



# *Leaves* From the Tree

*Studies from God's Word*

In 2005, Pastor Tim Bourgeois began a daily bible reading to encourage Tree of Life Christian Church and the larger body of Christ to read the entire Bible cover to cover.

The following series of articles are transcripts of Pastor Tim's original emails.

Please use these articles for meditation, personal devotion, Bible study, or your own daily Bible reading.



JUDGES 15 - 18

## Judges 15

***15:1-5 - "After some days, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife with a young goat. And he said, "I will go in to my wife in the chamber." But her father would not allow him to go in. And her father said, "I really thought that you utterly hated her, so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please take her instead." And Samson said to them, "This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm." So Samson went and caught 300 foxes and took torches. And he turned them tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails. And when he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines and set fire to the stacked grain and the standing grain, as well as the olive orchards."***

During the seven days of Samson's wedding feast, he had left the celebration before it concluded. Samson left the wedding to go down to Ashkelon as the Spirit of God stirred him to begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines. This led to a serious misunderstanding between Samson and the father of his bride. Samson considered himself officially married to her, even though he had not finished the seven days of the feast and as a result had never actually consummated their marriage. Several days later Samson arrived at the house of the bride with the intention of consummating their marriage. He brought an appropriate gift of a young goat, and was expecting to be welcomed back by her and her family from his excursion to Ashkelon. He was surprised to be met at the door by the bride's father who refused to allow Samson to go in to be with his wife.

Samson had not communicated his plans to the father when he previously left the feast. He gave the father no indication that he would return to complete the marriage process and take his bride as his wife. When he left for Ashkelon, he did so suddenly as the Spirit of God rushed upon him. In the absence of any communication with Samson, the father concluded that Samson's anger toward the thirty companions was also directed toward his bride. He took Samson's actions as an indication that he no longer wanted her as his wife. His assumption was understandable since she had been the cause of the 30 companions discovering the answer to his riddle and the reason he lost the wager with them. In Samson's absence, the father decided to make the best of a socially awkward circumstance and he gave his daughter to one of the thirty companions as his wife. This development would further inflame Samson as the companions not only manipulated his bride to win the wager, one of them had now stolen his wife.

The father now realized that he had given Samson's wife to another man and in essence had violated Samson's rights as her husband in doing so. Since she was already the wife of the companion, with the implication that they had already consummated their marriage, it was now too late to try to patch things up

between her and Samson. She now belonged to another man. The father made a serious attempt to mollify Samson's anticipated outrage at this development by offering his younger and even more beautiful daughter as a wife for Samson to replace the one she lost. Samson ignored the father's offer for a replacement wife. His heart was already stirring with a new plan to inflict punishment on the Philistines. Samson's motive was personal satisfaction for the offences he had endured from the Philistines, but there was another far greater factor behind this unplanned development. The Lord's hand was involved in all of this. Had the father not given Samson's wife to one of the 30 companions, then Samson would not have destroyed the crops of the Philistines.

The biggest point of this passage is to remind us of the extent of the sovereignty of God. He is in charge at all times and circumstances even in situations that seem to us to be spinning out of control. There are circumstances that spin beyond our control, like they did for Samson here, but it was not beyond the control of God. While the loss of his desired Philistine bride must have been a blow for Samson, it carried the purpose of God forward in a way that was necessary. At the same time, the Lord prevented Samson from entering into an unwise and forbidden marriage, and used the emotional impact to stir Samson's heart to fulfill his calling as Israel's deliverer from the Philistines.

***15:11-15 - "Then 3,000 men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?" And he said to them, "As they did to me, so have I done to them." And they said to him, "We have come down to bind you, that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines." And Samson said to them, "Swear to me that you will not attack me yourselves." They said to him, "No; we will only bind you and give you into their hands. We will surely not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock. When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand and took it, and with it he struck 1,000 men."***

Having had their harvest destroyed by Samson, the Philistines gathered a small army of men to take their vengeance on Samson. The Philistines raided a town in the territory of Judah near where Samson had gone after the destruction of their crops. The men of Judah met with the Philistines to determine the reason for the raid. When they learned that Samson had been the cause of this revenge raid, the men of Judah sought out Samson with the intention of taking him prisoner and delivering him to the Philistines. It is an indication of how far Judah had drifted from the Lord that they were ready to take the Lord's judge for Israel prisoner to accommodate the Philistines. They never even considered that the 3,000 of them plus Samson was more than enough to defeat 1,000 Philistines.

