

Right in Their Own Eyes

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] Well, it was just over a month ago, Tuesday the 17th of May 2016. Her name was Ali. She was found wandering on the fringes of the Sambisa forest.

She had with her a four-month-old baby. She was escorted by the father of the child, whom she said was the child's father, a Boko Haram fighter that had helped her escape.

She was whisked away by the authorities. In a televised meeting, the president promised her the best care and rehabilitation. However, she has not been seen for a month. Friends, you probably all know the story of these abducted girls.

It was the night of the 14th to 15th of April 2014. A group of Muslim militants attacked the government girls' secondary school in Chibok in Nigeria.

And the town of Chibok is apparently not a Muslim one, but a Christian in orientation. And the militants broke into the school. They pretended to be guards, and they told the girls to get out and to come with them.

[1 : 03] A large number were taken away in trucks to forests, where Boko Haram was known to frequent. And the girls were aged 16 to 18.

They were in their final year of school. And numbers vary, but it is thought that about 276 were taken. 53 escaped a couple of weeks later.

And it's conjectured that the group's goal was to use the girls and the young women as sexual objects and as a means of intimidating the civilian population.

There have been reports of forced marriages of the girls to members of Boko Haram. And the reputed bride price has been the equivalent of approximately 15 Aussie dollars.

Some may have been taken over the border to Chad and to Cameroon. There is one report from a month ago about a man claiming to be a Boko Haram commander. He was trying to barter for his own safety and said of the Chibok girls this.

[2 : 05] Frankly, just about a third of them remain. The rest have been martyred. Friends, those events are unfortunately not unusual in... These events are not unusual in history.

Women have often been used cruelly and sexually by men in war and outside of war. And today we read about it even among God's people. These incidents are not condoned, but they are told.

And so what I'm going to do today is relatively quickly put this passage in context. Then I'm going to run through the events and explain them. And then I'm going to put them into the context of the whole book.

And then I'll see what we can make of them as God's Christian people. So please have your Bibles open. Let's take a look at our passage. I wonder if you remember the genesis of our story.

I think the genesis of this story we look at today did not begin here, but began much, much earlier. Certainly it begins in earnest in chapter 19.

[3 : 07] Do you remember the story? We started off with the second wife of a man who had left her husband and returned home. The husband then heads off to find her, finds her at her father's home, speaks tenderly to her, and apparently convinces her to return with him.

He also experiences generosity from the father of the woman, so much so that they stay for a number of days. And then when the final day comes that they are going, they don't set off until late.

And they arrive late at a Benjaminite town. The conduct of the Benjaminites is as bad as that experienced by the angelic visitors to Sodom in Genesis 19.

It is horrific. In the end, the man's concubine is raped and left for dead. The man himself cuts her up and sends the pieces of her body around to the 12 tribes of Israel.

In chapter 20, all Israel gathers and sends, sorry, gathers for the first time in the whole of the book of Judges. This is the first time in all of Judges that all Israel has gathered.

[4 : 15] The man then tells the story, albeit not as truthfully as it might have been told. And for their part, the Israelites decide that they will wage Yahweh war, holy war, on their fellow Israelites, the tribe of Benjamin, who's done this awful thing.

And as a result, the tribe of Benjamin is virtually destroyed. 600 escapees go into the wilderness. And the Israelites sweep through the cities of Benjamin and they wipe out the cities and set them on fire.

Men, women, children, animals are killed. Nowhere in the book of Judges, let me tell you, are we told that all Israel has gone out like this against an enemy.

But this is one of their own. Here they do it against their own. So there's the background. Now let's turn to the aftermath of this bloodbath. Remember the context, whole cities wiped out.

Presumably the inhabitants of those cities wiped out with them, animals, children, cities reduced to ashes. And with that background, remember, let's turn and see what happens in the chapter.

[5 : 22] I'm just going to move through it very quickly. Look at verse one. We're told that there is an oath we had not heard about up until this point. Apparently, all Israel to a man had vowed, not one of us will give his daughter in marriage to a Benjaminite.

Now you need to hear the irony here. I mean, it is incredibly ironic when you think about it. Israel has never in the book of Judges rallied all Israel together against a foreign enemy.

But they have so against their own. Throughout the book of Judges and Joshua, Israel has not had any problems with God's command not to intermarry.

They've just gone and done it. They have intermarried. Even some of the judges do it. So they easily ignore God's command about intermarriage.

