

**DOWNWARD SPIRAL, PART 14: “FALSE WORSHIP OF THE TRUE GOD”  
JUDGES 17:1-18:31**

### Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today.

### Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 14 of our sermon series called “Downward Spiral,” where we're going through the book of Judges together.

And today's sermon is titled: “False Worship of the True God.”

So let's get right into it.

### Sermon Introduction

In 1521, Martin Luther entered the city of Worms to stand trial before the most powerful political and religious authorities in the world.

What was this all about? In one sense, it was about true *worship* of God.

In Luther's day, worship in the Catholic Church involved...

- praying to saints instead of Jesus as the only mediator between God and man,
- using images and relics (or holy objects like supposed “pieces of the cross” that were treated like magical talismans of power),
- purchasing indulgences (or pieces of paper signed by the Pope to supposedly reduce the amount of time your loved ones spent in purgatory before eventually going to heaven),
- hiring priests to privately observe the mass on your behalf,
- insisting that the Bible and worship services only be in Latin (even though nobody really understood Latin),
- declaring that salvation is *partly* based on our *own* efforts and works (and *denying* that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone),
- claiming that Scripture and Tradition are *equal* authorities (but only the Pope and his bishops can authoritatively interpret Scripture),
- and all kinds of other *unbiblical* beliefs and practices that crept into how people *worshipped* God.

Luther published many works against all these corruptions of *true* worship of God, so the Catholic Church threatened *excommunication*, and the Roman Emperor assembled an official *conference* in the city of Worms, where Luther was to stand trial.

A pile of his books was placed in front of him, and he was asked whether he would *recant* (or *deny*) what he had written.

Here's how Luther responded:

I ask your Imperial Majesty and your Illustrious Lordships, or anyone of any standing, to testify and refute my errors, to contradict them with the Old and New Testaments. I am ready, if better instructed, to recant any error and I shall be the first to throw my writings in the fire.

But the authorities were not willing to discuss Scripture with Luther, so they asked again: “Give us a plain reply to this question: Are you prepared to recant or not?”

After asking for a day to think it over, when he came back, this was Luther's response:

Your Imperial Majesty and your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and straight. Unless I am convicted of error by the *Scriptures* ... and my conscience is taken

captive by *God's word*, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us or open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Luther, as well as all the Reformers, understood that we must *not* worship God according to our *preferences*—whether that's what makes *sense* to us, what we *feel* is right, or what we've *always* done—but we must worship God according to *Scripture* alone.

God tells us in his Word *how* he is to be worshipped, and to worship him in any other way is neither safe nor open to us.

This very thought sparked the entire Protestant Reformation, recovering the gospel and the church, and reforming worship once again to be submitted to God's Word.

### The One Thing

We must not worship God as we *prefer* but as he *prescribes* [or as he *commands* in his Word].

### Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Judges 17-18.

I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open to this passage and look down at verses that are referred to throughout the sermon. It will help you follow along more easily.

I'd highly recommend using a physical Bible, but if you don't have one, you can download the ESV Bible app, or just ask someone next to you, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share with you.

<pause>

By way of reminder, "judges" here doesn't refer to judicial or court judges, but these judges were military leaders that God raised up to deliver his people from an oppressor. They were not kings over all of Israel, but they were more like clan or tribal leaders.

Today, we are entering the *third* and *final* section of the book of Judges.

- The *first* section was the two-part introduction (1:1-2:5; 2:6-3:6).
- The *second* section was the main body of the book, which told the narratives of 12 judges—6 major judges and 6 minor judges (3:7-16:31),
- and this *third* section is the two-part conclusion of the book (17:1-18:31; 19:1-21:25).

In the *earlier* sections, we saw the downward spiral play out, where...

- the people of Israel did what was *evil* in the sight of the LORD,
- the LORD handed them over to a foreign *oppressor*,
- the people *cried out* to the LORD,
- the LORD raised up a *judge* to deliver his people and give them rest,
- the judge eventually *died*,
- the people *returned* to their wickedness, but it's even *worse* than before,
- and then *repeat*, so that by the end of the book, the people of Israel look more like the *pagan* Canaanites than the people of *God*.

But in this *concluding* section...

- there is *no foreign oppressor* mentioned,
- there is *no judge* that the LORD raises up,
- and the LORD is largely *absent* in these final chapters.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "The Diet of Worms: Luther's Final Answer," cited in Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 214.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Wilcock (*The Message of Judges*, BST [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992]) writes: "Up to this point we have been aware that however weird the activities of some of the characters on the stage, the Lord has been ultimately in charge of the production. But now he seems to have left the cast to its own devices, putting in a fleeting (and enigmatic) appearance in just one of the five chapters (20:18-28)."