Instead, they simply did not want to rock the boat, and were willing to compromise even at the cost of Samson's life to remain on good terms with their Philistine oppressors. Their accusatory question to Samson recognized the Philistines as "rulers over us". While this was currently practically true, it reveals the spiritual degradation of their faith. The Lord was ruler over Israel, not the Philistines.

When they declared to Samson their plan to bind him and hand him over to the Philistines, Samson responded with a much better answer than they deserved. Rather than reacting in anger to their betrayal, Samson expressed his willingness to submit to their plan to take him prisoner with one stipulation. He wanted their promise that they would not attempt to harm him themselves. Samson did not want to fight against Judah. His calling was to judge Israel by fighting against the Philistines. Samson seemed to know at this point that by submitting to Judah it would provide him an opportunity to fight against the Philistines. His only concern was for Judah to not step between him and them. Judah agreed to Samson's terms and brought him bound with ropes to the Philistines at Lehi. As they approached, the Philistines shouted like victors over their hated and apparently conquered enemy. Their celebration was premature and short lived.

The Spirit of God once again rushed upon Samson and the ropes which bound him burned and melted off of him. This was not Samson bursting his ropes with bulging muscles. It was a miraculous expression of God's power that destroyed the ropes that bound him. What happened next is probably the most famous act of Samson other than his haircut years later by Delilah. Samson found a jawbone of a donkey that had recently died, and he wielded it like a battle axe. With this unlikely weapon in hand, Samson single-handedly slew 1000 of the Philistines that day. There is a touch of irony in this battle between Samson and the Philistines. They intended to take him prisoner at Lehi, which in Hebrew means jawbone.

Again, this accomplishment was not because Samson was bigger and stronger than them. Samson was not like Goliath. His strength and amazing ability was due to the power of God's Spirit rushing and remaining upon him until he accomplished all he was intended to accomplish by the Lord. The lesson for us is that when we do what God has called us to do, in reliance upon His empowering Spirit, we will be able to accomplish things that exceed all-natural expectation.

***15:18-20 - "And he was very thirsty, and he called upon the LORD and said, "You have granted this great salvation by the hand of your servant, and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" And God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came out from it. And when he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore the name of it was called En-hakkore; it is at Lehi to this day. And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years."***

Following the battle and Samson's great victory over the Philistines, Samson was understandably thirsty. Yes, his power was from the Lord, but this shows us that his body was fully involved in the fight and afterward his need was to be refreshed with water. Samson was stirred to pray rather than just go hunt for water to drink. Samson prayed for water, and did so with a bold expectancy which even borders on disrespect toward the Lord. However, the Lord did not rebuke him for his overly bold request for water, and instead answered Samson with a miracle. The Lord split open a rock there at Lehi and caused water that Samson could drink to come out. Samson named the place the Spring of the Caller to commemorate how God had answered his prayer with a miracle.

The question we should ask is why the Lord did this miracle so that a single man could have fresh water to drink. Why not simply direct Samson to where he could find water to drink? The place where Samson fought the Philistines was not far from town. Samson could have walked to find water. The reason for the miracle was more than satisfying Samson's thirst. The work of God in opening the rock and bringing water out to drink was meant to be a spiritual message to Samson, Judah which had drifted from the Lord, and all Israel which would hear of this account. When God does a miracle we should always consider what message the Lord is communicating through it beyond the physical circumstances of the miracle itself. In this case, Israel should have remembered when the Lord through Moses split open the rock in the wilderness to bring forth a river of water to satisfy the entire nation. Then, it was a powerful image of the salvation and deliverance of the Lord on behalf of His people. This miracle, while directly benefiting only Samson was a vivid reminder to drifting Israel that the Lord was still their only Rock of salvation.

