

What's the strangest thing you've ever gotten in the mail? I'm not talking about a letter from a Nigerian prince or a piece of junk mail. I'm talking about an actual piece of junk.

Since 2013, Ripley's Believe It or Not has been running a strange mail contest. The only rule was that the item couldn't be packaged or wrapped. It had to be sent with the address directly applied to the item. The weirdest items have included a tree trunk with a horseshoe embedded inside, a prosthetic arm, a traffic cone, a blue bra, toilet paper, although that doesn't seem so weird after last year. There was an actual mail box. I wonder if it fit in the mail box.

However, there is nothing in Ripley's contest that rivals what gets mailed to eleven of the twelve tribes of Israel in Judges 19. It's an absolutely dreadful story, horrific in every detail. It is the last and longest story in the book of Judges, covering 103 verses over 3 chapters. The story features no judge, no warrior, no hero to rescue Israel. There's no enemy or oppressor to fight. It is a dark story with no happy ending.

The short version of the story goes something like this. A Levite has a concubine who gets gang raped by some men of the tribe of Benjamin in the city of Gibeah. She is abused so severely she dies. In an effort to get revenge against the men of Gibeah, the Levite cuts her corpse into eleven pieces and sends them to the other eleven tribes. The other tribes respond in force, but the tribe of Benjamin, instead of turning the guilty parties, rally to their defense. The whole nation descends into a period of civil war that costs tens of thousands of lives, and leaves the tribe of Benjamin almost completely decimated.

Then, after trying to destroy the tribe of Benjamin, Israel desperately tries to save the tribe by finding brides for the few survivors. They concoct a scheme every bit as evil as what the men of Benjamin did in the first place.

So, I hope you've been blessed and encouraged this morning. Let's stand and sing... No, not so fast. This is one of those stories that when you read it, you truly think, "What did I just read? What's going on here?"

This is a story that begins badly and descends into unimaginable darkness. Sin is layered upon sin from beginning to end. There are no good guys. Only bad. Some worse. There are no winners, only losers. It is perhaps the most tragic story in all of Scripture.

The most important part of this story is the line both begins and ends this story. 19:1 begins with this line, "*In those days Israel had no king.*" When we finally get to the end of chapter 21, verse 25 reads, "*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.*" Literally, it reads "*everyone did what was right in their own eyes.*" This refrain is repeated multiple times in Judges. It does more than tell us when the story takes place. It tells us why it takes place.

God never intended for Israel to have a king. God was supposed to be their king. They were to led by His Law. They were to be guided by their special relationship with him. They interacted

with God through the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle. They had priests and the whole tribe of Levites who were to be their spiritual leaders. But Israel wasn't listening to God. This verse tells us that even God wasn't her king. There was no law. There was no guiding hand. Why? Because everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

This is apparent in the rest of verse 1 in chapter 19, "*Now a Levite who lived in a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim took a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.*" The Levites were a special tribe. They were devoted to the service of the Lord. They were to be the spiritual leaders of nation. But here we have this Levite who's went and got himself a concubine.

A concubine was a combination of a wife and a slave. She was a second-class wife to whom you were legally married, but she didn't have the full status of a wife. Concubines were acquired through political negotiations, business deals, in payment of debt, or you could simply buy or trade for one. In this sense, concubines were seen as contractual property. Given the customs of the day, the Levite may have simply purchased her from her father.

As a practical matter, concubines were often about having children. In an agrarian society, many children were needed tend the flocks, raise the crops and conduct family business. Many men would marry concubines when their wives could no longer bear children. It was a way of continuing to have young, strong labor even in your older years. However, children of a concubine did not possess the same inheritance rights as those of a full wife.

There is no question concubinage was exploitative. It was a practice Israel picked up from her pagan neighbors. It was used as a loophole to get around God's law against adultery. It was never a part of God's design for the home. God intended marriage to be a relationship of mutual love and support by a husband and a wife. There is no place in the Bible where God sanctions or approves this practice in any way.