It's just a description of the *corruption* of the people of Israel. These concluding chapters are basically "rock bottom" in the downward spiral.

If the previous sections gave us the *big picture*, this two-part conclusion is a *zoomed-in, on-the-ground* look at that *one* phrase that was repeated over and over again before.

Do you know what that phrase is?

"And the people of Israel did [or "again did"] what was *evil* in the sight of the LORD" (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

And we'll see that "what was *evil* in the sight of the LORD" was "what was *right* in [their] own eyes" (17:6; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1)—and we see that play out in the lives of *individuals*, *families*, and whole *tribes* in Israel.

And that's where we are as we begin today's passage.

### Scripture Reading

Since this is a longer passage, we'll read and summarize *portions* at a time and unpack them as we go.

### Overview

We'll look at this passage in two parts:

- I. A false devotion (17:1-13)
- II. A false conquest (18:1-31)

### I. A false devotion (17:1-13)

Chapter 17, verses 1-5 say this:

<sup>17:1</sup> There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> 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." <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.

Here, we're introduced to an Israelite family living in the land of *Ephraim*, which was one of the 12 tribes of Israel.

And on the surface, everything seems so *right* here.

- A son named Micah *confesses* to stealing silver from his mother, and they're reconciled.
- She even *blesses* her son in the name of the LORD, and then she *dedicates* all the silver to the LORD.
- So clearly, this is a *religious* family—and they understand themselves to be *devoted* to the LORD.

But when we look more closely, even though there is the *appearance* of religious devotion, everything is terribly *wrong* here.

In terms of the Ten Commandments...

- Micah *stole*, so he broke the *eighth* commandment, which says "You shall not steal" (Exod. 20:15).
- He stole from his *mother*, so he broke the *fifth* commandment, which says, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12).

- Even *before* he stole, he *coveted* the silver (or was consumed with a desire for it), so he broke the *tenth* commandment, which says, “You shall not covet” (Exod. 20:17).
- And by making a carved image and a metal image, Micah’s mom broke the *second* commandment, which says, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image” (Exod. 20:4).
- And by dedicating these *idols* in the *name* of the LORD, she broke the *third* commandment, which says, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain” (Exod. 20:7).
- And in verse 5, we find out that Micah *already* had a “shrine,” which literally translates as a “house of gods.” And he has *other* “household gods.” So along with the *second* commandment, he also breaks the *first* commandment, which says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3).

In addition to all this, Micah makes an “ephod,” which was a special garment that was only worn by the *high priest* in the tabernacle (Exod. 39:1-26).

There was only supposed to be *one* ephod worn *only* by the high priest at the tabernacle in the city of *Shiloh* (Judg. 18:31). That was in Micah’s *own* region of Ephraim, so the *true* place of worship wasn’t even *far* for him.

But *instead* of worshipping the LORD at “the house of God” at *Shiloh* (cf. Judg. 18:31), he’s got his *own* “house of gods” at *home*.<sup>3</sup>

And if he has an *ephod*, then he needs a *priest*, so Micah ordains his own *Ephraimite* son to be his own private priest. But according to God’s law, only *Levites* who were *specifically* descendants of *Aaron* could be priests (Exod. 28:1; 40:12–15; Num. 16:39–40; 17:8).

So in addition to breaking several of the Ten Commandments, Micah breaks God’s law by making a *false* ephod in a *false* tabernacle, and ordaining a *false* priest.

But all the while, he and his mom *think* that this is all worship that is *pleasing* to God.<sup>4</sup>

<pause>

We’ll skip verse 6 for now and come back to it.

Verses 7-13 then say this:

<sup>7</sup> Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.” <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> And the Levite was *content* to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. <sup>12</sup> And Micah ordained the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. <sup>13</sup> Then Micah said, “Now I *know* that the LORD will *prosper* me, because I have a *Levite* as priest.”

Here, the author introduces a *new* character to the story—an unnamed *Levite* who is coming from *Bethlehem* in Judah and now finds his way to Micah’s house in Ephraim.

And again, on the *surface*, everything seems so *right* here.

- The *Levite* is looking for a place to stay and work.

<sup>3</sup> This should all feel a bit like déjà vu because one of the judges earlier in the book, Gideon, *also* made an ephod in his hometown—and as a result, it said that “all Israel *whored* after it there, and it became a *snare* to Gideon and to his family” (Judg. 8:27).

<sup>4</sup> Sadly, even though Micah *escapes* his *mom*’s curse, he *enters* into the *God*’s curse for his new carved image and metal image. Deuteronomy 27:15 says, “‘Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret.’ And all the people shall answer and say, ‘Amen.’” Far better to be cursed by *man* than to fall into the *greater* curse of *God*’s judgment.

