

# A Hero Will Rise

The Book of Judges

Text

Judges 21:1-25

Topic

After their civil war, the Israelites devise plans for kidnapping brides for the 600 men of the tribe of Benjamin

Title

*“Benjamin, You May Now Catch the Bride”*

In *Toy Story 2*, Woody is abducted by an unscrupulous toy store owner, prompting Buzz Lightyear and the gang to head out on a daring rescue mission to save their friend.

It's one of a slew of Hollywood feature films - both animated and live action - that take a lighthearted, comedic approach to kidnapping. After all, what's not to laugh about when someone is kidnapped?

There's nothing funny about the two mass kidnappings in chapter twenty-one of Judges:

- In the first, the men, women, and children of Jabesh Gilead are mercilessly slaughtered, sparing for abduction only “four hundred young virgins who had not known a man intimately” (v12).
- In the second, no one is killed, but two hundred more girls are forcibly abducted on their way to a harvest festival in Shiloh.

You'd expect this from the Canaanites living in the Promised Land, but these crimes are carried-out by the tribes of Israel.

Didn't God's Law forbid such atrocities? It did (and it does).

It wasn't God's Law that was the problem. I'm going to argue that the tribes of Israel were suffering from what we routinely call *legalism*. On account of their being legalistic, they felt justified to attack and abduct.

Legalism is one of those words you hear almost immediately upon becoming a Christian. You may not be sure of what it means, but you know it's very, very bad.

It's worse than you think. We're going to personify legalism, and describe it as an enemy seeking to attack and abduct us. I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 Look **Out** For Legalism's Attack To Abduct You, and #2 Look **In** For Legalism's Attack To Abduct you.

## #1 Look **Out** For Legalism's Attack To Abduct You

(v1-13)

This from Wikipedia:

Bride kidnapping has been practiced around the world and throughout history. It continues to occur in countries in Central Asia, the Caucasus region, and parts of Africa, and among peoples as diverse as the Hmong in Southeast Asia, the Tzeltal in Mexico, and the Romani in Europe.

In Uzbekistan, almost one fifth of all marriages are initiated through the act of kidnapping.

In our chapter, all the women abducted are taken as brides. Previously, in a bloody civil conflict, eleven tribes of Israel had nearly exterminated the tribe of Benjamin. Only 600 men remained.

It is at this point in the story that we remember that in their zeal to defeat Benjamin, the Israelites had murdered women and children - every Benjamite except the 600 fighting men who had escaped and were holed-up at Rimmon.

They needed to find wives. But there was a problem.

Jdg 21:1 Now the men of Israel had sworn an oath at Mizpah, saying, "None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife."

The Israelites had "sworn an oath" not to allow their daughters to marry Benjamites. It wasn't necessary; it certainly wasn't part of God's Law. It was a rash, unbiblical, uncalled for show of extra-spirituality.

What they did was a good example of legalism in action. They imposed a man-made law upon themselves and others, then elevated its outward observance to the status of God's Law.

Let's pause and try to get a handle on legalism. A quick, but accurate, definition goes like this: "In Christianity, legalism is the excessive and improper use of God's Law, and the imposing of man-made laws as equally binding."

One commentator expanded on that, saying the following:

The word “legalism” does not occur in the Bible. It is a term Christians use to describe a doctrinal position emphasizing a system of rules and regulations for achieving both salvation and spiritual growth. Legalists believe in and demand a strict literal adherence to rules and regulations.

One more quote that describes how legalism plays-out in our walk with Jesus:

Legalism can take different forms:

1. The first is where a person attempts to keep the Law in order to attain salvation.
  2. The second is where a person keeps the Law in order to maintain his salvation.
  3. The third is when a Christian judges other Christians for not keeping certain codes of conduct that he thinks need to be observed.
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1. The folks who insist you must be water baptized in order to be saved; or that you must ‘keep’ the Sabbath; are an example of the first form of legalism.
  2. Those who insist that you must practice confession, and weekly partake of communion, are practicing the second form of legalism by thinking that salvation must be maintained by works.
  3. Among us Protestants, the third form of legalism is most prevalent - where we think our personal lists of do’s and don’ts makes us more spiritual than others.