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## Judges 16

***16:1-4 - "Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to her. The Gazites were told, "Samson has come here." And they surrounded the place and set an ambush for him all night at the gate of the city. They kept quiet all night, saying, "Let us wait till the light of the morning; then we will kill him." But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron. After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah."***

The previous chapter left Samson in a good place in his life. He had defeated 1000 Philistines with the jawbone which was immediately followed by the Lord refreshing him with a miracle provision of water from the rock. The last verse of chapter 15 identifies that Samson judged Israel for twenty years in what we should interpret as a summary of the work of the Lord on behalf of Israel through his life. Chapter 16 does not open with the description of two circumstances that most likely both occurred near the end of his twenty years as judge. The implication of the silence in the intervening twenty years is that those twenty years were largely uneventful. Normally, twenty years of peaceful living is a good thing, but for Samson it was not. His special calling was to deliver Israel from the Philistines. This meant that Samson was to wage war with the Philistine nation. Instead, for these twenty years he apparently coexisted in peace with them. As long as the Philistines did not further offend his personal boundaries as they had done in the wedding incident, Samson was content to leave them alone. It would again be up to the Lord to stir Samson to fulfill his calling.

What is interesting is how the Lord stirred Samson to act once again against the Philistines. We do not see the Lord speaking here to Samson and Samson following the revealed direction from the Lord as was the case with earlier deliverers like Gideon. Instead, Samson moves into a circumstance that will lead to a confrontation with the Philistines led, not by the word of the Lord, but by his own fleshly cravings. In this case, it was Samson's great character flaw which motivated him. Samson's flaw was his desire for Philistine women. Just as the Lord had found a way to get Samson to act against the Philistines through the circumstances of his wedding years before, now the Lord would once again work through Samson through the complications of Samson placing himself in a spiritually and morally compromising situation with a Philistine woman. This does not teach us that the Lord is unconcerned about our sins and fleshly indulgences. He did not approve of Samson's actions here, and he does not approve of similar sins in the life of any believer. The hardest lesson for Samson to learn was immediately ahead of him. The Lord's discipline in the life of this compromising and wayward judge would be painful and lasting.

***16:15-20 - "And she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and you have not told me where your great strength lies." And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death. And he told her all his heart, and said to her, "A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man." When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, "Come up again, for he has told me all his heart." Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him. And she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him."***

Delilah, in this development, should remind us of the incident with Samson's wife during the week of his wedding feast. When he had proposed his riddle, and the companions threatened her to discover the answer, they recognized that she would be capable of accomplishing what they, by force of arms could never accomplish. She used her feminine influence upon him, and by persistent weeping she manipulated him to divulge the answer to her. Because of the significant fallout from that event, we would hope that Samson had learned a hard, but lifelong lesson from it. However, here he is twenty years later in a nearly identical circumstance. His heart is vulnerable to manipulation because of giving his affection to the wrong person in the wrong way. He again had a secret to protect, but this secret was far more important than the answer to his wedding riddle.

This touched the symbol of his Nazirite vow to the Lord. It was one thing to give away the answer to a riddle to his own wife, but a true spiritual blunder to name the symbol of his vow as the source of his strength to a woman he should never have trusted. When Samson's hair was cut he lost his great strength. The conclusion many have drawn along with Delilah and the Philistines is that his long hair was the source of his strength. His hair was critical in importance, but it was not the source of his strength. His hair was a spiritual symbol of his vow to the Lord. The Lord was the source of Samson's strength and his strength was tied to his faithfulness to the vow. Samson placing himself in a position where his hair could be shorn and his vow fully broken was the last straw in the Lord's graciousness toward Samson. It was the Lord leaving Samson that left him no stronger than any other man.

The Philistine lords made the same assessment about Samuel that the companions at the wedding had years before. They realized that Samson was unstoppable in open battle, so they sought a way to discover by deception the



source of his strength. By offering a significant bribe to Delilah they secured her full cooperation. Her responses to his false answers should have alerted Samson to the danger to which he was exposing himself with her. However, it seems that Samson had become over confident on the wrong basis in the Lord's protection over him. Believers are given wonderful promises of the Lord's protection, but we are also given strong warnings about remaining ever vigilant against the schemes and traps of the evil one. We are also taught to not presume on the Lord by compromising in sin and then expecting our sin to have no affect upon the Lord's hand on our lives.

