

Judges 17-18 - Men without chests

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[0 : 0 0] sit. Let's have a word of prayer before we look at this fascinating passage. May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well, that was a long reading, but I think we need to have the whole of the story. It's interesting that as we reach the end of Judges, we move from passages that are well known, the great stories of Gideon, the story of Jephthah, the story of Samson, and then we come to passages that are at least unfamiliar. Dale Ralph Davis 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 think he's not actually implying that we should have that view, and that's not the view I'm taking this morning. And I hope that you'll find something in this passage which, if not encouraging, is at least valuable.

But first I'm going to go through the passage in some detail because I suspect it's not very familiar to you. When I gave my outline at the preaching group a month or so ago, someone said, I've read the whole Bible, but I don't ever remember reading that. So I hope you'll enjoy my going through it first. It's rather beautifully written in three parts, our two chapters. I'll give a slightly more literal translation of the first of the key verses.

That begins, there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. That's 17.1. 17.7 introduces the next key character. Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah who was a Levite. And 18.1 introduces the Danites. And in those days the tribe of the Danites were seeking a place of their own. Now let's start with Micah. I think the key, the most revealing verse is verse 2. In our introduction he says, 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. The first thing we learn about Micah is that he's a thief. In fact he steals from his own mother. He steals a lot. 1,100 shekels is a substantial amount of silver. If you listen carefully you'll hear that the Levite, he only got 10 shekels a year plus food and clothing etc. So it's 110 times his cash pay. And it's been stolen by Micah from his mother. And it seems that Micah's mother cursed the unknown thief and the son hears the curse and thinks, golly, I better do something about it. And so he rushes and explains that I want to get this sorted out. And mummy doesn't seem to be cross. That's the surprising thing about it. I don't know if she's really brought him up very well. I think that's part of the problem in the whole thing. She's quite religious. She invokes the name of the Lord. The Lord bless you, my son. And then she receives the money back. And in one sense she behaves very well because she consecrates the gift to the Lord.

She says, I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord. And you think, wow, this is a great moment. It's not quite as great as it looks because later on it turns out that only two elevenths of the gift are actually given to the Lord. We aren't told what happened to the other nine elevenths, but we sort of assume that she kept it. So the consecration wasn't complete. She could, of course, consecrate two elevenths to the Lord. That would be fine. But to give the impression of consecrating the lot and then keeping some, well, that didn't go down well in Acts, if you remember. So what's much worse, though, is that when she gives the silver to Micah, she gives it to him to make an image overlaid with silver. Micah has many errors in his worship style. He has the idol. He also has his household gods.

[5 : 2 1] It's not entirely clear what the ephod actually is. I mean, an ephod is normally the high priestly robe is an ephod. But earlier in the book, in chapter eight, the ephod appears to be a silver object. So it doesn't need to worry too much about it as far as this is concerned. The point is that Micah had a collection of dodgy liturgical junk, and he adds this idol to it. And in order to look after the dodgy liturgical junk, he has a dodgy priest. There's a procedure for having a priest, and it's not

this one. The one described here, it simply says, he installed one of his sons as his priest. That's not what you're supposed to do. Priests should be from the tribe of Levi. You don't just ordain your son. But Micah did. Why he thought he needed a priest and why this would be good, we'll find out later in the story. One final thought that's not particularly made in the passage, but I think it's relevant, is Micah's name. Micah's name means who is like the Lord. And the answer to that question, of course, is nothing. No one. We sang that hymn this morning, indescribable. There's no one like the Lord. The Lord can't be represented by an idol. But that doesn't stop Micah. He makes an idol to represent the Lord. So, on the one hand, Micah's family appear godly. They seek the Lord's blessing.

But actually, they break the eighth commandment. Thou shalt not steal. It's up on the wall, if you can see it. And they break the second commandment about idols. You can see it up there. Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, it says. But Micah's been poorly brought up, I think, by his mother.

And they have drifted away from God's word and God's plan. And it says in verse 6, it's summed up, In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit.

We'll think about what that means in a moment. But before we get there, we move on to our friend the Levite. He does have a name, but we're only told that at the end of the story. So, I'll only get to that at the end. And he needs a job. Just being a Levite isn't going to provide him with enough to live on. He needs to actually do something. And he gets on his metaphorical bike, and he goes to look for one. And he comes to Micah's house. And Micah thinks, well, I can trade in my dodgy priest for a better one. Here's one who's, well, I think not actually a priest. I think that comes out later on in the story. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. And this one, I think, was not a priest. But anyway, Micah thinks, I can at least trade up from a dad-ordained priest to a Levite. And in some ways, Micah and the Levite have a good relationship. It works out quite well.

Micah said to him, live with me and be my father and priest. He wants a clergyman who will bless him as his father. And he wants someone who will be his priest, who will give him wisdom, teach him the ways of God. He wants all these things. And that sounds good. It is good. And he has a relationship with him, which is partly contractual. He says, I'll give you 10 shekels of silver a year, your clothes and your food. So he has a contract. But it isn't just about money. As I said, it's actually a two-way relationship. The Levite is to be his father and his priest. And he himself, the young man, becomes like one of his sons to him. It's like what we care for our rector, and he cares for us. That all comes out very nicely in the passage.

