

Lesson 28 Lecture
Judges 17-21
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From a chronological progression, the Book of Judges concluded with the last lesson – with Samson. Today's reading is a type of appendix to this sad period of history of the Nation of Israel. There is disagreement amongst the commentators as to when these last five chapters happened during the period of the Judges – some say this happened soon after Joshua died, while others suggest these events happened more towards the end of the period. Either way, with today's reading we conclude the Book of Judges, and we are one lesson away from finishing this year's People of the Word Bible study.

We began this year's study with the birth of the great and humble servant of the Lord, Moses. We saw the Lord do amazing things for His people through this man of God – sending plagues upon Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea and destroying the enemy, feeding the people with manna, providing them water from a rock, and ultimately leading them to the Promised Land. However, I'm certain Moses would have been horrified and grieved over the condition of the Israelites in today's reading. These people had been first-hand witnesses and beneficiaries of God's awesome display of power and devotion. Furthermore, they were told in clear terms the cost of disobedience to the Lord. How was it possible these people who were lifted up so high by God's love could sink to such wicked depths?

I would suspect many of you reading this are good cooks. When you prepare one of your wonderful dishes, you begin with a recipe – a set of needed instructions and ingredients. With most recipes, there is typically a key ingredient – the component that drives the ultimate taste of the food you are preparing. Taking the concept of a recipe and applying it to the Nation of Israel's condition, the key ingredient that explains their great fall into wickedness is provided in Chapter 17, verse 6, *"In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit."*

Four times in today's reading do we see the phrase, *"In those days, Israel had no king."* One thing I hope you have picked up from this year's Bible study is what happens to a society when God or a Godly leader is not presiding. With the absence of a plumb line – a unifying standard system of values – we humans rightfully earn our unflattering description from Jesus – we are sheep. Sheep are incredibly stupid, and without a shepherd, they will wander off and get into all kinds of trouble. The presence of God or a leader who invites God's presence to lead his/her way, establishes a firm foundation from which individuals and nations can build. However, when God or a Godly leader is removed, we get what we have

in today's reading that is promised in Psalm 11:3, "*If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?*"

Today's reading consists of two stories of degradation.

1. Chapters 17-18: Micah, Jonathan, and the Danites demonstrating the degenerative effects of disobedience starting in the home, migrating to the ministry, and ultimately impacting society.
2. Chapters 19-21: A revelation of the darkness of the human condition when God is not reigning.

We were introduced in Chapter 17 to a man named Micah, who was from the hill country of Ephraim. The name Micah means 'Who is like Jehovah?' His behavior, though, seemed like his name was more like "*Who is Jehovah?*" We learn that he had stolen 1,100 shekels of silver from his mother. In fear of a curse that she had unknowingly pronounced on her son instead of living in fear of the Lord, he returned the money to her. I love J. Vernon McGee's assessment of the mother's response to her son's behavior, "*Instead of mama turning him across her knee and applying the board of education to the seat of knowledge, she congratulated him.*" Somewhere along the line in the alleged "progressive" mindset of child rearing, discipline of children has disintegrated into them ruling the homes. Parents won't even allow the word "no" to be spoken to their little "jihadists in training." I can't imagine being a teacher in today's times with children having no boundaries defined by reasonable discipline.

In just the first five verses of Chapter 17, Micah put out an assault on the Ten Commandments. In such a short period of time, he violated 7 of the 10:

1. He made a shrine of false gods in his home
2. He made idols from the silver shekels
3. He profaned the Lord's name by stealing (Proverbs 30:8-9)
5. He did not honor his mother by stealing her silver shekels
8. He stole his mother's money.
9. He lied about stealing the money until he heard about the curse.
10. He coveted the silver.

Additionally, he violated what was noted in Deuteronomy 12:1-14 which said there was to be but one place of worship in Israel, and the people were not permitted to have their own private shrines. Finally, by ordaining his own son, Micah violated the Lord's ordinance of only Aaron's family serving as priests. By

doing this with his son, he should have been killed (Numbers 3:10). This guy was really lost.