The Scriptures warn us that our sin does impact the way the Lord deals with us. "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." (Psalm 66:18). The Lord was very clear in the Law that obedience and faithfulness in His people would be blessed, while continued sin would be cursed. Samson had long ago lost his orientation to this principle of covenant relationship with the Lord. Perhaps, because of the extraordinary blessing associated with his calling (his great strength), Samson thought that the normal rules did not apply to him. He certainly acted as though he was above the Law of God. It would be a hard lesson for him to learn that none of God's people are exempt from obedience. We could say, even the leaders of God's people are not exempt, but the better way to say it would be especially the leaders are not exempt. Spiritual leaders are held to a higher standard, not a lower standard of exemption from having to obey the Lord.

The most tragic line in the life story of Samson is in verse 20, "But he did not know that the LORD had left him." It's tragic, because Samson had drifted so far that he was oblivious to the Lord having left him. This is self deception. He was fallen in serious covenant breaking sin, yet he was convinced everything was just fine between him and the Lord. Believers who repeatedly violate God's moral standards and still presume that they are under the full blessing of the Lord are in for a rude awakening as was Samson.

***16:21-25 - "And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison. But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved. Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to rejoice, and they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." And when the people saw him, they praised their god. For they said, "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us." And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, that he may entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars."***

Samson now encountered the full weight of the consequences of disregarding the Lord and His standards. He had enjoyed the fleeting pleasures of sin with the

Philistine women, but now he would learn whether pleasure of sin was worth the consequences attached to his disobedience. The Lord did not cushion the blow of the situation for Samson. Can you imagine being held down by soldiers as they gouge your eyes out? This was not a consequence that Samson would ever recover from. His spiritual blindness to the need for faithfulness to the standards of the Lord was now matched by permanent physical blindness. That was a hard consequence to endure by itself, but Samson would have to swallow much more. He was blinded, enslaved to the people he should have conquered, forced to serve them in grinding their grain, and as worst of all he was paraded as a testimony to the superiority of their god Dagon. Then, as a final insult, he was made an object of derisive entertainment for his captors. Right up until the moment he was seized Samson imagined that he was successfully getting away with violating the Lord's standards without any real cost. From the moment he was seized forward, Samson awakened to the painful reality that he had gotten away with nothing.

***16:27-30 - "Now the house was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained. Then Samson called to the LORD and said, "O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes." And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. And Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life."***

As only the Lord can, in this circumstance the Lord was dealing with both Samson and the Philistines, each according to their relationship with the Lord and His purpose for them. Yes, Samson remained under the discipline of the Lord even in this end of his story. He never regained his sight. He never regained his freedom, except in death. He died under discipline, but even that is far better than to die under judgment as did the Philistines. Samson was being disciplined by the Lord even in his death, but he was given the assurance of the Lord's forgiveness and restoration to covenant relationship and useful service in his final moments. The Lord had called Samson to deliver Israel from the Philistines. His entire life he had only partly fulfilled that call and even then it was only when the Lord arranged special circumstances that in effect drove Samson to do the Lord's will. Now, in his death, he would finally obey the Lord with everything within him.

The great mercy and grace of God are on display in this final development of Samson's life. After all his compromises he could have died in total failure. Even Samson's last prayer was an evidence of the grace of God stirring his heart to cry out for a restoration of his call and purpose. That does not mean that Samson's

motives were fully purified at the end though. His stated reason in asking God to restore His strength was not to complete his unfulfilled mission from God, or to restore the Lord's honor in the eyes of the worshippers of Dagon. His motive was to be avenged on the Philistines for the loss of his two eyes. Nevertheless, what Samson wanted, to bring down the great house full of Philistines was exactly what the Lord had planned for him to accomplish in his death. The Lord answered his prayer and restored his strength. It's true that the text mentions that Samson's hair had regrown, but his strength did not automatically return with the return of his hair. His strength returned when the Lord responded to this prayer.

