

Judges

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19 ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

A Very Religious Story¹

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Judges 17:1-18:31

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please keep your Bibles open to Judges chapter 17. Thank you, Heather, for reading.

You might have noticed that our passage for this morning is LONG. I want to ease any concerns that you might have by assuring you that – in spite of its length – this story is simple and we will move through it quickly.

Before we do that, let's get our bearings. With the close of chapter 16, we have officially moved OUT of the description of Israel's judges that we have been working through since chapter 3 and INTO the conclusion of the book.

The author is no longer interested in following chronology. Instead, he has stepped *out of the timeline* that we have been following, and he has hand-picked two stories that illustrate and summarize what Israel looked like when there was no king. Four times in these concluding chapters the author repeats:

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
(Judges 17:6 ESV)

¹ I'm using language here from Michael Wilcock, *The Message Of Judges* (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 116.

So, what did it look like when Israel had no king?

The story that we are considering this morning provides us with a snapshot. It revolves around three main characters. We find a man named Micah who robs his own mother and later constructs a little temple in his backyard. We find a Levitical priest who is happy to serve in ministry – so long as the price is right. And we find the tribe of Dan setting up a house of God in Shiloh – and using it to worship their idols.

In short, our story for this morning is a *very religious story*.

But this is not true and right religion. This is *ugly, distorted* religion. When there is no king – when there is no voice of spiritual authority calling the people back to God’s word – people worship in a way that seems right in their own eyes. So, with this story fresh in our minds, let’s ask the question:

What Does Worship Become When Everyone Does What Is Right In Their Own Eyes?

For starters:

1. Worship becomes selfish

We see this very clearly in the opening scene of the story. Look again at verses 1-2 of chapter 17:

There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. ² And he said to his mother, “The 1,100 pieces of silver that were taken from you, **about which you uttered a curse**, and also spoke it in my ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it.”
(Judges 17:1-2a ESV)

The story begins with a glimpse into a dysfunctional Israelite family. Micah has robbed his own mother to the tune of 1,100 pieces of silver – about 100 years wages! But mom doesn’t know that it was him, and so she paces through the house praying, ‘May the Lord CURSE the person who has robbed me!’

Micah decides to give the money back to his mom. But there is a noticeable detail that is missing from this act. Notice here that there is no mention of *repentance*.

Because Micah is not sorry that he has sinned against the Lord. Micah's not sorry that He has robbed God of glory. He's just afraid that a curse will ruin his life.

So he gives back the money and – in his mind – *wards off the curse*. He then goes on to make a shrine in his backyard. Initially, he enlists his son to serve as the 'priest' of his temple, but then – as luck would have it – an unexpected visitor pays him a visit. Look with me at verses 9-10:

And Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "**I am a Levite of Bethlehem in Judah**, and I am going to sojourn where I may find a place."¹⁰ And Micah said to him, "Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest (Judges 17:9-10a ESV)

Micah can't believe his luck! This is FANTASTIC! His own personal Levite serving in his own private shrine! He says to himself in verse 13:

"Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest." (Judges 17:13b ESV)

Everything about Micah's religion is selfish. The "god" that he worships here looks more like a glorified good luck charm than He does the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The question that drives Micah's worship is: "What can God do for me?" Tim Keller says it well:

The tragedy of man-made religion is that it always reduces God to someone to be controlled, rather than seeing God as the one who is in control and is worthy of real, whole-life worship.²

Call me crazy, but this feels like a very relevant warning for us today. How many North American Christians treat God like a good luck charm? If you were following Micah on twitter, would he really look all that out of place in your newsfeed?

² Timothy Keller, *Judges For You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 174-175.

‘Just hired an ANOINTED minister for our newly renovated facility! We’re expecting nothing less than health, wealth and happiness in the year to come! #Blessed #Favour’

There is a lot of talk these days about revival. Young people, we’re told, are turning to the Lord like never before in Canadian history. And this is *wonderfully encouraging* news, to be sure! But as we reach out with the gospel to a generation that seems to be leaning in, let’s tell them the truth about a life of worship.

Many of those seeking young people are coming from a place of deep hurt. They feel as if they were sold a lie by the generation that came before them and now – with broken families, a mental health crisis, and seemingly no hope for the future – they’re looking for something that *works*.