Apparently, he wasn't satisfied with his son's role as his priest, so we were introduced to Jonathan, a young Levite, who had been living in Bethlehem of Judah. Bethlehem was not one of the cities assigned to the priests and Levites (Joshua 21; Numbers 35). It's probably safe to speculate that given all the apostasy, the people were not financially supporting the tabernacle and its ministry, so he needed to find some place to survive. Warren Wiersbe commented, "*When God's people grow indifferent to spiritual things, one of the first evidences of their apathy is a decline in their giving to the work of the Lord.*" Jonathan was Moses' grandson, but he didn't display much of what he learned from his grandfather. The Levites were to:

- Assist the priests in their ministries
- Teach the law to the people
- Be involved in the sacred music and praises of Israel

He did none of this – he set himself up his own religion with Micah's support. Jonathan wasn't a spokesperson for the Lord; he gave the people just the message they wanted to hear. Sadly, this is the case in many churches today. Hebrews 4:12 tells us God's Word is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. This kind of teaching brings conviction, which can be painful, but essential for true spiritual growth. Tragically, most teaching today isn't full of *conviction*, but rather *confection* – sweet to the ears but useless to the soul.

Jonathan was a hireling. Jesus warned about hirelings – ministers or servants whose only interest is in wages and earnings. Jesus said in John 10:12-13, "*But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.*" Our precious Lord was no hireling – He confirmed this in John 10:11, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.*" True shepherds receive their calling and authority from God, not from people.

In verse 13 of chapter 17, Micah said, "*Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest.*" The prosperity doctrine has deep roots. I have no doubt that the root of the concept that proclaims if you have the right faith, you will be financially rewarded is in the bowels of hell. While God makes many promises to bless those who truly believe in Him, let's check out the "prosperity" of the real Biblical faith heroes' lives? Let's just name a few:

- Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers.
- Moses was constantly ridiculed by the very people he was leading
- David was sought for assassination by Saul and Absalom
- All of the apostles faced martyrdom with only John surviving

The most obvious testimony to debunk the heretical prosperity doctrine is Jesus. This was the only begotten Son of God. He never sinned. He had constant and intimate prayers with the Father. No one had greater faith than our Lord, and what happened to Him? Can or will God financially bless His children? Of course, but there is nothing in Scripture that offers this as a certainty. Jesus talked more about money than He did about heaven. Yet, what were the focuses of His teaching on this topic? He either warned of its potential to limit faith and spiritual growth, (Matthew 19:24) or He encouraged people to give their money to the poor (Mark 10:21).

The first story continues with the tribe of Dan – the Danites. They had been unable to take all of the property they were allotted, so they were looking for some other territory to occupy. They sent five spies to look for land, and on their way, they arrived at Micah's home. They asked Jonathan to inquire of the Lord if their journey would be successful, and Jonathan affirmed that the Lord had approved. They came to Laish, which is a beautiful portion of Israel, and they found a people living peaceably by themselves. The spies reported back to the rest of the Danites recommending an attack on Laish, so they assembled 600 men of battle and headed back to take the area.

Again, they stopped at Micah's house and looked to steal his ephod and idols. Jonathan, proving his qualifications as a hireling, accepted the offer to go with the Danites for a bigger and better paying job and took Micah's ephod and idols. Micah found out about this and caught up with the Danites complaining they had taken his idols and his priest. His complaint concluded with a revealing question - without his idols and hireling priest, "*What else do I have?*" That is exactly the condition of anyone who doesn't know Jesus Christ. Their god or gods is in their possessions or their talents. All of these can be taken away because idol faith has nothing on the other side. When those are taken, what is left? - Hopelessness.

Faith in Christ cannot be taken by anyone because it is a *relationship*. In this relationship, there is you and a living, loving, and all-powerful Being Who is relentlessly faithful. Jesus confirmed God's commitment to this relationship in John 10:28-29, "*And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand.*" This

last year has likely made you realize that the things you value in this world are vulnerable. Regardless of how much money you have or what position in the workforce or society you have, you are not in control. With this pandemic, the vulnerability of our health has been exposed. Brothers and sisters, there is an evil enemy looking to take everything you hold dear from you. Thanks be to God, the one thing he can't take from you is your faith in Christ. Satan can't take it from you because the object of your faith – the One holding you, won't let you and your faith go.

The Danites went on with Jonathan, destroyed the people and town of Laish, and occupied the territory. This story concluded with it telling us they held onto their idol worship, and Jonathan's sons remained priests up until the time of captivity. Not a pretty picture of what happens when you move away from God leading the way, is it? Well, the picture is about to get much worse.

Chapter 19 began with that common phrase, "*In those days, Israel had no king.*" We were introduced to an unnamed Levite, and he took up a concubine from Bethlehem. A concubine was a lawful wife who was guaranteed only food, clothing, and marital privileges. Any children she bore were legitimate, but because of her second-class status, they wouldn't necessarily share in the family inheritance. Levites were not to take up concubines, so clearly this man was not following the Law. She was unfaithful to him and ran home to her father. The Levite went after her and tried to get her back. Her father apparently liked the Levite and convinced him to stay longer than he wanted.

