

Judges 17

- With the death of Samson last week, we have finished our study of the judges of Israel
 - And yet, as you can plainly see, we still have five chapters left
 - So what's left to study?
 - Simply put...a lot
 - But to follow what comes next in this study, we need to reset our timeline and get a sense of the writer's purpose
 - At the outset of our study, we learned that the events of Judges covers about 300 years of history
 - As we've moved through the first 16 chapters, we've moved chronologically through that period of time
 - Naturally, we might assume that the next five chapters continue that pattern moving forward in time
 - But that's not correct
 - Chapters 17-21 go back in time to explain other events that transpired during the time of Judges
 - That's why these chapters do not feature a judge anyway
 - The story of the judges has already been told earlier
 - But now we need to understand something else, something more important than the judges themselves
 - We need to understand Jewish society
 - So we're going to go behind the scenes to document the internal strife and deterioration of Israel's religious, civil and domestic life
- But there's more...
 - The five chapters that end Judges are actually parts 1 and 2 of a three part story in the Old Testament

- The first part in chapters 17-18 explains the introduction of idolatry into the nation of Israel at the hands of the tribes of Ephraim and Dan
 - The second part in chapters 19-21 describes the beginning of civil war among tribes of Israel by the hands of the Benjamites
 - We've already seen idolatry and civil war featured in some of the stories of the judges
 - But now we get the background story of how these destructive forces found their way into Jewish society
- But where is part 3? Part 3 is the book of Ruth
 - Ruth follows Judges immediately in scripture and it was written by the same author, Samuel
 - Ruth is set in the same time period
 - And so it's a third sketch of Jewish life during the period of Judges
 - In the story of Ruth we're given the one and only solution to the problems of Israel's deteriorating culture
 - A child will be born in Bethlehem
 - And that child will lead to a king
 - And that king will one day save Israel from idolatry, civil war, disobedience, death
 - Rather than a people who do what is right in their own eyes, Israel will become a people redeemed and made righteous
 - Therefore, after we finish our study of Judges, we'll move into a study of Ruth to finish this three-part story
- So let's move to part 1, the story of how Dan introduced worship of graven images into Israel

Judg. 17:1 Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah.
Judg. 17:2 He said to his mother, "The eleven hundred pieces of silver which were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse in my hearing, behold, the silver is with me; I took it." And his mother said, "Blessed be my son by the Lord."

[Judg. 17:3](#) He then returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother, and his mother said, "I wholly dedicate the silver from my hand to the Lord for my son to make a graven image and a molten image; now therefore, I will return them to you."

[Judg. 17:4](#) So when he returned the silver to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave them to the silversmith who made them into a graven image and a molten image, and they were in the house of Micah.

[Judg. 17:5](#) And the man Micah had a shrine and he made an ephod and household idols and consecrated one of his sons, that he might become his priest.

[Judg. 17:6](#) In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

- This story is set in the latter half of the times of Judges, while the Philistines were oppressing the nation of Israel
 - Once again, the exact timing isn't important
 - Think about this account and the one that will follow in chapters 19-21 as stand alone accounts like the story of Ruth
 - Each makes it's own point
 - But all three are connected in a larger way as well
 - First, let's examine how the account begins
 - This story and the ones that follow are set in the heartland of Israel
 - The hill country of Ephraim is in the geographical center of the nation
 - Meaning these are not fringe cases, but instead they represent what was happening in the heart of the nation
 - A son named Micah confesses to his mother that he had stolen eleven hundred pieces of silver from her
 - When the silver had turned up missing, the mother had uttered a curse upon whoever took it
 - Now the boy is revealing to his mother that he was the guilty party
- It seems the son's confession was motivated by his desire to avoid the effects of his mother's curse

- A curse is literally the opposite of a blessing
 - It is the withholding of God's favor instead of the giving of favor
 - Only God can put power behind the words of curse or blessing
 - Just because someone speaks words of cursing or blessing doesn't mean the Lord will agree and carry them out
 - But when someone speaks under the influence of the Holy Spirit, then the words have power
 - In this case, the mother's curse will prove to be prophetic, as not only will this son be brought low by his sin but so will all Israel
- The son's name means "one who is like Yahweh," which is clearly ironic, and it's one of many details in this story that are ironic
 - The corruption and duplicity of the nation will be evident throughout this story and in every character
 - Micah is a thief willing to steal from his own mother
 - And now he confesses his sin, but merely to avoid a curse he fears
- Remarkably, when he confesses, his mother is willing to act as if nothing has happened
 - In fact, she blesses her son in the name of Yahweh
 - Earlier, she cursed him by the power of Yahweh because she lost her silver
 - Now she is willing to bless him because he returns the silver
 - We can see that their worship and obedience to Yahweh is superficial at best
 - In fact, we can detect a superstitious quality to their worship, such that the Lord is no longer viewed according to His word
 - Instead, Israel has come to relate to Him like any other idol or pagan good
 - The son's evil heart is easy to see, but we can also see the mother's corrupt heart

