

Judges 21:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And said, O LORD God of Israel, why is this come to pass in Israel, that there should be to day one tribe lacking in Israel?

Analysis

And said, O LORD God of Israel, why is this come to pass in Israel, that there should be to day one tribe lacking in Israel? The question "why is this come to pass" (lamah haytah zot, לָמַדְתָּה זֹאת) reveals Israel's confusion at finding themselves responsible for nearly exterminating a brother tribe. The phrase "one tribe lacking" (shevet echad, שְׁבָט אֶחָד) emphasizes the threat to Israel's tribal structure—God had promised Jacob twelve sons would become twelve tribes, yet now Benjamin faced extinction with only 600 surviving men.

The tragic irony is palpable: Israel asks God why this happened, yet they themselves caused it through excessive vengeance (600,000 men against one tribe) and a rash oath. Their question reveals a failure to recognize their own agency and responsibility. From a Reformed perspective, this demonstrates human tendency to blame circumstances or even God for consequences of our own sinful choices. Israel pursued justice against Benjamin's sin but did so with disproportionate force and without wisdom, then wondered how the disaster occurred. The theological point echoes throughout Scripture: God allows us to experience consequences of foolish decisions (Galatians 6:7-8). Their lament shows they valued tribal unity but had acted in ways that destroyed it, illustrating the disconnect between stated values and actual behavior when passion overrules wisdom.

Historical Context

The lament occurs at Bethel ("house of God," verse 2), where the ark resided during this early Judges period. Israel's concern for maintaining twelve tribes reflects the foundational promise to Jacob that his twelve sons would become a great nation (Genesis 49). The tribal structure was central to Israel's identity—each tribe had territorial inheritance, representatives in the assembly, and role in national life.

Benjamin's near-extinction was particularly tragic because this was Rachel's son, Joseph's full brother, and the tribe from which Israel's first king (Saul) would come. The tribe occupied strategic territory between Judah and Ephraim, including Jericho, Bethel, and later Jerusalem's northern border. Losing Benjamin would create geographic and political problems beyond mere numerical reduction. Yet Israel's lament rings hollow given their own role in creating the crisis: they prosecuted the war with overwhelming force (600,000 against one tribe), killed 25,100 Benjamites, destroyed all Benjamite cities (20:48), and made an oath preventing reconciliation. Their question to God amounts to asking why they did what they themselves chose to do—a failure to accept responsibility that characterizes the entire Judges period's moral decline.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. When have you found yourself asking God why something happened that resulted from your own unwise choices?
2. How does Israel's lament reveal the human tendency to value something (tribal unity) while acting in ways that destroy it?
3. What does this verse teach about accepting responsibility for consequences rather than treating them as mysterious divine judgments?

Interlinear Text

זאת ביתה משכאה לאלה יהוה למן ה יי אמר ו
And said H4100 O LORD God in Israel H1961 H2063
H559 H3068 H430 H3478

אחד: שבט משכאה לאלה יהוה בימינו לא פקח ד
in Israel lacking that there should be to day in Israel tribe one
H3478 H6485 H3117 H3478 H7626 H259

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