After finally leaving, the Levite, the concubine, and his servant arrived at Gibeah. They didn't have Motel 6's back then, so they stayed in the town center until a man invited them to stay at his home. Gibeah had become like Sodom – this story is similar to the story of Lot in Sodom. However, as opposed to Sodom where the people *didn't know* God, Gibeah was inhabited with the Benjamites. That's what makes this story all the more awful and should be a warning to us. When we remove God from our consciousness, the depths of the depravity become a possibility. At night, some wicked men surrounded the man's house demanding that he let the Levite out, so they could have homosexual relations with him. The man refused but offered his virgin daughter or the concubine instead.

Ladies, you should be so thankful for Jesus Christ. No one in human history did more for women and their status in society than Him. Before Jesus, women were second-class citizens. Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well. He allowed a prostitute to anoint Him with fragrance. Two of His closest friends were Mary and Martha. Look at the religious systems today that *don't* include Christ – women are reduced and discarded. Yes, there is still evidence of inequality between men and women in the world, but in **God's** eyes we have the assurance of

Galatians 3:28, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

Back to our horror story. The Levite sent out his concubine, and the men gang raped her all night long. This guy was a real piece of work. Not only did he send her out to get ravaged, he then went to sleep! Was this his way of him punishing her for being unfaithful? He found her dead at the doorstep, put her on his donkey, and set out for home. The hypocrisy of what he did next is breathtaking. This man, who volunteered his concubine to be mortally raped while he was sleeping, was so enraged at what had happened that he cut her up into 12 pieces and sent a piece of her to each tribe. His objective was to outrage the tribes to exact revenge on the Benjamites.

It worked. All of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead came together as one and assembled before the LORD in Mizpah. The leaders of all the people of the tribes of Israel took their places in the assembly of God’s people, four hundred thousand men armed with swords. They asked the Levite what had happened, and he recounted the story. He challenged the Israelites to what they were going to do. The men rose up and agreed they would right this wrong. Chapter 20, verse 11 tells us, “*So all the Israelites got together and united as one against the city.*” It is interesting to me what it takes to bring people together. We saw remarkable national unity in this country during World War II. Everyone sacrificed for the war. When the 1980 USA hockey team beat the Russian team and went on to win the gold medal, the country united in celebration. We even saw some unity in this country right after 9/11. Why does it take a great tragedy or a great victory to unite people?

Perhaps today’s church should be asking that question. The greatest tragedy and the greatest victory in world history – Christ crucified and His resurrection – is failing to keep today’s church united. Why? The same reasons as what happened to the Nation of Israel. The Word of God has been watered down by our succumbing to a more liberal worldview whose sole purpose is to eliminate God from its conscious. Is this evil force not promoting people to do what is right in their own eyes? In today’s reading, we’re witnessing what happens to a society when God is taken out of the picture. It’s not pretty is it? How much Godless action and immorality must we witness before we see we’re in the same predicament that we read in today’s reading? I’m believing that the same God who repeatedly showed mercy to His children who cried out to Him back then will do the same for us today. However, we all must repent of our selfishness and fear, humble ourselves before the Lord, confess our sins, and ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Back to our story – the Israelites sent messengers to the camps of the Benjamites to turn over the men who attacked the concubine, but the Benjamites refused. So, we had a civil war on our hands – here were the key statistics:

- There were 26,000 Benjamite swordsmen plus 700 able young men from Gibeah. Among all these soldiers there were seven hundred select troops who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.
- The Israelites mustered 400,000 swordsmen, all of them fit for battle.

For you number nerds like me, the Benjamites were outnumbered almost 15:1. The Israelites went up to Bethel and inquired of the Lord, “*Who of us is to go up first to fight against the Benjamites?*” Do you see the problem in this inquiry? They didn’t ask the Lord *if* they should fight, they asked Him *who is to go first?* How many times have you in your prayers approached the Lord with limited options as opposed to simply asking for His wisdom? The first battle yielded a defeat at the hands of the Benjamites with 22,000 dying. They went up to the Lord again, and notice the change in the request, “*Shall we go up again to fight against the Benjamites, our fellow Israelites?*” (Judges 20:23) The Lord told them to go up against them, but the second battle was another failure – 18,000 Israelites were cut down.

