

Series: King of Kings

The Cry for a King

Judges 21:16-25

Sermon by Lead Pastor Paul Joslin

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, July 13, 2025

A reading from Judges 21 verses 16 through 25: “and the elders of the assembly said, ‘with the women of Benjamin destroyed, how shall we provide wives for the men who are left? The Benjamite survivors must have heirs,’ they said, ‘so that a tribe of Israel will not be wiped out. We can’t give them our daughters as wives, since we Israelites have taken this oath, “cursed be anyone who gives a wife to a Benjamite,” but look, there is the annual festival of the Lord in Shiloh, which lies north of Bethel, east of the road that goes from Bethel to Shechem and south of Lebanon.’ So, they instructed the Benjamites, saying ‘go and hide in the vineyards, and watch. When the young women of Shiloh come out to join in the dancing, rush from the vineyards, and each of you seize one of them to be your wife, then return to the land of Benjamin. When their fathers or brothers complain to us, we will say to them, “Do us the favor of helping them, because we did not get wives for them during the war. You will not be guilty of breaking your oath, because you did not give your daughters to them.”’ So that is what the Benjamites did. While the young women were dancing, each man caught one and carried her off to be his wife. Then they returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and settled in them. At that time, the Israelites left that place and went home to their tribes and clans, each to his own inheritance. In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit,” the word of the Lord.

Should we just sit in that one for a little bit? Now you understand the parental warning a little. Yeah, what a wild story, right? Crazy. There are so many moments I feel like where we can come to scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, and we read a story like that or hear a story like that, and we just think out loud to ourselves like, “That is in the Bible? How did that make the cut? How did that story end up in the Bible?” and here is the thing that you have to know before we go any further with this story. If I am being honest with you, that is the culmination of the story. That is the story solving and resolving. It is way worse before we even get to that, so buckle up. It is going to be an interesting day together today.

We are entering into this series called “King of Kings,” and it is our summer series, where each week throughout the summer we are going to be looking at different kings from the Old Testament, kings from the book of Judges and Samuel and Kings, and we are going to be examining their lives and trying to do character studies of who these men were and honestly ways that they went astray, and we are going to be examining what it looks like when we place things that are not God on the throne of our lives, because what happens when we place things that are not God on the throne of our lives is that things dissolve into chaos, and that is this story that we have before us today.

Now you may be wondering, “Okay, Paul, it is summertime. It is sunny outside. We have flowers and hikes and water, and it is amazing. Why are we looking at depressing stories that require a parental advisory before you get up to preach,” right? “Why are we doing this? It is the Fourth of July. We are supposed to be enjoying parades and doing the whole thing, and now you are taking us to a place where we are looking at stories that make us really uncomfortable and sick to our stomach.”

That is a choice, and it is a choice, and here is what I need you to know. It is at Waterstone, we do not shy away from hard topics. In fact, we lean into hard conversations, and when we look at scripture, we think there are a lot of places in scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, that oftentimes we do not understand, that leave us feeling confused a little bit, like, “What is going on here?” I mean, let’s be honest. Most of us, we love the parts of scripture where Jesus shows up. The New Testament is awesome. Jesus talks about love and your neighbor and caring for the poor, and we love the way that He engages with the people who are less than and the forgiveness that He offers, and then you get to the Old Testament, and it is men kidnapping women to become their wives, and you are like, “What in the world?” but here is the truth. It is that in scripture, we believe that all of Scripture, not just the New Testament, not just the parts with Jesus, but even the Old Testament is inspired by the Holy Spirit, that these are stories that have been passed down to us from generations that explain to us one, our own reality. Our own hearts serve as a mirror to who we are, but they also point us forward to Jesus and what God is doing in the world, and so my prayer is that as we dive into this story today in particular, and as we look at what is honestly one of the most disturbing and vile stories in all of scripture, but ironically, one of the most important stories in scripture, is that some of those same things become real to us, that we begin to understand more about who we are and who God is and what He is doing in the world and who we need to be the king of our lives. So, we are going to dive into this story, and as I said, it is one of the hardest, strangest, most uncomfortable stories in all of scripture, but it is a place that God speaks so, so clearly, but to be honest with you, I really believe this, if you were to plot line the story I am about to tell, and you sent it in to the producers of HBO, and you were like, “Hey, I have got a great idea for a show,” and they read your story, they are like, “Wow, this person is really frightening. They probably need to be under watch, not like a show that we are going to produce.” It would feel very scary.

