but given the state of Israel at this time, it's difficult to imagine that such a festival has not been perverted by pagan influences. Still, it's a festival to the Lord, at least in name, and the elders of Israel figure out how to use the worship of the Lord to their own advantage.

They instruct the remaining men of Benjamin to abduct the young women of Shiloh while they are dancing in worship. The elders of Israel will fix things with the families—again, with perversely ingenious reasoning. The men of Shiloh had joined in taking the vow to keep their women from marrying men of Benjamin, but they can get around their vow if the men of Benjamin simply abduct the women. After all, the men of Shiloh won't be "giving" their daughters to the men of Benjamin. So goes the reasoning of the elders, anyway. The elders manipulate the difference between "giving" and "allowing to take." As it concerns the spirit of the vow, there's no difference at all. As it concerns the letter of the vow, well, again, the Israelites exploit a technicality, and they mollify the men of Shiloh.

And the men of Benjamin? They aren't violating anything? They violated no oath, for they took no oath. Here's what they are violating; rather, here's who they are violating: the young women of Shiloh. But they're only too happy to cooperate with the elders' plan: they abduct the dancers, carry them away, and make them their wives.

In Judges 19, some men of Benjamin raped a woman. In Judges 21, after the Israelites have prosecuted their case against Benjamin, the remaining men of Benjamin forcibly abduct (rape?) six hundred women, four hundred from Jabesh Gilead and two hundred from Shiloh. The tribe of Benjamin, as a whole, enabled the men of Gibeah to violate one woman. The other eleven tribes, as a whole, enable what's left of the tribe of Benjamin to violate six hundred women! The Israelites' sympathy for the perpetrators—twice the narrator notes that they "grieved" for the Benjamites—creates more victims.

In Judges 21, the Israelites find ingenious ways to circumvent both the vow to keep their women from

marrying the men of Benjamin and the oath to kill everyone who didn't attend the assembly, even finding a way to exploit the latter to fulfill the former. They can find loopholes in loopholes. In so doing, they honor neither promise. More to the point, they dishonor the people of Jabesh Gilead and the young women of both Jabesh Gilead and Shiloh, not to mention the Lord. That's justice in the period of the judges for you.

In the end, everyone goes home as if justice has been served and order has been restored. In reality, however, the Israelites have papered over their problem and created more problems. With that, the book of Judges comes to an end—except for one final observation from the narrator.

When it comes to sin, our brilliance knows no limits. If our sinful efforts to mitigate the effects of sin don't do the job, we can come up with a different approach or, if necessary, multiple additional approaches. We too can exploit the worship of God, fix things with those who stand in our way, get around a promise, manipulate minute differences between the wording and fulfillment of a promise, find the necessary loopholes, find the loopholes in the loopholes, and congratulate ourselves that order has been restored while completely ignoring the fact that our ingenious solution to the problem has created more problems, hurt more people, and dishonored God.

The world we live in

First, we refuse to take responsibility for the predicaments we create. Second, we devise sinful solutions to mitigate the effects of the predicament our sin created. Third, our sinful solutions not only fail to solve the problem, they also create more problems. This is the world we live in, no?

Consider the case of Melky Cabrera, an outfielder for the San Francisco Giants. He tested positive this summer for a performance-enhancing drug but, according to *The New York Daily News*, attempted to shift the blame by claiming that he unknowingly took the substance that was included in a supplement. But here's where it gets bizarre: Cabrera wanted to claim that the synthetic testosterone in his system came from a supplement he had ordered through a web site, but in actuality, one of his paid consultants set up the web site for him, and no such product existed. In Cabrera's case, the solution to the problem created more problems, leaving him in a worse place.

Or consider Watergate. The break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters in June 1972, under the direction of men working to re-elect President Richard Nixon, was bad enough. The solution to the problem, the cover-up, was worse. The scandal led to the resignation

of Nixon and to the conviction of an astounding forty-three people in all. All along, instead of taking the blame, members of the Administration blamed their political enemies and the media.

Or, worst of all, consider Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. First, leaders of the Third Reich blamed Germany's problems on the Jews. Finally, they devised a plan to systematically execute the Jews of Europe. What did they call it? The "final solution."

French writer Francois Mauriac (1885-1970) recalls hearing about trainloads of Jewish children being rounded up for deportation at a train station in Paris. He didn't see the children; he just heard about them, yet he was horrified. On that day, for him, the Enlightenment, born in the eighteenth century of the belief that humans could advance through reason and science, died:

At that time we knew nothing of Nazi methods of extermination. And who could have imagined them! Yet the way these lambs had been torn from their mothers in itself exceeded anything we had so far thought possible. ... The dream which Western man conceived in the eighteenth century, whose dawn he thought he saw in 1789 [the year of the French Revolution], and which, until August 2, 1914 [the beginning of World War I], had grown stronger with the progress of enlightenment and the discoveries of science—this dream vanished finally for me before those trainloads of little children. And yet I was still thousands of miles away from thinking that they were to be fuel for the gas chamber and the crematory.²

Shallow solutions

Beware of shallow solutions in a world where men conceive of and implement the "final solution." Beware of any solution that doesn't take sin into account. Beware of solutions that believe in the best of humanity but discount the worst of humanity. Many in our day still hold out hope that technology can solve the world's problems. But if the Holocaust proves anything, it proves that technology can be used for evil as well as for good. With technology, you can build a village or bomb a village, heal a child or incinerate a child. By all means, use technology for good, but also be aware that it can be used, and is being used, for evil.

