

IN THOSE DAYS ISRAEL HAD NO KING

Judges 17:1-21:25

Key Verse: 21:25

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

Today's passage is the epilogue of the Book of Judges. No judges appear in this passage. In fact, Samson was the last judge who delivered the people of Israel from their enemies. Instead, there are two major events recorded in these chapters that highlight the depths of Israel's moral corruption. First, the idolatry of the Danites. Second, the wicked men of the Benjamites. These events epitomize the spiritual condition of Israel at that time. May God help us to learn the fundamental reason behind their moral corruption so that we may not fall into the same trap of sin!

I. THE FAILURE OF ISRAEL THROUGH IDOLATRY (17:1-18:31)

First, Micah's idols. Look at 17:1-2a. *Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim said to his mother, "The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you and about which I heard you utter a curse--I have that silver with me; I took it."* Micah had stolen 1,100 shekels of silver from his mother. But when he heard his mother uttering a curse on the person who stole the money, he became afraid of the curse and he confessed. Then his mother became also afraid that her curse would be on her own son's life. So she tried to change her curse into a blessing. She said, *"I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol. I will give it back to you."* Then she gave 200 shekels of silver to a silversmith to make the image and the idol. Look at verse 5. *Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some idols and installed one of his sons as his priest.*

Micah's sin was idolatry. God had told his people, *"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below"* (Ex 20:4). This is the second commandment of the Ten Commandments. But Micah and his mother made idols and worshiped them. Why? Obviously they wanted to gain favor with God (17:13). However, they were very superstitious. They were heavily influenced by the idol worshiping culture of the Canaanites. More importantly, they worshiped God in their own ways, not in God's ways. They practiced religion without God's truth. They did not pay attention to the word of God. They did not worship God in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24). For example, Micah installed one of his sons as his priest, against the word of God that allowed only the Levites to become priests (Nu 8:15-19). He practiced a religion of convenience. The author of Judges comments: *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit* (6).

Micah's idolatry did not remain as one family's problem. It had a far-reaching consequence in Israel's history. His idolatry led the Danites to fall into the same false worship (18:31). The Danites then established a city that later became a major center of idol worship in the time of Jeroboam (1Ki 12:28-30).

Is idol worship our generation's problem as well? Can it hamper our personal life of faith? How can we avoid this sin that we know God hates very much? An idol is defined as any man-made thing or person that replaces God in our hearts and lives. The statue of the Virgin Mary or a religious icon is an obvious example. So are money, career, sports, human love, pleasure-seeking lifestyle, and even family that occupy modern people's minds and hearts. Some people even use astrology or horoscope for their decision making. But the one that seem innocuous and yet more dangerous is our worship that is based on self-devised ritual or routine. Like Micah, we can fall into the trap of idolatry. These self-devised religion robs us of true worship. Therefore, we must worship God in God's ways, as God designed. We must study the word of God with repentant heart so that we can worship God in spirit and in truth.

Second, a Levite's self-seeking service (17:7-13; 18:11-20). Look at verses 7-13. *A young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, who had been living within the clan of Judah, left that town in search of some other place to stay. On his way he came to Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim. Micah asked him, "Where are you from?" "I'm a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah," he said, "and I'm looking for a place to stay." Then Micah said to him, "Live with me and be my father and priest, and I'll give you ten shekels of silver a year, your clothes and your food." So the Levite agreed to live with him, and the young man was to him like one of his sons. Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house. And Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest."* Why did the Levite leave his hometown Bethlehem and come to the hill country of Ephraim? Obviously he was looking for a job (10-11). The Levites were chosen by God to serve as priests for his people. They were not supposed to earn their living by taking jobs. Instead, they were to be supported financially by the people so that they could devote themselves to the word of God full time (Nu 18:21-31). But this young man wanted to get a job. So he was traveling the hill country of Ephraim when Micah hired him for 10 shekels of silver a year plus room and board and clothing allowances.

This Levite obviously had no sense of calling from God in serving the Lord. He decided to become Micah's priest. His decision was not based on God's call, but man's call. Furthermore, later when the Danites offered a better position, he jumped at the chance (18:20). His life as a priest was not for God, but for himself. However, the worst thing he did was that he continued to use Micah's idols and integrate them into the worship of God. Look at 18:19-20: *They answered him, "Be quiet! Don't say a word. Come with us, and be our father and priest. Isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priest rather than just one man's household?" Then the priest was glad. He took the ephod, the other household gods and the carved image and went along with the people.*

This tells us that the word of God was lost among the people of Israel at that time. The Levites were to devote themselves to study and teach the word of God. But the people of Israel lost their absolute attitude toward the word of God and mixed their faith with all kinds of superstitious ideas from the pagan religion. When there was no word of God, idols took up God's place in people's hearts.

