

YUCK!

7th May 2017

Reading: Judges 19-21

Chapter 11 of Hebrews contains the role call of faith. Starting with Adam and Eve and including Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the author highlights how their faith pleased God. But there are too many to include, so the author writes...

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah. Hebrews 11:32

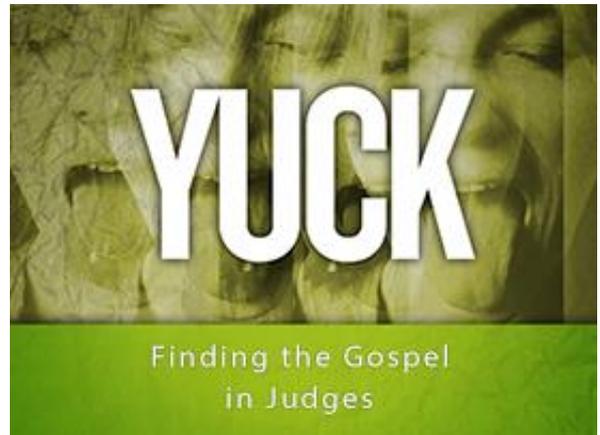
Though the author doesn't have time we do.

So who are Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah? Well, their story is found in the book of Judges, the book I'm looking forward to preaching through over the next few months. Judges covers the in-between time for Israel. The time between arriving in the Promised Land and the establishing of a king - a period of about 350 years. In this time Israel was a loose commonwealth of tribes more than a nation united under common rule. They shared a common history, language and most importantly a common religion. For God was to be their king, he alone was to be worshiped and from time to time he'd raise up a judge to lead his people. Under a good judge the people followed God and there was peace in the land. However when the judge died the Israelites abandoned God and got into all sorts of trouble.

The other thing about Judges is that though it starts off hopeful, there's a steady decline into anarchy and self destruction that'll appall you. Not because you haven't seen similar on six o'clock news but because you'll be amazed these things are in the Bible. "Surely not this - not this bad, surely not this dark, surely not this horrid". In fact we're going to start with the worst of the worst - the final story in Judges. A story so degraded some of you'll be tempted to tear these pages from your Bible. Now though the message is grim we still get a glimpse of the Gospel, God's Good News. Let me assure you it's there - but sometimes mighty hard to see. So brace yourself as we see how bad it gets when everyone does right in their own eyes.¹

Prayer

In the West we have a guiding principle to happiness. A mantra often repeated. For many it's the right of every Kiwi. What's this principle, mantra, right? Andy Stanley puts it like this. We believe we have the right to do what we like, when we like, with whom we like - with one proviso... as long as we don't harm anyone. It's true isn't it.



¹ This message draws on Andy Stanley's sermon, *Right in the Eye*, as well as Tim Keller's commentary *Judges for You*

You hear versions of this all the time, especially when people break social norms - especially in the area of sexuality. Same sex is fine - as long as it's consensual because they're not harming anyone. Sex changes are great - It's a choice, no one's harmed.

This is a modern version of the saddest finish to any book in the Bible. The last verse of Judges reads:

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Judges 21:25 (ESV)

This is the Biblical version of "I have the right to do what I like, when I like with whom I like - and if I have to I will harm others. Abandoning God's ways for their own, everyone did what was right in their own lives. Let's see how this played out and what led to this sad end to a book starting with such promise.

Now the last story in Judges is not only appalling but long and complex, so I'll highlight the main points as we move along - starting in chapter 19. As you turn there, a brief background. The story revolves around a Levite who gets into trouble, much of it of his own doing. None of the main characters are named, which is unusual and indicates this not only a story based in fact but it represents the sad state of the whole nation of Israel. Let's pick it up in Joshua 19:1-4

In those days Israel had no king.

Now a Levite who lived in a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim took a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. But she was unfaithful to him. She left him and went back to her father's house in Bethlehem, Judah. After she had been there four months, her husband went to her to persuade her to return. He had with him his servant and two donkeys. She took him into her father's house, and when her father saw him, he gladly welcomed him. His father-in-law, the girl's father, prevailed upon him to stay. So, he remained three days, eating and drinking, and sleeping there. Judge 19:1-4

The open sentence stating Israel has no king is important. It reminds the readers that what is about to unfold is why they need a king. It would never have happened with God's man in charge.