It is a wild story that we are about to step into, and this story begins in Judges 19, so we are actually going to back up from the story that Natalia just read. We are going to look at Judges 19 verse one, and this is how the story starts, the first line in the story: “In those days, Israel had no king.” Israel had no king, and what you are going to see in this series is this line actually sets up the whole premise of the entire King of Kings series, and this is the premise of the series. The big idea of the series we are stepping into is this: the king of your heart will dictate the direction of your life. What rules inside of you, what sits on the throne of your heart, shapes everything about you. It will shape your decisions, your relationships, and your future, even if you do not always realize the ways that it is shaping you.

I like to think of it this way. This is an illustration that I heard, and we have used it at Waterstone many times, but think of your life for a moment as a car. Does anybody have a favorite car they love or a dream car? You can just shout it out. Does anybody have a dream car that they wished they had? No, no car junkies. Okay. What is it? Sixty-nine Camaro, awesome. All right, Ben, your life is a 69 Camaro. You got your dream car. Mine, I love trucks, and so for a number of years, I drove this really beat up Ford F-150. It was a 2007, and it was a tank of a truck. I love this truck. I put 215,000 miles on it. It was a 2007, so the trim was, I mean, it was so bad. The air conditioner worked most of the time. It had heated seats, but other than that, you couldn’t connect your phone on anything other than auxiliary. There was no Bluetooth or anything like that.

The truck died, and I upgraded from a 2007 to a 2020 a couple of years ago, and it wasn't a new car. It is the very base level trim, but when you go from a car that you can't connect your phone to, to one that has Bluetooth and CarPlay, you are like, "Wow, this is awesome," right? It is an incredible upgrade, and the air conditioner worked all of the time, and I love this truck, and I like to dial it in. It has this way that you can adjust the temperature for my wife, who likes it a little warmer. I like it to be cold, so I blast the A.C. on my side. She can choose whatever she wants on her side. We can control what the kids are doing in the back. I like to dial it in. I want to make sure I know what we are playing on the radio, and sometimes I will take requests, but usually I am just like, "No, we are going to do what I want to do," and on long road trips, I like to be the one driving, because my wife, she is a great driver, but she goes a little slower through the parts of the country that I like to go a little faster through. I am in control of my car. I like to dial in the environment. I like to control everything about what is happening in my car. I really like to keep a clean car, which is really hard with a one-and-a-half-year-old and a six-year-old, because they like to leave their goldfish everywhere in the car. I am in control, but here is the thing. No matter how much I dial in the environment of my car, if I am not in the driver's seat, I have absolutely zero control about where the truck is going, right? That is just, you are like, "Yeah, duh, Paul." Life works a little bit like that, in that sometimes we can dial in all of the things that we want about our life. We can control the environment. We can try to control our life and how we are trying to keep things clean and keep things up-to-date and whatever we want to do, but if we are not in the driver's seat, sometimes we end up in places that we did not plan at all, and sometimes, even unbeknownst to us, things end up in the driver's seat, taking us to places that we did not expect to go.

For some of us, things like control end up in the driver's seat, and we start to freak out any time it seems like we are losing control. For some of us, fear is in the driver's seat, and we are afraid of anything happening in our life that we do not understand, and so we try to dial things in, and fear is driving us to the places where we do not want to go. For others of us it might be anger in the driver's seat, and you are just ready for a fight all the time, and anytime something happens on the road of your life that you are not expecting, you are ready to honk and get out of your car and fight someone, and for some of you now, it is not metaphor. That is a reality. That is just the way you live your life. For some of us, it is insecurity, and when insecurity ends up in the driver's seat, we can't handle criticism. We can't handle other people.