Getting back to our story in Judges: The Israelites imposed a man-made law upon themselves and others, then elevated its outward observance to the status of God's Law. Now that Benjamin had been subdued, the vow of the other tribes would make it impossible for them to recover. The vow all but guaranteed Benjamin's extinction.

Jdg 21:2 Then the people came to the house of God, and remained there before God till evening. They lifted up their voices and wept bitterly,

Jdg 21:3 and said, "O LORD God of Israel, why has this come to pass in Israel, that today there should be one tribe *missing* in Israel?"

"Why this" had "come to pass" was because of their letting their mission to punish the wicked men of Gibeah get out of control.

Jdg 21:4 So it was, on the next morning, that the people rose early and built an altar there, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.

One thing to note about legalists: They are outwardly spiritual. If you had come upon this scene, you'd have thought Israel totally committed to following their God.

Jdg 21:5 The children of Israel said, "Who *is there* among all the tribes of Israel who did not come up with the assembly to the LORD?" For they had made a great oath concerning anyone who had not come up to the LORD at Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death."

These guys loved oaths. They remembered another one that we just now hear about.

The basic text regulating the taking of vows is in Numbers 30:3, "When a man vows a vow unto the Lord, or swears an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."

How binding were these oaths? I consulted a Jewish website. Regarding the possible nullifying of vows, they say,

The rabbis... ruled that vows can be nullified by a sage. The procedure is for the sage to ask the man who made the vow whether he would have made it had he known that circumstances would arise which would have prevented him from keeping the vow... If the sage ascertains that had the man known that the vow would cause him this embarrassment he would not have made it, the vow is then treated as one made in error or unwittingly and the sage can declare it to be null and void.

I maintain they ought to have nullified their vow. Being legalists, that thought never entered their minds. Their vow was equal to God's Law. It would make them appear unspiritual to nullify it.

Please tell me they weren't seriously going to make matters worse?

Jdg 21:6 And the children of Israel grieved for Benjamin their brother, and said, "One tribe is cut off from Israel today.

Jdg 21:7 What shall we do for wives for those who remain, seeing we have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them our daughters as wives?"

Jdg 21:8 And they said, "What one *is there* from the tribes of Israel who did not come up to Mizpah to the LORD?" And, in fact, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh Gilead to the assembly.

Jdg 21:9 For when the people were counted, indeed, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead *was* there.

No reason is given for the absence of men from Jabesh Gilead. For all they knew, it could have been an oversight. Fueled by a legalistic spirit, the men of Israel were intent on keeping their rash vows above all else.

Jdg 21:10 So the congregation sent out there twelve thousand of their most valiant men, and commanded them, saying, "Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead with the edge of the sword, including the women and children.

Jdg 21:11 And this *is* the thing that you shall do: You shall utterly destroy every male, and every woman who has known a man intimately."

Do you see how their legalism kept making things worse? Not only did they commit further atrocities; they felt justified in doing them.

We might describe them as keeping to the letter of the law, while ignoring the spirit of the law. Even if the men of Jabesh Gilead had outright refused to join in the war against the Benjamites, the appropriate punishment wasn't mass murder.

In fact, the Israelites were using this second vow to their advantage, as an excuse for their solution to the bride problem.

Jdg 21:12 So they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead four hundred young virgins who had not known a man intimately; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

Their vow, as recorded in verse five, seemed to be confined to fighting men who refused to join them against the Benjamites. They altered it to include everyone *except* “young virgins,” whom they needed to resolve the problem created by their other vow.

Legalists are always changing the rules to fit their situation. Sabbath keeping is a good example. Each sabbatarian has his or her own list of what constitutes working on the Sabbath. And their list always benefits them while projecting restraints on others. In other words, it’s all subjective; it’s all man-made. It is custom-tailored to benefit the person keeping it.

Jdg 21:13 Then the whole congregation sent *word* to the children of Benjamin who *were* at the rock of Rimmon, and announced peace to them.

Problem solved. They murdered their fellow Israelites - including non-combatants, women, and children - in order to kidnap brides for the 600 Benjamites.

