

RUF Bible Study – Judges

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Judges 17-18 – Nice on the Outside, But Corrupt On the Inside

*And he said, "You take my gods that I made and the priest, and go away,
and what have I left? How then do you ask me, 'What is the matter with you?'"*
Judges 18:24

The British had the war won. They had the troops, the resources and the backing of their government. They sent trained soldiers to the field, experts in war tactics.

The American Revolutionaries didn't have much at all. Their soldiers were a ragtag group, barely held together. Their leaders were farmers and lawyers. And their generals didn't have much experience. It was going to be a rout.

So went conventional wisdom of the day in the late 1770s. A great historical novel about this period, *A Glorious Cause*, reflects on the arrogance of the British generals. Their hubris kept them from winning. Their pride kept them from advancing. Their love for ceremony, for the whole spectacle of war, kept them in cities so they could have parties, dances and stay with their mistresses. They would jockey for position, not wanting another general to get the credit for a victory, thereby robbing themselves of victory at all. It was a botched war, and it cost them dearly. But it all looked so good. The uniforms. The muskets and cannons. The beautiful marches of the king's army.

As we come to the close of Judges, we're seeing another case of a true lack of leadership. We're seeing corruption, greed, pride and unfaithfulness. And we're seeing it from God's own people, his church. It's a sad tale, and there are no judges in sight. Let's use the main characters of chapters 17 and 18 as our markers in thinking through this story.

Micah – Your Normal Person

The chapter opens with an unexceptional sentence that brings Micah to our attention: *There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.*

Micah is a normal guy living up in the mountains. Micah's name means "Who is like Yahweh?" and the answer is supposed to be "No one!" So let's see how, while everything looks good on the surface of things, underneath things are incredibly wrong.

After his introduction, we find Micah confessing his sin. He has stolen 1,100 pieces of silver from his mother, and he wants to make it right.

She's naturally happy to hear that, and she retracts her curse and turns it into a blessing. She offers to dedicate the money to the Lord and does so. She and Micah make some cool stuff for their church, and Micah gets the distinct pleasure of ordaining one of his own sons to serve there.

It's a beautiful, religious family. But things are oh so wrong. "Who is like Yahweh?" indeed.

First, why is Micah stealing so much money from his mother? That is wrong, and that is certainly not honoring your father and your mother. She is a woman of great means, and he's stolen from her.

Second, why is he returning it? It doesn't appear to be from a godly sorrow of repentance. He sounds scared of the curse. Blessings and curses carried real threat and power for these people, and Micah is scared. He's afraid of what's going to happen to him. That doesn't stop everyone, for greed is a powerful thing. But it stopped him. So he gives it back in fear.

Then his mother tries to reverse the curse. She offers a blessing, hoping it will cancel out her previous oracle. To make it sure, she says she will dedicate the money to the Lord. But she only gives 200 of the 1,100 pieces. Hadn't she promised it all? Hadn't she dedicated the full sum to the Lord? But she holds back and only gives a portion.

But wait – did this money actually go to the Lord at all? What they did with it was make some carved images and a metal image. They apparently had a household shrine. So this money didn't go to the church at all, but to their own images and altars. The silver would have made some impressive idols, which most likely would have been bulls or calves. This sounds again like the Golden Calf incident in Exodus 32, and is what Israel has been in trouble for all of these chapters of Judges. We're getting a first-hand look of just how it would happen.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Judges from Block, Wilcock, Redeemer Pres, Davis, Cundall/Morris, Jordan, and listened to sermons from Brandon Barrett, Shaynor Newsome, and Pete Hatton. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

They thought they were serving Yahweh. They thought they were worshipping as they should. What's the matter with a statue or picture of God? How could that hurt?

And lastly, Micah ordains his son as a priest for his own worship center. He felt like it needed to be more legitimate than it was, so it needed a professional. He provided his own priest. This is in direct contradiction to the stipulations of the covenant, which said that only Levites could serve as priests. No matter. They were in their own house church anyway, so Micah decided he could ordain whomever he wanted.

What's the point of all this? The narrator tells us – *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

With a good king functioning as he should, this type of behavior from Micah would not have been tolerated. In fact, the punishment according to the covenantal laws would be death. This is serious business.

But it's allowed to go on, and the narrator presents it as a picture of the way all of Israel is acting. It wasn't only the leaders, it was everyone all the way down to John Doe in the mountains. They were all doing what was right in their own eyes.

We might be tempted to think that when God says they were all doing whatever they thought was right, he means there were orgies and drug dealers everywhere. That rampant nakedness and drunkenness were what hacked God off so much.