There are all sorts of things that we can place in the driver's seat, and the premise of this series is that whatever is in your driver's seat, whatever is on the throne of your life, it will dictate the direction of your life, and what we are going to see through this series is that there are many times people place something other than God on the throne room of their life, and it has disastrous consequences, and that is the heart behind this story that we are looking at today. There was no king in Israel, but the author is essentially saying this: there was no one in the driver's seat, so everybody is in the back, screaming for their life, trying to figure out what is going on, because there is no one in the driver's seat.

The story goes on, "There was no king in Israel," and then the next verse says this: "Now a Levite who lived in a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim took a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah, but she was unfaithful to him. She left him and went back to her parents' home in Bethlehem, Judah. When she had been there for four months, her husband went to her and persuaded her to return." All right, so if you go back to the first section of this verse, this story begins with a Levite.

Now what do you know about the people of the tribe of Levi? Who were the Levites? Does anyone know? You can just shout it out. The priests, they were the pastors for the nation of Israel. They were the priests. Now this priest, this pastor, this Levite, takes a concubine as a relational partner, which essentially means he is not in a covenant commitment with her. Their commitment is something more akin to, “Hey, I will make sure to take care of you if you take care of me,” in certain non-specific ways that we will not get into, right? That is the dynamic of the relationship, which on the face of it should already tip you off that something is going very wrong in this story. That is not what pastors and priests are supposed to do, right? That is not the kind of relationships that they are supposed to be involved with, and then it goes south really, really quickly, because this concubine who he is in this relationship with, she decides to be unfaithful to this priest and this pastor, and so she leaves him and goes back home to her family, who is in Bethlehem in Judea. Now I need you to hang on to that city name, because it is going to come up later in the story. It is really important that we remember where this story begins. So that is just what happens in this story at the outset. A Levite, a priest, takes a person to be in some sort of contractual relationship with him, not a covenantal relationship, and she is unfaithful. She leaves him, and then after four months, for some reason, he decides, “Oh, you know what? I should probably go get her back. I like her. I want to figure things out,” and it is not like one of those romantic points in the movie, where the guy shows up with flowers and gifts and stands outside of the house with a boom box and proclaims his love. That is not where this story goes.

He shows up at the father-in-law’s house, and they essentially go on a five-day bender, where the father keeps him there. The Levite says, “I want to take my concubine. I want to go back home,” and he was like, “No, just stay around a little bit more. Let’s have a good time,” and they drink all day and all night, and then he wakes up the next day. He is like, “I really need to go,” and the father is like, “You should just stay. We are having a great time. I love having you here. We will just do our thing,” again, not the expectation you would have of a priest, and so after five days of just going on this bender with his father-in-law, trying to get his concubine back to take home, he finally has enough, and it is in the middle of the day, and he says, “Nope, I absolutely cannot stay another night. We have to go home. She is coming with me. I am leaving. I do not want to keep partying with you anymore,” and so he takes her home, and they leave in the middle of the day, which is not great, because in those days it is a rookie travel mistake.

The roads were dangerous at night or late in the day, and so this Levite leaves. He has two donkeys. He has a servant and his concubine, and they try to go home, which starts to sound like the beginning of a weird joke, right? So, they travel, and as they are traveling, the servant speaks up. The sun begins to set, and he says, “You know what we should do? We need to find a place to rest. It is getting dark. It is not going to be safe out here. There is a town right over there. It is called Jebus,” which is actually the town that later became Jerusalem, and he says, “We should stay there for the night,” and the Levite is like, “Absolutely no way will we stay with people who are not of our people. We will not stay with people who are not of the people of God. We have to stay with fellow Israelites. Those are not the people of Israel,” which on the face of it, makes sense. You stay with your tribe. You stay with your people. That is where you can expect safety and shelter, and so they go to a town nearby that is an Israelite town, and they walk into the town square, and they begin to wait for someone to invite them into their home for shelter and safety for the night, because that was kind of the laws of hospitality.