- When she receives back 1,100 pieces of silver, she makes a pious announcement that she will dedicate the silver to Yahweh
- Specifically, she wants two images made: a carved image and a cast image
- We aren't sure what these sacred images were, but perhaps the graven image was a carved animal or other image
- While the molten or cast image was the base upon which the carved image sat
- Either way, she is violating the Second Commandment and other ordinances in the Law against making or worshipping before such images
- And her sin goes even farther, in that she promised to devote all her silver to God but in the end only gave up 200 pieces for the images
 - This is stealing from God
 - Once we make a vow or pledge to serve God in some respect then later withhold what we promised, we steal from the Lord
 - The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 reminds us of how the Lord views this kind of duplicity
 - Apparently, her son learned the art of stealing from his mother
- What kind of heart believes the Lord will be pleased by worship that acts in disobedience to His commands?
 - Obviously, she does not possess a heart to please God
 - In fact, it's questionable if she even knows Yahweh truly
 - Instead, she is acting with a heart of superstition
 - We can do the same if we call sin something else in the hope that the Lord will accept it
 - We simply can't approach God on our own terms
 - What God says matters, and we must conduct ourselves in according to His word
 - We can't do what pleases us, then declare it is "for the Lord," and assume that fixes everything

- God will not be mocked by that kind of foolishness
- Then we're told these idols were set up in a shrine in Micah's house, where he began to take his idol worship a step farther
 - Micah's evil and deceived heart begins to fancy himself a man of importance
 - What began as personal idol worship has moved to drawing others into his folly
 - He began to copy the implements God gave Aaron and the priests who officiate at the tabernacle
 - He made an ephod, the ornate robe that the high priest wore
 - And he made more idols and consecrated one of his sons as his "priest"
 - Micah is directly violating Deut 12 where the Lord forbid Israel from multiplying sanctuaries in Canaan
 - You can see the effects of the deceitfulness of sin in his heart
 - Micah's greed led him to steal from his own mother
 - His theft resulted in a curse, which he tried to undo by confessing to his mother
 - When his mother failed to hold him accountable for his sin, he was emboldened believing himself immune from the consequences of his sin
 - His pride led him to act with impunity creating his own gods and engaging in idol worship in his own personal religious system
 - The deeper he goes, the more he moves away from the Living God
 - Notice Micah's not less religious...in fact, if anything he's *more* religious
 - But his religion is merely an expression of his pride and ego
 - He's not worshipping Yahweh; he's worshipping himself
 - And in that sense, Micah is a poster child for Israel in the time of Judges

- In fact, Samuel inserts his customary signature line in v.6 to emphasize the universality of Micah's sin
 - This is a time when *everyone* did what was right in their own eyes
 - In Micah's eyes, it was right to have idols and dress his son up as a priest even though he wasn't a Levite
 - And to conduct religious services under his own terms
 - To declare he was worshipping the Living God even as he did everything possible to offend that God
 - This is where idolatry began in the nation of Israel
 - This isn't the first time Israel bowed it's knee to images
 - We saw that as early as Exodus when Israel worshipped the calf
 - But this is the moment that the society began to view such things as compatible with being in covenant with Yahweh
 - And that thinking will grow in the coming centuries until it infects all corners of the nation
 - Only after the Babylonian captivity was idolatry extinguished
- And now we learn how this one man's sin became the basis for a nation's sin

Judg. 17:7 Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he was staying there.

Judg. 17:8 Then the man departed from the city, from Bethlehem in Judah, to stay wherever he might find a place; and as he made his journey, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah.

Judg. 17:9 Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to stay wherever I may find a place."

Judg. 17:10 Micah then said to him, "Dwell with me and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, a suit of clothes, and your maintenance." So the Levite went in.

Judg. 17:11 The Levite agreed to live with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons.

Judg. 17:12 So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in the house of Micah.

Judg. 17:13 Then Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest."

