

Judges 18A

- We're continuing through the epilogue of the book of Judges
 - The final five chapters tell two stories about circumstances that took place in Israel during points in the 300 years of the Judges
 - These stories are important
 - They explain the heart and mind of Israel during this time
 - How Israel was turning to idolatry
 - And how the tribes were breaking apart under the weight of their sin
 - And then as I explained last week, part three of the epilogue is found outside the book of Judges in the story of Ruth that follows immediately
 - Ruth is the good news ending to the story of Judges
 - Without Ruth, the history of Judges would leave us with little hope for the nation of Israel
 - Everything we've read points to Israel self-destructing
 - And the two stories that end the book only serve to reinforce that conclusion
 - But the story of Ruth gives us hope that the Lord has a plan to redeem the people from their sin and self-destruction
 - So after we study the two stories that end Judges, we'll go directly into the story of Ruth
 - For now, we're just getting started
- Last week we were introduced to an Ephraimite named Micah
 - He was a godless man who stole a fortune from his own mother
 - Worse than that, Micah determined to set up his own religious system
 - It was patterned after worship of Yahweh, but it was counterfeit
 - He contrived the system to suit his pride and ego

- So we concluded that Micah was really seeking to worship himself not the Living God
 - And as we ended chapter 17, he had secured the services of a Levite to serve as his personal priest
 - He was operating an illegitimate house of worship in place of worshipping God according to the Lord's direction
 - And now Micah's idolatry will mix with the sin of the tribe of Dan to infect the northern tribes of Israel with apostasy

Judg. 18:1 In those days there was no king of Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for themselves to live in, for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel.

Judg. 18:2 So the sons of Dan sent from their family five men out of their whole number, valiant men from Zorah and Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to search it; and they said to them, "Go, search the land." And they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there.

Judg. 18:3 When they were near the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young man, the Levite; and they turned aside there and said to him, "Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this place? And what do you have here?"

Judg. 18:4 He said to them, "Thus and so has Micah done to me, and he has hired me and I have become his priest."

Judg. 18:5 They said to him, "Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether our way on which we are going will be prosperous."

Judg. 18:6 The priest said to them, "Go in peace; your way in which you are going has the Lord's approval."

- Right from the start you can see trouble coming when Samuel begins with the statement that there was no king in those days
 - This is Samuel's way of reminding us that there was no central force among the people guarding their hearts and demanding obedience
 - The judges were ruling during these days
 - But the judges were only local leaders, spiritually weak and often mired in sin themselves
 - And so when a people who do what's right in their own eyes live without a strong governor, sin will rule the heart
 - And such was the case within the tribe of Dan

- In v.1 we hear the tribe of Dan are seeking a place to live in the land
 - We said last week that this story is likely set in the latter part of the time of Judges, during the time of Samson
 - This was the time when the Philistines were pressuring the western side of Israel and Samson was supposed to be freeing Israel from that oppression
 - Because Samson didn't attend to his task, the Philistines succeeded in forcing the western tribes to retreat east into the hill country of Ephraim
- One of these tribes living in Philistine territory was the tribe of Dan
 - When the Israelites first entered the land of Canaan under Joshua, the tribe of Dan was assigned the western portion of the land
 - Their land was bordered by the Mediterranean sea on the west and the tribes of Benjamin and Ephraim at the edge of the hill country in the east
 - So Dan's territory lay directly in the disputed area where Jews and Philistines often battled for control
- Since Samson didn't defeat the Philistines as commanded, the tribe of Dan suffered the most
 - Their inheritance in the land had not been cleared of the Philistines
 - So in that sense, the inheritance for the tribe of Dan has not yet been allotted
 - The word for allotted in Hebrew can also be translated knocked down or laid waste
 - The inheritance the Danites were given previously under Joshua had not been conquered yet
- So as a result, the Danites set out to look for greener pastures
 - They have determined that the only way they will find peace in the land is by taking matters into their own hands
 - They will abandon the land the Lord assigned to them

