

Idolatry in the Land

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[0 : 00] So this evening we're in the dungeon. I'm not sure if you can even see there's a picture on that screen. It's certainly dark and it is meant to be. The dungeon is a place that is dark and is dangerous and is out of control and is full of rats.

And I think that's quite a good description of the last few chapters of Judges, perhaps particularly the bit about the rats. You will find lots of characters here who are pretty awful. And I struggle to find anyone in the two chapters I've got who you could say anything good about him may have more success when he looks at the last three chapters in a few weeks' time.

This is really God's people hitting rock bottom. And it is materially different from the rest of Proverbs. The rest of Proverbs, the rest of Judges. Most of Judges, we have Judges, not surprisingly.

We don't have any Judges in the next couple of passages. Most of the book, there's a cycle that you go through and we become quite familiar with it, where God's people sin, God judges them through their enemies, people cry out to God, and God delivers them through one of the judges. Nothing of that in these chapters. Indeed, there's nothing in the chapters that show God working. It is all a record of the sins of the people.

[1 : 18] And it is pretty awful, as you'll discover. So we're going to look at the two chapters consecutively, and then at the end I'll bring together some thoughts that talk about them together.

So Judges chapter 7 are called Micah's religion. And as you listen to this chapter being read, think about what was the basis for Micah's religion.

What drove this character Micah in the passage in his religious practices? Doing something slightly different this evening in your readings, we're going to have a recording by David Soushey of the chapters.

And let's just listen now to chapter 17, and it will also appear on the screen. What's driving Micah's religion? Almost entirely superstition, I suggest.

He has a curse on him at the start of the chapter, and he spends the rest of the chapter trying to make sure that he's well rid of that curse. No real love of God, no real concern for sin.

[2 : 20] So let's just walk through the chapter and see the main points. So we start with Micah's crime. Micah has stolen money from his mother. That is pretty despicable in itself, particularly when you realize how much money he's stolen.

So later in the chapter when Micah hires this priest, he offers him 10 shekels of silver a year. So let's take 10 shekels of silver as being a decent year's wage for someone that would entice them to work for you.

Micah has stolen 1,100 shekels of silver from his mother, 110 years worth of wages for someone. It's a huge amount of money that he's stolen from his mother.

And perhaps not surprising that she should then curse the person who's taken it. Micah confesses to the sin, it appears, not so much because he feels any particular guilt about it, but because he's really worried about the curse that his mother's placed on him.

He wants that to be reversed, and it is very quickly by his mother. So the mother having cursed the person who took the money, she then says, the Lord bless you, my son, in an attempt to reverse the curse she's put on him.

[3 : 26] And she goes a bit further, and she says, well, I'm going to consecrate my silver to the Lord. Again, perhaps, trying to make sure that the curse that had come on Micah wouldn't actually happen in practice.

Interesting, she had 1,100 shekels of silver taken by Micah. She gave him back 200 shekels of silver for the Lord. So she actually didn't consecrate everything that he had taken for the Lord.

But she gives the money back to, or she gives some of the money and silver back to Micah to make this image of silver.

So we then have Micah's shrine, and Micah's not content just to make this image. He has three key things in his shrine. And all of them are out of disobedience to God's law.

So he has the image. A lot of people think it would be an image of a calf, similar to what Aaron made while Moses was up the mountain. Probably made basically from wood and overlaid with silver.

[4 : 32] A clear breach of the commandment that says you not to make any graven images. He has his household gods. Don't know exactly what these household gods were, but they certainly suggest that Micah wasn't, although he might claim to be a follower of the Lord, of Yahweh.

He was maybe hedging his bets. He had lots of his own gods as well, and he was putting them alongside that. Gain a breach of the commandments, no other gods. And Micah totally ignores it. And then the third thing is quite interesting, it's an ephod. Now the ephod was the kind of breastplate in the high priest's garments. It looked a bit maybe like the picture at the top right on the screen.

And one of the things that the ephod was used for was to determine God's will. There's the Urim and Thummim. We don't really know how they worked or how they operated, but they were used by the high priest when they needed to determine God's will.

