

Men Without Chests

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[0 : 00] Well, that was quite a long reading, wasn't it? And as we near the end of Judges, we move from passages that are well-known to passages that are pretty unfamiliar.

I guess you know the story as of Gideon and Jephthah and Samson. But I guess that passage wasn't so familiar to you. At least it wasn't to me.

And Dale Ralph Davis, in a commentary, says of passages like the end of Judges, the hearts of Bible-loving people whisper softly and tenderly that there's no need to wrestle with such scripture when they can be meditating on Philippians.

But I want to encourage you tonight to think that that's not the attitude we should have, and I don't think it's actually the attitude that Dale Ralph Davis himself has. I hope you'll find something this evening which will, if it doesn't encourage you, it is at least valuable.

But first I'm going to go through the passage in some detail on the assumption that you don't know it well. When we were discussing it, and I gave my outline at our preaching class, one of the group members said, I know I've read the whole Bible, but I don't ever remember reading that part.

[1 : 24] So we'll start at the beginning. It's beautifully written, that story, in its three sections. I think that's even more obvious if you have a slightly more literal translation.

17 verse 1 says, There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. So we start with him. Then when we get to 17 verse 7, it says, Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah who was a Levite.

So he's introduced. We don't get told his name till the end, which is interesting. That stage is just the Levite. And in 18 verse 1, it says, And in those days, the tribe of the Danites were seeking a place of their own where they might settle.

So they're introduced as well. So let's start by looking at Micah. Verse 2 is terribly revealing in chapter 17.

The 1,100 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. That tells you a lot about Micah, doesn't it?

[2 : 37] First thing we learn about him is he's a thief. In fact, he steals from his own mother. He steals quite a lot of money from his mother. 1,100 shekels.

Now that's 1,100, that's 110 times the cash pay for a Levite each year. Admittedly, the Levite also gets clothes and food, which I hope were a larger amount than the money that he got.

But he's still, 1,100 pieces of silver is a lot of money. And it seems that what Micah's mother did was she cursed the unknown thief.

And when Micah heard the curse, he thought, ooh, I better do something about this. And he produces the money and gives it all back.

The funny thing is she doesn't seem to be cross. Or even very surprised. She just seems relieved. And she responds in a very pious way.

[3 : 39] She invokes the name of the Lord and calls blessing down on her son. The Lord bless you, my son, is her response to this disastrous situation. And then, in one sense, she does even better than that.

The next thing she says is, I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord. Seems like a very generous gift. But the impression given at that point is that she's giving all the silver to the Lord.

Doesn't take more than a couple of verses after that before we discover that actually only two elevenths of the silver goes to the Lord. The other nine elevenths seems to go to Micah as far as, well, I think she probably keeps them for herself.

I mean, it's not that she had to give it all to the Lord. She could do what she wanted with it. But if she gave it to him, she shouldn't then somehow pull it back. And what's even worse is that the bit

that she actually does give to the Lord, she gives to her son to make an idol. And that's clearly not godly behavior. And Micah's errors in worship practices are not limited to the idol. Serious though, that is.

[4 : 55] We discover that he also had some household gods in verse 5, and he had an ephod. Now, an ephod is, or certainly can be, it's the high priestly robe.

But in chapter 8, verse 27, you don't need to look it up, it seems that the ephod is actually a silver object. So it seems to have more than one meaning.

From our point of view, I think what we actually see is that Micah has a dodgy shrine containing household gods, an idol, and an ephod.

And then, he decides he needs a priest to minister in his dodgy shrine. Now, there was a way. Priests were supposed to be descendants of Aaron. But, Micah didn't worry about that.

Micah installed one of his sons as his priest. So, for a dodgy shrine, he has a dodgy priest. Why he needed a priest, why he wanted a priest, will become clear as the story develops.

[6 : 08] One final thought on those first six verses is Micah's name. Although, nothing is made of it in the passage. But Micah's name means who is like the Lord?

To which the answer is no one or nothing. It's the very name that should encourage you not to make an idol. Because, nothing is like the Lord.

But that didn't stop him. I think, just say a few words about this. What seems to be the case is that Micah's family and he appear godly in many ways.

They speak the Lord's name. They seek blessing from him. But actually, the key is in verse six. In those days, Israel had no king.

Everyone did as they saw fit. Whereas, Micah appears godly, but actually he breaks the eighth commandment up on the wall behind me.

[7 : 12] Thou shalt not steal. And the second commandment, thou shalt not make for thyself any graven image. So let's move on to the second section.

We introduce a new character. We'll just call him the Levite because that's what he's called at this stage. His name's given at the end. Now, the Levite wants a job.

Clergy do. Everyone does. So he gets on his metaphorical bike and he goes and looks for one. And he comes to Micah's house. And when Micah sees the Levite, he thinks, wow, I can trade in my dodgy priest, my self-ordained one, for a better one.