At this point, I would suspect many of you are wondering why the Lord would sanction two battles He knew would cause such blood loss of His children? We can speculate all we want, but the truth is we don’t know. Many of us want answers to the unknown or unclear portions of Scripture. That is not faith. Faith is trusting in what we *do know* to be the bridge across the chasm of what we *don’t know or understand*. Faith requires us to trust in, and find peace in, the awesome words of Isaiah 55:8-9, “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,*” says the LORD. “*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.*”

They went up a third time to Bethel to inquire of the Lord, but their approach was much different. From verse 26 we learned that the whole army sat weeping before the LORD. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the LORD. They asked again if they should go up and fight the Benjamites, and the Lord’s answer was different as well, “*Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands.*” After some strategy and trickery, we learned in verse 35, “*The LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel, and on that day the Israelites struck down 25,100 Benjamites, all armed with swords.*” Notice who won the victory – not the 360,000 remaining Israelites – only the Lord. Do you feel like you’re in a battle where your outnumbered 15:1 or more? If you have the Lord on your side, He is all you will need.

The Israelites put the sword to Gibeah and the other Benjamite towns – killing all the inhabitants and animals and burning them to the ground. However,

six hundred remaining Benjamites – all that was left of the tribe, fled into the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, where they stayed four months. Heading into chapter 21, but still outraged at what the Benjamites of Gibeah had done – the men of Israel had taken an oath to not give their daughters in marriage to a Benjamite. The people again went to Bethel to inquire of the Lord how was the nation to continue without the tribe of Benjamin. They made a second oath that anyone who failed to assemble before the LORD at Mizpah was to be put to death. Neither of these oaths were required by the Lord.

The Israelites started to wonder how to repopulate the tribe of Benjamin. They couldn't do anything about it because of the oath they'd made regarding giving their daughters to the remaining Benjamites. So, then they asked if anyone had not shown up for this meeting with the Lord and discovered that no one from Jabesh Gilead had come to the camp for the assembly. The Israelites sent out 12,000 men to attack Jabesh Gilead with the instructions to kill every male and every woman who is not a virgin. They found among the people living in Jabesh Gilead four hundred young women who had never slept with a man, and they took them to the camp at Shiloh in Canaan.

The whole Israelite assembly sent an offering of peace to the 600 remaining Benjamite men. They offered the 400 young Jabesh Gilead virgins to the men, but there were not enough women. What would they do? More treachery. There was an annual festival of the LORD in Shiloh, which lies north of Bethel. The Israelites instructed the Benjamites, saying, “*Go and hide in the vineyards and watch. When the young women of Shiloh come out to join in the dancing, rush from the vineyards and each of you seize one of them to be your wife. Then return to the land of Benjamin.*” That is what they did, and the tribe of Benjamin was reborn.

Fun reading, huh? We've seen wife abuse, blatant homosexuality, gang rape leading to murder, injustice, brother killing brother, and even kidnapping. Gee, it's like picking up the paper or reading the on-line news today. Remember my initial analogy at the beginning of this lecture? The key ingredient to the recipe of this moral decline and foul-tasting time of history is identified in the last verse of the Book of Judges, “*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.*”

There's a much better recipe with the Lord being the key ingredient. Psalm 34:8a promises, “*Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good.*” Oh, that each and every one of us would stop and taste the goodness of the Lord. You only need to go as far as the cross, to see His goodness. However, if you look closely enough at your life, you will find His goodness woven in amidst all the pain and suffering. He is there – He always has been, and He always will be. We saw in today's reading the devastation that happens to a people who don't trust in the Lord. In *these* days, we *have* a King, and to complete Psalm 34:8, “*blessed is the man who trusts in Him!*”

Thanks be to Him, today, God's people don't live in the Book of Judges – we live in next week's reading. Carol will finish this year's series with a much better story than today as she teaches on the Book of Ruth that is all at once a story of love, redemption, and harvest. Let's pray.

Abba Father, we praise You and give You thanks for Your holy Word. We thank you for the grace that You give to us to show us examples of the carnage that can happen to a people and a society who turn their backs on you. Please forgive our sins as individuals and as a nation. We don't deserve it, but we humbly ask for Your Spirit to rise up and lead a final revival in this nation. May Your righteousness and glory rise up above the stench of this sin-filled world and reach the hearts of the lost and the deceived. If You are willing, we offer ourselves to be vessels of such a great testimony to your power, love, and mercy. May we each respond should You call out for us, "Here I am Lord." Amen.