[10:07] There is a problem, though, because Micah has a view of the priest that's sort of mechanical, really. Micah said, now I know that the Lord will be good to me since this Levite has become my priest.

What he really wants is prosperity. And he believes that if he does the right things in terms of worship with his shrine and his ephod and his household gods and the other liturgical junk, then the Lord will be good to him. But actually, it's man-made religion.

That's what comes out throughout the story. It's this terrifying thing that it's actually quite like the real thing. But it isn't quite the real thing. It's got all the sort of trappings of the real thing.

The Lord's name is invoked. There are priests. But actually, the loving relationship of us and our Heavenly Father seems to have been replaced by a form of religion. And again, it's summed up in 18 verse 1, in those days, Israel had no king.

Yes, as we come to the Lord's, into the Lord's presence, the Lord gives us blessings. And he may indeed give us prosperity. But faith does not simply lead to prosperity.

[11:38] And then the story gets worse. We thought it was not that encouraging up to this point. But when we get to chapter 18 and verse 1, the Danites turn up. And the Danites are living in the south of the country and they don't have a place of their own to live.

And so, they decide on a scheme that will enable them to find a place to live. And it's actually pretty similar to the scheme that was being used in Joshua.

You know, you send out spies to have a look and then the spies come back and tell you what it's like. And so far, so good. We're not given any interpretation of the story.

It doesn't say in the passage, other than these general statements about Israel having no king and everyone doing what's right in their own eyes, we're not told what God's plan is.

But I think that the writer is sympathetic to the existing inhabitants of Laish. And I don't think that the Danites are doing God's will.

[12:57] Although they're consciously following the pattern that we've seen earlier at the beginning, at the end of Joshua and in Judges, that doesn't mean they're doing God's will now.

But you have to decide for yourself. The spies come first to Micah's house. and it's quite funny, isn't it? They know the Levite instantly by his voice.

There is something about a clerical voice. You can just recognize it and you just know. They know it's the one. He has a distinctive style. You know, and it's just, it's less true now than it was, I think. I think that 30 years when I was a student, every preacher seemed to want to sound like John Stott. There was this sort of special style. It's less common now, but it's quite funny, I think. They just recognize the voice of the young Levite.

So they go in to consult him about their mission. Now we're not told on what basis the Levite gives his response. Well, first thing that's funny is in verse 6, he suddenly become the priest, which is certainly what he was acting as.

[14:10] The priest answered them, go in peace, your journey has the Lord's approval. Now, I have some doubts about this translation of the Hebrew.

A more literal translation goes, go in peace, your journey on which you are going is before the Lord, in front of the Lord.

The ESV has, the journey on which you go is under the eye of the Lord. Now, does that mean, that could mean what the NIV says.

That's a perfectly possible translation. It could mean, you know, go for it. It's under his eye, it has his approval. But, the same phrase, the same Hebrew phrase is used in Proverbs 5.21.

It says, a man's ways are before the eyes of the Lord and he ponders all his paths. That certainly doesn't mean, in Proverbs, that being before the eyes of the Lord doesn't mean they're always right.

[15:12] It means the Lord's looking at them to see what they're like. So, what is the instruction that the Levite is really giving to the Danites? We don't really know.

Is this actually one of those Delphic responses that's deliberately not clear? Your journey is before the Lord. could mean, leaves it open, really, I think.

They certainly take it the way the NIV takes it and they go, yes, we're off on the Lord's mission and off they go. That's certainly enough for them. But I think there's at least some doubt about that and I don't think the Levite is giving them absolute confidence and I think it's not clear that the Levite got this word from God.

So on they go and they get to Laish and it's all they hope for. Again, it's what we've seen earlier in Joshua and Judges.

It is a land flowing with milk and honey. They're prosperous and even better, the people who live there have no relationship with anyone else. They're just a little independent group and they come back with a good report.

[16:28] They come back and they say, yep, it's a really great place. Come on, let's attack them. We could take over this place. We could get a spacious land. We'll get the place we want to be.

So now they send out 600 men. Five men have gone as spies. Now it's 600 men go as the main event and on the way they stop at Micah's and there they are.

You can picture it, can't you? The 600 Danites, all with their weapons, are standing outside and then the five men go inside and they take the idol, the ephod and the household gods.

Not surprisingly, he's now called the priest, the Levite, says, what on earth are you doing? And they just tell him to be quiet.

And say, come with us. You can be a priest to a tribe, not just a family. You can have promotion. You won't just be the reverend, you could be the very reverend, the right reverend.

[17:38] You can go up in the world. You can be a really top Levite. That's what you, this is your chance. And the priest, it says, was very pleased.