However, they stick strictly with their own pledges to not give their daughters in marriage to their own. Can you hear the irony again? What a bunch of hypocrites this lot are.

[6 : 27] Anyway, that means there's a problem. There are 600 Benjaminite men hiding away.

There are no Benjaminite women left. The rest of the tribes of Israel won't give up their daughters to them because they've sworn an oath.

So if nothing happens, what will happen? The whole tribe will be wiped out. Listen to their voices lift up with weeping in verse 3. Lord God of Israel, they cry. Why has this happened to Israel?

Why should one of the tribes be missing from Israel today? Anyway, they offer some sacrifices the next day. But it seems as though there's no answer from God about this problem.

Maybe God's not going to be charged with wrongdoing by this lot. That's my guess. Anyway, whatever the case, they do some reasoning in verse 5 and they work out on a solution.

So the first thing they do is to think back to the original rallying for war. Back in chapter 20, we're not told of this solemn oath. However, we are told that they all gathered in the Lord's name.

[7 : 31] And it was certainly a solemn and serious occasion. Well, now we're told that the solemn and serious discussion of chapter 20 had another oath attached to it.

The oath was that anyone who failed to assemble before the Lord at Mizpah was to be put to death. The point is that only those who had failed to assemble before the Lord at Mizpah would have failed to take the oath about not taking their daughters to the Benjaminites, not giving their daughters to the Benjaminites.

You see, so what the Israelites reason is if they can find someone who's not come up, they might be able to find some women that they could give to the Benjaminites. Some weird logic goes on in this chapter, but nevertheless, mind you, let me tell you, it's not uncommon among the people of God that some weird logic sometimes goes on.

Anyway, let's have a look. So perhaps they could be justified. If they could find someone who's not gone up, they could be justified in punishing them by putting them to death. Then there might be some women left. Can you see where it goes?

Anyway, and those could be given to the Benjaminites to preserve the tribe. It is a neat bit of legal wrangling that is not without its compromises and problems. Nevertheless, it does have the interests of the tribe of Benjamin in mind.

[8 : 48] So in verse 12, the action is done. There's holy war that's engaged in yet again. And again, it is to be engaged in by one part of Israel against another part of Israel.

And all the relevant people are killed. However, there is an exception. Every woman who's a virgin is not to be killed, is to be accepted from that.

This tweaking with this dodging around the oath and the law are not really justified, friends, are they? They're simply ways of trying to get to a goal without explicit exposure to breaking oaths or laws.

And it is at the cost of even more shedding of innocent blood. Now look at verse 13. The whole assembly, that is all Israel, stretches out a hand to the remaining Benjamin and they proclaim peace to them.

They seek restoration. So in verse 14, the Benjaminites return. They enter the fold again. They receive wives. However, no matter how cunning their plan has been, it has fallen short.

[9 : 53] Because look at verse 14. There are not enough women for the 600 Benjaminites. It's not a full solution. Something else needs to go on. And so some grieving is engaged in.

The people are full of compassion for the diminished tribe. However, they are still bound by their oath. And another plan comes to mind. Our version says it like this. Verse 19. But look, there is an annual festival of the Lord in Shiloh, which lies north of Bethel, east of the road that goes from Bethel to Shechem and south to Labona.

Our versions convey the sense of, sorry, older versions convey the sense of this much better. One of the things I regret is that our new versions leave out that great little Hebrew word equivalent to behold.

Now, they've all dropped it. But it happens here. The English Standard Version has preserved it. It says, and so they said, behold, there is a yearly festival of the Lord at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel and so on.

In other words, aha, I've got a solution for this problem. Now, the idea is quite straightforward. There's an annual festival of the Lord in Shiloh.

[11 : 01] It's probably not one of the big three main religious festivals because there's dancing referred to and they didn't happen at these major festivals. However, it does have young women there.

And it also has vineyards. So the Benjaminites are told to wait in the vineyards for the young women to come out. And then to jump out, each one take one and then carry them off as white. Verse 21. Now, I wonder if you can hear the enormous irony in this passage. How did this story begin? It began with a woman.

A woman who was raped and abused by Benjaminites. All Israel became perturbed by this and exercised revenge on a whole tribe of Israel for doing this very thing.

The revenge was that the Benjaminites were ambushed and done away with, wiped out virtually as a tribe. Now, what you've got is another capture and rape being planned by the very people who are so aghast at the last one.

[12 : 06] Not one woman, but a whole host of them. And it will be at the hands of the same Benjaminites. But it was suggested, planned by and endorsed by the same Israelites who had been so aghast and objected so strongly to what Benjamin had done earlier.