Third, the Danites' easy-going life (18:1-10, 27-31). Look at 18:1-2. *In those days Israel had no king. And in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking a place of their own where they*

might settle, because they had not yet come into an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. So the Danites sent five warriors from Zorah and Eshtaol to spy out the land and explore it. These men represented all their clans. They told them, "Go, explore the land." The men entered the hill country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah, where they spent the night. Why did the Danites send five warriors to spy out the land and explore it? It was to find and occupy a land of their own as inheritance. Actually, the Danites had been given their own share of land earlier during the time of Joshua (Jos 19:40-48). It was located in the region southwest of Jerusalem. But they disobeyed God's command and failed to drive out their enemies. As a result, they were driven out by the Amorites (Jdg 1:34). They could not settle in their own land and were living in the land of Benjamin and Ephraim. Now they sent out five warriors to spy out the land of Laish, an isolated Canaanite city located about 100 miles north from Zorah and Eshtaol. Instead of fighting for their allotted territory as God commanded them, they preferred to look for new land in the north where resistance from the enemy wouldn't be so tough. Earlier when God called Israel to war, the Danites had refused to fight. In her song, Deborah said, "Why did Dan stay in ships?" (5:17). The Danites chose an easy-going way of life. It was a sin of complacency. Today we are also vulnerable to this sin of complacency more than ever as many people in this society look for an easy-going life.

When the spies reported that a peaceful and unsuspecting people lived in Laish, the Danites decided to attack them to take the land. Laish was located in the north of the Sea of Galilee. On their way, the Danites stopped at Micah's house. Look at 18:5-6. They said to Micah's priest, *"Please inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful."* The priest answered them, *"Go in peace. Your journey has the Lord's approval."* Then the Danites stole Micah's idols and hired his priest. They had no word of God and they were superstitious. Outwardly they appeared to worship God when they worshiped the idols. But worshiping images of God is not the same as worshiping God, even if it resembles true worship in some ways. It is a self-deception. It is like claiming to be a Christian without having a personal relationship with God.

So the Danites went on to Laish. They attacked the peaceful and unsuspecting people with the sword and burned down their city (27). Did they have the right to kill the citizens of Laish? No. God had commanded Israel to clean out and destroy certain cities because of their idolatry and wickedness (Dt 13:12-15), but Laish did not fall under that judgment. It was not within the assigned boundaries of Dan, and its people were peaceful in contrast to the warlike Canaanites. But the tribe of Dan had no regard for God's law. God's law said to destroy a city for idolatry, but in truth the Danites themselves were guilty of this sin. This story shows how far some of the tribes had wandered away from God.

Look at verses 29-31. *They named it Dan after their forefather Dan, who was born to Israel--though the city used to be called Laish. There the Danites set up for themselves the idols, and Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses, and his sons were priests for the tribe of Dan until the time of the captivity of the land. They continued to use the idols Micah had made, all the time the house of God was in Shiloh.* Shiloh was the religious center for Israel at that time. It was where the ark of covenant was located in the tabernacle. It was where God appeared to his people in his glory. It was where God spoke to them. All adult males were required to travel there for certain religious feasts. But the tribe of Dan set up idols and priests in the new territory they

conquered. The fact that they were over 80 miles away from Shiloh may have been their excuse for not obeying God's command. This decision further showed their disregard for God. They should have maintained their worship through the Levitical priests scattered throughout the land and the tabernacle in Shiloh. This story shows how pagan influences and moral depravity had crept into every corner of Israelite culture. There may be a tendency in our life to allow "harmless" habits to have their own small corners, but they can become dominating forces. The values, attitudes, and practices we have adopted from the world's system can be exposed by applying the light of God's truth to them. Eventually the city of Dan became the center of idol worship (1Ki 12:29). Their idol worship spread to other Israelites and became the basis of Jeroboam's rebellion that split the nation into two.

II. THE DEPTHS OF MORAL CORRUPTION (19:1-21:25)

The final three chapters of Judges describes events that are so awful that it is very hard to read and think about. However, the spiritual lessons of these chapters are very relevant to us today. They convey one clear message: the terrible things that happened to the Israelites were the results of their idolatry. When they abandoned God and worship the idols, the moral fabric of their society disintegrated.

First, a Levite and his concubine. Look at 19:1. *In those days Israel had no king. Now a Levite who lived in a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim took a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.* What kind of man was the Levite in this passage? Having concubines is not what God intended (Ge 2:24), though this was practiced in the Israelite society. As a Levite, this man was supposed to be a religious leader who upholds the law of God, but he followed the customs of the time. His main interest was eating and drinking and pursuing small pleasures. He delayed his trip home from his concubine's house three times to eat and drink. There are some other things that indicate this Levite's spiritual problem. But more on this later.

Second, the wicked men of Gibeah. When the Levite wanted to spend the night at Gibeah, the people there, the Benjamites, did not show hospitality toward one of their brethren. Only an old man, an outsider to the town, welcomed the Levite and his concubine to his home. But then an unspeakable thing happened that night. Look at verses 22-26. *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 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 disgraceful thing. 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 to this man, don't do such a disgraceful thing." 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. At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight.*

What can we say about this terrible event? The men of Gibeah remind us of the wicked men of Sodom. They not only practiced homosexuality, but also committed the terrible crime of a gang rape and murder. They were men of immorality and violence. But the Levite and the nice

old man of Gibeah also behaved a lot like Lot. The unwritten law of hospitality was (and is) strong in the Middle East. But what the two men offered to the wicked men of Gibeah was appalling. They were selfish. They were willing to sacrifice their daughter and wife, but not themselves. They lacked courage. They didn't want to get hurt themselves. They disobeyed the law of God by allowing deliberate abuse and murder. Then in the morning the Levite did not even know that his concubine was dead. It seems that he slept through the night when she struggled to survive the ordeal. This event shows us the depth of moral corruption to which the idol worshiping people of Israel had sunk. When people follow their sinful human nature, it leads them into the depth of corruption.