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## Judges 17

***17:1-3 - "There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. 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." And his mother said, "Blessed be my son by the LORD." And he restored the 1,100 pieces of silver to his mother. And his mother said, "I dedicate the silver to the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a metal image. Now therefore I will restore it to you."***

The previous chapter ended with death of Samson which also signaled the end of the series of judges or deliverers the Lord provided for Israel. The book of Judges continues for another five chapters, but there are no other judges introduced following Samson. What we saw in Samson's life was that he embodied at the same time the best and worst qualities of the judges. He was the best judge in the sense that the power of the Lord was revealed to a greater extent through his exploits. He was the worst of the judges in the sense that when he should have been a living example of the Lord's standards, he was instead a living example of compromise and self indulgence. These remaining chapters of Judges include accounts that demonstrate that the entire nation was drifting away from the Lord, and that the problem was not limited to one compromising leader like Samson.

This chapter begins in the middle of a story in the lives of Micah, a man of Ephraim and his mother. What precedes this point in their story is that there had been a mysterious theft of a great sum of money from Micah's mother. 1,100 pieces of silver was a small fortune in ancient Israel. We discover that Micah had stolen the silver from his own mother; violating two of the ten commandments in the process (commandments 5 and 8 regarding honoring one's mother and not stealing). From the description, he apparently was prepared to keep his theft secret from her until she responded in a way he had not anticipated. Micah's mother uttered a curse aimed at the unknown thief and Micah heard it. Understand, this was not like a modern curse in the sense of her using curse

words in frustration over her loss. This was a formal curse pronouncing judgment upon the thief of the silver. Micah took the implications of the curse seriously. He fully expected her curse to bring severe consequences down on his head. He had to weigh whether the benefit of the stolen silver was worth the consequence her curse would bring.

Of course, Micah should have considered the consequences before the curse was even uttered. He should have considered the consequences before yielding to the temptation to steal from his mother. The chapter opens with Micah confessing his crime to his mother. We can and should question the depth of his confession. This is most likely not a convicted heart responding in a spirit of true repentance. Micah is simply afraid of his mother's curse and is willing to risk confessing to her in the hope that he will escape the consequence. His mother's response is somewhat surprising, but given that she raised a man who did not think twice about stealing a fortune from his own mother, her response actually tells us a little of their relationship. She does not express any disappointment in him, or speak any word of exhortation to his heart in an effort to influence his character. Instead she seems to simply be relieved that her missing silver is restored. She immediately pronounces a blessing upon Micah, which is the opposite equivalent of her previous curse. Her blessing is inappropriate because it was given without evidence of genuine repentance on his part, and will only contribute to his character deterioration.

She then decides to dedicate the stolen and restored silver unto the Lord. Her dedication seems sincere and pious until we hear her instructions of what was to be done with the dedicated money. She wants a carved metal image made with the silver. This was not some generic work of art, but a religious image used as an object of worship, and representing a god. The silver image to be made may have even been intended to represent the Lord like the golden calf Aaron made in the wilderness was meant to represent the Lord. Her apparently good intentions only cloud the real issue here. The Lord had declared in the Law of God that He would accept dedicated offerings from His people, but those offerings were to be made to the Levitical priests at the Tabernacle of the Lord. Here, there is not Levite involved and no mention of the Tabernacle. Instead the image to be made will be a clear violation of the second commandment to make no graven images.

***17:4-6 - "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. And it was in the house of Micah. And the man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and household gods, and ordained one of his sons, who became his priest. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."***

The image was made from a portion of the silver. This passage implies that while she proclaimed the 1,100 silver pieces as dedicated to the Lord, she only used

200 of the pieces in having the image made. The other 900 pieces she apparently kept for herself, which was another violation of God's Law. Once dedicated to the Lord, an item was no longer under the authority of the person that offered it, but it belonged to the Lord. Her dedication pronouncement allowed her to appear more religious than she actually was when it came to her money. Following his confession, Micah developed a new interest in religion. It was not the pure religion of Abraham, Moses, and Joshua, but more similar to the mixed element religion we saw in the latter years of Gideon. Micah took some of the elements of the worship of Yahweh and he mixed it with his own ideas. He made his own shrine in his home and placed the silver image there in the shrine. He added an ephod, which was a representation of the garment the Levitical priests wore in the Tabernacle service. He also added other household gods, which were small idols commonly used for household protection and blessing by the superstitious Canaanite people. Micah even went to the extent of ordaining one of his own sons to become his personal priest for his own personal shrine.