Now Levites were the tribe set aside to serve God. They're the priests and served in the temple. They were scattered among Israeli and were expected to lead by example, which makes this story even more tragic.

The Levite's concubine has an affair and when discovered she runs to her father's house. Why? Well, the law permitted her husband to demand her death. Remember Jesus and the woman caught in adultery and how she was about to be stoned. Anyway, after three months the Levite wants her back and travelling to his

in-law's house is warmly greeted - probably out of relief she isn't going to be punished by death.

Now a comment about concubines. What's a concubine? Well a concubine was a second-class wife, having the status somewhere between a wife and a slave. She would be treated as a wife in that the husband could have sex with her. However she was expected to be and was treated as a servant. Now where does this practice come from? Well in Genesis 3, God makes it clear marriage is between one man and one woman. There is no provision for concubines. No, this practice came from neighbouring nations. Instead of looking up, they're looking to the side. Instead of looking up to God's law they were looking to the side and what other nations were doing. This is a common theme in Judges, that God's people put the practices and values of God aside for those of their neighbours. And it is no different for us. In the area of same sex relationships our culture puts pressure on us to affirm and encourage but instead of looking to the side Christians are required to look up, to God's Word and God's way.

Back to the story where we need to clip along. The laws of hospitality mean that the father-in-law wines and dines the Levite. The Levite would get ready to leave but his in-law got him so full and drunk he slept most of the day away. After a number of frustrating attempts he decides he will leave late one day. This is where the trouble begins for after a few hours they have to find a place for the night. Skirting around a Canaanite town where they didn't feel safe they enter the Jewish town of Gibeah from the tribe of Benjamin. Surely they will be OK amongst their own kind?

Now the law of hospitality had visitors go to the town center, where there was normally a communal well. There they'd wait until invited in by a local. And it's rather ominous that they have to wait and wait until evening when an elderly man comes in from the fields. His generosity is tempered with the hint of threat...

"You are welcome at my house," the old man said. "Let me supply whatever you need. Only don't spend the night in the square." Judges 19:20

Grateful, the Levite, his concubine and Levite's servant settle in for the night and are well hosted.

While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, "Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him." Judges 19:22

A couple of things here. First of all some commentators argue this demand wasn't for gratification but to shame the visitors. It was a known practice to rape outsiders or captured prisoners to subdue, humiliate and teach them a lesson they'll never forget. Second of all, this story reminds us of another Bible story? Do you know which one?... Sodom and Gomorrah. The men of Sodom wanted to do the same with Lot's guests. This story is showing us that because Israel was doing what they

wanted, when they wanted with whom they wanted they - doing right in their own eyes - they had gotten as bad, if not worse - as Sodom and Gomorrah.

The owner of the house went outside and said to them, “No, my friends, don’t be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don’t do this disgraceful thing. 24 Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But to this man, don’t do such a disgraceful thing.” Judges 19:23–24

How do you like that response? Appalling! Now the next few verses are grim so I’ll summarise. The mob abuse and rape the concubine, leaving her barely breathing body at the door. The next morning the Levite discovers her and puts her now lifeless body on his donkey and travels home without further incident.

So what’s he to do? What’s his response? He decides to write a letter to each of the twelve tribes demanding justice. But, just before he puts the letters in the post, he probably thinks, “A letter. I wonder if they’ll even read it?” So being creative in a macabre way, he cuts his concubine into twelve and posts a portion with each letter.

Now as an aside. Did your parents ever read you Bible stories when you were a child. Do you read Bible stories to your children or grandchildren? Sometimes I read Gideon’s story, from Judges, at mat time at kindy. It’s wonderful they we do. But I bet you’ve never being asked, “Hey Dad can I have the story of the Levite and the chainsaw before bed”.

