Westlake Church Lausanne

The King and Priest We Need
Judges 17-18

The standard line goes that humanity is on a path of ever increasing progress. And there's a sense in which that's undeniably the case. Just consider health care – diseases which once claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of children have been more or less eradicated by vaccination. And yet, there's another sense in which humanity has made very little progress. Thousands of lives might be saved by vaccination, but we still go to war and our weapons mean we can kill more people than ever. So whilst in many regards humanity is making progress, in another, we're flat-lining.

But Judges tells a much more depressing story than that. Over the duration of the Judges Israel hasn't been getting better, or even flat-lining, it's been getting worse. And it's increasingly difficult to tell her people apart from the Canaanites they were supposed to displace when they took over the Promised Land.

Now last week we looked at Samson, and Samson was the last of the Judges. And you might think, 'No judge, no Judges'. Except the writer doesn't end the story there. Instead he shows us just how bad things became in Israel. And what we'll see is that whilst before Israel faced threats from outside, increasingly the greatest threats she faces are from the inside. And surprisingly perhaps it's all incredibly relevant for your life.

Compromised Hearts

Do any of you know who this is? It's Eric Cantona – who was a famous football player for Manchester United. And as a doctor I once had to look after a little baby boy who's Dad named his little boy Cantona in tribute to Eric! And I think it would be a fair bet to say that his Dad was not a fan of Liverpool or Lausanne! Name your son Cantona and you're saying something about who you support, aren't you?

Chapter 17:1, 'There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.' And the name Micah means 'who is like YHWH?' Who is like God? And the answer is – no one! There's no one like our God. So, imagine giving your son that name - it would kind of imply that you were a fan, a worshipper of YHWH, Israel's God, wouldn't it? Who is like YHWH? No one – none of these foreign gods and idols can compare with him.' And you'd think that this was going to be one spiritual, God-fearing family, wouldn't you? And yet, spend a little time in Micah's house and you begin to realise that things are not quite what they seem.

And the story begins with it becoming apparent that Micah has stolen a stack of money from his mother. Verse 2, '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." So here's an Israelite who's stolen from his mum. So how many of the 10 commandments has he broken? At least 2: to honour his mother, and not to steal.

Well, at least he's given it back! But why? Does he return it because his conscience plagues him, because he knows he's done something wrong and he's

genuinely repentant? No. Why does he return it? Because he hears his mother pronounce a curse on whoever took it. Because he's worried something worse will happen to him! So he's behaving like a superstitious pagan, not like a repentant Israelite.

But then look at his mum – the one who named him Micah in the first place! Verse 2, 'And his mother said, "Blessed be my son in the Lord." And you might think, 'well she seems pretty good, she's pretty spiritual. Forgives him and blesses him in the name of God, not an idol!' And she receives the money back and says, v3, "I dedicate the silver to the Lord." And you think, wow! Good woman! Lost the money, found it, and gives it straight back to God for his service. So Micah might be bad, but great mum!

Except, look what she does with the silver supposedly dedicated to God: v3, "I dedicate the silver to the Lord… to make a carved image and a metal image." And v4, "His mother took 200 pieces of silver and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into a carved image and a metal image." Hang on a minute?! You're going to make an idol with it?! That breaks the second of the 10 commandments, not to make graven images!

But then the writer tells us that Micah added that idol to his other household gods – in his own little temple. And v5, he 'ordained one of his sons, who became his priest.' So, despite the fact that God had told Israel that they were to worship in one central place, at the Tabernacle, the Tent Moses had set up, which was now at a place called Shiloh; and despite the fact that God had said only men from the tribe of Levi could be priests, Micah has his own little temple, and has his own son, who was not a Levite, act as priest.

So can you see what's going on here? On the surface it all seems very spiritual and religious, doesn't it? But underneath it's a mess of superstition, pagan ideas, disobedience to God, and idolatry. And not just in their family. There's clearly at least one silversmith who's prepared to make the idol. So the Arts are also becoming more pagan.

But doesn't it all sound incredibly like the 21st century West? You see the writer says, v6, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' It was a spiritual free-for-all. Ask these people, 'do you believe in God?' and they'd say sure. But in reality they practised a pick and mix spirituality – a bit of Israel's God here, a bit of idolatry there. A bit of YHWH here and a bit of superstition there. A bit of faithfulness here – let's call him Micah! – and a bit of unfaithfulness there – let's make an idol! And it's a mirror to our own pluralistic and individualistic culture, where, like Micah and his family, we want to pick and choose what we believe about God.

You see, Micah and his mum want to make God as an image, how they see him. And whilst we might not make a physical image, there's this danger that we want to craft a god of our own preference. You might read the Bible and think, 'I don't

like that bit, I don't believe in a god like that, so I'll ignore that. The god I believe in is like this.' And perhaps there's no bigger example of that currently than the whole issue of sexual ethics. Where the Bible is very clear about what it teaches on same-sex relationships, or sex outside of marriage, sometimes we want a God who's different. I was talking to someone recently who told me about his teenage daughter, and she said to him, 'Dad, I really love Jesus, I just love Jesus – but I don't believe all that stuff in the bible.' Which begs the question, which Jesus does she love? And the problem is when it's a Jesus of our own imagination. A god we've made according to our own preference.