All of this was in violation of various laws given by God to Israel to maintain the spiritual purity of their worship. God had forbidden Israel from setting up such shrines for themselves. He had commanded all worship to be localized at the Tabernacle alone. The intent was to protect Israel from their own fleshly inclinations to mix together the worship practices of the corrupt Canaanite culture around them with the worship of Yahweh. When we make our own way of approach to God, we place ourselves in charge of our "relationship" with Him. When we are in charge, anything that seems right and good to ourselves becomes our standard. Micah was not the only one in Israel to drift away from the Lord in this way, but his story reflects the growing national compromise and spiritual corruption. Sadly, Micah would fit right into the spiritual environment in our generation and culture today. So many are only concerned with choosing a religion that works for them. Little consideration is given to what the Lord has revealed to us regarding how He would have us approach Him.

At this critical point, the writer inserts a single line of commentary to help focus the reader's perspective on how to interpret this development. The comment is going to be repeated later in Judges, and it serves as the single line best description of the period of Israel's history. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The mention of the lack of a king in Israel carries two points with it. It's true that this was the period in Israel's history just before the appointment by the Lord of the first king of the nation. One of the king's important responsibilities was to restrain the development of evil in Israel, and to lead the people in remaining faithful to the Lord and His ways. Remember, in the Law of God, the Lord had commanded that the king was to write his own copy of the Law and then read from it for the rest of his life. The king, under the influence of the regular reading of God's Law, was to be a godly influence on the kingdom of God's people.

The other, more subtle point in this comment regarding the king was that in another greater sense Israel did have a king, but that king was being ignored and disregarded. The Lord was the true king over Israel ever since the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 19:5-6). The comment here does not mean that the Lord was not king, but that Israel no longer was considering the Lord as her king. Once the Lord is disregarded, the inevitable result is that every person ends up doing what seems right in their own eyes. The Lord's laws and standards no longer function in their lives as they were intended. Rather than being guided, instructed, warned, and restrained by God's righteous standards, the people substituted their own personal standards. Sure, God had said don't steal, but now the decision whether to steal or not was no longer an issue of absolute right or wrong, but a pragmatic decision of whether they could get away with it and escape any serious consequence. So it was for all of His standards. Anything goes in a society that rejects the clear standards of the Lord and substitutes human rules in their place. We will see the consequences of this development unfold in the chapters to come.

***17:7-13 - "Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there. And the man departed from the town of Bethlehem in Judah to sojourn where he could find a place. And as he journeyed, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah. 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." And Micah said to him, "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." And the Levite went in. And the Levite was content to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. 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 priest."***

Micah's self made religion progressed when a young Levite crossed his path. When Micah heard that the young man was looking for a place to settle, and learned that he was a Levite, he saw this as a golden opportunity to acquire his own personal priest. Even though he had previously ordained his own son as a household priest, Micah knew in his heart that true priests were supposed to also be Levites. So, Micah made this Levite a generous offer of a home, a suit of clothes, food, and an annual salary if he would stay in his home and function as priest over Micah's shrine. The young man should have known better as a Levite than to accept such an offer, but, again, every man was doing what seemed right in their own eyes. Micah had now effectively created his own customized religion. In his own mind, this was perfectly reasonable because he was doing it with what he considered to be good intentions. His declaration that now, he knew that the Lord would prosper him because he had his own Levite as a priest reflects his

desire to be blessed by the Lord. That desire in itself is a good desire, nevertheless what Micah did here was all wrong.

The Lord would not bless him as he hoped and anticipated because he was disregarding everything the Lord had previously communicated in His Law regarding worship, shrines, images, Levites, and their service. The Levites were not appointed to serve Israel in any manner Israel might choose. The Levites were appointed as the Lord's servants in His house, the Tabernacle, to serve according to the Lord's commands and standards. The covenant blessing of the Lord is given to those that honor Him by paying close attention to what He has spoken, and obeying Him as they should. When we make up our own religion and establish our own rules we should expect that we will have to also furnish our own blessing because the Lord will not bless corruptions of His ways.