Then finally, when this deed is done, they can go home to Benjamin. And the passage goes on to indicate that the parents of the young women will have no recourse. And all of this to preserve the 12 tribes in Israel.

By hook or by crook. By fair means and foul. Israel has survived the book of Judges. Now, friends, with that we close with our summary statement.

Can you see it there? Verse 25, we're told. In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Now, friends, I want to use this verse to reflect on where we've been in the book of Judges.

I wonder if you remember the sorry tale, how this sorry tale began. I think it actually begins way back in chapter 13. Let me read to you the beginning of chapter 13. There was a certain man of Zorah of the tribe of the Danites whose name was Manoah.

[13 : 19] And his wife was barren and had no children. Story begins with a woman who's barren, has no children. And do you remember that this wife was promised a son who would begin to deliver Israel?

From the Philistines. Do you remember who he was? Samson, wasn't it? And before long, we discover that is what his name is. And Samson appears to neglect the vow that he was supposed to live under.

The text is somewhat ambiguous, but it appears as though he flouts the law that had been part of his appointment. However, it is Samson who uses the words used in the very last verse of this chapter.

I want to tell you about it. Do you remember one of the very first things Samson says after he grows up to be a man? He sees a Philistine woman. And do you remember what he says about her? Literally, he says to his father these words. Get her for me. For she is right in my eyes. That is the first time that phrase is used in the book of Judges.

[14 : 27] On the lips of Samson. Samson was an Israelite. He is a man dedicated to God from birth. And yet he is one who does what is fit for him, what is right in his own eyes.

And in case we miss it, the narrator then repeats it just a few verses later. Within a few verses, he tells us that the woman was right in Samson's eyes. And so this judge leads Israel.

Not only does he do it by beginning delivery from the Philistines, but he also leads Israel, in my view, by doing what is right in his own eyes. Just think of those who succeed him.

In chapter 17, we find a man who steals from his mum 1100 pieces of silver. He turns it into an idol and sets up a makeshift shrine.

He then hires a Levite to be a priest, presuming that that will make him rich. Then there are the Danites who come upon the priest and effectively steal him by force and set up another idolatrous shrine.

[15 : 28] It becomes the focus of idolatry amongst all of Israel. Then there's a Levite in chapter 19 who acquires a second wife that's a concubine. She gets angry with him.

He comes after her. She returns with him. He spectacularly fails as a husband and hands her over to the Benjaminites. Then this Levite fails to disclose the whole truth to Israel about what actually happened.

Israel hears. They fail to investigate properly. Israel acts presumptively. The whole tribe is virtually wiped out. And then to sort it out, then they sort it out by doing what they condemned the Benjaminites for doing.

They allow more rape. There is only one star, I think, in the whole of those chapters that follow Samson.

That's the old man who tries to protect the visitors to the square. But Samson has effectively, I think, in the book of Judges, become the leader of Israel.

[16 : 35] And he leaves them by doing what is right in his own eyes. And it is a picture of Israel as a whole. They follow suit with a vengeance. And I think the writer wants to stress that this is what they do. Together they become corrupt.

At the beginning of the book, they are said to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. But by the end of the book, you know what they do? They do what is right in their own eyes, which is the same as doing evil in the eyes of the Lord.

These judges that were meant to lead in deliverance and rest instead lead in self-determination and sin. And together with them, Israel sinks into sin and to self-centeredness.

Friends, where is that going to end up? Some people who write the book of Judges think that the solution is kingship. And that's what's being said in that last verse. They think that the words in the last chapter offer solace and solution.

Do you remember those last words? Look at them again. 21, 25. They go like this. In those days, Israel had no king. Every man did what he considered to be right. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

[17 : 34] Some think that this is a promise that a king will sort it out. That will sort out Israel's self-determination or self-domination. They think that a king will put a lid and a control on such self-centeredness.

And there are hints that they might be right. After all, in the Hebrew Bible, do you know what the very first words are after the book of Judges? If you were to read through the Hebrew Bible, the very first words are this.

There was a certain man of Ramatham Zophim. And then we find out that he's got a barren wife as well.

And that barren wife is given a child from God. And we hear the echoes of the story of Samson deliberately, I think. And we wonder perhaps whether he might turn back the tide.

That he might be the answer. Perhaps through him there might be a king who will do what Samson had not done. And perhaps even do what Samson had begun rightly.

