

Judges

Lesson 35

Instead of recognizing the men's sin in Gibeah for what it was, instead of doing the moral thing and obeying the Law to administer the death penalty, Benjamin decided to support the evil men and be willing to die to protect them. On that day, Benjamin gathered an army of 26,700 men, far short of the number of men that we would expect with a 28% growth rate. That number was far short of the number who took possession of the tribal land of Benjamin under Joshua.

2. The Fighting of the Nation

a) The First Campaign

(1) The First Question for God

The sides were chosen. Eleven tribes against one. The fighting of the nation was inevitable. The first campaign would come soon. But before Israel attacked Benjamin, they presented their first question for God in this crusade. Verse 18. *“Now the sons of Israel arose, went up to Bethel, and inquired of God and said, ‘Who shall go up first for us to battle against the sons of Benjamin?’ Then the LORD said, ‘Judah shall go up first.’”* (20:18)

From Mizpah, the nation of Israel moved to Bethel in the land of Benjamin. It was the place where Abraham built his first altar and worshiped the LORD. It was the place where Abraham went to find God after he was thrown out of Egypt. It was the place where Jacob had his vision and met the LORD as Jacob was running from Esau. It was a holy place in Benjamin's territory with a wealth of holy history. There the LORD instructed Israel's army to let the tribe of Judah go first. This does not mean that only Judah engaged in the first campaign. It means that the tribe of Judah was to be in front of all the rest of the troops. This arrangement was not unusual. Under Moses, Judah always led the way as the camp moved from place to place. That changed with Joshua in the campaign of the west side of the Promised Land as directed by the LORD, but it was not a permanent change.

(2) The First Battle Array

With the instruction from the LORD, we see Israel in the first battle array against Benjamin. Verse 19. *“So the sons of Israel arose in the morning and camped against Gibeah. ²⁰ The men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel arrayed for battle against them at Gibeah.”* (20:19-20)

Early in the morning, the camp was broken at Bethel, and the whole army camped at Gibeah, and the soldiers arranged themselves in battle array. What does that mean? In this case, the tribes of Israel were set in order at the battle line. Swordsmen were together; archers were together; spearmen were together, in each tribal division. Judah was upfront at the battle line. Swordmen, with or without shields, were in the lead. Others were behind. The soldiers would be in lines extending as wide as possible. The next tribe was behind in the same formation. Three-hundred and sixty-thousand men lined up in proper order for battle.

(3) The First Great Defeat

But Israel, even with Judah in front, came to its first great defeat. Verse 21. *“Then the sons of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and felled to the ground on that day 22,000 men of Israel. ²² But the people, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and arrayed for battle again in the place where they had arrayed themselves the first day.”* (20:21-22)

On the first day, the battle was fierce, with 22,000 deaths on the side of Israel. We do not know how many men of Benjamin were killed. Surely, besides these deaths, many were wounded on each side. That is the way battles are. Men are wounded. In verse 22, the writer sums up the attitude of

Israel. Even though they were beaten, the next day, they would go right back to the battleline in proper order and attempt to bring judgment on Benjamin again.

(4) The First Time of Weeping

Even though the writer had already told us that Israel went out the next day to fight again, he circles back in the story to the night of the day before to inform us of the first time of weeping. Verse 23. *"The sons of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until evening, and inquired of the LORD, saying, 'Shall we again draw near for battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin?' And the LORD said, 'Go up against him.'"* (20:23)

We are not told if the camp returned to Bethel, where they first heard from the LORD about this battle. Most likely, they did. Nevertheless, while they were weeping to the LORD, He told them to go against Benjamin again. He does not tell them that they will be victorious. He just says, *"Go up against him."*

b) The Second Campaign

(1) The Second Battle Array

On the second day, Israel attempted the second campaign. Again, Israel lined up in the second battle array. Verse 24. *"Then the sons of Israel came against the sons of Benjamin the second day."* (20:24)

(2) The Second Great Defeat

But Israel's second campaign, in the second battle array, ended up in the second great defeat. Verse 25. *"Benjamin went out against them from Gibeah the second day and felled to the ground again 18,000 men of the sons of Israel; all these drew the sword."* (20:25)

If you are keeping count, in two days, Israel has lost forty-thousand men. Without any other information, it seems that Benjamin has not lost a man. At this point in the story, it would seem to some that Israel had engaged in a battle with Benjamin that was totally wrong and out of place. Israel had inquired of the LORD. The LORD had answered Israel. What was going on?