If you saw someone in your town square who did not belong there, you would invite them into your home. Well, they wait and wait and wait, and no one shows up. It is beginning to get dark, and then an old man comes in from working in the fields, and he sees them, and he says, “Hey, where are you from? Where are you going?” and they are like, “We are coming from Bethlehem, and we are getting ready to go to Ephraim, and it is a long journey. We need a place to stay for the night.” The old man says, “You can stay with me, but you should definitely not spend any more time in the town square. This is not a safe place for you to stay. Whatever you do, do not spend the night here,” which again sounds a little ominous and like the start of a horror movie, right? So, he invites them into his home, and this verse, it really is trying to go out of its way to tell you that this Levite really likes to try to have a good time, because in verse 19:22 it says, “While they were enjoying themselves,” which is another clue. They were doing what he had been doing with the father-in-law, but now with this old man, “some wicked men of the city surrounded the house, and they began pounding on the door,” and they shout to the old man who owned the house, and they say, “Bring out the man who came to your house, so that we can have sex with him.” I read that right. That is not a typo, and your reaction should be what it just was: “What in the world is going on in the story? This is bizarre.” You have this drunken priest who is running around with basically a concubine prostitute, and now he goes into a town where these people want to have sex with him, and they are pounding on the door, demanding that he come out.

Now this story should give you pause. What is happening here? Does this story even sound a little familiar? It sounds a little similar to Genesis 19, Sodom and Gomorrah, if you remember that story, where a couple of angels of the Lord go into a town, and the men of the town come out, and they want to assault them, except this time, it is not happening in a foreign, pagan city. It is happening in Israel, and it is as if the author is going out of his way again and again and again to tell you that things have gone horribly wrong in Israel. They have become like the nations that surround them. Rather than reflecting God and God’s image to the nations around them, they have become like those same nations. Something has gone horribly, horribly wrong in Israel.

So, as the men are pounding on the door, what happens next is just absolutely gut-wrenching. The old man shouts back, “Do not do this evil, vile thing,” and then he comes up with a horrifying alternative. He says, “Why don’t you take my virgin daughter and his concubine, and you can do whatever you want with them, but just do not harm this man whom I have welcomed into my home.” Now, as a father of a daughter, that is unimaginable to me. Fathers are not supposed to give up their children, to sacrifice them to protect themselves. They are supposed to sacrifice themselves to protect their children. Again, the morality of the story is off-kilter. It is completely upside down, but before the father can do his horrifying play, then the Levite just offers up his concubine and shoves her out the door, and I will not even put the verses on the screen or tell you what happens next, but by the end of the night, this woman has been murdered. Horrifying. It is horrifying.

The next morning, the Levite wakes up, and he finds her at the doorstep, and he says, “Get up. Let’s go.” He has been sleeping the whole night through this horrifying night and just has no compassion. We are supposed to understand this is a terrible, terrible person. “Get up. Let’s go,” and then he realizes that she is dead. He puts her on the back of his donkey and takes her home, and he realizes, this is a horrible thing that has happened, and the rest of the tribes of Israel need to know about this horrible thing

that has happened, and so he gets this idea, and he says that he will send a letter to all twelve tribes of Israel to tell them about what has happened to his concubine and the horrible thing that happened at Gibeah, but he decides that he needs to prove it. In those days there was no way to prove what had happened, and so in order to prove his letter he is sending to the tribes since this happened, he comes up with an idea to cut this woman into twelve pieces and send her to the twelve tribes, and he sends them off to the twelve tribes.

