

Judges 21:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpeh, saying, There shall not any of us give his daughter unto Benjamin to wife.

Analysis

Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpeh, saying, There shall not any of us give his daughter unto Benjamin to wife. The Hebrew verb *nishba* (נִשְׁבַּע, "had sworn") indicates a solemn oath taken before God during the assembly at Mizpeh (20:1). This rash vow created an impossible dilemma: Israel had reduced Benjamin to 600 men who needed wives to survive, yet they had bound themselves by oath not to provide daughters. The oath formula reflects the binding nature of vows in ancient Israel—once spoken in God's name, they could not be broken without severe consequences (Numbers 30:2, Deuteronomy 23:21-23).

This verse introduces the tragic irony of the final chapters: Israel's zeal to punish Benjamin's sin led them to make hasty oaths without considering consequences. The phrase "not any of us" (*ish mimmennu*, אִישׁ מִמֶּנּוּ) emphasizes the oath's universality—every tribe bound itself. From a Reformed perspective, this demonstrates the danger of untempered zeal and rash promises made in anger. James 1:19-20 warns that "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." Israel sought to execute justice but created new injustice through imprudent oaths, requiring increasingly unethical solutions (destroying Jabesh-gilead, condoning kidnapping at Shiloh). Their predicament illustrates how sin compounds when we act on passion rather than wisdom, even when the initial cause seems righteous.

Historical Context

Mizpeh (or Mizpah, meaning "watchtower") was a significant assembly site in Benjamin's territory where Israel gathered for the civil war against Benjamin (20:1-3). The assembly represented all tribes united against Benjamin for harboring the Gibeah rapists-murderers. Taking oaths at such tribal assemblies was common in ancient Israel—these were considered binding before God and the community (Joshua 9:15-20, 1 Samuel 14:24-45).

The practice of making marriage oaths had precedent: Abraham made his servant swear not to take a Canaanite wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:3), and later Israelites would be forbidden to intermarry with Canaanites (Deuteronomy 7:3). However, this oath was different—it concerned fellow Israelites, not foreigners. The severity reflects the depth of Israel's horror at Benjamin's protection of rapists-murderers from Gibeah. Yet the oath's rashness becomes apparent when Benjamin is nearly extinct. This period in Judges shows Israel's moral confusion: they could distinguish evil requiring punishment but lacked wisdom to pursue justice proportionately, making vows in heat that created new ethical dilemmas requiring increasingly problematic solutions.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How do rash vows made in anger create ethical dilemmas that require us to choose between breaking our word or committing further wrongs?
2. What does this oath reveal about the danger of absolute commitments made without considering long-term consequences?
3. How can we pursue justice against sin without letting righteous anger lead us into imprudent decisions that compound rather than resolve evil?

Interlinear Text

אֵשׁ	יִשְׂרָאֵל	נָשָׁבַע	בְּמִצְפֶּה	לֵאמֹר	אֵשׁ
Now the men	of Israel	had sworn	in Mizpeh	saying	Now the men
H376	H3478	H7650	H4709	H559	H376
וְלֹא	נָתַתְּ	בִּתּוֹ	לְבִנְיָמִן	לְאִשָּׁה:	
H4480	H3808	of us give	his daughter	unto Benjamin	to wife
	H5414	H1323	H1144	H802	

Additional Cross-References

Judges 20:1 (References Israel): Then all the children of Israel went out, and the congregation was gathered together as one man, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, with the land of Gilead, unto the LORD in Mizpeh.

Mark 6:23 (Parallel theme): And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom.

Acts 23:12 (Parallel theme): And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.

Ecclesiastes 5:2 (Parallel theme): Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

Judges 20:8 (Parallel theme): And all the people arose as one man, saying, We will not any of us go to his tent, neither will we any of us turn into his house.

Judges 21:18 (References Israel): Howbeit we may not give them wives of our daughters: for the children of Israel have sworn, saying, Cursed be he that giveth a wife to Benjamin.