- And they will take other land for themselves
- Obviously, this plan will require taking land that belongs to some other tribe
- It's a faithless act committed in fear and pride
- The Danites are prepared to reject the Lord's provision and its place they will seek an illegitimate claim in the land
 - Just as Micah rejected true worship for something false, so now are the Danites rejecting the Lord
 - It's another form of apostasy
 - Assuming that they can provide for themselves something better than what the Lord provided
- The plan begins with the tribe sending out a scouting party of five valiant men to find a better place for the tribe
 - They move up from Zorah and Eshtaol in the western coastal plain into the country of Ephraim
 - You may recognize the names of those towns
 - This is the same area where Samson grew up
 - Samuel seems to be reminding us that these circumstances were the product of Samson's own disobedience
 - And as circumstances have it, these spies find their way to the house of Micah in Ephraim
 - As they spend time in Micah's home, they hear the distinctive voice of the Levite staying with Micah
 - Apparently, Levites had a unique accent
 - Here again, this confirms what we learned earlier in this study
 - The unity of the tribes of Israel was evaporating to the point that language was beginning to differ
 - This is another sign that the nation was fracturing
 - When they hear that the voice of the priest, they ask why he's hanging out in Micah's home

- Specifically, they want to know what priestly business he has found in Micah's home
- After all, he's a long way from Shiloh, the location of the tabernacle
- The Levite summarizes the story of how he came to Micah's home
 - He explains the good deal he found
 - And that Micah had hired him to be a personal priest
- Have you ever heard someone explain something to you, some new idea or invention, and you think to yourself, "Why didn't I think of that?"
 - The idea is so radical, so revolutionary that it's both surprising and obvious at the same time
 - That's what ran through the minds of these five Danites when they heard this Levite say he was hired as a personal priest
 - These Danites probably thought to themselves, "A personal priest? Why didn't I think of that."
 - In this case, it's a terrible idea, a sinful rebellious idolatrous idea
 - But the idea took hold in these men's hearts
 - And from this point forward, men in Israel began to accept that a person could establish their own path to God
 - They could have idols and priests and temples of their own
 - It's an example of sin spreading
 - When we take missteps in following God, we may not be the only one to suffer
 - We may be the seed that causes sin to sprout up somewhere else
 - And even if we choose to repent and retreat from our own sin, who knows where our sin may travel without us?
 - Micah's sin is about to travel a long way without him
- Notice what happens next...in v.5 they inquire of this man concerning the will of God

- Remember, this man is not a priest
 - He's just a Levite
 - The only reason he's called a priest at this point is because Micah has consecrated him as a personal priest
 - But that's like someone calling you their personal Superman
 - Someone might give you that title, but I recommend you dare not try to stop a bullet or leap off a tall building
- Nonetheless, notice how quickly these Danites embrace the Levite as if he truly represented God
 - They ask him to inquire of God concerning the future of their journey
 - Remember that the true ephod worn by the High Priest of Israel included the Urim and the Thummim stones
 - These stones allowed the High Priest to discern the will of God concerning some matter
 - The priest would inquire of the Lord in the form of a yes-no question and then throw the stones as lots
 - The Lord would cause the stones to reflect His answer the question
- Apparently, the make-believe ephod Micah's "priest" wore included pretend Urim and the Thummim stones too
 - Therefore, these men are asking the priest to seek God's will in the usual way
 - And this priest is only too happy to comply
 - He does whatever he does in his counterfeit way and then gives the Danites the answer he knows they want to hear
 - The Lord has blessed their journey, he reports
- Obviously, this scene is entirely a charade, for such is all manmade religion
 - It's like the tale of the Emperor's Clothes by Hans Christian Andersen

- As you may remember, two weavers promise to make the king a new suit of clothes that will appear invisible to those in the kingdom who are stupid or incompetent
- The weavers never actually deliver any clothes to the emperor, but only pretend to clothe him in exchange for a large fee
- Despite the emperor being naked, everyone pretended to see his new clothes for fear of revealing themselves to be the stupid one
- Even the emperor himself played along claiming his new clothes were splendid
- It required a young boy to point out the obvious, that the emperor was actually naked
- That's what's happening here between Micah, the Levite and the Danites
 - Micah knew the ephod wasn't the actual garment of the High Priest
 - And the Danites knew Micah's house wasn't the tabernacle
 - The Levite knew he wasn't truly a priest nor did he have the actual Urim and the Thummim
- So when they ask him for a blessing and he responds with an answer, everyone is playing along in a farce that suits their purposes
 - Micah feels the satisfaction of seeing his little drive through tabernacle being legitimized by the Danites' visit
 - The Danites receive affirmation for their decisions to abandon the Lord's provision
 - And the Levite take pride in being recognized as a legitimate representative of the Lord
 - Everyone is getting what they want...except the Lord
- That's what happens when we seek to please ourselves
 - We may achieve some limited benefit, but that benefit is strictly limited to our flesh
 - We won't benefit our soul