- *Micah* is eager to replace his *Ephraimite* son with an actual *Levite* to be his private priest, so he gives him an offer of employment and accommodations.
- *Both* of them can't believe their good fortune. In verse 11, the *Levite* is *content*; and in verse 13, *Micah* is *happy* and *hopeful*.
- It all seems to be God's good providence to bring them together.

But again, when we look more closely, even though there is the *appearance* of religious devotion, everything is terribly *wrong* here.

Levites are *Israelites*, but only a *subset* of Levites could be *priests*—the descendants of *Aaron*.

The job of the *Levite* was to *assist* the priests in the tabernacle (Num. 18) and to *teach* God's law to the people (Deut. 33:10; Neh. 8:9).

They were financially supported by the tithes of the people (Num. 18:21-24), but they weren't given their own tribal territory; instead, they had 48 cities scattered among the other tribes of Israel to live in (Josh. 21).

But the city of *Bethlehem* was *not* one of those cities.

So a few questions arise:

- Why is this *Levite* in *Bethlehem* to begin with? That's *not* one of the cities allotted for the Levites.
- Why is this *Levite* in search for a place to stay and work? God has *already* provided 48 cities for Levites to live in and *already* prescribed the work he is to do and how he is to be supported financially.
- Why is this *Levite* agreeing to be a *private* household priest? There was no such role prescribed in God's law—only *public* priests who served *all* of Israel.
- And why is this *Levite* agreeing to be a *priest* at all? Only descendants of *Aaron* can be *priests*—and we'll find out later that he was *not* from the line of *Aaron* (18:30).

And this *Levite* *should* know all this because he's called to *teach* God's law to the people of Israel.

So he is *breaking* God's law left and right, but *none* of it seems to bother his conscience.

In fact, in verse 11, it says that he's "content" with this whole arrangement.

<pause>

And things aren't just wrong with the *Levite*, but look again at what *Micah* says in verse 13: "Now I *know* that the LORD will *prosper* me, because I have a *Levite* as priest."

Notice that *Micah* is *still* in violation of God's law—he shouldn't have his own shrine, idols, ephod, or priest *at all*.

But here, he feels *good* about now having a *Levite* instead of an *Ephraimite* as his priest. He thinks that the *closer* he gets to obeying God's law—even though he's *still* not obeying it, but he's getting *closer*—then the more God should "prosper" (or bless) him.

It's like someone who commits adultery, and then says to their spouse, "Now I *know* that you will *reward* me, because the one I'm *currently* having an affair with is more *impressive* than the *previous* person I was having an affair with."

*That* is how *ridiculous* *Micah's* statement in verse 13 should sound to us.

<pause>

How could *Micah* say or think such a thing?

Verse 6, which we skipped over earlier, *tells* us; it says this:

<sup>6</sup> In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

This is the repeated refrain that we'll hear *four* times (in *part* or in *whole*) in this two-part conclusion, and it diagnoses the *root* problem that we'll keep on seeing in these final chapters.

And there are *two* related diagnoses here.

First, "In those days there was *no king* in Israel."

Ultimately, the *LORD* was King over Israel (Judg. 8:23; 1 Sam. 8:7)—and he *governs* his people through his *Word*.

But in Deuteronomy 17, God anticipated the setting up of a *human* king to lead his people, and he laid out the requirements of *who* that king should be and *what* the king was to do.

And one of the most important things he was to do is in found in...

Deuteronomy 17:18-20: "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall *write* for himself in a book a *copy* of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be *with* him, and he shall *read* in it *all* the days of his life, that he may learn to *fear* the LORD his God by *keeping* all the words of this law and these statutes, and *doing* them, that his *heart* may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may *not* turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

So God's people need a certain *kind* of king—one who is *devoted* to God's Word and who will *lead* God's people according to his Word.

Later, for Israel, that would be King *David*.

But *even* David and his son Solomon could only keep the nation together for *two* generations. By the *third* generation, the nation *split*, and everyone was back to doing what was "right" in their own eyes.

And that brings us to the next diagnosis.

[<sup>6</sup> In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.]

Second, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Micah, his mom, and the Levite are not *exceptions*—as if everyone *else* was doing the *right* thing *except* them—but they are *examples* of the "everyone" who was doing these kinds of things.

And they *honestly* didn't think they were doing anything *wrong*; they did what was "right" in their own eyes.

In their minds...

- If it helps them to *focus* on God, then there isn't anything wrong with making and using images to worship him.
- If it's more convenient to worship from *home* rather than with *God's people* at the *tabernacle*, then there isn't anything wrong with having their own *private* ephod and priest at home.
- If everyone is *content* and *happy* about the decision, then there isn't anything wrong about it.
- *Surely*, God *must* be pleased by *any* worship we offer him.