So just as Micah's family worship God just however they want, until it becomes not God they're worshipping but idols, so we too can mix orthodox Christian beliefs with other stuff and think it's ok – because it *feels* ok. Because it seems good to us. And like them, in our highly individualistic culture, we live out v6 and everyone believes and does whatever seems ok to them. And if their mantra was 'do what's right in your own eyes', ours is 'be true to yourself; don't let anyone else judge you', and you become the judge of what's right or wrong, in your eyes.

You see, look at v6 again, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.' In other words, if there had there been a king, this kind of thing wouldn't have happened. The only problem is that when there were kings, things did not go any better. In fact, the kings became state sponsors of idolatry. And so this comment by the writer goes deeper than just lamenting the lack of a human king. I mean, think of when God rescued Israel from slavery, and entered into covenant with them. That covenant was structured along the lines of all the ancient treaties of the day between kings and their people. And the message was clear: God was saying, I am your true king, and Israel, you are to be my faithful people. But by now, not even God's authority as king was recognised.

The problem is, that if you make something other than God your absolute, your king, if you become the standard of right and wrong for your life, and you seek your identity and inner sense of well-being in something other than God, it can have profound effects on your life, can't it? And Micah's a sad example of that.

You see, in chapter 18, when his idols are taken from him, he catches up with the thieves and says, v24, "You take my gods that I made… and what have I left?" That's the question, isn't it? When your idol is taken from you, what's left? Or, turn that around and, if something is taken from you, and your world collapses, and nothing's left, then you know what's most important to you. You know what your idol is. Remove your idol, your God-substitute, and there's a deep inner emptiness.

Some months back I read a report into the death of a woman, aged around 60, who had died by assisted suicide in a clinic somewhere in Europe. And this lady had been a wealthy London socialite, who had lived the high-life, with multiple male lovers. But her adult children testified to how she could not bear the

thought of growing old and losing her beauty. She couldn't bear the thought of not being the centre of attention. Life for her would cease to be worth living. And so, although she was still fit and active and in the best of health, she took her own life rather than lose what mattered most to her – her looks, her sexual appeal.

Now maybe for you it's not your looks, but what is it that if it were taken from you you'd say, 'what have I left? Life is not worth living' Maybe, given your stage in life it's the thought of being single – and marriage becomes for you an idol that you cannot live without. Or maybe it's the opposite, and you could never lose your personal freedom – that that would seem like death to you – so you flee the idea of commitment. Or maybe it's being top in your class, and lose that prestige and the world would come crashing down. Or maybe it's getting the right kind of job. Or your physical fitness. The problem is, all of these can be taken from you, can't they? They're incredibly unstable ground to build a life, or identity or self-worth on. Ultimately, it's only God who can give you that kind of never-chaning stability.

So, is the answer more religion? Well, Micah's story suggests not, because it warns us of the dangers of religion.

Corrupt Priests

So Micah has his own little temple at home, and what happens next? – enter a young Levite. Verse 7: 'Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite.'

And as a tribe the Levites were specifically set apart to act as priests and teachers of God's law to the rest of Israel. And this young Levite leaves his home and eventually finds himself in Micah's area. Now, interestingly, whilst we're told Micah's name, we're not told the Levite's name, not yet anyway. The writer leaves him nameless right until the end of the story, and later on we'll see why.

And he pitches up at Micah's place and Micah seizes the opportunity. Micah's a spiritual kind of guy, he wants a priest, and he knows his son's not the real thing, so when this out-of-work Levite comes along he thinks – 'this is perfect, I need a Levite, and here's a Levite - this must be a God-thing!' Verse 10, "Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest." So Micah wants this young man to be his spiritual mentor. Think about that. You see, the danger when you're young is that you just listen to your peers, to other young guys. I mean who wants to listen to their parents, or people like their parents?! But that's not how wisdom and personal growth come, is it? All of us need to seek out voices that are older and wiser than us.

But to persuade him, Micah offers him, v10, 'ten pieces of silver a year and a suit of clothes and your living.' He just needs to become priest to his little collection of idols. And verse 11, 'The Levite was content to dwell with the man.' So this young guy, who should have been teaching people to stay faithful to God, abandons God for money and some new clothes. He exchanges his priestly

garments, which should have set him apart in service to God, for the best, maybe the only offer he can get. And if you read what are called de-conversion stories, of how people walk away from the Christian faith, very rarely has it to do with being persuaded by better philosophical or intellectual arguments. Much more often they've experienced some kind of emotional crisis, or they've had what seems like a better offer – and sex, or some relationship, or career success, or personal freedom just seem more valuable than God.

But then, these men from the tribe of Dan come along, and they make the Levite an even better offer: 18:19, "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?" We can give you more prestige, higher social standing, job promotion! And the writer says, v20, 'And the priest's heart was glad' and he goes with them.