And Micah saw fit to make one of these and to have it for himself. And to have the whole thing in a shrine, ostensibly for the Lord, but actually a real mixture of different religious elements.

[5 : 44] And of course, that in itself was totally wrong. And the Ark of the Covenant in those days was in Shiloh, and that was the place where the Jews should have gone if they wanted to present themselves before God.

There was nothing that justified them setting up their own household shrines to the Lord, even if they had been a bit better constructed than Micah's.

So Micah, although he and his mother might have said that they were true Jews and that they were trying to obey Yahweh by what they did, they clearly showed that their religion was pure superstition and that they didn't have a real knowledge of the Lord.

And then to make matters worse, Micah says, well, I've got this shrine, I've got this garment, this ephod, I've got this image. Well, I need someone to be a priest. If you've got a shrine, you need to have a priest, says Micah.

Well, who's around you? You could be my priest. Let's just make my son my priest. And again, total violation of God's law. The priests were to come from the Levites. They were to be the descendants of Aaron. This was a man from Ephraim, from a completely different tribe.

[6 : 51] And he is, for his own convenience, making his son his priest. But again, trying to carry favor with God or the gods whom he worshipped and just taking things into his own hands.

And then something else interesting happens because a Levite comes along. A Levite who has come from Judah, from Bethlehem, up to Ephraim. It's not that big a distance from Judah to Ephraim. He's come possibly because he didn't have things to do in Judah.

And perhaps he wasn't being treated as the Levites should have been, as being those who were kept by the others as they served God. He's come to try and find something else. And he comes across Micah.

And Micah thinks, great. Now I've got a real priest. A Levite who can be my priest. Let's get rid of my son. Don't need him anymore. This man can be my priest. And then I'll be right with God.

Now the Levite, as soon as he arrived, she looked at him and said, this has nothing to do with the worship of God. This is pure superstition and idolatry. I'm having nothing to do with it. But the Levite clearly had his price and the offer that Micah made to him was accepted.

[8 : 03] And so Micah, at the end of the chapter, says, I'm fine. I started off under a curse, really worried about that, what might happen to me, because I stole from my mother. I've now given God, gods, all these things.

I've got my shrine. I've even got my own priest. And the Lord will definitely be good to me now. What dreadful ignorance, isn't it?

If he had any basic knowledge of the commandments or of God's law, he would realize just how far wrong he'd gone. But because his religion was based on superstition and on taking the religion of those round about and adding it to the law of God, Micah thinks, I'm okay.

So let's move on to chapter 18. Chapter 18 continues the story, but it spreads it out wider, not just to one individual, but to a whole tribe. So let's listen to that together and then we'll think about it. So poor Micah, everything he depended on, his idol and his priest, they're gone in a flash as the Danites take them away. But Judges, he's seen, I think, is mainly about the sins of the Danites. [9 : 14] It's not about one man who's a bit of a rogue character in the nation of Israel. It's about a whole tribe that has gone against God's way and has become really sinful.

So on the map of the left of the screen there, we have the key locations that are mentioned in chapter 18 of Judges. And I've circled there the two cities which are within Dan. And that's broadly where Dan's inheritance, as given through Joshua, was. So slightly to the east of Judah, not to the west of Judah.

And it was a mixture of hill country and coast. The problem the Danites had was that that country was occupied by the Amorites. And the Amorites, we did in chapter 1 of Judges, had confined the Danites to the hill country.

And the tribes of Israel together hadn't yet managed to cast them out. The other problem the Danites had, as we've learned in the story of Samson who was a Danite, was they also had the Philistines sitting just below them to the south of them.

[10 : 19] And they were a constant thorn in their flesh as well. So the Danites clearly in this story had decided we've become a bit cramped here. This isn't a very good place for us to live.

Let's go and find somewhere else. And so they sent these five spies out to look for that somewhere else. So I suggest the first sin of the Danite was faithlessness, lack of faith in God.

God had given them a territory that was to be theirs. They only had to be obedient to God and work alongside their fellow Israelites. And they could have cast out the Amorites. And they could have had a perfectly satisfactory place for their tribe to settle.

But they decided it was going to be a bit too difficult. They took things in their own hands and they ignored what God had given to them. They were faithless.