But the truth is: "what was *right* in [their] own eyes" (17:6; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1) was "what was *evil* in the sight of the LORD" (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

<pause>

*How* were they supposed to know that?

Because God has *spoken*, and he *expects* his people to hear, trust, and obey his *Word*.

If we look closely at Micah, the *core* issue was his assumption that *obedience* to God's Word is *optional* (or just "nice to do" when it's convenient) rather than *expected* (or what God says we *must* do, even when it's not convenient).

In other words, he views *obedience* to God's Word *not* as what should be *expected* of him, but as "extra credit" that he should be *rewarded* for.

At the *heart* of doing what is "right" in our own eyes is treating God's Word as *optional* rather than *expected*.

<pause>

Let's think for a moment about the Reformation conviction of *sola Scriptura* (or Scripture *alone*).

It basically means that the Bible is our *supreme* (or *highest*) authority in life.<sup>5</sup>

Many Christians affirm that the Bible is *true*, but that's not enough.

We must have the settled conviction that Scripture is *truer* (or *more true*) than other people's thoughts, our own reason and experience, tradition, preferences, or anything else.

Scripture *alone* must be the *supreme* authority over everything else, or else Scripture means *very little* in practice.

In our decision-making, if that *other* thing *trumps* what Scripture says, then *that* is *really* our supreme authority—which is just another way of saying that we're doing what is "right" in our own eyes.

All of us have a tendency to trust "our *own* eyes" more than God's Word.

- We trust our own *reason* (or what makes *sense* to us).
- We trust our own *emotions* (or what we *feel* is right).
- We trust our own *experiences* (or what we've *always* known or done).

Ask yourself: How might I be tempted to trust what is "right" in my *own* eyes rather than submitting to *God's Word*?

Many examples could be given, but one that we see here is the *privatization* of worship, where it's just "me and God" *without* being joined with the rest of God's *people*.

God *prescribed* his people in the old covenant to go to the tabernacle for *public* worship, but Micah *preferred* to stay at home and do his own *private* worship.

And on this side of redemptive history, God *still* prescribes that believers are to regularly gather *as a church* for public worship.

1 Corinthians 10 repeatedly says, "when you come together *as a church*" (v. 18; cf. vv. 17, 20, 33, 34).

And Hebrew 10:25 warns us not to *neglect* regularly meeting together as a church.

That is *not* optional.

It cannot be substituted with your own personal worship in your home, or meeting with a small group of Christian friends, or just streaming worship songs and sermons on your own—even though all those are good things in and of themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> That doesn't mean that there aren't other legitimate authorities in the world; God's Word tells us to obey our parents, governments, and church elders. And through proverbs and parables, God's Word also legitimizes the use of reason and experience to discern truth. But Scripture *alone* means that, if we ever have to choose between what Scripture says and something else, we choose Scripture *every* time.

If you're a Christian and you're *able* to gather with your church, yet you're choosing to *not* regularly gather with your church, then you are *disobeying* what God has *prescribed* regarding how he is to be worshipped.

Now, our reason, emotions, and experiences might kick in to try to justify *not* regularly gathering:

- we have a lot going on with family and work right now,
- we can't disrupt our kids' regular nap time,
- we feel like we get more out of listening to sermons *online*,
- *other* churches don't seem to care much whether we're there or not, so why does *our* church seem to care so much?

In *all* of that though, what we're *really* saying is "God's Word is *optional* here."

But if we follow Scripture *alone* as our highest authority, we will find a way to make regularly gathering with our church *non-negotiable*.<sup>6</sup>

<pause>

Another temptation, especially in our day, is to throw out the biblical qualifications for *church elders*.

In the old covenant, God *prescribed* that *only* the descendants of *Aaron* were to be priests, but Micah *ignored* that prescription and set up his *Ephraimite* son and later the Levite who was *not* from the line of *Aaron* to be his priest.

In the new covenant, God *prescribes* that *only* biblically qualified *men* may serve as elders in the church.

1 Timothy 2:12 says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man."

Those are two of the main functions of an *elder*, so God has *not* authorized women—even the *godliest* of women—to serve in that church office.

Again, our reason, emotions, and experiences might kick in to try to justify *having* women pastors:

- they're *godly* women and *gifted* teachers,
- there aren't *enough* biblically qualified *men* to serve as elders,
- we feel that it's *unfair* or *devaluing* of women for God to set limits,
- *other* churches don't seem to have a problem with having *women* pastors, so why does *our* church seem to care so much about it?

But again, in *all* of that, what we're *really* saying is "God's Word is *optional* here."

But if we follow Scripture *alone* as our *highest* authority, then God's Word *must* be able to *contradict* our reason, feelings, and experiences, and we *must* trust that *his* ways are *best* and *right* and according to his *good* design.