A Levite who was serious about being a spiritual leader in Israel would not have a concubine in the first place. He was just doing what was right in his own eyes. We might feel sympathetic for this young woman who leaves her husband and goes back to her father's house. She's in an unenviable situation as a second class wife, but she is not blameless in this story. Verse 2 says, "*She was unfaithful to him.*" Literally it means she "played the prostitute." Maybe she's ashamed, or maybe she thinks her husband won't take her back, but whatever the case, she goes back to her father's house in Bethlehem. She's doing what is right in her own eyes.

The Levite waits for her to come back, but after four months, he decides to go to her father's house and fetch her himself. There's a lot of details left out here because they're not central to the story. We have no idea how the conversation went, but she seems to welcome him gladly and immediately invites him into her father's house. The father-in-law, for his part, seems overjoyed to receive him. In fact he wants to celebrate and he prevails upon him to stay three days. They eat and drink and seem to be getting along splendidly, but by the fourth day, the

Levite is ready to leave, and over the next two days, he tries to leave multiple times, but girl's father seems unwilling to let them go.

We don't know if he's just an overeager host, he's concerned about his daughter and doesn't trust the Levite, or he just doesn't want to see his baby go again. He's just doing what is right in his own eyes. So every time the Levite tries to leave, her father is like, "*Refresh yourself with something to eat; then you can go. It's getting late. Stay tonight and enjoy yourself.*" He tries keeping them there three more days.

Ironically, it's the father's protectiveness that sets this whole tragedy in motion, as he unknowingly puts his daughter in harm's way by delaying their departure. The Levite tried to leave on the morning of the 5th day, but by the time he can pry himself away, it's already late in the afternoon. He sets out with his servant, his concubine, and two donkeys, and they head for home. He knows that he won't get far, but refuses to be delayed any longer by dear old dad.

The first city they pass on their homeward journey about 5 miles away is Jebus, which will one day when David captures it become Jerusalem. But today it is still a pagan city. The servant suggests they spend the night there, but understandably, the Levite would rather not stay in a foreign, pagan city. He wants to continue on to an Israelite city where they might expect better hospitality. So, they press on 10 more miles toward Gibeah, of the tribe of Benjamin.

By the time they get to Gibeah, the sun is setting. They go on into the city square, just inside the gates, in hopes of finding lodging for the night. This is ancient equivalent of AirBnB. Near Eastern hospitality dictated that a local family should provide refuge for travelers needing shelter for the night.

However, no one offers to take them in. That's strange. This is the first sign something was wrong in Gibeah, and the problem is a lot worse than a lack of hospitality. As dusk draws into night, an old man comes in late from his work in the fields. When he sees the stranger in the square, he knows trouble is brewing. Notice that he's not a local. He's an Ephraimite living among the Benjamites, and he knows not every is Kosher in town.

Down in vs. 20, the old man says, "*You are welcome at my house...Let me supply whatever you need. Only don't spend the night in the square.*" He knows that's a bad idea. This is the second sign there's something strange in the neighborhood.

At first, the old man seems the perfect host. He feeds the animals, gives them water to wash their feet, and feeds them dinner. This is where things take a very dark turn. I will read this straight from the Biblical text beginning in Judges 19:22

22 While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, "Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him."

The word that's used to describe these men literally means "sons of belial." It's more than just wicked. It is the personification of wickedness. It's a term that later becomes a name for Satan himself. So, you have these men of Gibeah, who are supposed to be children of God, but instead they are the sons of evil. It may only be some of the men of the city, but no one tries to stop them. No one warned these strangers in town. Everyone turns a blind eye. They are bold and brash enough to come outside at night to engage in a public orgy without shame or fear. The whole city is complicit in this evil.