And those may have been a part of the problem (we'll see some rather unsavory things at the end of the book). But this is religious sin. This looks so good, so proper, so right. It's moral and good. It's church stuff. This is what God is mad about. As commentator Block writes, "A woman... openly confesses her devotion to Yahweh in blessing and dedication, but her actions run directly counter to that confession. Her son, who bears a thoroughly orthodox name, commits the ultimate crime, establishing a cult system in direct violation of Yahweh's incomparability, as expressed by the name, and Yahweh's explicit command not to worship any gods besides him nor to make any physical representations of deity."²

We are like everyman Micah and his mother. We are afraid of the future and the way things might work out for us. We believe it when people bring down curses on us, telling us we won't amount to anything. We believe that we may never be loved. That no one may ever pick us. Or that we'll be doomed to failure in work, love and life. We want to reverse the curse.

So we start to shape up. In the religious version of this, we may start to go to church or read the Bible every day. We clean up our language and stop drinking. We try to keep our clothes on. We pursue a radical morality.

But we are building idols. We are trying to buy off God that way. We think it's a quid pro quo relationship. We want control of the way things work; God blesses good people and punishes bad people. We think, I need to be a better person so God will bless me. "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

In our own lives we shy away from *true* obedience. Sometimes because we're ignorant of what God truly wants. Maybe no one has taught us. Maybe we haven't been listening. Maybe it seems so backwards and strange – chastity? Truthfulness? How quaint. So we ignore the parts we don't like, and accentuate the parts we do.

But that isn't true religion. It's like what we were saying in the *unChristian* book. Our professions and our lives don't match up to the Bible. We might look good for awhile. We might appear religious. But, even if we're trying to be good, we're actually hypocritical and using God for our own selfish desires. Ouch.

"The story will show that superficially everything was as it should be, in that happy state of affairs which is a blend of ignorance and hypocrisy."⁴ Jesus speaks about this at great length in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. External religion looks good for a time, but it is exposed as hypocrisy and doom. Can you relate to Micah and his mother? Can you see how similar we are to an everyday Israelite in the time of Judges?

If you haven't yet, take the time to write down the possible idols in your life, thinking particularly about "religious" ones. Security. Helping people. Respect. Duty. Goodness. These can be what we're truly after. If so, then we're setting up little shops where we worship others' gods alongside God himself.

The Levite Priest – God For Hire

Things must have gone well for awhile, but still Micah was uneasy about his private shrine. One day a young man of Bethlehem, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, walked up the road. We later learn his name was Jonathan (18:30).

Micah can't believe his good fortune. God must be smiling on him. He hasn't felt good about his son as priest. That just wasn't right. But now a real, live Levite was here! It's unclear as to why Jonathan has wandered away from his people, but he's looking for work.

Micah makes him an offer: *Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year and a suit of clothes and your living.* Let me hire you.

It doesn't take much. The Levite shakes his hand, brings in his priestly gear and sets up shop. *And Micah ordained the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because I have a Levite as a priest."*

² Block, 482

³ Davis, 207

⁴ Wilcock, 151

Bam. We have a new church, and one that is not approved by God. This is not the way it's supposed to be.

This passage is another huge caution to our religious zeal. It all seems so good. It's like a new pastor in town with a church plant. But things haven't been done the right way.

As someone who is thinking about planting a church someday, this passage hits home to me. I wonder – would my church be legitimate? How would I go about deciding if I needed to be there? If I were needed, what would we do for our worship? How would we decide what was Biblical and what was cultural?

I see churches started all the time for all kinds of reasons. And there are people going to those churches. Perhaps the first concern should be a need. How many churches in a town do we need? Is this church really doing anything different? Has the organizing pastor considered what other pastors in the town are doing or does he just show up and set up shop?

If it is a good thing, then who is the pastor? What are his qualifications? Who is behind him on this? In our nation in the past 200 years we have a strong tradition of uneducated preachers. They have zeal, but they have not been trained. I think this has been a huge problem. I'm not wanting to be a seminary snob (for that is not the complete solution), but pastors should have to be qualified to be ordained.

A church in my city just ordained a young man they want to lead their college group. *Then* they plan to train him. While I commend them for the planned training, that is backwards. It isn't what ordination should be. Ordination should be the final process in a lengthy training time, ending in an examination of his experience, views, knowledge and calling.

Worshipping God in the wrong way is such an easy thing to do. Our day and nation are filled with churches trying to attract people and fill the pews. Churches tone down the "bad parts" of Christianity. They want people to feel good, have an excellent, fun time and come back with more money.

There are pastors for hire out there. Being a pastor can be a good gig. You can have power, influence, control and a steady job. But there are a ton of pressures on pastors. The biggest one is preaching the truth even when it's not popular. If you have an influential person or family in your church, will you speak the truth and discipline him or them if you have to? Or will you cave to his pocketbook?