- In v.17 we're introduced to a Levite who lived in Bethlehem in Judah
 - We recognize the importance of the city of Bethlehem, but it's also the key element in this story
 - This city will be the birth place of God's chosen king for Israel, David
 - And it's the birth place of the man David pictures, Jesus the Messiah
 - Bethlehem is also a key detail in our three part story in Judges and Ruth
 - We see the city mentioned here in the account of Ephraim's and Dan's idolatry in Judges 17-18
 - And it will come up again in the story of the Benjamite civil war in Judges 18-21
 - And finally, Bethlehem is the town at the center of the story of Ruth
 - The city serves as a link tying together the three parts of our story
 - The story emphasizes that Israel's sin couldn't be corrected by human judges
 - Time and time again, those men failed to curb the sin of the nation
 - And later when Israel will seek for a king, they still do what's right in their own eyes by selecting a king that looks the part
 - Which only proves that the solution to their sin can only come from God through a Man God will send to do what's right in God's sight
 - And that man will be Israel's Messiah from the city of David, Bethlehem
- For reasons that aren't important, this man, a Levite, encounters Micah during his travels away from his home
 - It's important to note that this man wandered away from his home in Bethlehem and stumbled upon Micah along the way
 - These details alluded to his spiritual journey

- He's left the home of God's anointed
- And he's fallen into the hands of a man of idolatry and false worship
- As such this man becomes a picture of all Israel, walking away from the Lord and to become ensnared by the sin of idolatry
- He's called a Levite, but he's not called a priest
 - In other words, this man was descended from Aaron and Levi
 - But he was never formally a priest of Israel
 - Remember, all priests must be Levites
 - But not all Levites served as priests
 - So this man was not serving as a priest nor was he authorized to do so, though he came from the correct tribe
- When Micah learns that this man is a Levite and is in need of a new home, Micah sees his opportunity to "upgrade" his family priest
 - Up to this point, Micah has been using his son as the family priest
 - But even a man like Micah with his warped sense of how to worship knew that the correct tribe for priests was Levi
 - Earlier, he selected his son to serve as priest because he had no better option
 - Since he needed a priest in his mind, he made a compromise and selected an Ephraimite
 - But now that a bonafide Levite had fallen into his lap, he opted to improve his religious system
 - If this whole thing sound ridiculous, don't laugh too quickly
 - People have done this forever
 - Cain's chief sin was pretending to worship God but doing so on his own terms using practices designed to mimic God's commands
 - God commanded a certain kind of offering, but Cain decided he would rather do one his way

- If Cain (and Micah) weren't willing to worship God in the way God prescribed, we might ask why didn't they just abandon any pretense and cease worship altogether?
 - The answer is because men have a subconscious awareness that they are in debt to God and need reconciliation
 - And that vulnerability causes us to seek God
 - But unless our hearts are truly repentant, we seek Him according to our own desires
 - Paul speaks about men in the last days have a form of godliness but denying its power
- Such was Micah's heart
 - He's so excited to receive the Levite because this man brings Micah's system closer to the one God prescribed
 - But only in external ways
 - It's like the Mormon religion, which is carefully calibrated to counterfeit Jewish worship
 - Mormon have buildings they call temples
 - They call certain men priests
 - They conduct ceremonies that borrow heavily from Jewish practices
- But all these externals are merely window dressing
 - They're intended to convey a sense of legitimacy and piety to something that is otherwise bankrupt and meaningless
 - You will see this pattern in every manmade religion
 - Men substitute external for internal, image for substance, ego for repentance, self for God
- In v.10, Micah makes the Levite a job offer that he can't refuse
 - Micah will employ this Levite as a personal, family priest for a tidy sum
 - For this penniless, homeless Levite, this is an offer of a lifetime

- Like an unemployed fast food cook being offered the chance to work as the private chef of a wealthy patron
- For Micah, the Levite is a means to superstitious blessing
 - In v.13 he says that surely the Lord will bless him now that he has employed a Levite as priest
 - You get a sense of the sliding scale that dominates this man's thinking
 - If he acts in ways that are somewhat close to God's instructions, then he will please God somewhat
 - But if he operates even more closely to God's rules, then he will gain that much more blessing
- This is moral relativism at its worse, and it's complete fiction
 - This man is disobeying the Lord's commands in many ways and in great degrees
 - He's worshipping idols
 - He's operating a pagan worship shrine in his home and declaring it to be a proper house of worship in disobedience to the Law
 - And he's consecrating unqualified men to serve as so-called priests in this false system of worship
 - Micah's system possesses only a faint resemblance to God's system of worship, but somehow Micah has determined that he's playing horseshoes
 - Close is good enough
- In reality, obedience is a point, not a scale
 - When someone comes to know the Lord truly and seeks to please Him, then that person will seek to move in God's direction
 - Toward Bethlehem, as it were
 - And as we move toward God in faith and obedience, we steadily leave behind our own ways and replace them with His ways in our life

- We stop declaring our sin to be good and begin to hate it as much as the Lord does
- And in its place, we adopt God's heart and God's mind from our study of scripture
- And over time, we become more like Him so that we might please Him