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## Judges 18

***Judges 18:1-3 - "In those days there was no king in Israel. And in those days the tribe of the people of Dan was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in, for until then no inheritance among the tribes of Israel had fallen to them. So the people of Dan sent five able men from the whole number of their tribe, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to explore it. And they said to them, "Go and explore the land." And they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there."***

The key line from last chapter is repeated again in part to begin this chapter. There was no king in Israel in those days, and the result was that every man was doing what was right in their own eyes. We saw in chapter 18 that the misadventure of Micah and the Levite developing their own private religion was a result of this anything goes spiritual atmosphere in Israel. This chapter expands upon that theme. The spiritual deterioration in Israel is not limited to a single isolated household. The entire tribe of Dan veers off course in the events described here. The setting is a problem which has developed with the territory in which Dan is to dwell. At first glance, the text seems to indicate that the tribe of Dan somehow was left out when the Lord had Joshua assign each of the tribes of Israel their inheritance upon the conquest of the Promised Land. The wording, "for until then no inheritance among the tribes of Israel had fallen to them" is the reason for that impression.

However, the Lord did not forget Dan in the allotment of the land, and Joshua did not forget them either (Joshua 19:40-48). Dan had already been assigned their own portion of the land years before this event. The problem was not that Dan had been neglected by the Lord, but they had themselves neglected the Lord. Remember, that Dan had failed to possess their portion of the land because the Amorites, who at that time dwelt in the plains of their territory had proven difficult

to conquer. Dan did not persevere in the Lord's command to drive out the inhabitants of their territory. When faced with the challenge of an enemy that was not easily defeated, Dan did not trust the Lord or seek Him for His wisdom or help. Instead, they retreated to the hill country and felt sorry for themselves that they were not able to enjoy a comfortable living circumstance like the other tribes.

Now, years later, Dan is fed up with their cramped and uncomfortable life in the hill country. We should expect that they would turn back to the Lord in repentance for their unbelief and disobedience. Instead, they further ignore the Lord and decide to take matters into their own hands. Mimicking the pattern of when Israel first entered the land of Canaan, Dan sends out men to spy out the land to the far north. Those men arrive at the house of Micah as representatives of a rebellious tribe pursuing their own plan outside of the will and plan of God for them. If they failed in conquering and settling their own portion of the land, they will test the waters to see if they can sneak into a portion of the land allotted to the tribe of Ephraim. The portion given to Ephraim in the north was extensive, and while the tribe of Ephraim was already settled, they had not yet fully obeyed the Lord themselves by completing the conquest of their territory. What unfolds in this chapter is a sad story of one rebellious tribe taking advantage of another. There are no innocent victims here.

***18:14-20 - "Then the five men who had gone to scout out the country of Laish said to their brothers, "Do you know that in these houses there are an ephod, household gods, a carved image, and a metal image? Now therefore consider what you will do." And they turned aside there and came to the house of the young Levite, at the home of Micah, and asked him about his welfare. Now the 600 men of the Danites, armed with their weapons of war, stood by the entrance of the gate. And the five men who had gone to scout out the land went up and entered and took the carved image, the ephod, the household gods, and the metal image, while the priest stood by the entrance of the gate with the 600 men armed with weapons of war. And when these went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the household gods, and the metal image, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" And they said to him, "Keep quiet; put your hand on your mouth and come with us and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?" And the priest's heart was glad. He took the ephod and the household gods and the carved image and went along with the people."***

During their stay at the house of Micah, the five spies from Dan had taken note of the household shrine that Micah had built. They were impressed by its apparent religious significance. When the army of Dan arrived at the house, the spies informed them of the shrine and hinted that those religious items possessed by Micah were theirs for the taking. The army of Dan was as impressed as the



spies, and together they seized the ephod, the household gods (idols), and the metal image that had been made from the silver that Micah has stolen from his own mother. The men of Dan took the items, not for their monetary value, but for their perceived religious power. The items actually had no power at all, but they were convinced that they did. When a person, or in this case an entire community disconnects from the Lord and His word, they leave themselves open and susceptible to spiritual deception and religious superstition. Dan desperately wanted to be confident in the success of this venture to find a territory to settle, and their hope was that the idols and image of Micah would provide that for them.