Now, it's worth saying that the Levite wasn't, I think, actually a priest. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. When we get to the end, we discover this Levite's a descendant of Moses, which means he wasn't a priest because you had to be a descendant of Aaron.

But anyway, Micah decides to trade up from a dad-ordained priest to a Levite. And in some ways, Micah has a good relationship with the Levite.

[8 : 34] In verse 10, it says this, live with me and be my father and priest. And, so, it's a good relationship he intends to have. Fatherhood suggests blessing.

And, being a priest, at the very least, implies bringing wisdom, which we see him seek. We see Micah seek, or no, the others seek, in 18 verse 6.

And the relationship is both a relationship of fatherhood and priesthood, but it's also a contractual one.

He gives him a proper contract. I'll give you 10 shekels of silver a year, your clothes, and your food. And, it works both ways.

Well, in fact, he does more than that. He does give him his needs, as it were, but he also has the Levite to live with him, and the young man became like one of his sons to him.

[9 : 39] It's rather a good picture of relationship between a congregation and its rector. We care for Martin, and he cares for us. But it does seem that Micah's main interest in the Levite is that he believes that having the Levite as his priest will bring him prosperity.

Micah said, now I know that the Lord will be good to me since this Levite has become my priest. He seems to have a pretty mechanical view of the way that things work.

He thinks that if I do the right things in terms of worship with my shrine and its objects in it, all the liturgical junk that I've acquired, and my priest, then the Lord will be good to me.

It's really a picture of man-made religion. The terrifying thing is it looks quite like the real thing. The Lord's name is invoked.

There are still priests. And yet the difference between it and the real thing is that the real thing is about a loving relationship between human beings and God.

[10:52] And it seems as if it's been replaced by something that you do, you put the penny in the slot and you get what you want. At least that's what he believes.

Yes, the Lord does give us blessings, but faith doesn't simply lead us to prosperity.

God may give us prosperity, he may not. The summary is in 18 verse 1, in those days Israel had no king.

And then things aren't too great, are they really? But then it gets worse because the Danites turn up. Now, the passage doesn't tell us how we should interpret it.

So I'm giving you my interpretation as I understand it. but I think that the writer is sympathetic to the inhabitants of Laish.

[11:54] That's my interpretation. It's not the only possible interpretation. I'm reading, that's my understanding of it. And the Danites are not following God.

Now, the Danites have lost, had failed to acquire the land that they really wanted. And so they now decide that they're going to get this bit of land.

And in some ways they consciously follow the pattern that had been followed in Joshua and the beginning of Judges. So what they do is they get spies.

You remember how spies go out in Joshua? Was it even before that? Spies go out to explore the land. And so they get these five spies and they go out to explore it.

And when they go out there they come first to Micah's house. And as they listen they recognize the voice of the young Levite.

[13:02] Isn't that funny? How you actually know a clergy, you can spot a clergyman by his voice or a clergywoman but it's, I think, that wasn't really a sexist comment, I think it's especially true.

of clergymen. That sort of distinctive voice, they just hear it and they go, oh yes, that's the Levite, we can spot him. It's not quite as true today as it was 30 years ago or 40 years ago when I was a student.

There was a sort of conscious effort made by clergy that they would sound like Dick Lucas or John Stott. There were these sort of special voices people wanted to acquire. Well, the Levite had his clerical voice and they recognized the voice of the young Levite so they turned in there and asked him, who brought you here?

What are you doing in this place? Why are you here? So, he tells them about what Micah had done for him, how Micah had hired him and he was his priest. So they said, ah, right, well, that's the thing that priests do.

They'll be able to give us wisdom. So let's inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful. The priest answered them, go in peace.

[14:13] Your journey has the Lord's approval. Now, without getting into too much detail, I'm not terribly comfortable with the NIV's translation at this point.

A more literal translation is, go in peace. Your journey on which you are going is before the Lord. The ESV has, the journey on which you go is under the eye of the Lord.

Now, I think that's more ambiguous than the NIV. I don't, I think he may, the Levite may be saying, it's okay, on you go, or he may just be saying, making a rather general comment.

Well, your journey is under the eye of the Lord. The Lord is seeing it. Well, indeed, of course, he is. And the reason that I have some doubts about the translation is because in Proverbs 5.21, it says, a man's ways are before the eyes of the Lord.

Same phrase. And he ponders all his paths. That certainly doesn't mean that a man's ways are always doing what God wants. They're just something that he sees.

[15:27] The fact that our ways are before the Lord does not guarantee his approval. So, how much approval is the Levite giving to the Danites?

We don't know. Is the Levite just giving a sort of Delphic response, slightly like the Oracle? Your journey is under the eye of the Lord.

Well, yes. Anyway, they certainly take it the way the NIV puts it and they set off with enthusiasm on their journey. And they come to Laish.