Our narrator in Judges, most likely Samuel, frames the story in such a way that we cannot miss the parallels to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. That was event so evil, that God saw fit to destroy the entire valley. This is Samuel's way of telling us that things in Israel are every bit as bad as Sodom and Gomorrah. Except then, they were pagan cities who owed no allegiance to God, but now it is an Israelite city of God's own chosen people.

23 The owner of the house went outside and said to them, "No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this outrageous thing. 24 Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don't do such an outrageous thing."

How bad do things have to be when giving up your own daughter and another man's wife to be raped seems like a better alternative? When he says to them, "do to them whatever you wish." What it literally says in the Hebrew is "Do to them whatever is good in your own eyes."

There is a twisted sense of hospitality here. Customs of honor and hospitality dictated that when you take someone into your home, you are taking them under your protection. The old man is trying to protect the Levite here. It's a matter of personal duty and honor, but he's willing to sacrifice his own daughter and the concubine to do it. His selfish view of personal honor is more important to him than protecting his own daughter. He's not willing to put his own life on the line. He's doing what was right in his own eyes. And the Levite never jumps in to protest to defend his concubine. He willingly goes along with the plan. Better her than me.

25 But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go. 26 At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight. 27 When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. 28 He said to her, "Get up; let's go." But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home.

Here we see just how complicit the Levite is in this process. He's the one that throws his concubine out to them like tossing a scrap of meat to dogs. She's getting gang-raped and abused all-night long, and what does he do? He goes to bed. Did you notice that in verse 27?

“When her master got up in the morning.” He slept through the whole thing. He is every bit the monster as those outside the house. They were willing to rape her, and he was willing to let them do it. He was just doing what was right in his own eyes.

All she wanted was to be protected and to be loved. In her last, dying moments she collapses at the doorway with her hands grasping the threshold. Just let me in where I am safe.

Notice how calloused the Levite is at this point. He shows zero concern for her. *“Get up; let’s go,”* as if he is waking her up because she overslept. Vs. 28 says, *“But there was no answer.”* That’s because she’s dead.

29 When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel. 30 Everyone who saw it was saying to one another, “Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Just imagine! We must do something! So speak up!”

It’s a macabre scene. He carves her up like he’s dressing a deer. What inspires him to come up with this plan? How did he send these body parts? Did he call UPS? Who did he send them to? I suppose each tribe had a leading patriarch or elder to represent them. Judah gets her head. Zebulon gets the right hand and forearm. Naphtali gets her torso, and so on.

I suppose today, he’d just post a video on Tik Tok. It would go viral and the outrage mob would all show up in the streets of Gibeah and riot until these men of Benjamin were cancelled.

His packages have their intended affect. The tribes are shocked into action; assembling a force of 400,000 men armed with swords. To give you some perspective, only about 175,00 total fought in the battle of Gettysburg. It’s an impressive showing. In chapter 20:4 they say, *“Tell us how the awful thing happened.”* The Levite tells his story, but he leaves out the key detail that he’s the one that sacrificed his own concubine.” He’s the first one they should have strung up.

They send out messengers throughout the tribe of Benjamin asking them to turn over the guilty parties. Here’s what we read in 20:13-14,

3 Now turn those wicked men of Gibeah over to us so that we may put them to death and purge the evil from Israel.” But the Benjamites would not listen to their fellow Israelites. 14 From their towns they came together at Gibeah to fight against the Israelites.

Eleven tribes versus one and they can only produce 26,000 swordsmen, but they also have 700 left-handed sling throwers who were all expert marksmen. For a variety of reasons, their left-handedness gives them a distinct advantage on the battlefield. The military history nerd in me would love to go into the reasons for this, but we can’t.

Now, for the first time in the whole story, God comes into the picture. They inquire of the Lord who should lead the charge into battle, and God tells them Judah. Bethlehem was in Judah. The victim was from Judah, so this makes sense. Things get even more strange here. God seems as

interested in punishing the other tribes as he does Benjamin. The first two times they march into battle, the Benjamites soundly defeat the rest of Israel. The fighting takes place near the city gates which would be highly defensible, and well within range of those 700 slingers up on the city walls, and they do some serious damage. 22,000 die the first day. Another 18,000 die the second day.

