

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 10 – A Chaotic Epilogue
Judges 17-21

Introduction

The book of Judges has given us a bleak picture of the nation of Israel during the 350-400 years after Joshua. The cycles of sin have been repetitive, with each cycle taking Israel to a new low. The ending of the book contains two stories that can only be described as pure spiritual and moral chaos. It is sort of like walking into a house of mirrors where *everything* is distorted. There is no aspect of these stories that come anywhere close to what God originally intended for His chosen nation. Truly, *“everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* (17:6; 21:25). The most surprising fact about these two stories is *that they took place chronologically at the beginning of the book of Judges*. This gives us a sense for the author’s real message: The ENTIRE period of the Judges was woven through and through with spiritual defection, moral degradation and inter-tribal conflict. And, the sad irony is that both of these epilogue stories center on the actions of priests from the tribe of Levi – the very people who were assigned to lead the nation *toward* God and His blessings.

Micah’s personal religion: 17:1-13

If the theme of this entire section is, *“everyone did what was right in his own eyes,”* then the opening story is a perfect example of free-for-all religion. A man named Micah, encouraged by his mother, decided to create his own household religion. Micah *did what was right in his own eyes*. At least 7 of the 10 commandments were violated in the process of setting up this homemade worship:

- Micah steals his mother’s 1,100 pieces of silver.
- The mother pronounces a curse on the thief.
- Micah, fearing the curse, confesses that he is the thief.
- He returns the silver to his mother and she blesses him.
- She then gives him the silver to make a household idol.
- Micah makes an idol and sets up a shrine in their house.

- He appoints one of his own sons to be his household ‘priest.’
- A Levite wanders into town, so Micah hires him to be his priest.

The closing line contains sad irony:

Then Micah said, “Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest” (17:13).

Micah was so deceived that he thought God would bless him for setting up this personal, household religious system . . . even though every aspect of it was contrary to God’s revealed will. The tribe of Levi supplied all the priests for Israel, and they were to conduct worship according to strict guidelines given by God through Moses (book of Leviticus). Further, *all* worship rituals were to be conducted at the sacred Tabernacle, which was in Shiloh at that time. Such was the religious drift in Israel, that Micah and his mother thought they were honoring God when, in fact, they were breaking all of His laws.

We may ask: What was a Levite doing wandering around looking for a job? The Levites were to live in designated cities in Israel, and their sustenance was to be derived from the tithes and offerings given by worshippers at the Tabernacle of the Lord. It seems that the Levites were not being adequately supported by the offerings of the people; thus, we find a priest wandering the country looking for work.

It appears that both Micah and his mother were sincere; but sincerity alone does not make something right. They were sincerely wrong in their attempt to create their own in-house worship system. The apostle Paul wrote about religious zealots in his day: “I know what enthusiasm they have for God, but it is misdirected zeal” (Romans 10:2). This is why it is so important to be firmly grounded in the truth of God’s Word. Otherwise, religious zeal can actually do more harm than good (which is so evident in many religious circles in our world today). Zeal, if not guided by truth, is like a train without tracks – dangerous!

Yet, the self-styled religion of Micah’s house was taken to a whole new level in the second part of this story, as it became the religion for an entire tribe in Israel.

The tribe of Dan steals Micah's priest and idol: 18:1-31

The tribe of Dan had been assigned their own territory (Joshua 19:40-48); but they never fully occupied it, so they wanted more. And they wanted *easy-to-conquer* territory. They sent out an army of 600 men to capture the quiet, secluded town of Laish in the far north. This town was “unsuspecting” of any trouble (18:7).

Dan wanted an easy way to get more territory. This was because they had failed to do the hard work of trusting God to drive out the Canaanites in the territory God allotted to them. “The Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the valley” (Judges 1:34). God wanted them to learn to trust Him for this territory (Judges 3:4); but they were unwilling to cooperate with God to gain the victory. So, they went looking for easy prey and found the quiet, peaceful city of Laish in the far north, a city that God had NOT designated for destruction. All too often we look for the easy way forward, instead of trusting God with the more difficult path that He asks us to walk. The easy way is to quit, to give in, to compromise, to write a check, to sign the papers, to conquer an easy prey. Resist the temptation to take the easy way out. Instead, as God how He might want you to take the more difficult path of faith, trusting Him for the victory. The tribe of Dan paid a heavy price for going the easy way. When the tribes of Israel are listed in 1Chronicles, Dan is not mentioned. Again, when the tribes of Israel are listed in Revelation 7, Dan is nowhere to be found. It appears that Dan lost their place in God's story because they chose to write their own story. The “easy way” turned out to be a very costly way for the tribe of Dan.