But – to be clear – we don’t worship because ‘it works’. Our invitations to this generation cannot be, ‘Come to Jesus and he’ll fix your marriage, your finances, and your depression.’ Now, to be clear, God’s way DOES work! He may very well fix your marriage, expand your finances and heal your depression! But if THAT is what fuels a person’s worship, then that is *selfish* worship. It sounds just like Micah:

Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, (Judges 17:13b ESV)

Here’s the invitation: Come to God FOR GOD! Come and worship because HE DESERVES YOUR WORSHIP! All your life you’ve been trained to ask: ‘What can I get?’ but don’t bring that approach to the Maker of heaven and earth. When you see Him rightly, you will ask: ‘What can I possibly *give* to the One who is so WORTHY of praise?’

And as you lay down your selfishness – as you surrender your life – something wonderful will happen:

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:25 ESV)

This is true worship. And there is nothing selfish about it.

The second thing that we learn in this story is that, when everyone does what is right in their eyes:

2. Worship becomes worldly

Before Israel entered the promised land, God gave His people clear direction:

you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, **that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices** that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 20:17-18 ESV)

God called His people to be thorough in driving out the idolatry from their midst because He knew that – if they attempted to coexist with the idolatrous worship of the world around them – they would quickly adopt that idolatry into their own worship.

But they *didn't* drive out the surrounding nations. And so that idolatry *did* seep in. We saw perhaps the most striking example of this back in chapter 11 when Jephthah decided to thank the Lord for granting him victory... by sacrificing his own daughter! The god of the Canaanites delighted in child sacrifice, but the God of the Israelites – the true and living God – strictly FORBID such a thing! What was Jephthah thinking?

His worship had become worldly. It had become tainted and transformed to look just like the surrounding culture. We see the same thing in our passage for this morning. We read in verse 3:

So when he restored the money to his mother, his mother took 200 pieces of silver and gave it to the silversmith, **who made it into a carved image and a metal image.** (Judges 17:4a ESV)

In order to THANK God, Micah's mother used some of her restored riches to build an idol! She thought that this would PLEASE Him! This is as if our church elders said, 'The Lord has really blessed, so we decided to erect a golden statue of buddha in the foyer.'

And, lest we assume that this foolishness was reserved for Micah and his family, when the tribe of Dan poached the Levite priest from Micah's shrine, they also stole this idol. You might be

tempted to assume, ‘Perhaps they stole the idol to *destroy* it’. But as you come to the end of chapter 18, you read:

So they set up Micah's carved image that he made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh. (Judges 18:31 ESV)

Here’s something that is worth reflecting on: This isn’t a story of Israel *rejecting* God. It’s a story of a people who have become so *ignorant* of God that they no longer understand Who He is and what pleases Him. As one commentator notes:

In this passage what is primarily condemned is not idolatry in the raw but syncretism in particular, not the worship of other gods but the worship of Yahweh in a wrong way.³

Let me ask you a very practical question: When is the last time that you heard a Christian say, ‘I wonder if God was pleased with our worship this morning?’

Are we mindful of the fact that we are constantly being shaped and transformed by the culture around us? Sure, we’re not erecting physical idols in the sanctuary, but idolatry takes many forms. Does celebrity culture ever creep into our worship? Does consumerism ever creep into our worship? How much does the world out there shape our worship in here?

Third, and finally, when everyone does what is right in their own eyes:

3. Worship becomes individualistic

I would argue that this is THE central warning of the text. In the days of the judges the tribes of Israel were isolated and divided, and nowhere was this more obvious than in their worship.

Think about this: Before the days of the judges, when the people of God were wandering in the desert with Moses and Joshua, worship was *centralized*. Every Israelite knew that Moses was God’s spokesman. Everyone knew that God’s presence dwelt in the tabernacle.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such A Great Salvation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2000), 205.

But when the next generation settled down in the promised land and Moses and Joshua were dead and gone worship became *decentralized*. People began to build shrines in their backyards – see Micah in chapter 17. Tribes began to set up their own, competing places of worship – see the tribe of Dan in chapter 18:

And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. ³¹ So they set up Micah's carved image that he made, **as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.** (Judges 18:30-31 ESV)

The fact that the author ended this story here is not an insignificant detail. He sees something *problematic* in Dan's new place of worship. In verses 27-29 he highlights just how remote Dan's new centre of worship was. He writes:

But the people of Dan took what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him, and they came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting, and struck them with the edge of the sword and burned the city with fire. ²⁸ **And there was no deliverer because it was far from Sidon, and they had no dealings with anyone.** It was in the valley that belongs to Beth-rehob. Then they rebuilt the city and lived in it. ²⁹ And they named the city Dan, after the name of Dan their ancestor, who was born to Israel; but the name of the city was Laish at the first. (Judges 18:27-29 ESV)

This author is careful to draw our attention to how *isolated* this location was. This isolation made it an *easy* military target. But it also made it a *lousy* centre of worship. The Danites made their centre of worship as far from the rest of the Israelites as possible!