So the first thing they do is to send these five spies out. And as these five spies go, they come to the hill country, which you see is just above Dan in that map.

[11 : 23] They've not gone very far when they get to the hill country of Ephraim, which is where they find the Levite, particularly in the home of Micah. And the Danites ask him, is the Lord going to be with us?

And I suggest that they are joining in the superstition of the Danite. And at this stage, probably the Levite. Perhaps the Levite took great pride in breaking out his ephod and putting it on and pronouncing to them, yes, the Lord is with you.

Your journey has the Lord's approval. Actually, in the original, it's not quite as precise as that. The Levite slightly hedging his bets. It says something like, the Lord is looking on you. And they certainly interpreted it as meaning that God was approving of what they were doing.

I think the Danite was thinking, well, it doesn't work out. I can take the other interpretation and say, yes, God was looking on you and he didn't agree with what you're doing. But they took it as this is a sign of God's will.

Now, we are not to take it, I think, that the fact that they ended up in Leish and defeating that city was a sign that God was with them as they went. It was fairly predictable.

[12 : 33] You come to an unprotected city without a real army and with no one to help it. If you've got a big army going there, you are going to take it. It wasn't anything to do with God being with them that that happened.

But they demonstrate a real superstition as they went out. So the spies went up. They saw the city in Leish. You see, that's quite a long way away. You're right at the north of the nation of Israel. In fact, you're slightly outside the boundary of the nation of Israel when they come to that in the land of the Canaanites, well away from where they were supposed to be settling down in the south of the country.

But they go up there. They find the city. The spies think, yes, we can take this. This is easy. And they go back with their report. And so the Danites together, they come up.

And again, as they come, one of the first places they come to is the house of Micah. And again, they encounter the priest. Interesting that the Danites seem to know the priest.

[13 : 30] They recognize him by his voice. Might just be they recognize from his accent that he was from their kind of territory. But more likely, perhaps, it was someone they knew they had come

across before. And that was why they had this interaction with him.

But they didn't really care about the priest. And they certainly didn't care about Micah. And they gathered all their 600 troops together in a force that's role of strength. Went and took the idol and all the other things from Micah's shrine.

And when the priest challenged them, they said, well, look, there's all of us here. Why don't you just join us? But rather than just be a priest for one person, for Micah, and a few people live round about him, you come and you can be a priest for a whole tribe.

And I'm sure alongside that, there might be a bit more money attached for the Levite. And such was his corruptibility. Such was his lack of regard for God or what was right, that he went with them.

And he rejoiced that he was going on his way with them. So they stole everything that was Micah's. Micah comes out after them. Very quickly realises if he comes up against 600 with this motley crew, he's assembled from his neighbours.

[14 : 41] He's not got much chance. And he has to retreat with his tail between his legs. And so the Danites go on to Laish. And then there's, I've called it murder, you call it genocide.

They totally destroy the city and everyone in it. They have no compassion, no pity, no centre taking something that doesn't really belong to them.

Because they're stronger, because they're more powerful than the people of Laish, they think they can go in and do what they want. And then finally, we could list lots more sins of the Danites.

The idolatry of Micah becomes the idolatry of a whole tribe. The things they've taken from Micah become the centre priest for the shrine that they set up in Laish.

Which, again in direct contravention to the house of God, which is now in Shiloh, they set it up and they worship there. Chapter says it's until the exile.

[15 : 42] I think that's probably not the exile that we read about at the end of the time of the kings. It is probably an exile where the Philistines came and took things away from the Israelites.

So it's shorter term rather than in the very long term. But the key thing is, they've taken these idols and instead of worshipping God, they're worshipping these idols.

They have fallen into idolatry. We want a couple of hundred years or maybe a bit more. And we have a king called Jeroboam. Jeroboam was the first king of Israel after the divided kingdom.

And he set up a shrine in Dan. And not with a silver idol there, he had a golden idol. But perhaps it was the fact that this was sitting there to begin with that gave him the idea that this would be a good place to have as a centre of worship.

And Jeroboam became the benchmark against which the wickedness of the future kings of Israel was measured. So there's perhaps a hint here of what is to come later on through Jeroboam.