I have seen schools and churches started with the financial power of one person. Things may start nicely, but the one who pays the piper calls the tune. If that powerful person gets crossed, heads often roll.

Jonathan the Levite priest is wrong. He should not have been Micah's private pastor. He was ignoring God's laws about the Levitical priesthood, and further legitimatizing the idolatry rampant in the church. Micah wanted things done his own way. He offered friendship, power, position and security to Jonathan and it was too much to resist.

We should beware. Do we try to get the church in our back pocket? Do we try to earn God's favor and his blessings by buying him off somehow?

And we should pray for our legitimate church leaders and pastors. They are tempted. Tempted to use their power for ill. Tempted to pursue jobs not out of a true calling, but out of a steady income. Pastors are people too, and they can be led astray. Not only that, but there are wolves in sheep's clothing. Jonathan may have been a good guy. He may have had the right background. But he didn't care about the Bible and doing things the right way.

When we have a symbiotic relationship like Micah's and Jonathan's we are in serious trouble. Such is the case in doomed partnerships.

Consider the relationship between King George and his advisors surrounding the time period of the Revolutionary War. We've mentioned already the poor generals. But these men were propped up by the king. King George kept making bad decision after bad decision. Every decision made sense when isolated from the others. But as a whole, George never understood how his government alienated the people so far away.

He didn't understand because he didn't want to believe it, and because his advice was awful. His confidants and his government continued to read the unrest through the lens of their past experiences. It was a riot that needed to be quelled. The Americans were nuisance to be dealt with. Most people loved the king, so the few troublemakers could be quieted and things would get back to normal.

Those advisors were wrong. The king was wrong. If he started hearing the "wrong" things from his people he would replace his advisors with more who would tell him what he wanted to hear. The symbiotic cycle degenerated further.

We must get clarity in such a situation as we have here in Judges 17. The only way we can rise above the tyranny of our own opinions is to believe in God's word. If everyone is doing what is right in his own eyes, we will be buffeted back and forth by the wind. To truly rise above, we must trust in God's word even when it doesn't make sense to us. And we must demand this of our leaders, even if it seems to cause our harm in the short term.

The Danites – A People Adrift

Our last "character" in the story comes from one of the tribes of Israel, the Danites. This tribe had never settled on their land. In chapter 1 our narrator told us: *The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain.* (1:34)

Now this people, hundreds of years later, get on the move in chapter 18. What transpires sounds a lot like the spy episode in Numbers 13. In that historical story, God's people had sent out spies to scout out the land. They found an incredible

bounty – and giants. Only Joshua and Caleb had the confidence that God would provide the land for them; the others gave a report saying this would be an impossible endeavor. God punished them for their lack of faith.

We've been seeing the repercussions of such a faithless people all throughout the book of Judges. Tired of living in the margins, the Danites recall their heritage and send out new spies. They first find a Levite priest, the very Jonathan of our story in chapter 17. Jonathan blesses them for their journey.

The Danites find the land they're looking for and it looks like a perfect place to settle down. So they assemble 600 soldiers and swoop down to take the city.

While taking the city, they find Micah's private temple. They plunder it too, robbing Micah of his ephod, household gods, metal image and carved image. They also take Jonathan, the priest. And they burn the city of Laish.

Micah is distraught. He can't believe this is happening. He rushes out in anguish. "What is wrong?" they ask. *And he said, "You take my gods that I made and the priest, and go away, and what have I left? How then do you ask me, 'What is the matter with you?'"* (18:24)

Micah's false gods have no power. The true Israelite would have laughed at Micah's foolish tears and questions. If you have made your gods, how much power do you think they really have?

We feel this way when our false gods are exposed. We work so hard in creating a career, investing all we have and are into it. It becomes our identity. We mold our lives around it, giving everything to it. Then one day we go to work and get fired. But... How can this happen? I gave everything to this company! What do I have left? How can I go on?

And our former employers don't really care. They might for a bit, but it's a business. They have to go on. The bottom line just doesn't have time to coddle your tears. Your idol has been brought down. Better not have built it up in the first place, to have kept the Lord alone as our one, true God.

We also see Jonathan for who he really is. He's gotten a better offer so he's moving to work for the Danites. He's not loyal to Yahweh and his word, so it's no surprise (though it is for Micah!) when he scoots to something new. How loyal are our allegiances? How rooted are our relationships? How sincere are our vows?

Jonathan's duplicity is all the more shocking when, at the end of chapter 18, we find out he is the grandson of Moses! Oh no. How far we've fallen. We've been following this Levite priest and his wrong-headed ministry, and then we find out he has been throwing away his heritage. We shouldn't be surprised. Just as Samson pictured for us the lusty, selfish paganism of God's judges, and Micah the syncretistic tendency of a normal Israelite, now Jonathan pictures for us the waywardness of the priests. They don't care about Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy or Joshua any more. The leaders will work for food. It may look good, but it's so far gone from what they were. Moses' grandson. We shake our heads. But a legacy won't cut it. You cannot rely on the good name of your parents or family. You stand before God.