[18 : 38] The delivery from the Philistines. And sure enough, Samuel is born and he's born full of promise. He introduces kingship to Israel. And the first of the kings, though, is an ominous sign.

The first king has a tendency to do what is right in his own eyes, even as the judges had done before him. He is replaced, therefore, by one that God says is better than him. David, a man after God's own heart.

And David does complete the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines that Samson began.

However, he also walks on the roof of his palace. And arrogantly does not control his lust.

Oh, he does repent. And God does forgive. And he does put himself under God's leadership. But then as we look at the books of kings, we find that the kings who follow him are generally no better than the people that they rule.

Beginning with Solomon. They don't solve the problem, the kings of Israel. And even the book of Judges will indicate that. Let me show you. If you've got your Bibles there, then take a look at Judges 18.

[19 : 47] Have a look. Judges 18, verse 30. Look at what it says. It is a wonderful telltale giveaway that kings won't solve the problem.

It's only a passing comment. But there it is. In Judges 18, 30, we read this. There the Danites set up for themselves the idol. And Jonathan, the son of Gershon, the son of Moses, and his sons were priests for the tribe of Dan.

Until when? Until the time of the captivity of the land. Until kings failed and God had to kick them out. And send a foreign nation to conquer them.

Even within the Judges, you hear, the kings won't solve the problem. It's a telltale sign. You see, the rite of Judges talks about that time of the captivity. Friends, we read as the Bible know that the kings of Israel will not solve the problem.

Now, friends, I suspect that many of you who have been listening to this series of Bible messages on Judges have been tempted to think, Ah, this is the Old Testament world.

[20 : 52] This is not our world. But, friends, as you can see from the story I told you at the beginning of the abduction, death, and slavery of Nigerian girls, this is our world as well.

This is our world as well. But, friends, as you can see from the story of the abduction, death, and slavery of those girls, it is an awful world, full of self-centeredness.

There are several commentators that I read who had written at the end of the last century, and they said that the 20th century was the most violent century in the history of humanity. And they're right, in my own view, is that the 21st century, though, might turn out to be the most self-centered century in the history of humanity.

Friends, it is clearly the century of self, isn't it? Clearly the century of self. You only have to listen to our politicians to know that, and you only have to look at the laws that are being passed around our world to know that.

It is the century of the autonomous self. A century that will be dominated by humans doing what is right in their own eyes with gusto, and where governments will comply and let them do it.

[22 : 06] And I predict it will be the century when we dismantle the restraints that our forefathers put in place in law, where humans will be kings and queens, and where humans across the board will do what is right in their own eyes, with all constraints gone.

There will be anarchy and loss of order in our world, particularly moral order. I fear there may even be epidemic violence in our world.

You see, self-assertion without constraint will inevitably result in awesome disruption and dislocation. So what can we find in the Bible that will help us, as we face a world that might possibly be like that?

Well, first and foremost, we find the story of a king who became a servant and who did what was right in the eyes of God his Father. That's what we find.

That is the center of the Bible's message. There is what we ought to look at. He came to do his Father's will. He humbled himself. He became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

[23 : 18] And through that, he established forgiveness and demonstrated what is at the heart of God, grace. But he did more. He gave us a model to follow.

A model of not doing what is in our own interests. A model of no selfish ambition. No self at the center, but others instead.

Instead, a determination to be humble. And to count others as more important than ourselves. Not doing what works for us, friends.

Not doing what is right in our eyes, but doing what is right in the eyes of God. Doing what our Savior does. Doing what is right in the eyes of our Father.

And doing what is best, not for ourselves, but for others and for him. Emptying ourselves as he did. Dying for others as he did.

[24 : 16] Sacrificing ourselves for others as he did. Having such a king over such a people will indeed change the world, friends. And the good news of the gospel is that this king has come to end self-rule.

So let's proclaim him. Let's live like him. And let's start doing so here in our church. In our families. In our workplaces.

Let's not get sucked in by the world and the way it is going. Let me tell you, friends, our world needs an alternative to the way that it is heading. And the only real alternative is found in King Jesus, who humbled himself and obeyed his father to the point of death.

Even death on a cross. People who follow him will be marked out from the rest of the world. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for your son, our saviour, who humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

who did not consider that he was there to rule but to serve. Father, please help us to live like him.

[25 : 37] Please help us to be distinctly his of the people that he has saved. Please help us to be humble as he is, to struggle and to work hard at doing what is right in your eyes, not that which is right in our own.

And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.