[16 : 45] So a pretty sad story. A man who's gone wrong and who has tried to put things right in a very misguided way. And a whole tribe that's gone wrong and time and time again is disobedient to God.

But what relevance does it have to us? That's always the challenge when you come to a passage like this. It's a different time, different circumstances. We're not going to do exactly the things that these people did.

What relevance does this story have to us in Edinburgh in the 21st century? Well, I've called it DIY religion.

Because that's exactly what's happening here, particularly with Micah. He's kind of making it up as he goes along. He's taking bits from the Jewish faith. He's taking bits that God has commanded the people.

And he's saying, I'm a follower of the Lord. He keeps referring to the Lord in the passage. So he's thinking, this is my religion. This is the religion of Yahweh. And yet he's added so much to it.

[17 : 50] And he's been disobedient to so much of it that actually it's his religion. It's a mixture of lots of different things and bears very little resemblance to true worship of the Lord.

And the same thing can be said of the Danites. As they take on what Mike has done, again they become guilty of this DIY religion.

And I suggest that is perhaps one of the main applications of this passage for us today. That we don't get sucked into what we might call DIY religion.

That we make sure that we remain true to the Lord and to his word. And that we don't add things or subtract things. So what are the dangers?

First one I've called scripture Minus. And this in this case is Micah. And he knows presumably the law, certainly parts of the law.

[18 : 50] And there are bits of it he chooses to ignore. Particularly the bits relating to the worship of God. No other gods. No idols. Micah totally ignores them.

And there's a danger nowadays that we see bits of scripture that we find difficult. And we think, well, maybe they don't really matter. Or maybe they don't mean what they appear to mean.

Let's see if we can make them mean something different. Something that is more acceptable to us. And that certainly is something that happens in the church.

The big church, if you like, today. And there's a danger it could happen in churches like ours as well. That the bits of the Bible that we find really difficult. We tend to ignore or to think, well, maybe they mean something different from what they appear to say.

So it might be what the Bible says about money and property, for instance. It might be what the Bible says about social justice. Or maybe about divine justice. About sexuality.

[19 : 56] About gender. There are lots of different things where people today might interpret the Bible in a way that is different from what if we take a plain reading, we might believe God is saying through it.

And in saying that, I don't think we should be looking out the way and talking about them and all the things that they do wrong in terms of Scripture. We should be looking at our own hearts and saying, are there things in the Bible that I find difficult and therefore that I ignore?

Are there areas where I'm letting the values of society affect me and affect my judgment to the extent that I don't follow what God's word says and I don't obey it entirely?

And that brings us on to Scripture Plus. Now, there's in some ways not much difference between Scripture Minus and Scripture Plus because if you add something into what the Bible says, you're taking away from what you really should be obeying through the Bible.

But again, we have Micah and he's adding things to Scripture. He thinks he needs more than just to worship God. He needs all his household idols as well.

[21 : 08] He needs more than to have the house of God in Shiloh where the Ark of the Covenant is. He wants something in his own backyard where he can say, that is my center of worship.

Now, again, if we look around us today, there are dangers in Christian faith that some of the New Age thinking and practices can come in. Some of the kind of Eastern mysticism can come into the church.

Very easy to see things that can be added into Scripture. And in doing so, as we say, they actually take away from Scripture because they are disobedient to God.

I'm not thinking anyone here is involved in anything like that. So let's try and bring it in a bit. And I think the danger for many of us is that we look at Scripture through the lens of our culture.

And we try to add our culture into what the Bible says to us. Now, there is an extent to which we do have to take our culture into account as we seek to apply the Bible in our lives.

[22 : 09] If you ignore culture completely, what's happening around about you, you very quickly become irrelevant and don't have much to say to society. But what we mustn't do is let our view of culture color our view of Scripture, rather than letting our view of Scripture and understanding of Scripture dictate how we view our culture.

We don't want to add the things of our culture. We don't want to add the things of our society, things which have nothing to do with the Lord and are not based on Christian principles or Christian values. We don't want to add them in and say they are part of what we do as Christians.

Because we need wholly and entirely to focus what we believe and how we go about interpreting our culture on God's Word and on our commitment to Him.