(3) The Second Time of Weeping

The loss of forty-thousand men led to the second time of weeping. Verse 26. *"Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel and wept; thus they remained there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD."* ²⁷ *The sons of Israel inquired of the LORD (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, ²⁸ and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, Aaron's son, stood before it to minister in those days), saying, 'Shall I yet again go out to battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?' And the LORD said, 'Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand.'* (20:26-28)

In this second time of weeping, we find that the camp did leave Gibeah and return to Bethel to weep before the LORD. They were devastated. They made offerings to the LORD. We were not told if they made an offering to the LORD at Bethel the first time. We were not told if Israel confessed their sin first at Bethel before engaging Benjamin in battle. But this time, they did confess their sin with a burnt and peace offering. As we learned in our study of the book of Leviticus, the burnt offering was for the confession of sin, and the peace offering was a gift of thanks to the LORD for something He had done for them. The two should always go hand in hand. For those of you who have asked for prayer for some kind of need, you have learned that I pray earnestly for the answer to the need from the LORD, but then, when the answer comes, whether or not it is a happy answer or a sad answer, I always pray for the same number of days to the LORD in thanks for the answer. If I pray for a need for two weeks, I thank the LORD for the answer for two weeks.

I want to stop and make mention of something that is easy to overlook in this passage. It is a first, and it is a big first. For the first time in the Bible, we are told that the people of the nation of Israel *"fasted."* The term, nor the concept, has ever been used in the Bible before. The simple definition simply means *to not eat*. That is all it means here. The men of Israel were so devastated by

the loss of forty-thousand men that they could not eat. It was not some act of holiness before God. It was simply that they were so moved with grief that they could not eat. Throughout the rest of the Bible, grief, suffering, and deep emotions accompanied by loss often accompany the word fasting. Or, as with Daniel, when he was living in a godless country where petitioning a god included sexual orgies and grand festivals, Daniel did neither while he petitioned the LORD. He would not eat while he was praying. However, in Daniel's story, we find that when Daniel was not praying, he would eat.

Another point about this fasting is a time issue. It is the first time it is mentioned. How long had it been since the creation for this to be presented in the timeline of God's Word? If the Bible is accurate, and I believe that it is, at least three-thousand and eighty years had passed since the creation of Adam. Today we are in the year 2021. If the Bible is accurate, and I believe that it is, we are living in the six-thousand, three hundred and fifth year since the creation of Adam. What does that mean concerning this passage? Just in a simple round number, the year this first mention of *fasting* is placed in the Bible is almost halfway in the middle of time from the creation of Adam to our lives today in 2021. What is my point? This mention of fasting has nothing to do with the belief surrounding the fasting phenomenon in theological circles today. Had the LORD wanted Israel to fast for His purposes, He would have given that instruction through Moses in the Law. Moses does not make one mention about fasting. We need to know and recognize that every false religion in the world, every cult in the world, teaches that *fasting* is necessary to please their gods. It was so in Egypt. That is where Israel learned about *fasting*. It took four hundred and thirty years for Israel to get out of Egypt, but Egypt never got out of Israel, especially in the area of false religion practices. I could spend the time to go through all passages in the Bible to show you the true context of the entry, but that would take us a few lessons to complete, and we do not want to take that time. I will say this, all of the instruction for the organization of the Church is found in the books of Romans through the Revelation. If the LORD wanted *fasting* to be part of the Church, surely, He would have had it mentioned at least once in the instructional books of the New Testament, but it is not.

Be that as it may, in this passage, the men *fasted*; they did not eat because of the great grief at the loss of forty-thousand men in two days.