Now, as North American readers, we don't initially see the issue here, do we? 'So what? So what if Micah set up a shrine in his yard? So what if Dan took it upon themselves to set up a centre of worship for their tribe in the middle of nowhere? Good for them! To each his own!'

But God's desires *unity* in our worship. He desired that for them, and He desires it for us as well. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth and he warned:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and **that there be no divisions among you**, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I

follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”¹³ **Is Christ divided?** (1 Corinthians 1:10-13a ESV)

This is one of the reasons why we recite the Apostle’s Creed once a month as a church. There’s a line in there that can cause some confusion – perhaps you found yourself confused this morning.

We declared together:

I believe in the Holy Ghost,
the holy catholic church

People sometimes object, ‘Now wait a minute! I’m Baptist, not Catholic!’ But the creed is not referring to Roman Catholicism. It was written long before those divisions existed. The word ‘catholic’ simply means ‘universal’. In the creed we are declaring with Christians across the planet and down through the ages: ‘I believe there is ONE church.’

Do you believe that?

When everyone does what is right in their own eyes, we lose sight of this truth. Some of us are tempted to follow Micah’s example. We refuse to think beyond our own family, ‘We don’t need the Church. We don’t need anyone. Our family is a silo. We do things our own way and we are just fine by ourselves thank you very much.’

Others of us are tempted to follow Dan’s example. We pull away from the other tribes in God’s family and live on an island unto ourselves. We don’t celebrate the successes of the churches around us – in fact we wonder whether they even deserve to be *called* churches! Why should they be if they don’t share our perfect theology down to a ‘t’?

Pride pulls the people of God apart. We need a King with the authority – and the ability – to hold us together.

And that brings us back to the heart of this passage. Here, we find an example of what worship looked like when there was no king in Israel. This is what it looked like when everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

Israel needed a king.

She needed someone who – with spiritual authority – could call her back to obedience.

She needed someone to unite a divided people and to centralize their worship.

The first readers of Judges would have recognized this needed king as none other than King David. He – the man after God’s own heart – would unite the tribes for the first time since the earliest days of the judges. He would capture Jerusalem and set it apart as the central place of worship. He would commission his son, Solomon, to build the temple where all the Israelites would assemble to worship together. ‘Yes,’ they said, ‘we need David!’

But, of course, we know that David’s reforms ultimately fell short. Within two generations, the united tribes of Israel were ripped in two. Within 14 generations, Manasseh – Judah’s king – was worshipping idols in God’s sanctuary. Within 20 generations, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon.

Israel got her king – and she wound up in worse shape than even the days of the judges. Which is why, if this passage was only meant to point to David, it would be terribly discouraging.

But, of course, it points *beyond* David. It points to the true King; the King we need.

The King We Need

If we want to worship God in Spirit and in truth – if we care about pleasing Him in all that we do – then our only hope is to follow Jesus as he leads us in worship. He is the only one who can truly reform our worship.

King Jesus sees our bent towards *selfishness*. And he loves us enough to call it out. So, for example, when he sees people in the crowd who are only following him for material gain he says:

Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, **but because you ate your fill of the loaves.** ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. (John 6:26b-27a ESV)

Then he turns to those who are following him for position and power and says:

But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and **whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.** ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43b-45 ESV)

Then he turns to those who think that following him will lead to ease and comfort and he says:

“If anyone would come after me, **let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24b-25 ESV)

True religion – according to the King – is not about twisting the arm of God for favors. It’s not about selfishness. It’s about pouring ourselves out completely in our love and service of Him.

And King Jesus sees our bent towards worldliness. And he lovingly calls it out. He warns us that we cannot love money, or security, or family, or anything else more than Him. He sees that – to quote John Calvin – the human heart is a perpetual *forge of idols*.

And so, he offers us a new heart. King Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to transform us from the inside out. He calls us to a pure worship. And this is not of our own doing. It is through His Spirit working in us.

Finally, King Jesus sees our bent towards individualism. While David built a centralized temple in Jerusalem, Jesus went a step further. He himself became the temple. He is the place where we meet with God. And now, people of all tribes, tongues and nations are united in him.

Worship apart from the king is selfish, worldly and individualistic. If that’s what you want, you can find it anywhere in our culture. But here – in the holy catholic church where we are led by our King – our worship should be unlike anything else that the world has to offer. It is real. It is compelling. It is what we were made for. Oh that we would be a people who follow our King – the true worship leader. To that end, let’s pray together.