

Judges 21:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the children of Israel repented them for Benjamin their brother, and said, There is one tribe cut off from Israel this day.

Analysis

And the children of Israel repented them for Benjamin their brother, and said, There is one tribe cut off from Israel this day. The Hebrew *nicham* (נָחַם, "repented," or "had compassion") indicates grief and change of mind, though not necessarily full moral repentance. The phrase "Benjamin their brother" (Binyamin achihem, בִּנְיָמִן אָחִיהֶם) reveals belated recognition of kinship—they had treated Benjamin as enemy but now remember tribal brotherhood. The passive construction "is cut off" (*nigda*, נִגְדָּה) suggests they still haven't fully owned their own agency in nearly exterminating Benjamin through excessive force and rash oaths.

This verse captures the tragedy of belated wisdom: Israel grieves for Benjamin only after destroying him. Their "repentance" is emotional regret at consequences rather than moral transformation—they feel badly about the outcome but will still solve the problem through violence (destroying Jabesh-gilead, condoning kidnapping at Shiloh). From a Reformed perspective, this illustrates the difference between worldly sorrow that produces death and godly sorrow that produces repentance leading to salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10). True repentance would involve confessing their excessive vengeance, rash oaths, and failure to seek God's wisdom, then finding merciful solutions. Instead, they maintained their oaths' letter while violating their spirit, showing more concern for their honor than for righteousness. Their "compassion" for Benjamin led to destroying another city,

revealing that emotional regret without wisdom merely exchanges one injustice for another.

Historical Context

Benjamin was Rachel's youngest son and Joseph's only full brother, making this tribe particularly precious in Israel's memory. The tribe's territory was strategic, occupying the hill country between Judah and Ephraim, including Jericho, Ai, Gibeon, and later Jerusalem's northern border. Benjamin's military prowess was legendary—the tribe of left-handed slingers who "could sling stones at a hair breadth and not miss" (Judges 20:16).

The phrase "cut off" is agricultural, suggesting a branch severed from a tree—the organic unity of Israel's twelve tribes was disrupted. Israel's concern was not merely sentimental but practical: Benjamin's extinction would create territorial, military, and theological problems. The promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob involved twelve tribes, and losing one seemed to threaten divine promise fulfillment. Yet Israel's grief appears more focused on preserving the institution of twelve tribes than on the actual people—they mourned Benjamin's near-extinction while simultaneously destroying Benjamite cities and later Jabesh-gilead. This reflects the moral confusion of the Judges period: concern for religious forms (twelve tribes, keeping oaths) divorced from concern for people and genuine righteousness, illustrating that the era's problem was not mere lawlessness but law divorced from love and wisdom.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How do we sometimes grieve consequences of our own actions while still failing to accept responsibility or change our approach?
2. What is the difference between worldly sorrow at bad outcomes and godly sorrow that produces genuine repentance and change?
3. How might Israel's concern for preserving "twelve tribes" as an institution have eclipsed their concern for the actual people involved?

Interlinear Text

וַתִּתְּנוּ	בְּנֵי יִ	מִשְׁכָּאֵל:	אֵל	בְּנֵימָן	אָחִי יוֹ
repented	And the children	from Israel	H413	them for Benjamin	their brother
H5162	H1121	H3478		H1144	H251
וַיֹּאמֶר ו	נִגְדַּע	הַיּוֹם	שֵׁבֶט	אֶחָד	מִשְׁכָּאֵל:
and said	cut off	this day	tribe	There is one	from Israel
H559	H1438	H3117	H7626	H259	H3478

Additional Cross-References

Judges 21:15 (Repentance): And the people repented them for Benjamin, because that the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.