So we mustn't take away from Scripture as Micah did. We mustn't add to Scripture as Micah did.

The Bible, the Word of God, is our ultimate authority for what we believe and for how we live our lives.

And then the challenge for all of us is to take what's in God's Word and to apply it in our own situations to make sure that we're living faithfully for Him.

[23 : 27] No Scripture minus and no Scripture plus for us. Second application, you may have noticed a couple of times as we went through the passage, you'll notice a couple of times when Tim speaks on other passages next, a couple of weeks' time, that it says there was no king.

In those days, there was no king in Israel. And in one of the passages here, and again in one of the passages in 1921, it says everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

That's really the only direct comment that the writer here makes on what's happening. The rest of it is factual. You can read some nuances into the way he expresses it, to judge that he disapproves of what's going on.

But that's the only real commentary he makes here. There was no king, so everyone did what was right in their own eyes. So the question then is, what is the value of a king?

Who needs a king? The Israelites, as you know, got a king. Initially Saul, and then lots of others afterwards. Between the United Kingdom and the divided kingdoms, there were a total of 42 kings.

[24 : 40] Out of these 42, 32 were entirely bad. All the ones in Israel, most of the ones in Judah.

The other 10, I'm being a little bit generous to Solomon here, but the other 10 you could say they at least had good points to them.

But they were very much the minority. We look back on the kingdom, and once you get past David and a few others, like Josiah and Hezekiah and maybe Asa, you don't see much to commend there. And yet the writer here says, the root cause, or one of the root causes of the problem, was that there was no king. So who needs a king? What does a king give you?

A king gives you authority, direction, and protection, I suggest. But your problem is, a bad king leads everyone astray. So if you get a Jeroboam or an Ahab or one of the other really evil kings of Israel, they drag the whole nation down with them.

But a good king, a David or a Josiah, these are things that they offer the people. They offer authority, someone they can look up to and respect, and who will rule over them.

[25 : 51] They give them direction. They set the pattern for the way the nation is, and if they're a good king, should point people towards God. And they offer protection. They are there partly as warriors and as leaders of the army, and they protect the people.

I think this is a very interesting question. I'm not going to explore it in great detail this evening. This very interesting question comes out of this, what the writer says here, which is, is a bad king better than no king at all?

If you have a bad king, you still have authority, you still have, to an extent, people giving direction and protection. Is that better than total lawlessness? In our world today, was Libya better off under Colonel Gaddafi, or when Gaddafi was eliminated and it became a lawless anarchist state?

Very difficult to say in many ways. I'm not going to explore that, but I'll leave you if you want to think about it. But of course, when we think of Israel today, we probably have more of an analogy with the church.

And does the church need a king? Or should we all be doing our own thing? So quite a lot of churches have, not they wouldn't call them kings, they have an archbishop or a moderator, someone like that, someone who is in charge, the figurehead of the church.

[27 : 12] And they don't have the kind of power that a king would have had. There are lots of checks and balances. But a lot of Christian denominations would have someone who's a figurehead and would have a structure they look up to.

We don't. We're independent. We call ourselves autonomous. It means the same thing. We look only to God. I think there is a potential danger in that.

Because if things go wrong, then they can go very wrong. And there's no, in human terms, there's no control over it. So it's not that different from the way the clans were and the tribes in Israel.

There was no one in authority. And each of them had to decide what to do and whether it was right. And how can we as a church make sure that without a king in this world, that we keep on the right track, that we remain obedient to God?

Well, of course, the answer is that we need to remain obedient to Scripture, that the elders and the members of the church, we need each of us to be examining God's Word and saying, is what we are doing, what we believe right?

[28 : 19] And we need to be those who go away and when the preacher preached on his Sunday evening, go away and think and say, yes, is that truly preaching God's Word and so on. But actually, the real answer is we do have a king.

And actually, Israel had a king in those days. They just didn't recognize him. And for us today, Jesus is king. He is the one whom we own as the king of kings and lord of lords.

And so when we come to trust in Jesus and put our faith in him, we have someone in authority. We have someone who we have allegiance to. Jesus is lord, we say.