*That's* the difference between *false* devotion and *true* devotion.

<pause>

Regarding *not* having women pastors, a short booklet that I'd recommend is *Can Women Be Pastors?* by Greg Gilbert. [We have it in both our physical and digital library].

And feel free to talk more with me [or your pastors] after the service if you have further questions.

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<sup>6</sup> Also, when we gather together for worship, we are *only* authorized to do what God has told us to do in his Word, which has been summarized as preach the Word, sing the Word, pray the Word, read the Word, and see the Word in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Everything we do in our gathering together *must* have biblical warrant (known as "the regulative principle"); otherwise, we are not authorized to do them—no matter how much we might *prefer* them.



So again, how might you be tempted to trust what is “right in your *own* eyes” rather than submitting to *God’s Word*?

This would be a good discussion to have with others later today—just make sure your discussions are centered on “what *God* has *prescribed* in his Word?” rather than “what *I prefer* according to my reason, feelings, and experiences?”

<pause>

So first, a false devotion; and second...

## II. A false conquest (18:1-31)

Chapter 18, verses 1-6 says this:

<sup>18:1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> When they were by the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young Levite. And they turned aside and said to him, “Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? What is your business here?” <sup>4</sup> And he said to them, “This is how Micah dealt with me: he has hired me, and I have become his priest.” <sup>5</sup> And they said to him, “Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether the journey on which we are setting out will succeed.” <sup>6</sup> And the priest said to them, “Go in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of the LORD.”

In verse 1, we see the beginning of the same refrain: “In those days there was *no king* in Israel.” And it’s meant to call to mind the *second* part as well: “Everyone did what was *right* in his *own* eyes.”

This triggers us to interpret what comes next as *not* quite right.

Though, on the surface, everything seems so *right* here.

- The whole thing sounds a lot like how God had *first* brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt into the promised land. They sent *spies* to survey the land and *report* back, and then all the tribes of Israel were to enter and *conquer* the land that *God* had promised to give them.
- And here, it seems like the tribe of Dan is seeking to take their inheritance of land, and so, they send five *spies* to survey the land first.
- *Micah* provides *housing* for the Danites, and the *Levite* helps them secure God’s *blessing* of their conquest.
- The whole thing looks *divinely* orchestrated and approved.

But when we look more closely, even though there is the *appearance* of a divinely ordained conquest, everything is terribly *wrong* here.

Earlier in chapter 1, we saw that God has *already* allotted the tribe of Dan a territory in the land, but due to their *disobedience* (cf. Judg. 2), they were *unable* to conquer the entirety of the land that God gave them (Judg. 1:34-36; cf. Josh. 19:40-48).

So here in verse 1, when we read “until then no inheritance among the tribes of Israel had fallen to them,” we should recognize that this was a problem caused by their *own* disobedience—*not* because of God’s *lack* of provision.

And instead of turning back to God in faith and obedience to take the land that God has *already* apportioned to them, the Danites justify a *new* conquest for land that the LORD *never* promised to give them.

And Micah—the *false* priest using a *false* ephod to *supposedly* inquire of God in a *false* tabernacle with *idols*—he gives them a *favorable* response, which is *exactly* what they *want* to hear.

And so, the Danites continue on their *false* conquest.

Look at verses 7-8.

[<sup>7</sup> Then the five men departed and came to Laish and saw the people who were there, how they lived in security, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and unsuspecting, lacking nothing that is in the earth and possessing wealth, and how they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone. <sup>8</sup> And when they came to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers said to them, “What do you report?”]

The five Danite spies travel about 100 miles north, where they discover a town called Laish, which seems to have *everything* that they’re looking for—*most* of all, how they’re “quiet and unsuspecting” and “had no dealings with anyone,” meaning that *nobody* is going to come and help them, and how they’re easy, defenseless targets.

And so, they come back down to their fellow Danites and give their report.

Verses 9-10 say this:

<sup>9</sup> They said, “Arise, and let us go up against them, for we have *seen* the land, and behold, it is *very good*. And will you do nothing? Do not be slow to go, to enter in and possess the land. <sup>10</sup> As soon as you go, you will come to an *unsuspecting* people. The land is *spacious*, for *God* has given it into your hands, a place where there is *no lack of anything* that is in the earth.”

Again, on the surface, everything seems so *right* here.

- Like God’s *original* creation, they call the town of Laish “very good” (Gen. 1:31).
- Similar to the *original* spies of Israel who reported that “[the land] flows with milk and honey” (Num. 13:27), here, the Danite spies say, “there is no lack of anything that is in the earth.”
- They also claim divine reassurance—“*God* has given it into your hands.”

But when we look more closely, even though there is the *appearance* of a divinely ordained conquest, everything is terribly *wrong* here.

