

The Book of Judges

Lesson 13: When There Was No King: Idolatry and Outrage -- Judges 17:1-21:25

You have followed Israel down a long, descending staircase. Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson: the cycle has turned and turned again, and each time the nation has landed a little lower than before. Now the book of Judges sets down its scalpel and shows you the wound underneath. There are no big-name deliverers in these last five chapters. There is no dramatic rescue. Instead you are taken into a private home in the hill country of Ephraim, into a man named Micah's living room, and you watch ordinary religion quietly rot. Micah steals from his own mother, gives the silver back, and then she has it melted into an idol. A homemade shrine. A homemade priesthood. A young Levite hired like a chaplain for room and board. And Micah says, with no trace of irony, 'Now I know the Lord will be good to me, because I have a Levite as my priest.' He has manufactured a god and a worship to suit himself, and he feels safe.

That is how the unraveling begins, and notice where it begins: not with a foreign army, but in a home, with good religious intentions and a do-it-yourself faith. Then the camera pulls back. The tribe of Dan comes through, fails to find its inheritance, and on the way simply helps itself to Micah's idols and his priest, marching off with another man's gods on their shoulders. When Micah protests, they tell him to be quiet or lose his life. Convenient religion, it turns out, has no loyalty. It can be picked up, carried off, and re-installed wherever the strong decide. And all the while the writer keeps tapping you on the shoulder with one terrible refrain: 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.'

And then the floor gives way entirely. Judges 19 takes you to Gibeah, a town in Israel, among God's own covenant people, and what happens there in the dark is so vile the writer himself seems to lower his voice. A Levite, his concubine, a night that should never be told, and a woman who is abused and left dead at a threshold. The book does not flinch and it does not approve. It simply lays the body before you, the way the Levite laid it before all Israel, and asks: do you see now? Do you see what it costs when every man becomes his own authority, his own priest, his own king? The civil war that follows nearly erases an entire tribe of Israel from the earth.

This is the last lesson, and it is the heaviest. But do not look away, because the darkness here is doing something. It is digging a hole in the shape of a need. Every page of Judges has been pressing one question into you: who will rule? Not just who will rule a nation, but who will rule a human heart. Left to ourselves we do not drift upward; we drift to Micah's shrine and then to Gibeah's threshold. The book ends with no answer inside its own pages. There is no king in Israel. But the book is reaching past itself, with both hands, toward the One who would come, the true and righteous King, who reigns now over His people and writes His law where no idol

can be carried off, on the heart. Let us walk through it together, soberly, with our eyes open, and let it drive us to Him.

Group Discussion: Where in our shared life as the Lord's people do we see the same instinct that drove Micah, the urge to build a religion that suits us rather than to submit to the rule of God as He has revealed it?

Personal Reflection: In what one area of your life right now (your money, your private habits, your relationships, your worship, your speech) are you quietly doing what is right in your own eyes, telling yourself the Lord will be good to you anyway, while declining to let Him actually be King over it?

Read Judges 17:1–21:25

Study Questions

1. Judges 17:6 and 21:25 frame these chapters with the refrain, 'In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' What does this verse teach us is the root problem behind all the idolatry and violence that follows, and why is doing what is right in our own eyes such a dangerous standard?
2. Micah built a shrine, made an idol, and hired a priest, then said, 'Now I know the Lord will be good to me' (17:13). Where have you been tempted to construct a convenient, self-designed version of faith and then assure yourself God is pleased, and how would you know the difference between worshiping God His way and worshiping a god of your own making?
3. The young Levite left Bethlehem looking for a place, took Micah's offer for room and board, and later let the Danites carry him off to a better position (17:7–13; 18:18–20). What does his career teach us about the corruption of religious leadership when it serves self rather than God, and what does faithful service to God require instead?

4. The Danites took Micah's idols by force and told him to be silent or lose his life (18:24–26). When have you seen, or felt in yourself, the way self-serving religion uses power to get its way, and what would it look like for you to lay down that kind of grasping?
5. Throughout these chapters people repeatedly invoke the Lord's name (17:13; 18:6; 19:18) while doing exactly as they please. What does this teach us about the difference between using God's name and submitting to God's rule, and how does Scripture say true worshipers approach Him (John 4:23–24)?
6. Judges 19 records the outrage at Gibeah with deliberate restraint, yet refuses to hide the horror. As you sit honestly before this account, where do you see in your own heart the same seeds (the same disregard for others, the same willingness to sacrifice someone weaker for your own comfort) that, left unchecked, grow into such evil?
7. Israel's response to Gibeah was real grief and even assembly 'as one man before the Lord' (20:1), yet the war that followed nearly destroyed a tribe and ended in more rash vows and more bloodshed (chapters 20–21). What does this teach us about the limits of human outrage and human solutions when the heart itself has not been changed?
8. The book ends not with resolution but with the same refrain about no king and everyone doing right in his own eyes (21:25). When you reach the end of your own efforts to fix yourself by willpower and good intentions, where does that emptiness leave you, and to whom does it point you?

9. Judges leaves its readers with a deep, unanswered ache: 'there was no king in Israel.' Scripture answers that ache fully and finally in Christ, the true and righteous King. What do passages such as Daniel 2:44, Mark 1:14-15, Mark 9:1, Acts 2:30-36, and Colossians 1:13 teach about when and where His kingdom came, how He reigns now over His church, and why we must guard against expecting an earthly, political throne instead of the spiritual reign He already exercises over the hearts of His people?
10. Looking back over the entire book of Judges, from Othniel to this dark appendix, name one specific way the Lord Jesus, the true King, has been forming you through this study, and one concrete way you will submit to His rule this coming week.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Deuteronomy 12:8, 'everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes' named in advance as the very thing Israel must not do; Hebrews 8:10-12, the new covenant in which God writes His law on the heart, the answer to a people who could not rule themselves; Daniel 2:44, the eternal kingdom God would set up in the days of the Roman kings, never to be destroyed; Colossians 1:13, believers already transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son; Romans 15:4, why these dark Old Testament records were written, for our instruction and warning

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