Well if you think it couldn’t possibly get worse, it does. Chapter 20 describes how Israel responds. Eleven tribes gather and demand Benjamin hand over the evil doers. The Benjaminites refuse, “Saying over my dead body”. So, the eleven tribes attack and are defeated, attack and defeated, attacks and finally win. Now instead of just sorting out the town of Gibeah they go on a murderous rampage. They kill every man women and child in Benjamin except for 600 soldiers who escaped into the mountains after the initial defeat. And then... then Israel cools down and realises what they’ve done. And, finally, eventually they think, “I wonder what God thinks we should do?” Notice how late God comes into the piece!

The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly. 3 “O Lord, the God of Israel,” they cried, “why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today? Judge 21:2–3

Funny how we’re good at consulting God after the fact. We get a head of steam, leap into action and when it all turns to custard say “Lord, why has this happened to me?” And as an aside. The well know law of “An eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth” was to stop exactly this sort of excess. If someone had a fight and knocked out a tooth - the most you could demand was the knocking out of their tooth. Like

for like. Don't punish in excess. Here Israel clearly break this law of restraint, acting just like the nations around them. Not looking up but looking sideways.

Not only this but the eleven tribes made a foolish oath not to allow any of their daughters marry a Benjaminite they're in bind. You see, there's 600 surviving Benjaminite men but no Benjaminite women. Well, someone has the bright idea. "Is there any town who didn't send men to fight with us." Someone replies, "Yes, the town of Jabesh Gilead". So off they go and kill everyone in this town except unmarried women. But there's a short-fall of wives. So they put their heads together and come up with another plan. Calling the remaining Benjaminites' they say, "Listen there's a festival coming up in Shiloh. It's well known that unmarried girls dance down a certain road as part of the festivities. Hide in the vineyards beside the road and when they come, jump out, grab yourself a wife and we'll smooth things over with their fathers. And that's what they do. And that's how the book of Judge's ends.

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. Judges 21:24–25

And so, how are we going to make sense of this mess with everyone doing right in their own eyes? For the Levite said, "Listen concubine - it's your fault we're in this mess. If you hadn't had an affair and if your father hadn't kept getting me drunk and delaying our departure we'd never be in this situation. Out you go" For the mob, "We don't want no strangers in our town. Let's teach them a lesson so they'll tell others and stay away". The Benjaminites, the eleven other tribes, the soldiers kidnapping wives - they're all doing what was right in their own eyes. What are we to make of it? Where's the Gospel and why did I start here?

First of all this story highlights our desperate need. In Israel's day, as today, many hold the view it's our right to do what we like, when we like, with whom we like - to do right in our own eyes. Because we're civilised we add - as long as it doesn't harm others. But this doesn't wash with God - because he knows where it'll end. He knows it will end here, with this stories of abuse, rape, murder and wholesale slaughter. NZ needs to know how black our society will come, we need to know how dark our lives will become - if we keep doing right in our own eyes, not looking to God's ways but looking sideways at everyone else. And I started with this story so next week when we start at the beginning of Judges you'll see that though God's people started well this is where they ended up when even God's people do right in their own eyes.

And what's God's answer to this? Where's our hope. Where's our way forward? Well, God's answer is... we need a king. Four times in the last few chapters of Judges with Israel sinking to it's lowest - four times we're told, "In those days God's people had no king". One of the major themes of Judges is, "Look how bad things get when we have no godly king". And the following books - 1 & 2 Samuel - point to the answer. They show how God took Israel by the scruff of the neck and appointed David as king. And when God's king was in charge God's people prospered. And after David the prophets pointed to a true and better king who would follow. And he's

come... and what's his name? - Jesus. Yes, one day as Jesus entered Jericho a blind man called out, "Jesus, Son of who? Son of David, have mercy of me". Why? Because even this blind man recognised Jesus was the true and better King who came to set the captive free, make the blind to see and shine light into this dark world.

And this morning we've seen how dark our world can get. And as we read this story in the Bible and watch the evening news with atrocities in Syria and child abuse in New Zealand we cant hide from the fact that we and nations cannot continue to do right in our own eyes - to do what we want, when we like, with whom we like. It is only we have the true and better King in our lives that can we break the shackles that bind us and live in the light. This is why we fall on our knees and worship Jesus - the true and better King - who gives us a sure, steadfast and rock solid hope. Let's pray