Laish was *not* part of the promised land that God had allotted to *any* of the people of Israel.

So rather than *trusting* that God has *already* given them their allotted land, and *obeying* him to conquer *that* land, the Danites further *disobey* God to go *outside* the promised land to attack and conquer a defenseless, “quiet and unsuspecting” people.

All the while, the Danites only see how *great* of an opportunity this is for them, how *unified* and excited they are as a tribe to move forward, and how *God* seemingly approves of this *false* conquest of theirs.

<pause>

In essence, the Danites were *disobeying* God by using the modern equivalent of ...

- “God is *calling* me to do this,”
- or “I’m *convicted* that God wants me to do this,”
- or “I *prayed* about it.”

But you can be sure that God is *never* calling you to *disobey* his Word.

- If you’re a Christian, God is *not* calling you to marry an *unbeliever*;
- God is *not* calling you to *divorce* your spouse for any reason other than sexual immorality, abandonment, or perhaps abuse, which is a kind of “forced abandonment”;
- God is *not* calling you to maximize your ministry or marketplace gifts at the expense of faithfulness to your family or church.

Not all *great* opportunities are *godly* opportunities.

- Even if it seems like a “once in a lifetime” opportunity,

- even if everyone around you is “for” it,
- even if you use or hear a lot of spiritual words to justify it—
- whether it’s a great *job* opportunity, *marriage* opportunity, or *learning* opportunity—
- the main question we need to ask ourselves is, “What does *God’s Word* say?”

<pause>

Look now at verses 11-16.

[<sup>11</sup> So 600 men of the tribe of Dan, armed with weapons of war, set out from Zorah and Eshtaol, <sup>12</sup> and went up and encamped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. On this account that place is called Mahaneh-dan to this day; behold, it is west of Kiriath-jearim. <sup>13</sup> And they passed on from there to the hill country of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah.

<sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> Now the 600 men of the Danites, armed with their weapons of war, stood by the entrance of the gate.]

*Six hundred* armed Danites head out to war, but at the suggestion of the *five* original spies, they decide to stop by *Micah’s* house first.

When they come to the *Levite* who had previously given them God’s reassurance for their conquest, the Danites start by asking how he’s doing, but then quickly end the chit chat to *take* what they *really* came for.

Verses 17-20 say this:

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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?” <sup>19</sup> 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?” <sup>20</sup> 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.

In verses 17-18, the Levite *at first* protests the Danites *stealing* Micah’s idols.

But in verses 19-20, once he finds out that the Danites want *him* too, and how this would be a *promotion* for him—from being a *private* priest of *one* man to being a *public* priest of the *entire tribe* of Dan—suddenly, the Levite doesn’t seem so “content” anymore, and he doesn’t hesitate to *betray* the one who has taken care of him and treated him like his *own* son (17:11).

In fact, verse 20 says that he was “glad” at the thought of this big promotion, *regardless* how much *pain* it would cause his figurative “father,” Micah.<sup>7</sup>

<pause>

Ask yourself: what would *I* be willing to do for the sake of self-promotion or “success” in this world?

Would I betray *others*—and more importantly, would I betray my *heavenly Father*—for the sake of my *own* glory?

<pause>

<sup>7</sup> He has *such* a dramatic change of heart that, even though he initially *protested* the Danites stealing Micah’s idols, in verse 20, he now *personally* “took the ephod and the household gods and the carved image and went along with the people.”

Look now at verses 21-26.

[<sup>21</sup> So they turned and departed, putting the little ones and the livestock and the goods in front of them. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> 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?" <sup>24</sup> 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?'" <sup>25</sup> 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." <sup>26</sup> Then the people of Dan went their way. And when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his home.]

In verses 21-22, after the Danites depart, Micah discovers what's happened and he quickly assembles a make-shift army from among his household and neighbors, and he catches up to the Danites and *confronts* them.

In verses 23-24, the Danites start gaslighting Micah, as if *he's* the one who is *wrong* to shout at them—"What's the matter with you?" And filled with *frustration*, Micah basically says, "You took *everything* from me, and you have the *audacity* to say to me, 'What's the matter with you?'"

In verses 25-26, the Danites respond with a *threat*, which has the gist of, "You better watch how you speak to us; otherwise, some of us might start to get *angry* and actually hurt you, and we'd hate to see you and your whole household get killed." And seeing that he's outnumbered and outmatched, Micah goes home empty-handed and the Danites leave with his *ephod*, his *idols*, and his *priest*.

<pause>

Before moving on, notice what Micah says in verse 24: "You *take* my *gods* that I *made* and the priest, and go away, and *what have I left?*"<sup>8</sup>

That is one of the *saddest* and *baffling* statements in this entire narrative.