The people of Jabesh Gilead found out the hard way that legalism was a powerful enemy.

I said we are to “look out for legalism’s attack to abduct” us. As believers who are saved by grace through faith, and who continue to walk with Jesus by faith in the power of His Spirit, we are surrounded by legalists.

In some cases, it **is** a life-and-death matter. Christians are right now being forced to convert to Islam or die.



The assault upon us in the West is not physical so much as it is spiritual. There is constant pressure on us to conform to a set of man-made rules, thinking those will help us to achieve or maintain our salvation.

Truth is, we are to 'keep' God's Law, but not by strict mechanical obedience. One pastor said, "The legalist focuses only on obeying bare rules, destroying the broader context of God's love and redemption in which He gave His law in the first place."

The way to defend against legalisms attack to abduct you is to hold as foundational what Jesus said was the greatest commandment:

Mat 22:37 ... 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.'

Mat 22:38 This is *the* first and great commandment.

Mat 22:39 And *the* second *is* like it: 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'

Mat 22:40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

If you are pursuing that kind of personal, passionate relationship with Jesus, you'll be immune from the onslaught of legalists and their various legalism. You'll act in love and you will find yourself keeping God's Law as a by-product.

Maybe you're not a Christian. You do not become one by obeying some man-made rules and rituals seemingly based on the Bible. No works of yours could ever save you. Your very best efforts will always fall short. You can't work your way to Heaven; you can't get there by deeds.

Jesus offers you salvation as a free gift of God's grace. What do you do when someone gives you a gift? You receive it, you open it, you enjoy it.

That's why we say salvation is by grace, through faith. You simply believe in Jesus. Do it now... For sure, before we finish.

## #2 Look **In** For Legalism's Attack To Abduct You

(v14-25)

There's another form of legalism that attacks us, one we haven't yet mentioned. It is our trying to find all sorts of creative ways to get around God's Law.

The New Testament era Pharisees were excellent practitioners of this kind of legalism. Once they even thought they could righteously get away from honoring their elderly parents by taking any support they could offer them and giving it to God instead (Mark 7:9-13).

I'd throw-out as a modern example the many creative arguments believers use to justify getting involved romantically with nonbelievers, and subsequently marrying them.

God's Word is clear - "do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers" (Second Corinthians 6:14). Any attempt to circumvent that principle is legalism.

When I say to "look **in** for legalism," I mean to emphasize that we are prone to it by nature.

As our story continues, we'll see an example of this kind of legalism. If you were paying attention, and did the math, you realized that they were still 200 brides short to supply the 600 Benjamites. Here comes their legalistic solution.

Jdg 21:14 So Benjamin came back at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh Gilead; and yet they had not found enough for them.  
Jdg 21:15 And the people grieved for Benjamin, because the LORD had made a void in the tribes of Israel.

Wait a minute. The writer, who we believe was Samuel, seems to involve the Lord by this wording. How is this the Lord's doing?

The ISV translates these words, "the Lord had broken" Benjamin. Samuel might have simply meant that it was a bummer that Benjamin had needed to be punished at all.

Think of it this way: If you are a parent, do you like disciplining your kids? Do you like it when they refuse to yield, and your discipline gets more severe?

The Israelites had to discipline the tribe of Benjamin; now they were grieved about it. But clearly they went beyond the punishment God intended.

Jdg 21:16 Then the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do for wives for those who remain, since the women of Benjamin have been destroyed?"

Jdg 21:17 And they said, "*There must be* an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe may not be destroyed from Israel.

Jdg 21:18 However, we cannot give them wives from our daughters, for the children of Israel have sworn an oath, saying, 'Cursed *be* the one who gives a wife to Benjamin.' "

Jdg 21:19 Then they said, "In fact, *there is* a yearly feast of the LORD in Shiloh, which *is* north of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah."

Jdg 21:20 Therefore they instructed the children of Benjamin, saying, "Go, lie in wait in the vineyards,

Jdg 21:21 and watch; and just when the daughters of Shiloh come out to perform their dances, then come out from the vineyards, and every man catch a wife for himself from the daughters of Shiloh; then go to the land of Benjamin.