And when they arrive there, they see the people living in safety, at peace and secure. They see this prosperous group of people who don't have any relationship with any other group of people.

And they think, this is the ideal group of people that we could attack and occupy this land. So, they come back with a good report. Just as Joshua and Caleb did on the first scouting mission.

[16:30] And they're well received. So, they send out 600 men to seize Laish. And they're clearly all well prepared. There are 600 men of the Danites armed for battle.

And off they go. And they stop at Micah on the way because there's a chance to take some useful stuff anyway.

Some liturgical stuff from Micah en route. So, the Levite, to give him his due, says, what on earth are you doing?

You can't take the ephod and the household gods and the image. I love the way that each time the little group comes, nearly all those same things are mentioned each time.

Some variation, but that seems to be basically the pattern. So, they tell him to be quiet and say, come with us. You can be a priest to a tribe, not just a family.

[17:31] You can have promotion. Come on, Levite. You don't have to be just reverent. You could be very reverent. You could be right reverent. I think perhaps most reverent will be pushing it.

And the Levite is, well, he's been treated well by Micah, but promotion seems too exciting and he just is disloyal and off he goes with the Danites to be their priest.

In fact, by this stage in the story, he's being referred to as the priest, although I still have doubts as to whether he really is. And on the one hand, the Levite is disloyal and on the other hand, Micah gets what he deserved.

I mean, the very beginning of the story, Micah's a thief and now he's stolen from. And he also discovers that gods that you make can be taken from you.

If you can make them, well, they can be taken away. For the Danites are too powerful. Those 600 men standing there, well, Micah's no match for them.

[18:41] And they take what Micah had made and his priest. And again, that's more literally in verse 27, the priest who belonged to him. And they go on to destroy Laish and its people and to build a new city.

And they name it Dan after their ancestor, Dan. And then at the very end of the story, we're told the name of the Levite.

There's some complications about the text. If you look at the bottom, it's a note. But taking the text as we have it there, well, the Levite's called Jonathan, who appears to be the grandson of Moses. So we're seeing two important things. One is that he isn't a priest. He's a Levite. And secondly, we see how quickly you can descend from being a godly community under Moses to this pretty ungodly rabble that we're now beginning to see in these last chapters of Judges.

True religion can descend into a parody of itself very quickly. So that, I think, is what the story is about.

[20:04] It's about man-made religion. The terrifying thing is it looks very like the real thing. Worship and priests. But it does believe that the primary aim of religion is prosperity, not relationship with God.

And actually, we saw at the very beginning how they disregarded God's commandments in the most obvious way. And when we think about moving off from God's ways, I was at a Sea Sunday service last week on a pier in Jersey.

And the preacher said that if you're one degree off, then after you've gone 60 miles, you'll be a mile out of where you ought to be.

So it's really important to follow God's way carefully. These people perhaps were more than a degree off, I think. But they're drifting off away from God's way.

And there are two phrases above all that describe the religion of Judges 17 and 18. And there in 17, verse 6, and one of them is repeated later on.

[21:29] In those days, Israel had no king. So there's no authority keeping them the right way. We haven't yet got to David to show them the way. Or Solomon.

And everyone did as they saw fit. Literally, everyone did what was right in his own eyes. So what about us? Are we in danger of man-made religion?

Well, we have the commandments up there. Although we do seem to have slightly hidden them behind the screen. I say that at least partly in jest to make them more difficult to see.

Do we replace God's word by what is right in our own eyes? Might not changing the definition of marriage in the SEC be an example of that? Are we submitting to King Jesus God?

Might be worth asking some questions about the Gamaliel principle. You know the one I mean. There's that place where Gamaliel says, if this purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. [22 : 42] But if it's of God, you will not be able to stop these men. So you can look at the way something turns out and deduce from that whether it was godly or not.

Well, if my interpretation of the passage is right, then it all turned out pretty well for Dan. They got what they wanted. They got the land they were looking for. But I don't think it follows that it was from God.

It's not very easy to spot man-made religion. If you think of the late Middle Ages, I think there was a lot of, my feeling is there's a lot of man-made religion about.

Think of indulgences, for example. They seem to me pretty man-made. And a lot of people seem to think they were okay. And people drifted into sort of works-based righteousness.

I think that's, I think that would be an example of man-made religion. And then 500 years ago, Luther came and pointed out that that wasn't God's way.

[23 : 44] He brought them back to the Bible so that that drift, those degrees that they'd gone off, they came back to the correct orientation.

That's what this passage encourages us to do. It warns us of the danger of drifting off into something that's not what we should do. And it warns us of the danger that when we get there, we find that it's a sort of mechanical religion.

We've drifted away from a relationship with God, from the living God. And we've come into something that looks like putting coins in a slot and waiting and believing that if we do the right thing in the right way, with the right liturgical actions, then, well, God will bless us and make it all work out for us.

whereas God is a God of grace with whom we are in relationship through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.