And that shouldn't just be words. It's not just a formula. It should be a practice in our lives. And everything we do, we recognize the authority of the Lord Jesus and that he is the one who we owe total allegiance to.

He's also the one who gives us direction and to set our priorities. And if we're following Jesus, if we're trusting in him, if we're recognizing him as Lord, our priorities, our direction will be completely changed and will be very different from how they were before we knew Jesus or if we didn't now know him.

[29 : 44] Jesus sets direction in our lives and again does it primarily through the scripture as he guides us through that. And of course, we have security.

We have the protection of Jesus. That the battle has been fought and has been won by the Lord Jesus. And as we have our trust in him, if we own him as our saviour, as well as our Lord, and our hope is holy in him, we have complete security because we know that our lives are hidden with Christ in God.

He is the one who gives us security as we look to him as the one who gives us direction and as we recognize his authority. Hope all of us this evening know him as saviour.

If not, just recognize that the only real security comes through Jesus and through his death for us and forgiveness for sins through him. And as individuals and as a church, let's make sure that we're looking to Jesus as the one who is our king, the one whom we serve and the one whom we obey. That is the way to keep on track. That is the way to make sure that we don't fall into this DIY religion or everyone doing what they feel is right. If we have Jesus as king, if we have the scripture as our guidebook, then we can know that we will be within the will of God.

[31 : 12] Let me just finish by going back to the dungeon. One of the most shocking news stories of the last 10 years was about a man called Joseph Fritzel.

Joseph Fritzel was an Austrian and it emerged that he has kept his daughter in a cellar, in a dungeon if you like, under his house for 24 years. He and his wife and other members of the family they were living quite happily above and everyone but him was oblivious to what was happening down below.

When she was finally released, Fritzel's daughter had had seven children all fathered by him and there were three of them still with her. And these three children had spent their lives in the dungeon. They knew nothing else. And the dinginess and the darkness and everything else that was down there in that cellar, that was the life they knew and they accepted it. That was in a sense what they thought was normal.

Fritzel's daughter clearly knew better. She had had a life before she was imprisoned by her father and she knew what it was like to be out in daylight and to have freedom. And yet she too had accepted the normality of the life down in that dungeon.

[32 : 30] That was her lot in life and she felt there was nothing she could do about it and she had accepted it. Lesson for us. There are lots of people outside in the dungeon, in the darkness that is our country today who don't know any better.

Who think this is normal and who don't understand that there is something that is much better, much more fulfilling, much more worthwhile than the lifestyle that they've been used to through their lives.

And we need to make sure they know about it. And we also need to make sure that we don't get dragged into the darkness and begin to accept that as inevitable.

We are called to be those who bring people to the light, who show them the light and who live out the light in our lives. Who recognize Jesus as our King and want others to come to know Him and to know the security that He offers.

who recognize the power of Scripture, that it is God's Word, that it is to bring salvation to us as we trust in the Lord Jesus.

[33 : 39] And we want to bring that to others as well. Our society, we may think, is not quite as bad as the society and judges who read about here.

Not quite. But it is very dark. And as those who know the truth and who are able to tell others the truth, our responsibility is to live it out and to serve Jesus in our day, in our generation.

Let's go and do that. And let's make sure as we do it, that we do it with a firm assurance of Jesus as our King and as our Lord. Let's pray together. Father, we thank You for Your Word to us.

We thank You that even the difficult and dark passages of Scripture have much to teach us. And we fear that we will learn lessons from this passage this evening, particularly that each of us may make sure that Jesus is King in our lives, that we know Him as Saviour, and that we are obeying Him as Lord.

Help us, too, to take Scripture as our guide, as our lamp, as the thing which sets the direction of our lives. And not to add to it, not to subtract from it, but to obey it to Your glory.

[34 : 56] Thank You for Your Word to us. Thank You for its relevance, even in these harder passages. And we pray that You'll help us to apply it in our hearts. Pray for Your presence this week. As we enter into a week of prayer, we pray that You'll be with us and help us really to lay hold on You and on Your goodness to us.

Help us in our daily lives, too, to live as witnesses for the Lord Jesus and to represent Him before others. We give You thanks and commit ourselves to You in His name.

Amen.