Now this is where we have to pause, because this story is absolutely horrifying, and I think one of the things that sometimes happens is when a story is in scripture, we sometimes get the idea, we come to scripture with this understanding, this belief that if it is in scripture, then somehow God is okay with what happened, or that maybe even God approves what happened, because after all, this is a story in God's Bible. It is God's word to us, and so He has to on some level be okay with what is taking place in this story, and I need you to hear this so clearly: that could not be further from the truth. What this story is intended to say is you should read this story and **not** be nodding along like, "Oh yeah, that makes sense. Yeah, just cut her into pieces. That is logical," as if it should not make you sick to your stomach when it is happening in the story. At every turn, these people, these men are making these choices that should be objectively horrifying to our sense of morality. They should not be things that we want to stomach. What's important for you to know is just because it is something recorded in the Bible doesn't mean that the Bible is endorsing that story. One of the truths of scripture is that it gives us raw, unfiltered, unedited, real stories of what happens when people reject God's way of living, and so we should be horrified by this story.

In fact, that is what happens. The letter goes out, and all of Israel is horrified. They are outraged. They are appalled, and they say, "What is this? Who would do such a thing? This could not take place in our country. This is beyond what we should allow," and so they gather together 400,000 soldiers, and they ask the Levite what happened, and just to prove, if you have any question about whether or not this Levite is a good or a bad person, he spins the story, and he says, "We just showed up in this town, and they essentially tried to take me, and they assaulted my concubine," and he totally omits the part where he just threw her to the wolves, and so everybody freaks out, and they are in this rage, and they are so angry about what's happened, and they need to enact justice, and so they send the people to the town to purge the evil from them, and so they show up at the town, and then all of Benjamin, the tribe that Gibeah is in, hears about this giant army that is coming for them, and so they go to the town, and instead of handing over the people who have done this atrocity, they begin to defend them, and this standoff turns into a civil war, and so suddenly tribe is fighting against tribe, brother is fighting against brother, and what essentially happens is this battle rages for a few days, and after the first day, 22,000 Israelites have been killed, and Gibeah is still standing. The second day, 18,000 Israelites are killed, and Gibeah is still standing, and they begin to wonder, "What is happening? Why can't we conquer them? We are supposed to be enacting justice," and so there is one time in the story where they pray and say, "Okay God, what should we do?" and He says, "Tomorrow I will hand them over to you," and so they come up with this plan, and they say, "We have been getting our tail kicked. Why don't we attack? Then when we start to lose, like we have been doing the last few days, we will retreat. They will chase after us, and when they chase after us, we will send another army in behind them, and then we will sandwich them in, and we can wipe them all out, and then we will destroy the town of Gibeah," and so that is what happens.

By the end of it, the town is completely wiped out. Every man, woman, and child in the town has been killed, and the 25,000 soldiers from Benjamin have been destroyed, but it is not enough for them. The Israelites are so outraged, and by that time the bloodlust has taken over so much, that they go through the entire region of Benjamin, and they put every city to fire and flame and kill every person they can find. They go scorched-earth on their own people, and by the end of the story, there are six-hundred people from the tribe of Benjamin left, six-hundred men left. They have completely wiped out this tribe, completely devastated this group of people, and then they wake up from the rage and the bloodlust, and they say, “Oh, no, what have we done?” and so then they gather back together before God in the town of Bethel, and it says this in chapter 21, verse 2: “The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly. ‘Lord God of Israel,’ they cried, ‘Why has this happened to us? Why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today?’” They start to blame God for what has happened, and God has to be looking at this like, “I did not tell you to wipe them all out. You guys did that on your own.” They are blaming God for all of their vengeance, all of their bloodlust, all of the violence that’s happened. “Why could God allow this to happen to us?” and so they blame Him, and God did not have anything to do with it.

In fact, God is almost completely absent from this story, and they realize what they have done, that they have wiped out this tribe, but they also realize that in order to repopulate this tribe, these six-hundred men who are left need wives in order to be able to have children, to build back up the tribe that they have essentially committed genocide against, and so they come up with two plans to try to solve this predicament that they have created for themselves. They say, “Okay, you know what? Plan A is let’s do a census of all of the tribes of Israel and all of the towns of Israel, and we want to figure out, because we called all of Israel to battle, to fight against the tribe of Benjamin, was there anyone who did not show up? Was there anyone who did not answer the call to arms?”

