**A Levite and His Concubine**

John Greenleaf Whittier wrote “For all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these ‘It might have been’”. This came from the poem Maud Muller, a story of unrequited love and a two people spending a lifetime of regret. As we continue our study of Judges, one wonders what might have been had the people in these chapters made better decisions. As we discussed last week, the last 5 chapters of Judges describe very unusual events and chapter 19 takes us from strange to gruesome. The saddest words are the opening words of the chapter “In those days Israel had no king”. Like chapters 17 & 18, another Levite is the subject of this chapter. He was an unnamed man who lived in the hill country of Ephraim and took a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. She left him and returned to her father’s house to live (the JKV says that she prostituted herself). After 4 months, the man went back to Bethlehem to ask her to return to him. Her father gladly welcomed him into the house and provided meals and a place to stay for 3 days. David Guzik speculated that either the father was glad to see the couple reunited or was anxious to get his daughter out of his house. On the 4th day, the Levite prepared to leave but the father asked him to stay another night. On the 5th day of the visit, the father caused him to linger until the afternoon then asked him to stay another night. The Levite insisted on leaving even though it was late in the day.

Taking his concubine and servant, the Levite left. In the next chapter, we learn that he was going to Shiloh before he returned to Ephraim. The journey from Bethlehem to Shiloh took them through the territory of Benjamin. The first town they encountered was Jerusalem also known as Jebus. The city of David that would become the center of power of Israel was still occupied by Canaanites at the time (see 1:21). Despite his servant’s advice that they spend the night in Jerusalem, the Levite decided to move on to Gibeah which was occupied by the tribe of Benjamin. His logic was sound since he thought they would be safer in a town of fellow Israelites rather than a town of Canaanites.

When they arrived at Gibeah, they found no place to stay until an old man also from the hill country of Ephraim invited them to his home. He urged them not to spend the night in the town square, an indication that he knew they would not be safe there. During the night, some men of the town beat on the door and demanded the Levite be brought out for their pleasure, much the same as how the men of Sodom prevailed on Lot (see Gen. chap. 19). The NIV describes them as wicked men while the KJV more accurately refers to them as sons of Belial. Just as Lot had done, the man offered his own daughter as well as the Levite’s concubine. When they refused, the Levite sent his concubine out and she was repeatedly raped during the night.

When the Levite got up the following morning, he found the woman lying in the doorway. When she did not respond to him, he placed her on his donkey and left. When he arrived at home, he took her and cut her body into 12 pieces which he sent to the 12 tribes. The chapter ends as the recipients of the body parts said nothing like that had ever happened in Israel and they pondered what to do.

This chapter is so offensive that the writer F. B. Meyer recommended that it not be read. The actions of the Levite went from bad to worse, culminating in the butchering of his wife. Some have written that she was possibly still alive after being raped. Matthew Henry wrote that if chapters 17 & 18 were about how an active Levite led the tribe of Dan astray, chapter 19 is about how a passive Levite set in motion other tragic events. He had no good options in Gibeah but a brave man would have faced the mob and protected his wife. He did not and his reaction to her dead body the following morning indicated no remorse. Words do not exist that describe the horror of the dismemberment of her body. As we will read in the next chapter, his account of the events was only that she was raped and killed, leaving out his cowardice.

The woman is a victim throughout this story. Matthew Henry wrote that while the Levite’s actions were inexcusable, perhaps her fate was punishment for her sinful life. Other writers were kinder, noting that different translations suggested that she merely left her husband, not that she was a prostitute. Herbert Wolf wrote that it was little wonder she left her husband in the first place given his poor character.

The men of Gibeah were just as savage as the men of Sodom (see Rom. 1:24) yet we see no swift justice as in Genesis. This was a time when God allowed the Israelites to self govern and they responded poorly. There was no judge, there was no king and the Israelites did not acknowledge God as their king. Doubtless, the saddest words today are what might have been for the unsaved. I’ll close by using Whittier’s poem for inspiration.

Of all the words of tongue and pen, speak not of what might have been

There but for the grace of God go I, a sinner condemned, twice to die

But I’m covered by the blood of Calvary and a home in heaven waits for me