

Right righteousness

*In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.
Judges 21:25*

These concluding words of the book of Judges are repeated from Judges 17:6, providing commentary on the outlandish and extreme events recorded in these chapters that describe the fickle and lawless nature of the Israelite nation of those days, after the death of Joshua's generation. Chapter 19 describes a heinous crime committed by evil men of Gibeah, a city of Benjamin. Chapter 20 then describes the civil war that resulted as the Benjamites defended Gibeah against the remaining tribes of Israel, who had determined to execute judgment against the evil done in Gibeah.

Although the crimes committed were worthy of judgment, God allowed the outnumbered Benjamites who defended Gibeah to inflict heavy losses against the eleven Israelite tribes, in spite of their efforts to enquire of the LORD before each of the first two battles. Having just cause for retribution against the abominable crimes committed, in their first visit to the house of God (Judges 20:18) they simply asked the LORD which tribe should lead the charge. They had already presumed their major course of action before coming to ask the LORD for this detail. God gave them the answer, after which they lost 22,000 men in the first battle against Benjamin. As they prepared to reset the battle lines, they enquired of the LORD again, as they wept and asked if they should go up against Benjamin, "my brother," again (20:23). This reveals a new sensitivity that their judgment was being waged in a familial context. They received an affirmative answer, and proceeded to lose another 18,000 soldiers to Benjamin in the second battle. It was not until the third battle, where their approach to enquire of the LORD was accompanied by brokenness, humility, fasting, and confession and offerings for sin, that the Israelite nation received a promise of victory from the LORD that was realized in that final battle.

While there are many lessons to learn from this account, a significant lesson is gleaned by comparing the attitude of the tribes united against Gibeah in each approach to the LORD. Although the LORD was favorable to their just cause, which was based upon principles of His law, we see from the progression of their enquiries and results that He was not favorable to their attitude, until their third approach. Perhaps we have a New Testament corollary application in Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." In both cases, the attitude and spirit with which we execute a righteous action is also tied to the acceptability of the action. We may see ourselves as right in our own eyes, but what matters is the sight of the LORD. Therefore, in the correction of wrongdoing, which is right and necessary, let us learn to grieve over the sin of the offender, as well as our own sinful propensities, as we seek to effect judgment and justice for the benefit of all.