And he says, well, I'm going to move up in the world. I can go on. He goes for it. He's disloyal to Micah. He's been well treated by him, but when he sees the chance of promotion, he says, yep, we're off.

And the strange thing is, of course, that Micah gets what he deserved. Because Micah starts off as a thief, and now the thief is stolen from. and of course, he discovers that the gods that you make can be taken from you.

They're just physical objects. They can be taken away. So Micah chases after them and he catches up. He says, you took the gods I made and my priest and went away.

What else do I have? But there are 600 Danites and they're all armed and Micah's only got a few people in his team, so they just take what Micah had made and his priest.

[18:53] You know how it lists all the things each time? The emphasis on this dodgy collection of stuff. Every time it's mentioned, you have a complete list. Again, the ephod, the household gods and the idol and they're taken.

When it says in verse 27 that they took his priest, we could translate that more literally, the priest who belonged to him. All those words are used.

And they go on to destroy Laish and its people and to build a new city. And they change its name and it's going to be called Dan rather than Laish.

And they set up the idol and now at the very end of the story we're told the name of the Levite. Now there's some doubt about the text so one could discuss it at some length and I'm not going to.

But the text as in the NIV is quite straightforward. He's called Jonathan, he's son of Gershom, the son of Moses. Well that tells us two things. One, it tells us he's not a priest because the priests were descended from Aaron, not from Moses.

[20:04] And more importantly I think we see that how quickly people can move away from God's plan coming through Moses with the commandments etc.

into a thing that looks like it but isn't the real thing. How it descends into a parody of itself. We also, if I'm interpreting chapter 18 right, that parody of worship that, which isn't quite the real thing, leads to destruction for the peaceful inhabitants of Laish.

And there are two phrases that describe this man-made religion. The religion that we see in Judges 17 and 18. And we've already, we've heard them read and I've already read them out now before.

They're both in 17 verse 6 or the ones then repeated later on. In those days Israel had no king and secondly, everyone did as they saw fit or more literally, everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Last Sunday, Susan and I were at a sea Sunday service on a pier in Jersey and the preacher shared the following thought with us which was quite helpful which is that if you're one degree out in your boat after you've gone about 60 miles you'll be a mile out.

[21:37] So you'll be a long way from your target. So being on the right, don't neglect getting it right. Doing it a bit right isn't good enough was the point that he was making.

We want to study God's word and get it right. Because these people, they knew something about God. They knew that you needed certain things but actually in the process they disregarded God's commandments and they believed that religion is primarily about prosperity rather than knowing God.

So what about us? How does this passage speak to us today? Are we in danger of man-made religion? It would be naughty if I said that we have the commandments but we've managed to put the screen up so you can't see them because I'm not making a theological point but it is quite difficult to see them.

Are we in danger of replacing God's word by what is right in our own eyes? I'm not going to discuss this one but might not changing the definition of marriage be an example of doing just that.

Do we submit to King Jesus or do we not? I think it's not easy to see that one's religion has become man-made.

[23:12] I think you can end up in the wrong place. These people didn't try to be in the wrong place. They just ended up there. I was thinking this is the again this is theologically a big issue but here we are 500 years after Martin Luther people in the late middle ages didn't mean to have moved away from God's word.

They just they just ended up with indulgences and they ended up with just believing in some of them believing in justification by works.

They just thought they were okay. It needed Luther to say well actually those aren't okay. That's man-made religion. You actually need you're justified by faith or saved by grace.

one thing that strikes me in the passage is that the Gamaliel principle doesn't always work. You know what I mean by the Gamaliel principle it's that bit in Acts where Gamaliel said if their purpose or activity is of human origin it will fail but if it's of God you will not be able to stop them.

So leave them alone wait and see you'll see if it's God's plan by the fruits that how it all turns out.

Well this time I don't think that works on this occasion because on this occasion it certainly doesn't they it all works out very well for the Danites.

[24 : 41] They certainly get what they want but I think that it wasn't of God but you have to read it for yourself and make your own decision on what it says.

So that's the challenge to us I think and how do we make sure that we that our religion is real? I guess it's about relationship rather than religion. They had moved into a sort of mechanical view we do this you get that whereas knowing God is much more than that it's knowing him as our heavenly father.

It's about making sure that we don't go the wrong way. They had drifted from God's word as it had been revealed to them. We need to we need to stick with God's word to read it and to study it and to obey it and to enjoy and then we'll find that just a final thought that real religion is so much more exciting than man-made religion because it's actually about a relationship it's actually about the God of grace and knowing him.

Let's pray as we sit. first I'm going to use the collect for today which seems surprisingly appropriate and I'll perhaps pray a bit more.

[26 : 16] Lord of all power and might who art the author and giver of all good things graft in our hearts the love of thy name increase in us true religion nourish us with all goodness and of thy great mercy keep us in the same through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. So Father we're challenged by this story. We're challenged by these people who had set off in God's way and then drifted away and not only they but others suffered too.

We pray that you would keep us faithful day by day for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.