- What kind of "gods" can be *taken*? If they're *really* gods, can they not contend for themselves (Judg. 6:31-32)?
- What kind of "gods" are *made* by human hands? Does he not see the *folly* of bowing down and worshiping a block of wood or silver (Isa. 44:9-20)?

And just look at how having his gods taken away *affects* Micah—he feels like he has *nothing* left.

Bear in mind, Micah earlier stole 1,100 pieces of silver from his mother, which is the equivalent of about \$3 million today. And to our knowledge, only 200 of the 1,100 pieces of silver was used on his newest idols.

So this is *not* a poor family by any means.

But that's what idolatry does to a person.

You can have immense wealth, and you can have family and neighbors who are supportive to the point of chasing down a whole tribe alongside you, and yet, if you *don't* have your *idols*, you're left feeling like you have *nothing*.

Listen to God's Word in...

Psalm 135:15-18: The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not

<sup>8</sup> Mixed in all this is a bit of irony. The one who stole from his mother now has his figurative "son" steal from him. And Micah is actually *better* off now with his house cleared of all his false elements of worship, so that he can worship God as he prescribes—with the *true* priest wearing the *true* ephod at the *true* tabernacle in Shiloh, which isn't too far from his house in Ephraim.

hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. **Those who *make them become like them*; so do all who *trust in them*.**

Even though idols promise *power* and *prosperity*, the reality is that they will inevitably make you feel *powerless* and *empty*—just like the *idols* are.<sup>9</sup>

Micah's emotions swing from such *happiness* and *hope* in chapter 17 to such *despair* and *hopelessness* here in chapter 18. How he *feels* and how he perceives himself is wholly *dependent* on whether or not he *has* his *idols*.

<pause>

Idols don't have to be carved images, but "whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have *that*, *then* I'll feel my life has meaning, *then* I'll know I have value, *then* I'll feel significant and secure.'"<sup>10</sup>

Ask yourself:

- Despite the many provisions and blessings God has given me, what is it that I *still* feel like I *lack*?
- What causes me to feel great *highs* and great *lows*?

Whatever that may be, that may be a *functional idol* in my life—even if I profess to trust in Christ alone.

Kids, these are good questions for you to think about too. What is something that you feel like you *must* have—and without it, you feel *angry*, or *sad*, or like you have *nothing*?

That'd be a good discussion to have with others, especially your parents, later today.

<pause>

Look at verses 27-29.

[<sup>27</sup> But the people of Dan took what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him, and they came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting, and struck them with the edge of the sword and burned the city with fire. <sup>28</sup> And there was no deliverer because it was far from Sidon, and they had no dealings with anyone. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth-rehob. Then they rebuilt the city and lived in it. <sup>29</sup> And they named the city Dan, after the name of Dan their ancestor, who was born to Israel; but the name of the city was Laish at the first.]

With Micah's idols and priest in their possession, the Danites continue their *false* conquest to the "quiet and unsuspecting" people of Laish, and they completely *destroyed* the *defenseless* people.

The Danites rename the city "Dan," even though it's *nowhere near* the allotted territory that the LORD *actually* gave them.

Verses 30-31 then say this:

<sup>30</sup> 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. <sup>31</sup> So they set up Micah's carved image that he made, as long as the *house of God* was at *Shiloh*.

The Danites set up Micah's idols in their new city of Dan, and then the *unnamed* Levite is *finally* named—*Jonathan*.

But *more* than that, he is none other than the grandson of *Moses*.

<sup>9</sup> Miles V. Van Pelt, "Judges," in *Deuteronomy-Ruth*, ESVEC (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Penguin, 2009), xx.

This would have been *shocking* and even *devastating* for the Israelites to read.<sup>11</sup>

Moses was the one whom God used to *deliver* his people out of Egypt, to bring them into *covenant* relationship with him, and to give God's *law* to them.

He *wrote* the first five books of the Bible—Genesis to Deuteronomy. If there was *anyone* who should have *known* God's Word, surely it should have been his *grandson*.

He was only *two* generations removed from Moses (Judg. 2:8-10). Jonathan the Levite likely *knew* his grandfather personally.

And yet, Moses's *grandson* became a *false* priest for hire.

And now, Moses's grandson and his sons *all* become *false* priests of *false* idols at a *false* tabernacle for the entire tribe of Dan.

And this wasn't for just a *little while* but "*until* the day of the captivity of the land," which would have been almost 500 years later.<sup>12</sup>

<pause>

Parents, as we read passages like this, I'm sure it's painful to think about what this could mean for our *own* family. We *long* for our children and grandchildren to *know* and *follow* the Lord all the days of their lives.

But we have to remember that we raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord as part of *our* obedience and desire to glorify God—*not* because God has made any guarantees that our children will *surely* be Christians. We don't obey to *get* something from God, but we trust and obey him as part of our *own* worship of God.