And yet, you also stand before God with others. We are not all responsible only for ourselves. The Danites show us that the sins of the people were multiplied to each other and affected each other.

It's buried in these verses in chapter 18 in verse 30: *And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves....* This was the start of a whole separate center of worship, and this place, this very place, becomes a burden and curse for the generations to come. Just one example comes from 1 Kings 10:29: *But Jehu did not turn aside from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin—that is, the golden calves that were in Bethel and in Dan.*

If you keep reading through the Old Testament, you find that these golden calves, these centers of idolatrous worship, these high places, were a continuous source of trouble, conflict and woe for Israel. This becomes one of the HUGE subtexts of the narrative throughout the history of God's people. Who will tear down the idols?

Right here is where it starts. The Danites co-opt nobody Micah's personal idols and personal priest, and they set up a shop that no one really cares about. But it has tremendous downstream consequences.

Our sin is not done in isolation. Our sin affects others. We don't always know what it will be, but we have to believe that sin is more sinful than we think. It gets its way into communities and the way they think and act until things get corrupted and diseased.

What sins have you forgotten about? What sins are acceptable in your community? The sins of greed and radical consumption seem to go unchecked in America these days. People from other cultures and other times would be aghast at our nonchalant attitude toward this. Are there other unchecked sins in your life? Others in your church or group of friends?

We must come clean before the Lord. What looks like a repeat performance of Numbers 13 actually is the pursuit of selfish gain, of trying to use God again, and of creating a false temple of worship. Religious activity is not the same as Biblical faithfulness.

In contrast to the bumbling reigns of the British generals, dignitaries and politicians, we have George Washington. General Washington was a Virginian farmer. He had been in the British army and had won some distinction, but he was not the type of man who would have risen to prominence in English society. In America, however, he quietly made it all the way to the generalship of the upstart army.

Many were not impressed. He made mistakes. There were usurpers to his power. But he hired competent men around him, he waited patiently, he played the role of a leader well – and he won. It is not wrong to call him the father of our country. He was a great man.

We haven't seen many great men in Judges. We don't see any here, not even someone we can make excuses for. There is no one. 18:1 puts it clearly: *In those days there was no king in Israel.*

Israel needed a king. It needed a leader to set straight the everyday man, the priest and the people. To wipe out the high places of worship and direct people to the Tabernacle, the house of God. To distribute the land fairly and make allowances for the tribes. To rule justly with mercy and goodness.

We don't have one here. The author is starting to set us up for the kingship, and he has in mind David, the king. But we have in mind someone greater than that. We have in mind Jesus Christ, the messiah. There was no judge in these days of chapters 17 and 18, and in the lack of one we see how great Jesus was.

The Westminster Larger Catechism gives a fuller answer of what Jesus does as our king. Hear its word: *Q. 45. How doth Christ execute the office of a king? A. Christ executes the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them; in bestowing saving grace upon his elect, rewarding their obedience, and correcting them for their sins, preserving and supporting them under all their temptations and sufferings, restraining and overcoming all their enemies, and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory, and their good; and also in taking vengeance on the rest, who know not God, and obey not the gospel.*

We have been taught to shudder of the thought of a king. But we live every day under rulers, powers, leaders, bosses, mayors, governors and presidents. Who will be our representative? Who will lead us?

As Davis writes, "Here [Judges 17 and 18] is Israel wallowing in her own religious and moral mess. Here the problem is not the enemy without but the cancer within. Here, so the writer says, Israel has hit rock bottom. Hard. Yet not without hope."⁵ Our hope is in the gospel. We need the one and true Savior. We need then to obey his words to us in real relational worship to this true king.

⁵ Davis, 197

Lead On, O King Eternal, Ernest Shurtleff

*Lead on, O King eternal, The day of march has come;
Henceforth in fields of conquest, Thy tents shall be our home.
Through days of preparation, Thy grace has made us strong;
And now, O King eternal, We lift our battle song.*

*Lead on, O King eternal, Till sin's fierce war shall cease,
And holiness shall whisper, The sweet amen of peace.
For not with swords' loud clashing, Nor roll of stirring drums;
With deeds of love and mercy, The heavenly kingdom comes.*

*Lead on, O King eternal, We follow, not with fears,
For gladness breaks like morning, Where'er Thy face appears.
Thy cross is lifted over us, We journey in its light;
The crown awaits the conquest; Lead on, O God of might.*