Then they find one town that did not come, and they decide, “Okay, you know what we should do? Since they did not show up to help us kill all the people that now we are trying to solve the problem of all the people we killed, let’s kill them, and when we kill them, then we can take all of the wives that we do not kill, and we can give them to the Benjamites, and then that problem will be solved,” except there are only four-hundred women that are left alive in this village, which means that they are about two-hundred short, and so then they come up with another plan, because they realize, “We still can’t give our wives or our daughters to these people, because we swore an oath before God that we would not let them have our daughters in marriage, and so there is a festival where people are going to be worshipping God. What if we sent those two-hundred men to that festival, and when they see a woman that they are attracted to or that they want, they can just take her, and then that person will be their wife, and if their dads or their brothers get upset about what has happened, we will just say, ‘Hey, you know what? You swore an oath, but it is okay, because you did not really give your daughter away. We just took her, so everybody is fine,’” and so that is what they do, and then the book of Judges ends with that story. They just all go home after all of these women have been murdered and all of these children have been murdered, and all of these other women have been kidnapped and taken. They are like, “All right, we handled that. Now we are good. Let’s just go home,” and that is how the book ends.

That is the end, except for this line that the author gives us at the very, very end: “In those days, Israel had no king, and all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.” So, what in the world are we supposed to do with a story as brutal and violent and as morally upside-down as that one? The answer lies in this verse. The author is trying to key us in on what has gone wrong in this story. There was no king in Israel. There was no one ruling. There was no one setting the course of morality for the people, and so everyone just did whatever they felt was best, and what is fascinating is if you read the story, if you go from Judges 19 through 21, it is actually the longest story in the book of Judges, and throughout the entire story, God is almost completely absent. In fact, the only two times He shows up are when they are trying to decide who should attack the city first, and they ask God. That is the only time they seek God’s wisdom, and then at the very end, when they blame God for everything that has happened. Those are the only two times that God has spoken of. He is almost completely absent from the story, and what the author is trying to point out in this story is that everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes. They are not asking God for wisdom. No one in the story is seeking God’s wisdom or submitting to his rule. They are simply trusting their instincts. They are doing what they feel is right. Everyone becomes their own moral compass in their story. They become their own king.

What the author is trying to point out is that when sin goes unchecked, this is what happens. This is what it looks like. When people begin to live by deciding for themselves what is right and wrong, chaos happens, that when we enthrone ourselves in the place of God in our lives, things begin to fall apart. This story is meant to be a warning, a wake-up call. It is supposed to hold a mirror to us and say, “Whom are you following? Who is the king in your life? Where are you deciding to do what is right in your own eyes?” That statement, “right in their own eyes,” is a very specific phrase that we see throughout scripture, and actually, as we go through King of Kings, you are going to see that come up many, many times. This king did either what was right in the Lord’s eyes or did what was right in his own eyes. In fact, that statement goes all the way back to the beginning of scripture.

If you remember in Genesis, Eve comes to the garden, and she sees the tree of the forbidden fruit, and the snake invites her to take it, and you remember what Eve says about the fruit, that it looks pleasing to her eyes. It looked good in her eyes, and the temptation in the garden was to define right and wrong, morality, apart from what God has said, and according to what looks right to you. It is the exact same story playing out, except on a grander scale. What the author is trying to point to is that when we define good and evil on our own terms, apart from God, it always leads to destruction. When sight becomes a substitute for trust, when personal instinct replaces divine authority, this is what happens. The heart of sin is not just breaking the rules, but it is actually replacing God’s rule with our own, becoming our own king, and that is the piece that should sound so familiar to us, because we live in a Judges 21:25 world, where people do what is right in their own eyes all the time.

We live in a culture that says, “I can do whatever I want with whoever I want, whenever I want, as long as I am not hurting anyone.” This is the dominant moral framework that our culture lives with. Everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, so on the surface, when you read that, at first glance, it sounds awesome. “I get to do whatever I want whenever I want, with whomever I want, total freedom, baby. This is the land of America. We believe in freedom. We should get to do whatever we want, with whomever we want, whenever we want.”