As the warriors of Dan moved north toward Laish, they came to the house of Micah. They stole both his household idols *and* his Levitical priest, believing that these would help them gain the victory in battle. In fact, the priest helped them with the theft!

When these went into Micah's house and took the graven image, the ephod and household idols and the molten image, the priest said to them, “What are you doing?” They said to him, “Be silent, put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?” The priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod and household idols and the graven image and went among the people” (18:18-20).

The priest was *glad* that he was being offered a more prestigious

position as priest over an entire tribe, rather than just one family. So, he stole *all* of the religious hardware from Micah's house and took off with his new employers. This priest has drifted far, far away from God's commands concerning the sacred priesthood.

When Micah found out he been robbed of his entire religious system, he took some neighbors and caught up with the 600 men from Dan, protesting the theft of his idols and his priest. But Micah and his friends were no match for the 600 armed warriors, so they returned home empty-handed.

The sons of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, or else fierce men will fall upon you and you will lose your life, with the lives of your household." So the sons of Dan went on their way; and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his house (18:25,26).

After the tribe of Dan captured the city of Laish, they set up the idols they had stolen from Micah's house, and made the priest *their* priest in their new city. Now, the entire tribe of Dan has formed its own new religion. And they renamed the city "Dan" in honor of their tribe.

"The sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh" (18:30,31).

An entire tribe had defected from true Yahweh worship. Yet, there is more sad irony tucked away in these verses. The name of the priest behind all of this defection is finally given: He is Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of **Moses!** The wayward Levite leading this entire religious defection was Moses' grandson. Oh how far and fast Israel had fallen from her spiritual roots. And when spiritual roots are lost, moral and civil decay soon follows ...

A Levitical Priest and his concubine: 19:1-30

The final story in Judges also involves a priest from Levi. This must rank as one of the saddest, most degrading stories in all of Scripture. Again, we must recall that these events took place *at the beginning* of the period of the Judges, indicating the moral degradation that ran through the entire 350-400 years. In summary, here is what happened:

- A Levite married a concubine (a wife with reduced legal rights).
- The concubine was unfaithful to her husband and ran away.
- The Levite went to reconcile with her after 4 months.
- The Levite partied with her father for 4 straight days.
- On the 5th evening, the Levite departed with his concubine.
- They passed a Canaanite city, thinking it unsafe to stop there.
- They came to Gibeah, thinking it safe, being an Israelite town.
- The men of Gibeah demanded to have sex with the Levite.
- The host first tried to give his virgin daughter to the mob.
- The Levite pushed his concubine out the door to satisfy the mob.
- The mob sexually abused her all night, while the Levite slept.
- The next morning, he found his concubine dead on the doorstep.
- The Levite took her body home and cut her up in 12 pieces.
- He mailed 12 body parts to the 12 tribes of Israel.
- His gory mailbags achieved his desired purpose:

All who saw it said, “Nothing like this has ever happened or been seen from the day when the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt to this day. Consider it, take counsel and speak up!” (19:30).

Judges 19 is one of the saddest chapters in the Bible. The moral and civil fabric of Israel had disintegrated. But the reason the author has placed two epilogue stories side by side conveys the deeper message: When our spiritual lives drift (chs.17,18), every other aspect of our lives suffer (chs.19-21). God Himself must be the center. When He is not, chaos is the result. What can WE learn from these side-by-side stories in Judges? We need to wake up and be warned. Our society is daily brimming with stories that easily rival the depravity of Judges 19, both in real life and in the imaginary world created on screen. We need to take a step back and ask some hard questions about the spiritual drift that is fueling our moral/ethical drift. We need to find our true ‘center’ again . . . and that center is God. “The Lord says, ‘I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control’” (Psalm 32:8,9). When we lose our center, we lose it all.

War against the tribe of Benjamin: 20:1-48

The only positive detail in this entire story is that all the other tribes *were* outraged at the crime of the men of Gibeah, and they came together to seek the Lord (20:18,23,27). All Israel gathered to make war against the tribe of Benjamin (the men who

committed the crime were from Gibeah, a Benjamite city). When Benjamin refused to hand over the men who had abused and killed the woman, war ensued. Surprisingly, Israel was defeated by Benjamin on the first 2 days of battle. This seems to indicate, indirectly, that God's judgment was on the *entire nation*, not just the tribe of Benjamin. Finally, on the 3rd day, the Lord allowed Israel to prevail and the tribe of Benjamin was entirely decimated, except for 600 men.