When deception and superstition are the focus, the faith of the people leaning on those things is irrelevant. We can believe in the power of a false god or idol, but the strength of our misguided faith does not make it any more powerful in reality. The only power it has is the power to enforce the deception of the people who believe in it. The world in which we live is in many ways much more sophisticated than the world in which Dan succumbed to such a falsehood, yet people today continue to be drawn to similar empty objects of "faith." How many are impressed when the image of "Jesus" or Mary are reported to have been discovered in items such as a potato, a tree, a pancake, or even a Cheeto cheese snack? This is not to mention the "official" images of Jesus, Mary, and various angels which are manufactured to provide comfort and confidence to the religious and superstitious consumer.

The men of Dan decided to lend as much religious credibility to their efforts as they could. Not content with stealing Micah's shrine, they made an offer he could not refuse to the young Levite that had been hired by Micah to officiate at his shrine. The priest was only too happy to accept their offer. The big selling point was the increased prestige of acting as a priest to an entire tribe in Israel. If the Levite's own spiritual corruption was not already evident by having accepted the job of caring for the idols of Micah, his readiness to take the lead in furthering the spiritual corruption of an entire tribe revealed his true colors. True priests were called and set apart to serve the Lord in the tabernacle of the Lord, and only in strict accordance with the revealed Law of God. This priest happily disregarded all of that and jumped at the opportunity for a big career advancement.

***18:22-25 - "When they had gone a distance from the home of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house were called out, and they overtook the people of Dan. And they shouted to the people of Dan, who turned around and said to Micah, "What is the matter with you, that you come with such a company?" 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?'" And the people of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest angry fellows fall upon you, and you lose your life with the lives of your household."***

Micah was either absent or silent during the ransacking of his shrine, but he quickly gathered the men from his community to pursue the men of Dan. That the men of the community were willing to pursue and confront an army indicates that they probably had joined Micah in the use of the shrine. Their intent was to confront Dan regarding their crime. Micah's outrage over their theft of his gods rings hollow. It's ironic and tragic at the same time. The irony is that Micah has to attempt to rescue his gods! Apparently the gods he honored and served were not powerful enough to guard themselves against being taken by Dan. It's a poor god one worships when the god has less power than the person that worships it. Any god that can be stolen is no god to revere and serve. The tragedy is that neither Micah, the men of his community, nor the men of Dan saw the irony of the situation. Dan's threat of violence to protect their new acquisition convinced Micah and his friends that they would be better off returning home and finding other gods to worship.

***18:30-31 - "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. So they set up Micah's carved image that he made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh."***

There is one final detail of this sad development that only increases the impact of the story. Up until this point in the account, the young man that Micah had hired and who had gone with the men of Dan, had only been identified as the Levite and the priest. Now, at the end of the story we learn his identity, and the revelation drives home the point of the deep degree of the spiritual deterioration of Israel. The Levite is actually a direct descendant of Moses. If there was one family in Israel that we should expect to resist the tide of compromise and idolatry in Israel it would be the family of Moses. Yet, here within two generations since the passing of Moses, a member of his own family becomes a key figure to influence the tribe of Dan in the folly of idolatry. Moses had faithfully led Israel in the pure ways of the Lord, and now his grandson Jonathan would lead Dan away from the Lord.

We see this same pattern repeated in modern times in the spiritual declension of the historic denominations of Christianity established by men we rightly consider

to be heroes of the faith. When a Martin Luther leads a reformation of the church, or a John Wesley establishes a new deeper pattern for discipleship it does not guarantee that those who generations later associate themselves with the church organizations they spawned will remain faithful to the founder's commitments. Each generation must confront their own need to faithfully follow the Lord as He has revealed in His word. The alternative is a religious mixture of deception, superstition and tradition such as Jonathan, the grandson of Moses established in Dan.