And that's how far Israel has fallen. Even the priesthood is corrupt. And this young man simply sells himself to the highest bidder. And now, not just one family, but a whole tribe is led astray to idolatry. And in reality the Levite's not serving God, or Micah or Dan, is he. He's just in it for himself, for his own self-advancement.

So consider this young man's spiritual journey. It starts in Bethlehem of Judah – the place that will sit at the centre of God's plan of salvation, and he ends up worshipping idols, in what becomes the Danite city of Laish, which was outside the borders of the Promised Land. It's a sobering story of a steady drift away from God and the truth, isn't it? And yet, each step must have seemed so 'right', so 'providential', that God must be in it. But he wasn't. In the end, it's all so empty.

But who was this young Levite? Verse 30, 'Jonathan the son of Gershom, son of Moses.' And the writer leaves it to the very end of the story to drop the bombshell. This was one of Moses' grandchildren! That's how low Israel has fallen.

So what can his story teach us? Well, firstly, even today there are religious crooks who are in it for the money and are after your money. And they'll sell you a message you want to hear, and they'll take your money but leave you worshipping idols, something less than God.

But there's something else. You see, why did Micah want this Levite in the first place? And why would anyone buy a feel-good message today?

Well look back to what Micah says in the last verse of Chapter 17, having employed the Levite: v13, 'Then Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest." So Micah wants to be blessed, and 'if I only do the right thing, and have a Levite, God will bless me.' It's an ancient form of what Christian Smith, the American Sociologist, says marks how the vast

majority of so-called Christian young people relate to God, which he calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism: That if I do good, if I live a moral life, go to church, read my bible, recycle my garbage, employ a Levite, God will make my life better and I'll prosper, and he will leave the other areas of my life alone.

The problem of course is that this type of religion reduces God to a god who does our bidding, and whose sole reason for existing is to bless us and to run the universe around us. But that's not the God of the Bible. And real, genuine Christian faith gives us a God who is so great, and so awesome, and so other to us, and yet so gracious, that we want to live for his glory and do his bidding, rather than he do ours.

So it's not just a king Israel needs, it's also a priest. But before we get there. One last indication of how far they've fallen.

Community in Conflict

Now, what do the following football clubs have in common? Crystal Palace, FC Lugano, and FC Metz. They're all bottom of their league. And if you were to look back at chapter 1 you'll find that the tribe of Dan is listed last, at the bottom of the league of the tribes of Israel, because they had failed to take the land that had been allotted to them. And Chapter 18 tells us how, having failed to obey God and take the land, they were homeless and migrating northwards in an attempt to find a home.

But as they do that, they end up robbing and threatening Micah, a fellow Israelite. And the writer is setting up what we'll see in more graphic detail in the last few chapters of the book, that Israel begins to turn against itself. And now, the biggest threat is not from outside, but from within. And Israel turns on Israel.

And with echoes of Israel taking the Promised Land, the Danites send out spies – except the city they spy out, Laish, lies outside the Promised Land. And just look how the writer describes the Sidonians who lived there: v27 – 'a people quiet and unsuspecting.' In other words, if you were asked 'which of these two people groups – the Danites, thieving and threatening violence – or the Sidonians, living in peace and quiet, look more like God's people?' you'd probably say the Sidonians! So by now, even gentiles appear to be living better lives than God's people.

And that's not lost on other Bible writers. By the time you get to the last book of the Bible, to Revelation chapter 7, the book that describes the great city of God, the ultimate Promised Land for God's people, Dan isn't bottom of the league – it doesn't even make it into the league. They've been relegated, dropped off the list of the tribes of Israel, outside the city of God.

So as we finish, what hope is there for Israel, and what hope is there for us – who like them find ourselves drawn to idols, or who think God is there to bless us, or who live lives indistinguishable, sometimes even worse than those around us?

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The King and Priest We All Need.
So this story tells us that we need a much better God than idols that leave you empty, a much better priest than one who takes from you, a much better community, and ultimately, we need a king. And in Jesus, God gives them all.

You see here Israel needs a king and a priest – but he'd have to be a king or a priest who wasn't in it for his own gain, who gave up his wealth for his people, rather than taking their wealth; who was faithful to God not unfaithful; who sought the good of his people at his cost, not theirs.

And the New Testament tells us that Jesus was just such a king and just such a priest. He came as king, but was crowned with a crown of thorns, and enthroned on the cross, with *'Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews'* nailed above his head. And as king he died for his people, for people like these Danites, or you and me, who want to ignore his rule and authority and live as if there were no king. And in dying for us, he becomes our faithful high priest, who makes the one perfect sacrifice to atone for our sins. And in rising from the dead and ascending to the Father's right side he now sits as the greatest of all kings. And he's the ultimate Micah – the ultimate 'who is like YHWH?' Jesus is. And as our King and High Priest he welcomes us into his new community – the Israel of faith – the community of those whose lives have been transformed by putting their faith in him, and not those idols that will forever let us down.