Jdg 21:22 Then it shall be, when their fathers or their brothers come to us to complain, that we will say to them, 'Be kind to them for our sakes, because we did not take a wife for any of them in the war; for *it is not as though* you have given the *women* to them at this time, making yourselves guilty of your oath.' "

If the gals were kidnapped, then their fathers hadn't technically *given* them to be married. It was a devious but creative way to get around their oath.

Too bad it was completely immoral. I mean, how can kidnapping brides be OK? It can to the legalist looking for a technicality.

Then President Bill Clinton famously said of Monica Lewinsky, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman."

For her part, in an interview with Barbara Walters, Miss Lewinsky described her activities with the president as "fooling around."

We found out, to the dishonor of the oval office, that they were, in fact, having what any Christian would consider sexual relations. They redefined the term as a technicality to argue what they were doing wasn't sexual.

Their denials became a loophole that even Christians still use to say that certain sexual behaviors aren't *really* sex so, therefore, they are OK for believers to engage in prior to marriage.

The point is this: Don't be looking for loopholes, or workarounds. It's legalism.

Jdg 21:23 And the children of Benjamin did so; they took enough wives for their number from those who danced, whom they caught. Then they went and returned to their inheritance, and they rebuilt the cities and dwelt in them.

All of this trouble had begun when perverted men in Gibeah had sexually assaulted the Levites concubine. Now it was ending with bride kidnapping, which is, in fact, a type of sexual assault. It's a sex crime.

Through it all, the men of Israel were able to justify their murderous, malicious actions based on their perceived need to honor their extra-biblical man-made oaths

Jdg 21:24 So the children of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family; they went out from there, every man to his inheritance.

I'm guessing they felt pretty good about themselves. Everything seemed to have worked out just fine.

Legalism is like that. It seems to work out, externally, on paper. But at what cost? In our story, the cost was immense - tens of thousands murdered, hundreds kidnapped.

Those left alive were deceived into thinking they were right with their God, having kept their oaths. They were self-righteous, and no one gets to Heaven by their own righteousness. Meaning they, too, were casualties of legalism.

Think of all the loopholes we find in the civil laws of our nation, or in the tax codes. Do you feel bad if you find a loophole that saves you money?

I'm guessing not. I don't. I'm not suggesting there's anything wrong with utilizing loopholes as a citizen, or in your business.

*I **am** saying unequivocally that it is wrong to look for loopholes in your walk with the Lord.*

I mentioned the greatest commandment earlier as our protection from legalism. We could summarize it by asking ourselves, in every situation, "What does God's love, and loving God, require of me?"

Jdg 21:25 In those days *there was* no king in Israel; everyone did *what was* right in his own eyes.

The era of the kings would come. It would start off badly, with Saul, chosen by the people based on his external qualifications. It would continue with David - God's choice based on his heart.

One day, the One greater than David, Jesus, will sit as King over the Millennial earth, and into eternity.

Let's take one last look at legalism. The chapter gives us two pictures to warn us legalism is on the attack:

- First, we saw the citizens of Jabesh Gilead living peacefully in the Promised Land. For whatever reason, they did not join with their brothers against Benjamin. They did not make any foolish, rash vows. Legalism attacked them and, in their case, destroyed them. Legalism will attack you, from without, while you are at peace with the Lord, enjoying your relationship with Him. The legalist can't stand your freedom in Jesus and wants you to join him or be destroyed.
- Second, the young ladies were on their way to rejoice when men assaulted them. The men were lying in wait, within their own territory. Just so, you and I have a bent, lying within us, to be taken captive by legalism.

It's possible that each of us has an area in our lives in which we are believing or behaving legalistically.

Is there something you do, or do not do, that you believe makes you more spiritual than others? It's usually something in a so-called "gray area," that is not directly commanded or condemned by the Bible.

- You might think your freedom to participate in it makes you more mature than others.
- You might think your avoidance of it makes you more mature than others.

Either way, the truth is that you are under attack by legalism, and if you believe either way makes you more mature, you've already been taken captive.

Break free by asking, “What does God’s love, and loving God, require of me?”