

Right in Their Own Eyes

Part IV- The Pains & Perils of Purging Sin

We come now to the final saga of our study. In the murder of the Levite's concubine, and his action of sending portions of her body to the heads of the twelve tribes, Israel is alerted to the fact that a veritable Sodom has arisen within its own borders in the tribe of Benjamin. All Israel, with the exception of Benjamin, have assembled at Mizpah to judge the matter. The Levite is called upon to testify of the crime, which he does in a way that puts himself in the most favorable light. The assembly then rules that the perpetrators of this deed must be brought to judgment and calls upon the men of Benjamin to hand them over. The Benjamites refuse to do so and assemble themselves for battle. Civil war is about to ensue over this incident.

Deja Vu All Over Again!

Earlier in Israel's history there had developed a similar situation. After the tribes had conquered Canaan and were settled in their land, the 2 1/2 tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan river had erected an altar on its banks (Note Joshua 22). This was considered a serious breach of the covenant and an offense to God by the rest of the tribes. The nation assembled at Shiloh, preparing, if necessary, to go to battle against their brethren. It is none other than Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the High Priest, who was chosen to investigate the matter. The 2 1/2 tribes assured Phinehas that their intention was not to sacrifice on that altar, nor to divide from the remainder of the nation. Rather, they intended it as a simple reminder to their future children that they were, though physically cut off by the Jordan, still a part of that nation on the other side, who worshipped at a similar altar at Shiloh. Upon hearing their explanation, the other tribes are satisfied that no disservice to their God was involved, and they return to their homes. However, no such peaceable resolution will be forthcoming in the incident before us.

Serious Seeking

Note that every step taken in the war by Israel is directed by God. Benjamin's army numbers about 27,000 men, opposed by some 400,000 from the rest of the tribes. To us it seems that the outcome is a foregone conclusion. But they will fight tribe by tribe, and the tribe of Judah, perhaps because of its near proximity to Benjamin, is selected first by God to do the fighting. The first day of battle is a disaster for Israel, as some 22,000 men are slain by the fierce Benjamites. Suddenly, this task of purging evil from Israel's border is not as easy as it first appeared. Though no seeking of God is recorded before the first day of battle, now there is weeping before Him as they prepare for another attack (Judges 20:23). Again, at God's direction, they attack, with the result being similar to that of the first day. Some 18,000 men of Israel are slain by the Benjamites. Now what had appeared to be an easy task has taken on a much more serious note! Suddenly the seeking of God's blessing--non-existent on the first day of battle, half-hearted on the second--becomes much more intense. Now there is praying, seeking, fasting and the offering of sacrifices by the nation as they inquire through Phinehas whether or not it is God's will they attack again.

What are we to make of this matter? It's clear that it's God's will that they battle

Benjamin, for He sends them into battle and directs their every step. We might assume then, as they no doubt did, that this procedure would be quick and painless. However, such is not to be the case. I can only conclude that the reason for this is that the other tribes were, to some extent, guilty as well. No, not guilty of the particular wickedness found in Gibeah, but guilty of a general complacency, a lack of vigilance that allowed this wickedness to ever reach such heights. Israel is now being awakened, not only to the sin of Benjamin, but to her own shortcomings.

Our Situation

Our situation today is, admittedly, not the same as theirs. We don't live in a Theocracy. The covenant people of God are not those living in a particular nation, but those who comprise Christ's church out of all nations. We are no more called to judge wickedness out in the world than Israel was to judge wickedness out among heathen nations. But we do have the duty of purging sin out of our own midst. The inexperienced believer approaches this task-- the discipline of the church--as an easy matter: Just do it! However, those of us who have experience in such things know otherwise. Yes, such is necessary and needful. But we do not approach the task flippantly or lightly, nor with the glee with which some seem to relish the procedure. Purging sin out of one's midst is a most painful affair--not only for the one being purged, but for those doing the purging as well! Inevitably our own lack of vigilance and our general coldness towards God comes into view as we seek to be faithful to Christ in such matters. Better, far better had it been for us--as Israel is surely learning in the event before us--to have watched, to have been on guard, to have been more diligent in detecting the advance of sin in its beginnings, at its first approach. That's true for us as individuals, and it's true for us corporately as Christ's church.

The Outcome

Finally, as they prepare to attack once again, God promises Israel victory. One force attacks from the front and feigns defeat by fleeing. This draws the, by now, overconfident Benjamites out of the city, thinking that they have once again routed their enemy. However, a large force of Israelite soldiers is waiting in hiding. When the Benjamite army advances in pursuit of the first body of Israelites, this force attacks Gibeah from behind them and puts it to the torch. This is the signal to those drawing out the Benjamites to turn and fight, and a general slaughter of Benjamin ensues. All are put to death--man, woman, child, and beast-- except for some 600 men who flee to the top of a rock in the wilderness.

This tactic may sound familiar to many of you. In Joshua's day, shortly after the conquering of Jericho, the men of the much smaller city of Ai defeats a much larger force of Israelites. The reason, remember, was that sin--Achan's disobedience in taking of the accursed things of Jericho--had infiltrated the camp of Israel. Once that matter is resolved, the army of Israel once again attacks Ai. Part of their force, at God's direction, waits in hiding to ambush them from the rear as the rest of the army feigns defeat to draw the men of Ai from the safety of their city. Caught in the middle, the inhabitants of Ai are all slain by the victorious army of Israel.

The similarity of these two situations cannot be overlooked. It confirms our conclusion that victory was not immediately forthcoming against Benjamin for the very same reason

it was not against Ai. Sin had infiltrated the nation. Not until Israel dealt with her own sin would victory be forthcoming. And it holds an even more ominous message: Benjamin, through its willful disobedience in refusing to purge sin from its midst, places itself outside the covenant people of God and is now treated by God exactly as He treated the Canaanite inhabitants of Israel! Let none of us think, no matter who or what we suppose ourselves to be, that we can embrace sin and continue blest by God! And the willful refusal to part with it, once discovered, clearly means that we are outside the sphere of God's covenant. Here is the real lesson to which we might say, in the words of the Levite, "Consider it, take advice, and speak your minds."