The problem with this way of living, though, is that it neglects two things, or it believes two lies, and it asks you to believe two lies. It essentially asks you to believe that you know and understand what is right and best for you, and it also asks you to believe that no matter what you do, you will not hurt anyone else, and what this story exposes is the depth of that lie, that no matter what happens, when we live according to this, we are always going to end up hurting ourselves and most likely are going to hurt those around us. The reality of this story, and here is the hard truth of what this story is pointing at, is that you and I make an absolutely terrible moral compass, and that is not intended to insult you. That is just the reality of the human condition. It is that so many of us, our hearts are pulled in a hundred different directions, and we are driven by fear and desire and insecurity and ego and emotion. I do not know about you, but one minute I am convinced I am standing on the truth. I know what is right. I know what is wrong, and I am going to do this thing, because I am convinced that it is the thing that I should do, and then I do it, and the next minute I am like, "Man, why did I do that? That was terrible," and we live in this constant push and pull where we think, we are convinced that we know what is right and wrong, and then we do the thing, and we end up in a place where we feel complete regret about what has happened.

Most of us, many of us, all of us, are not neutral judges. We have biases too, and we bend morality in our favor. We try to do what benefits us most at the moment. What this story is saying is you were not meant to lead yourself. You are not equipped to be your own moral compass. That is not a weakness in you. That is just reality, and when we try to chart our own direction for right and wrong without God, we do not end up in a place of freedom. We end up in a place of chaos, and the story from Eden to now, it is one long story of humanity continually saying, "I know what is right. I know what I should do. I know the way that I should lead," people choosing what is right at the moment and discovering later how wrong they were, and here is the tragic part of that lie. It is that what often ends up happening, what happens in this story is that when people live according to that belief, "I can do whatever I want with whomever I want, whenever I want, and nobody else will get hurt, and it will all be fine," is the people who suffer the most in those instances are the people who do not have the power to decide what is right or wrong.

The people who are harmed in this story are not the men who are trying to figure out what is right and wrong for themselves. The people who are harmed in this story are the women and the children who are put to the sword, the women who are kidnapped and taken essentially into sex slavery, all in the name of morality and trying to set right what is wrong, and you can see those same types of things playing out in our own culture. When people break a covenant commitment, who is it that suffers? It is often the children. We live in a culture of sexual autonomy, and people can do whatever they want, whenever they want, with whomever they want, and yet who often suffers? It is women, domestic violence, sexual violence, assault, because people think they can get away with whatever they want and use people and degrade their dignity in the name of personal freedom. It is the wealthy and the powerful who get to set laws, and then it is the people who are poorest or most vulnerable among us who suffer. When we choose our own morality, we end up in all sorts of awful places where women and children and the vulnerable are abused and neglected and harmed.

The story should sound familiar, because the fallout of moral independence always harms the vulnerable, because if I have power, and I get to choose what I want to do, I am always going to protect my own comfort over someone else's dignity, and we stop asking the question, "Is this right?" and we ask

the question, “Is this right for me?” and it leads to chaos and collateral damage, and that is what we see in the book of Judges. It is these people who are just doing whatever they want, trying to make up morality, trying to come up with some sense of what to do, and it continually degrades into more and more chaos. Here is the reality. Doing what is right in your own eyes, choosing morality for yourself, does not make you more enlightened. It makes you dangerous to yourself and to the people around you, and it is as if this whole story is screaming at humanity, “You have been making this choice from the beginning, and you think it will lead you to freedom and personal happiness, and every single time it leads to chaos and destruction of your own life, your own soul, and the ripple effect of whom it affects around you,” and that is the call of the story, “There was no king in Israel.”

The truth is, we all need a king. We need someone that we can submit to, who can guide us, who can lead us, who can tell us the difference between right and wrong, so we do not have to make it up ourselves, someone we can point to and say, “Okay, I trust you. I submit to your authority. You lead me. You show me the way, because I am making a mess of things on my own,” and the beauty of scripture is that that story is the story God is telling. He sends a king, a good king. We are all the men in this story. They abuse women. Jesus treats them with dignity and honor. The men in this story are men who sacrifice others to protect themselves, but Jesus is the man who sacrifices Himself to protect others. The people who try to reign and rule and bring about their own sense of justice and destroy the world, we have a Jesus who stands up to evil and brings about the kind of justice that is true and good, and that we all long for.