“So all of Benjamin who fell that day were 25,000 men who draw the sword; all these were valiant warriors. But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they remained at the rock of Rimmon four months. The men of Israel then turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, both the entire city with the cattle and all that they found; they also set on fire all the cities which they found” (20:46-48).

Mourning the loss of the tribe of Benjamin: 21:1-6

A solemn ceremony of national mourning took place, as Israel lamented the loss of one of their tribes.

So the people came to Bethel and sat there before God until evening, and lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. They said, “Why, O Lord, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel, so that one tribe should be missing today in Israel?” It came about the next day that the people arose early and built an altar there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings (21:2-4).

Given what we have seen thus far, we might anticipate that this whole story has a strange ending . . . and it does!

Finding wives for the remaining 600 Benjamite men: 21:7-23

The only way to secure a future for the tribe of Benjamin was to allow the 600 surviving warriors to take wives from among the other tribes. Yet, the other tribes had vowed that they would not give their daughters to Benjamin. So, they came up with two ways to secure wives for Benjamite men. The first 400 wives were taken from the city of Jabesh-Gilead. This city had failed to come to the mandatory ceremony of mourning/repentance at Mizpah. Thus, Israel attacked that city, killing everyone, except for 400 virgin women. These women were then given to 400 of the remaining Benjamite men. The final 200 wives were secured in a most bizarre manner. (Yet, the entire ending of Judges is bizarre, so, why not!)

The 200 remaining Benjamite men were told to go to the annual religious festival at Shiloh and to kidnap wives for themselves! This was likely the annual 7-day Passover festival, which involved women dancing and singing the song of Miriam and the Exodus.

And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, “Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, and watch; and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to take part in the dances, then you shall come out of the vineyards and each of you shall catch his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. It shall come about, when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, that we shall say to them, ‘Give them to us voluntarily, because we did not take for each man of Benjamin a wife in battle, nor did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.’” The sons of Benjamin did so, and took wives according to their number from those who danced, whom they carried away. And they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the cities and lived in them” (21:19-23).

What had Israel come to? This final section of Judges started with a man stealing silver from his mother and ends with men kidnapping dancing girls at a Passover festival! The spiritual life of Israel had broken loose from its anchor, and the nation was drifting in ever-deepening waters of chaos and confusion.

The postscript: 21:24

“The sons of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and each one of them went out from there to his inheritance. In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (21:24,25).

Israel had no king (17:6; 18:1; 19:1 and 21:25) because Yahweh was supposed to be their KING, ruling in their hearts and lives. The theocracy (“rule of God”) was in shambles because human hearts refused to enthrone Him. In the next major section of God’s story, Samuel the priest and prophet will rise up and give Israel what it wants: a human king. The theocratic period in Israel will give way to the monarchical period. The people will find out very quickly, however, that having a flawed human king can be worse than having no king at all. Be careful what you wish for. If God is *not* on His throne in your heart, you are headed for trouble.

Afterword: The cause of the chaos in Judges?

Israel's history during the period of the Judges was chaotic, to say the least. They went through repetitive cycles of departure from Yahweh and His laws, leading to painful periods of bondage and oppression. They would cry out in repentance and be led, by God-given leaders (Judges), into periods of rest . . . only to repeat the cycle over and over again. As the two epilogue stories show, the entire period was replete with spiritual, moral and civil chaos.

Why? Because Israel had strayed far from Sinai. It was at Mt. Sinai that Yahweh their God gave to Israel a very detailed and specific roadmap for life - laws governing every aspect of their lives: worship, work, marriage, family, business, crime and punishment, etc. God warned Israel at that time to *"take to heart"* all of His words and to *"observe them carefully."*

"Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life. And by this word you will prolong your days in the land, which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess" (Deuteronomy 32:46,47).

Israel *did not* take to heart all of God's words. They did not cultivate their personal relationship with Him. They did not love Him "with all their heart, all their soul, and all their strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

In any age, when people stop loving God and heeding His words, self-styled religion will inevitably flourish. *"Every man will do what is right in his own eyes."* And when the anchor of God gives way, society will inevitably drift toward shores of destruction.

Why not rather give God our sincere attention?

"Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live" (Isaiah 55:3).

"Those who listen to instruction will prosper; those who trust the Lord will be joyful" (Proverbs 16:20).