But this time, Israel worshiped the LORD correctly with an offering. Therefore, the LORD answered their plea in a way He had not answered the two times before, "*Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand.*" That was a promise they could depend on! The LORD promised that Israel would be victorious over Benjamin.

- c) The Third Campaign
 - (1) The Third Battle Array
 - (a) Israel's Change of Battle Strategy
 - (i) Men to Wait in Ambush

And so, we come to the third campaign, the third battle array, and Israel's change of battle strategy. This time, there were men assigned to wait in ambush. Verse 29. "*So Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah.*" (20:29)

If you will remember, Joshua did the same thing at the LORD's command at Ai. In fact, as we read ahead, the military tactic will be the same as it was at Ai.

- (ii) Men to Attack as Before

How does the military tactic begin? To start, some of the men were to attack as before. Verse 30. "*The sons of Israel went up against the sons of Benjamin on the third day and arrayed themselves against Gibeah as at other times.*" (20:30)

Everything looked the same to the men of Benjamin as the two days before. To Benjamin, nothing had changed.

(b) Benjamin's Same Battle Strategy

(i) First Success

Because Benjamin saw Israel in the same battle array as before, Benjamin's same battle strategy was used. At the start of the battle, Benjamin had the first success. Verse 31. *"The sons of Benjamin went out against the people and were drawn away from the city, and they began to strike and kill some of the people as at other times, on the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, and in the field, about thirty men of Israel."*³² *The sons of Benjamin said, "They are struck down before us, as at the first."* (20:31-32a)

The strategy of Israel was not without losses. The strategy of Benjamin was not without its victories. About thirty men of Israel were lost. None were lost at first with Benjamin.

(ii) Second Failure

But the quick victories of Benjamin turned to failure. In this third campaign, Benjamin was first successful, but second failure came. Verse 32b. *"But the sons of Israel said, 'Let us flee that we may draw them away from the city to the highways.'"*³³ *Then all the men of Israel arose from their place and arrayed themselves at Baal-tamar; and the men of Israel in ambush broke out of their place, even out of Maareh-geba.*³⁴ *When ten thousand choice men from all Israel came against Gibeah, the battle became fierce; but Benjamin did not know that disaster was close to them.*³⁵ *And the LORD struck Benjamin before Israel, so that the sons of Israel destroyed 25,100 men of Benjamin that day, all who draw the sword."* (20:32b-35)

The wording in this record is a little bit confusing. Let us retell the story as it happened. The battle began at Gibeah just as it had the previous two days. After about thirty men were lost in battle, Israel purposefully retreated to Baal-tamar, just a little distance from Gibeah. In their retreat, the soldiers of Gibeah followed. Unbeknownst to the soldiers of Gibeah, Israel had placed an army of ten thousand men behind Gibeah in Maareh-geba. These were the men waiting in ambush to attack Gibeah when the soldiers were out of the town. Therefore, the soldiers of Benjamin would not have a place of safety to retreat to or return to at night when the fighting ended. We were told in verse 14 that Benjamin only had 26,700 soldiers in this battle. At the end of the verse, the writer tells us that 25,100 were dead. That meant that sixteen hundred soldiers survived that day at that time.

(2) The Third Battle Strategy

(a) The Withdrawal from Gibeah

The writer then retraced the third battle strategy to tell us again about the withdrawal from Gibeah. Verse 36. *"So the sons of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. When the men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin because they relied on the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah,"*³⁷ *the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush also deployed and struck all the city with the edge of the sword."* (20:36-37)

Here we are told why Israel retreated and gave ground to Benjamin. The purpose was to draw the soldiers away from the town of Gibeah so ambush soldiers could destroy the town.

(b) The Following from Gibeah

How did Israel make this happen? How did Israel draw Benjamin to follow the soldiers out of Gibeah? Verse 38. *"Now the appointed sign between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of smoke rise from the city."*³⁹ *Then the men of Israel turned in the battle, and Benjamin began to strike and kill about thirty men of Israel, for they said, "Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle."* (20:38-39)