

Part III - The Results of Spiritual Declension -- Judges 19

We are now over halfway through our study of the last five chapters of Judges. Remember that these chapters form a sort of "appendage" to the main body of the book, much like the book of Ruth. They contain the history of four events, which can be grouped in two sets of pairs--in each case, the latter event follows from the previous. At first glance, the incident related here in chapter 19 doesn't seem to have much in common with the two events preceding it. However, notice the "Mt. Ephraim connection" in verse 1 and 16. So far, that location has figured prominently in each of the events in this section. Since this was the location of the home of Phinehas (see Joshua 24:33), the high priest during these episodes (see Judges 20:28), we might venture a guess that he is the human agent who preserved these histories and passed them down to the later high priests.

As we've noted previously, the main body of Judges relates the roller-coaster-like spiritual history of Israel. As long as God raises them up a judge to deliver and rule them, they prosper. But no sooner does the judge pass off the scene than the spiritual state of the nation begins to erode. Inevitably, their disobedience brings upon them God's judgment in the form of invasion or oppression by Israel's enemies. But whereas the body of the book shows the external results of sin--enslavement to an enemy without--this appendage shows the internal results of sin--rottenness and decay from within. It may shock you to realize just how far this rottenness had developed!

The Levite and His Concubine

The story begins by introducing us to a Levite of Mt. Ephraim who has taken to himself a concubine from the city of Bethlehem. She proves to be unfaithful to him, running away into harlotry and, eventually, back to her father's home in Bethlehem. The Levite, along with his servant and two donkeys, undertakes a journey to Bethlehem to be reconciled to her. Her father is absolutely overjoyed to see him (I think I can read between the lines here as to why). For three days the Levite does nothing but eat and drink with the girl's father, planning to leave on the fourth day. However, on the fourth day, the father entices the Levite to stay just a little while longer. They continue eating and drinking until it is now too late to leave and must stay an extra night. As they prepare to leave early on the fifth morning, the girl's father again entices the Levite to stay a little longer. Finally, late in the afternoon of the fifth day, they begin their journey back to Mt. Ephraim. As evening approaches, it's apparent that they will have to find lodging for the evening. Jerusalem is near by, but, at this point in its history, it is still a Jebusite city. The Levite refuses to seek lodging there, undoubtedly concerned about their reception. He, instead, holds out for Gibeah--a Benjamite city-- where, he thought, they would be safe. Night falls by the time they arrive there, and they sit in the street, waiting for someone to take them in for the evening (see Job's reference to this primitive custom in Job 31:32). No one in this Benjamite city, however, offers them this customary hospitality.

Finally, an old man--himself a transplant from Mt. Ephraim--comes in from his work in the fields. Seeing the travelers, he inquires into their situation. The Levite explains their predicament and offers to supply any items his party might need during their stay. The old man, however, graciously receives them, insisting that he be allowed to provide for their needs.

As they sit eating and drinking, the old man's home is surrounded by a gang of homosexual "hoodlums". They demand that the Levite be sent out to them that they might rape him. Aghast, the old man offers them his daughter and the Levite's concubine instead. The concubine is turned over to this mob who abuse her all night long. In the morning, she manages to return to the old man's doorstep where she dies. The Levite, discovering her dead body, loads her onto his donkey and takes her home. He then does an astounding thing: He takes a knife and divides her body into twelve pieces and sends them to the heads of the twelve tribes. Never before had anyone heard of or seen such an act!

Decline in the Ministry

Although a horrible crime has been committed against this Levite's concubine, it's clear that the writer of this story did not look too favorably upon the conduct of the Levite himself. The law tended to place that priestly tribe under greater obligations of purity and conduct than the others. The story seems to indicate that this Levite was overly smitten with this woman, no matter how defiled or profane she might be. Further, a general lack of self-discipline on the Levite's part is indicated by his indulging in unrestrained feasting and merriment rather than getting on with business. Further still, his cowardice is depicted in the fact that he would turn his concubine over to the mob in order to spare himself. Then there is the rather touching scene--no doubt endearing this man forever to all you female readers--where he finds his dead concubine lying on the doorstep and says to her "Up, and let us be going!" At the very least, there has been some contributory negligence on the part of the Levite in this matter. Here was a man who was supposed to be specially separated to God, chasing this woman, overly indulging his flesh, and, because of his lack of discipline, placing himself and his party at risk. We sense here a decline in zeal among those who should have been the spiritual leaders of the nation.