For example, I used the internet to do research for this sermon. Did I use technology for a good purpose or for an evil purpose? Your answer may depend on your opinion of the quality of the sermon! In any event, when I did a search on the internet last week, in connection with the

composition of this sermon, my results turned up a small, pornographic photo. I thought I was using this tool for good, but as I sought to do so, someone else was using it for evil—and tempting others to click on that photo and use it for evil as well.

If technology is being used for evil, we must look elsewhere for the help we need, as the author of Judges suggests with his last verse.

What God does with a virgin

Judges 21:25:

²⁵In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

The narrator finishes the epilogue where he started it: with the full refrain that sheds light on the entire narrative (Judges 17:6). Indeed, he finishes his entire narrative with it so that we leave with it ringing in our ears. After the full refrain was introduced, the first part of the refrain, which concerns the absence of a king, appeared in two other places in the epilogue (Judges 18:1, 19:1). The horrendous behavior on display in the book of Judges, culminating in the epilogue, Judges 17-21, can be understood, in one sense, by the absence of a king. Everyone literally did what was “right in his own eyes,” not what was right in the eyes of the Lord, because there was no king in Israel.

Does that mean that if there were a king, everyone would do right in the eyes of the Lord? Well, what happened when the Lord finally gave Israel a king? Saul, the first king, did what was right in his own eyes and led Israel astray. David, the next king, was an improvement, a man after God’s own heart, so-called, but by no means did he do what was right in the eyes of the Lord without exception, nor did he leave Israel in a good place when he left the scene. Not long after his death, the northern tribes split from the southern tribes, and most of the ensuing kings went their own way, not the way of the Lord. From the perspective of the history of Israel, the refrain of the book of Judges could be interpreted this way: everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes; no one needed a king to lead him or her astray.

However, David, in his most lucid, heart-after-God moments, wrote psalms, many of which anticipated a different kind of king, one that Israelites began to call the Messiah. Yes, the Messiah. Israel needed the Messiah. When the Messiah came, there would be a covenant-keeping king in Israel to motivate people to do right in the eyes of the Lord. David may not have been the king we needed, but maybe he was the poet we needed.

Long about what we now call the first century, an angel appeared to a young woman, a virgin, in the village of Nazareth and told her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and that she would give birth to a child, who would be called the Son of God. The men of Israel, in the time of the Judges, abducted hundreds of virgins, against their will, and compounded the perversity of a tribe in Israel. God, on the other hand, in tender humility, approached a virgin in order to overturn all perversity and bless the entire world. The virgin was delighted, answering the angel: “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:26-38). Indeed, the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Son of God, who saves not only Israel but also the whole world by defeating sin in his death, resurrection, and ascension, whereby he sends the Holy Spirit, who inspires relationship with God and behavior that pleases God. Look what God does with a virgin! He blesses her, unimaginably, with the opportunity to bring salvation to the world. And to think, in our day, virginity is laughed at!

Is our time all that different from the time of the Judges? Don’t most people do what is right in their own eyes? We weep for our losses but not so much for our sins. We refuse to take responsibility for our sins and shift the blame. Our solutions not only leave us with more problems, they also create more problems. What a mess! We need a king. We need the king.

One necessary thing

If the virgin birth tells us anything, it tells us that God is willing to dive into the mess with us. An alternative name for Jesus is Immanuel, which means “God with us.” Jesus goes where no one else wants to go, where no one else can go: to the depths of your heart. If you give any attention to your heart, you probably know, better than anyone else: it’s pretty messy in there. The depths of your heart: that’s where Jesus wants to go. That’s also where he wants to stay. Listen to Jesus: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). He’ll neither leave you nor forsake you—no matter the mess. Let him in.

Early on in my spiritual journey, I wanted Jesus to clean up the mess in my heart. For many years, though, I was frustrated by his pace. If he was supposed to clean up the mess, he seemed to be taking his own sweet time about it. In fact, he seemed more intent on making me aware that my heart was a lot messier than I thought it was. Far from feeling better that my heart was getting cleaner, I was feeling worse because of the enormity of the mess. What heartens me most these days is that Jesus wants to be with me in the mess and wants me to trust that he is working in deep, beautiful, and often unseen ways.

Jesus has broken into this evil age, this mess, with the healing love of God. At the end of the age, he will finish the work he has begun—in our hearts, in the world. He will vanquish sin once and for all, heal us body and soul, unite heaven and earth, and re-create the world, making something unspeakably beautiful of us and this world.

You may think you need many things. Believe in Jesus. He is the one necessary thing.

NOTES

¹Jimmy Buffet, “Margaritaville” (1977).

²Francois Mauriac (preface), Ellie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), vii.