Church, we also have to recognize that it's *much easier* to be *unfaithful* than to remain *faithful*. Syncretism and idolatry crept in after just *two* generations and lasted for almost *500 years* afterwards. We need to be *vigilant* in being faithful to God's Word in *our* generation and to *teach* the *next* generation to do likewise. There's *no guarantee* that the next generation will be faithful, but we want to do all we can as part of our *own* obedience and worship of God.

## Conclusion

As we close, we need to understand that this passage is *not* simply teaching us that we need to do better.

<sup>11</sup> Dale Ralph Davis (*Such a Great Salvation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990], 203-204) writes: "'Moses' is certainly correct in verse 30. Some translations (e.g., KJV, NASB) have 'Manasseh.' That is because a number of Hebrew manuscripts read 'Manasseh' but often with a suspended *n*, that is, a little above the normal writing line. The scribes wrote the *n* (Hebrew letter *nun*) that way to show that it was inserted. The insertion then changed 'Moses' into 'Manasseh.' Rashi (Jewish exegete, 1040-96) explained that the *n* was inserted to protect the honor of Moses (what shame for Moses' memory to have a descendant officiating in this perverted worship), but it was suspended to show that 'Manasseh' was not the real reading. The Manasseh intended is the wicked king of 2 Kings 21. Such worship, the scribes suggested, would have been very compatible with Manasseh but not, alas, with Moses. See C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges* (London: Rivingtons, 1918), 434-35, and C. D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (1897; reprint ed., New York: KTAV, 1966), 334ff. By holding back the priest's identity till the very end of the narrative and then disclosing his relation to Moses the write essentially crushes the reader under a literary load of bricks. Shock, dismay, disbelief, a helpless feeling of tragedy—these are the reactions. 'Moses' wreaks literary destruction on the faithful Israelites reader/hearer. John the Baptist was right (see Matt. 3:9)."

<sup>12</sup> Barry G. Webb (*Judges and Ruth*, PTW [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015]) writes: "'Until the day of the captivity of the land' in verse 30 probably refers to the devastation of the area in which Dan was located and the deportation of its population to Assyria by Tiglath-pileser III in 734 BC, approximately 475 years after the middle of the judges period. For details see Webb, *Judges*, pp. 1–12, 449. The complete end of the northern kingdom came with the fall of its capital, Samaria, to Sargon II in 722 BC (2 Kings 17:21–23)." Before the Assyrian captivity, the city of Dan is also where Jeroboam put a golden calf, so those in the northern kingdom of Israel would not go to the temple in Jerusalem to worship the LORD: "So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, 'You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.' And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one" (1 Kings 12:28-30).

Rather, it shows us that, left to ourselves, *all* of us will inevitably end up doing what is “right” in our own eyes, which is *really* what is “evil” in the sight of the LORD.

Even though *God* created us and we are accountable to him, *all* of us functionally *reject* his Word in ways that seem “right” to ourselves, and we are rightfully deserving of his judgment.

We *cannot* do better on our own.

Micah set up for himself *false* images and a *false* priest in a *false* tabernacle, hoping that his self-made worship would somehow please God and prosper him, but it only brought upon God’s judgment and his own despair.

But the good news of Jesus Christ is that...

- *he* is the true “image of the invisible God” that cannot be taken away (Col. 1:15);
- *he* is the true high priest who doesn’t *promote* himself at our expense, but who *humbled* himself and gave his life as a substitutionary sacrifice for us (Heb. 8-10);
- *he* is the Word of God who has come in the flesh to dwell (or “tabernacle”) among us, so that true worship is now *not* at Shiloh but through *faith* in Christ (John 1:14);
- and *he* is the perfect, sinless king who has come to finally lead us away from doing what “right” in our *own* eyes to doing what is right in *God’s* sight.

*Jesus* came to do what *we* could never do ourselves.

He doesn’t just *model* and *teach* us God’s Word, but he laid down *his* life in *our* place to take the punishment *we* deserved for *rejecting* God’s Word, and he *resurrected* three days later to give us new life, so that we would genuinely *desire* to obey God’s Word.

So for all who *repent* of their sins—who stop trusting in what is “right” in their own eyes—and who *believe* in Jesus Christ *alone* as their Lord and Savior, they are *forgiven* of their sins, *given* a lasting joy and hope in him, and *enabled* to *truly* obey and *worship* God as he prescribes.

So fix your eyes on *Christ* and recognize what *he* has done for you. See how *trustworthy* he is, and trust that *his* word is more reliable than anything that may seem “right” in our *own* eyes.

*That’s* the *only* way we’ll be able to worship God *not* as we *prefer* but as he *prescribes*.

Let’s pray.