He is the antithesis to every choice and every moment of this story, but it gets even a little bit more beautiful than that, because you might be here today, and you might be thinking about your own life and thinking, “Man, I have made a mess of things, and I would love to blame God and say, ‘God, why have you allowed this to happen in my life?’” and He is saying, “You made some of these choices yourself,” or maybe you are here, and you have felt the ripple effects of someone else’s choices and the violence and abuse and the ways that they have mistreated you, and your life feels like it is spinning. The beauty of scripture is that it says we have a king who steps into that, that at the moment you realize “I do not want to be the king of my own life,” Jesus says, “I will do it. I am a king who is worthy of submission, and you follow me,” and when things feel like a mess, we have a king who steps into our story to bring about redemption from the vilest things that have happened to us. That is the beauty of this story.

Judges ends on that note: “In those days, there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes,” and if you flip the page to the very next story, it is the book of Ruth, and the very first line in the book of Ruth is this, “In the days when the Judges ruled,” so the same time period of the story we just read, “there was a famine in the land, so a man from Bethlehem in Judah,” where did the story we just read start? Bethlehem in Judah, and then the book of Ruth goes on to tell the story of a Moabite woman who has grafted into the family of God because of her faithfulness and her loyalty, and the story starts in the exact same town, Bethlehem of Judah, and then that story ends, the book of Ruth ends with this line, “and after Ruth and Boaz married,” and they have a son, “and they named this son Obed, and Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David the king.

The story gets even more beautiful than that, because thousands of years after that, in the same town of Bethlehem, a king is born named Jesus, and see what this story is trying to make so, so clear to us is that even in the absolute darkest moments that we have experienced in our own lives or as a people,

God is quietly setting redemption in motion. In the time when the judges ruled, when there was no king, when everything was descending into chaos, and everything started in the town of Bethlehem, at the exact same time, God was weaving together a story in Bethlehem that would lead to King David, that would lead to Jesus setting redemption in motion. God is always reigning. He is always redeeming, and He is always inviting us to surrender ourselves to Jesus, the King of Kings, who is always willing to redeem our story, so if today you have realized that something else may have been ruling your heart, fear or pride, or comfort, your own security, some sort of self-rule, this is your opportunity, the chance to hand it over. You do not have to carry the weight of being your own king any longer. You do not have to try to build everything and hold everything together on your own. Jesus is not here to copilot your life. He is here to reign, to lead, and to restore. The invitation now as we close, I want to invite you to stand and worship Jesus, the King of Kings, who holds all things together, so stand, and I will pray for us as we close.

Heavenly Father, God, as we come together before you, God, there are those moments in scripture when we pause, and we wonder, “What in the world is happening, and what are you doing? What is going on?” and yet God, it is often in those places of confusion that you speak the most clearly. God, if there is anyone here today that is tired of carrying the weight of trying to be their own moral compass, their own king, be in the driver’s seat, I pray that they would turn that over to you. God, if there is anyone here today who has been harmed by the choices of others who have tried to set their own morality and make their own choices and do what is right in their own eyes, God, I pray that you would bring healing. God, I pray for all of us as we live in a world that looks like it is falling apart, coming apart at the seams, that is full of chaos because of choices we have made and choices others have made, I pray that we would see the thread of redemption that has woven through it all, that even in the midst of chaos, you are making all things new. You are working to redeem and to restore, because you are a good king, the King of kings, and so may we surrender to your rule and your reign in our lives, so that the world might be changed for the better. It is in Christ’s name that we pray, amen.

Even in the darkest moments, God is always writing the story of redemption, even in the darkest moments, and I hope you see and know that truth more deeply today.

42:16 minutes

Edited by Tom Kenaston

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