Third, “such a thing has never been done.” What did the Levite do with the body of his concubine? Look at verses 29-30. *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. Everyone who saw it said, "Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Think about it! Consider it! Tell us what to do!"* Although this was a terrible way to spread the news, it effectively communicated the horror of the crime and called the people into action.

What was the reaction of the Israelites? The rape and murder of the Levite's concubine did not end with one man's rage. The Israelites realized that they were in a moral and spiritual crisis. *Then all the Israelites from Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead came out as one man and assembled before the Lord in Mizpah. The leaders of all the people of the tribes of Israel took their places in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand soldiers armed with swords (20:1-2).* They could not ignore what had been done in Gibeah, so the tribes of Israel assembled. Then the large assembly heard the case, mainly from the testimony of the Levite. But we see problems even in their handling of the terrible case. The Levite passionately argued the heinous crime of the men of Gibeah. But he wasn't at all remorseful of his own sin and behavior. The assembly failed to judge the Levite's sins.

So the Israelites decided that the men of Gibeah must be punished. First, they asked that the guilty men be extradited and executed. But the Benjamites refused, and mobilized for war. So the event escalated into a tragic civil war, brothers against brothers. The civil war took heavy toll on both sides. The first two battles belonged to the Benjamites. They had some skillful special forces. *Among all these soldiers there were seven hundred chosen men who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not miss (16).* The allied forces were defeated soundly in their first battle. *The Benjamites came out of Gibeah and cut down twenty-two thousand Israelites on the battlefield that day (21).* So what did the Israelites do? *The Israelites went up and wept before the Lord until evening, and they inquired of the Lord. They said, "Shall we go up again to battle against the Benjamites, our brothers?" The Lord answered, "Go up against them" (23).* However, 18,000 more Israelites were killed by the Benjamites in the second battle (25).

Look at verses 26-29. *Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before the Lord. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the Lord. And the Israelites inquired of the Lord. (In those days the ark of the covenant of God was there, with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron,*

ministering before it.) They asked, "Shall we go up again to battle with Benjamin our brother, or not?" The Lord responded, "Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands." Then Israel set an ambush around Gibeah. Finally, the third battle belonged to the allied forces. They fasted, prayed and sought God's help. They set a successful ambush and won the war. Then they put all the towns in Benjamin to the sword. Only 600 men survived. It was a bloody civil war.

The Benjamites refuse to acknowledge the terrible sin of their men in Gibeah. Their pride and stubbornness resulted in a costly war. All of their women and children perished. Only 600 men survived by escaping to the desert area. Sin problem cannot be solved until the sinner admits his sin. We learn from the Benjamites about the consequence of ignoring God's law about sex and ignoring God's law about murder.

Fourth, wives for the Benjamites. Look at 21:1-3. *The men of Israel had taken an oath at Mizpah: "Not one of us will give his daughter in marriage to a Benjamite." The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly. "O Lord, the God of Israel," they cried, "why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today?"* Why did the Israelites raise their voices and weep bitterly? The bloody civil war wiped out the tribe of Benjamin, except for the 600 men. Now, one tribe of Israel faced extinction. What complicated the matter further was that in their righteous anger to judge the Benjamites, the Israelites had made a hasty vow not to give their daughters to Benjamites in marriage (1). How did they solve the problem? When it was discovered that no one from Jabesh-Gilead had attended the required assembly, they decided that wives for the men of Benjamin must come from this selfish city that did not care about the agony of their brothers. So 400 Benjamites got their wives from Jabesh-Gilead. Still 200 of them did not have wives. So the Israelites made a suggestion to the lonely Benjamites (20-21). They followed the advice and went to a festival in Shiloh. They hid, and when the girls of Shiloh came out to dance, each man grabbed one for himself.

Let us read verse 25. *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.* This is the final verse of the Book of Judges and is a fitting commentary on the times. The people of Israel rejected God's ruling in their hearts and lives. They worshiped idols instead, because idols did not require their obedience. Idols did not demand them to live by the truth. So they lived according to their sinful nature and the result was that the whole society's moral fiber broke down. Without God they had no direction in life. Without God, the shepherd King, to guide them, the Israelites went astray like sheep without a shepherd. Sinful men want to be their own men, away from God, so that they could do whatever they want, whenever they want. This is what the Israelites did and the result was terrible.

We learn that when people reject the true King, the only true God, they become idol worshipers. They become slaves of their sinful desire. May God help us to know our King and serve him according to the word of God! May God help us live a life that pleases our King!