- And more importantly, we don't bless the Lord
- He is not honored much less pleased with such charades
- That's why the Bible says that the Lord does not hear the prayers of the unbeliever
 - He is not impressed with manmade piety
 - These men were speaking of God and acting as if they served Him and He was responding to them
 - But these things were happening entirely in their self-deceived minds
 - God was nowhere to be found in any of this nonsense
- That's the chief concern in this first of our three stories to end Judges
 - True worship of Yahweh is at risk
 - The people are adrift spiritually and willing to make up their own religion
 - Left unchecked, where does this lead the nation?
- That's easy to see as the rest of chapter will show

Judg. 18:7 Then the five men departed and came to Laish and saw the people who were in it living in security, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and secure; for there was no ruler humiliating them for anything in the land, and they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone.

Judg. 18:8 When they came back to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers said to them, "What do you report?"

Judg. 18:9 They said, "Arise, and let us go up against them; for we have seen the land, and behold, it is very good. And will you sit still? Do not delay to go, to enter, to possess the land.

Judg. 18:10 "When you enter, you will come to a secure people with a spacious land; for God has given it into your hand, a place where there is no lack of anything that is on the earth."

- Having been "blessed" by Micah's priest, the men head about 100 miles due north eventually reaching a town called Laish
 - Laish was a quiet place, isolated and beautiful

- This Canaanite town sat at the foot of Mt Hermon in a beautiful valley
- Unlike most Canaanite cities, it wasn't defended by a large wall, probably because the inhabitants thought it unnecessary
- So the spies realize that taking this city away from the Canaanites would be easy
- They return to report what they have found and they argue for relocating to this distant place on the basis of three advantages
 - First, the land is secure and spacious
 - Secondly, it's the place the Lord is giving to the Danites
 - Finally, it's fertile land with everything they need
- But notice what really attracted the Danites to this region more than anything else
 - In v.7 they remark that this region is free from authorities that might harass them
 - They're referring both to the Philistine rulers and the judges of Israel
 - The Danites are excited by the prospect of of no one telling them what to do
- You're peering into the heart of this people
 - They won't bow their knee to anyone
 - Much like Micah, the Danites would rather make their own rules than follow the word of God
 - The Lord assigned the tribe of Dan to the land He had prepared for them
 - And the Lord told the people through Joshua to remove the peoples they found in the land
 - Had they obeyed, the Lord would have given them the victories they sought and freed them from the oppression they detested
 - Instead, they disobeyed the Lord's command and decided to live among the Canaanites and Philistines

- Because they didn't drive out the Philistines, the Danites suffered under the oppression of their enemies
- Years later, the Danites complained when their disobedience came back upon their heads
- And for the record, it wasn't as though the Danites were unwilling to fight for what they wanted
 - We know this because of what follows next in the text

Judg. 18:11 Then from the family of the Danites, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, six hundred men armed with weapons of war set out.

Judg. 18:12 They went up and camped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. Therefore they called that place Mahaneh-dan to this day; behold, it is west of Kiriath-jearim.

Judg. 18:13 They passed from there to the hill country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah.

- Once the Danites discovered there was land worth possessing, they prepared a military force to defeat the people who held the land
 - Keep in mind they have calculated that this town could be taken because they believe they possess the strength to defeat this enemy
 - Earlier, they probably stopped fighting for the same reason
 - They decided they lacked the strength to defeat the enemy so they gave up
 - You see how they are making every decision according to what was right in their own eyes?
 - They aren't relying on the word of God
 - They don't trust the Lord to keep His promises
 - Instead, they see the world merely as men
 - This is the inevitable result of walking away from the Lord
 - Either we abide in Christ and in His word so that we may think and act more closely with His will
 - Or we live in our flesh, moving away from Him and seeking to engage in evil deeds
 - As Paul taught

[Col. 1:21](#) And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,
[Col. 1:22](#) yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach –
[Col. 1:23](#) if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

- But this army doesn't go straight to the city of Laish
 - Instead, they retrace the route of the spies, landing in Micah's house again
 - Why have they come back to Micah?
 - Could it be they have decided that Micah's priest was responsible for leading them into the perfect city?
 - Now they return ready to claim their good luck charm
 - Next time we'll see how this first part of our epilogue concludes, with the sin of Micah and Dan conspiring to bring idolatry to an entire tribe
 - Little sins lead to big sin
 - And big sin leads us to finding new gods in ourselves or in others
 - How will God rescue His nation from this descent into oblivion?