Isn't this generally how spiritual decline begins? It normally does not start in the pew but in the pulpit! When the men who are specially set apart to minister God's Word and oversee His people are themselves cold, lax, carnal, and indifferent, inevitably others follow suit. If the spiritual leaders are hirelings, sold out to the flesh, seeking their own things, it can hardly surprise us that their followers do the same! Perhaps we could expect such a lifestyle as that exhibited here by the priests of Baal or Ashtoreth, but we expect better things of those separated and consecrated to Jehovah!

Decline in Manners

The second thing we notice here is a decline in what we might call simple human decency, simple charity, and good manners. The quaint scene of the Levite and his party, sitting in the street, waiting for someone to give them shelter, reminds many of us--especially those of us reared in a rural setting--of a time not so long ago when such hospitality and common courtesy was the rule in our own culture. Yet no one in this Benjamite city will venture to offer such, even to a Levite! Notice, however, how quickly and naturally the old man from Mt. Ephraim offers what others refuse.

Today we stand utterly aghast at the decline in human decency and manners in our culture. We witness a general decline in respect for authority, an increase in vulgarity and crudeness, a general lack of concern for our neighbors' well-being, and a lack of involvement in the affairs of our community. To be sure, having good manners is not in

itself any indication of saving grace. Yet these simply courtesies, which greatly affect the quality of our lives, are indications of "common" grace which often accompanies the ministry of God's Word. However, "common" grace is not too common today! Yet, I remind you, the decline in such things is but a symptom of a larger decline in a community's respect for and fear of God!

Decline in Morals

The most obvious symptom of a spiritual decline, certainly illustrated by our text, is an utter lack of morality. How bad had things gone in Gibeah? Notice the similarity of the story related here with that of the angels' visit to Lot in the city of Sodom. In both cases, visitors come into the city who are threatened with rape by a homosexual gang, and females are offered instead to satisfy the lust of the mob. Some of the very same phraseology is employed here in both stories. In the case of the angels, of course, they blinded their attackers and protected Lot and his family. No such protection is forthcoming here. The point being pressed is this: A veritable Sodom has arisen within the very borders of Israel!

Why the dismemberment by the Levite of his concubine's body? Remember, there was no police force in Israel. When the crime of murder was committed against a person, someone, usually a close relative, was responsible for seeing to it that justice was executed against the guilty party. The "avenger", as he was called, literally tracked down the killer and slew him. In other cases, an entire community would stone to death an evildoer guilty of a capital offense. The witnesses to the person's actions would cast the first stones, then the other citizens would join in, putting away evil from their midst. But what do you do when wickedness has progressed to the point that an entire town is involved in the crime? This man's shocking action was intended as a wakeup call to the entire nation to rouse them to action, and it certainly accomplishes that end.

May I point out that what was a most shocking act in their day would be deemed almost commonplace today! Consider the violent crime in our midst. We have atrocities occurring daily throughout our land which, fifty years ago, would have made national news. I could go on and on with stories of horrible crimes committed right here in the Memphis area--just as you could relate such to me from your own locale--of which you've never heard a word in the media! It's not that the media covers them up--it's just that today they are so commonplace that they aren't "news" anymore--unless lots and lots of people are killed, or they are exceedingly bizarre, or they involve a celebrity figure of some sort! These crimes scarcely even rate a blurb in our local paper. Sexual crime is rampant. Homosexuality is out of the closet and militantly parades itself in our streets. We, like they, have found to our great surprise that Sodom exists right at our own doorstep.

What is the answer? I am convinced that nothing short of a Gospel awakening will have any impact upon our culture. All the government programs, the millions of dollars, and the kooky philosophies that have been employed to counter this decline have only compounded the problem! The attempt by Christians to combat these matters with political means has done absolutely nothing to retard the plunge of our culture into darkness. Nothing short of a spiritual reformation sent from God will stop it! To this end we ought all to be praying.

Yet note the progression in our text. We can trace these matters back to a coldness and indifference on the part of God's people. What will serve as our "wake-up call" to rouse us from our slumber? I wish I knew! But I do know that I may well lament the decline of morality and the rise of wickedness in my culture, all the while excusing my own coldness and indifference, never seeing a connection between those two things. Hopefully this little study will serve to remind us that Christians are, of all the people in our land, most responsible for the decline going on around us.