It's not until the third day that God assures them of victory. This time Israel sets an ambush that draws the Benjamite swordsmen out of the city where they are wiped out. 25,000 of them die. Only 600 survive, and presumably most of them were the left-handed slingers, and they escape into the wilderness. Meanwhile, the men of Israel attack all the undefended towns of Benjamin, killing everything and everyone, every man, woman, child and animal. Then they set the buildings on fire. It's an orgy of rage and anger that far exceeds the crime.

When Judges 20 ends, all that is left of the tribe are the 600 warriors that escaped. Now, the Israelites have a sobering realization. Israel is about to be only 11 tribes instead of 12. They suddenly become intent on saving the tribe of Benjamin, but they've killed all their wives and made a stupid vow to never give one of their daughters in marriage to a Benjamite. They make a peace with the surviving Benjamites, and agree to find wives for them so the tribe can survive.

This is when they discover that one city didn't send any soldiers for the battle, so the men of this city never made that vow. They attack the city of Jabesh Gilead killing everyone except for virgin girls of marriageable age, whom they gave to the Benjamites for wives. We have murder, kidnapping, sex trafficking and rape on a massive scale. And it doesn't even solve their problem. There still aren't enough wives for all the men. So, their next genius plan is to have the warriors from the tribe of Benjamin kidnap and rape the daughters of another Israelite city, Shiloh, while they were celebrating a holy festival.

Here's how the book of Judges ends,

23 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. 24 At that time the Israelites left that place and went home to their tribes and clans, each to his own inheritance. 25 In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

I told you it was a dark story, a story without a happy ending. So, why is it in the Bible? What is God trying to tell us? It is a morality tale. It tells us what happens to a people in a moral vacuum. This is what happens when there is no godly leadership, there is no absolute truth, and everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

In this story, there are two things in particular you see. The first is human life is cheapened. Human lives become disposable as long as it fits what is right in your own eyes. Think of how much death and destruction takes place. Even if some sort of punishment was justified against

the tribe of Benjamin, another innocent city was destroyed, and a second had 200 virgin daughters of marriageable age stolen from them.

The second thing that happens inside this moral vacuum is that women are no longer assigned a place of honor. For the Levite and his host, women were nothing more than chips to be bartered with. They were expendable. Neither one of them is willing to put their own life at risk to defend their daughter or his wife. But it's not just that. You had kidnapping, sex trafficking and rape on a massive scale.

Women will not fare well in any culture where womanhood is no longer something to be prized, preserved and protected. We need to celebrate and elevate femininity without diminishing masculinity. We are feminizing our men, and telling girls that to be a strong woman is to act like a man. Women are taught to debase their femininity in pursuit of feminist power and significance. Our girls are being trained to emulate the qualities of men rather than master the art of being a woman.

Let me say this to the girls and young women here this morning. Being a woman is a wonderful thing. Your femininity is a precious treasure worthy of being cherished. You are not alone. You are not the only one who feels this way. Don't believe the lies of our culture. Don't believe the mainstream media. Don't believe the lies Satan whispers in your ear. We as followers of Jesus must not fall into this trap. Like Jesus we must treat women with honor, worth, dignity and respect.

That statement which begins and ends this story is such a fitting description of our own culture that acknowledges no god, no absolute truth, and no objective standard or morality. Ours is a culture of find your own truth and follow your heart. Do what feels right to you. In other words, do whatever seems right in your own eyes – the exact thing that the host in Gibeah told the men of Gibeah to do with his daughter and the concubine. The saddest part of this story may be that we aren't too far behind.

The final thing I will say is that we cannot look back at this story without also seeing the cross and the empty grave. Where there was only sin, we see grace. Where there was only darkness and death, we see hope and healing.