

The Low Spiritual Conditions in Israel During the Dark Days of the Judges

Judges 17:1-13

"Now there was a man from the mountains of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. ² And he said to his mother, "The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you, and on which you put a curse, even saying it in my ears—here is the silver with me; I took it."

And his mother said, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my son!" ³ So when he had returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, his mother said, "I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son, to make a carved image and a molded image; now therefore, I will return it to you." ⁴ Thus he returned the silver to his mother. Then his mother took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to the silversmith, and he made it into a carved image and a molded image; and they were in the house of Micah.

⁵ The man Micah had a shrine, and made an ephod and household idols; and he consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest. ⁶ In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

⁷ Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah; he was a Levite, and was staying there. ⁸ The man departed from the city of Bethlehem in Judah to stay wherever he could find a place. Then he came to the mountains of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, as he journeyed. ⁹ And Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?"

So he said to him, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am on my way to find a place to stay."

¹⁰ Micah said to him, "Dwell with me, and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten shekels of silver per year, a suit of clothes, and your sustenance." So the Levite went in. ¹¹ Then the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man became like one of his sons to him. ¹² So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and lived in the house of Micah. ¹³ Then Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!"

Background Notes

The period of the Judges lasted about 350 years, until the time of Samuel and the beginning of the monarchy, and those years were certainly not the best time period in Israel's history. After

Joshua died, the children of Israel went downhill, spiritually and morally. That's why the time of the Judges is sometimes called "the dark days of the Judges."

Judges 17-21 show us how bad it was, both spiritually and morally, during the time of the Judges. These chapters are like an appendix to the book of Judges. Chapter 17 shows us how bad conditions were spiritually, and chapters 19-21 show us how bad conditions were morally. In Judges 17 and 21 we have the statement that "everyone did that which was right in his own eyes." Judges 17:6 - "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" And Judges 21:25 - "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" In other words, there was **no spiritual or moral authority** in the land. Everyone just "did his own thing."

Does that sound familiar? Where is the spiritual and moral authority in our own nation today? More often than not, it seems that everyone does what is "right in his own eyes." The recent horrific tragedy at the high school in Colorado is a reflection of the loss of spiritual and moral authority in our society.

The man named "Micah" in this chapter of Judges is obviously not the prophet Micah, who comes much later in Israel's history. The name Micah means, "Who is like the Lord?" Well, this Micah certainly didn't live up to his name. He robbed his mother of 1,100 shekels of silver (more than a little pocket change!) -- but he gave it back when he heard his mother pronouncing a curse on the thief! His mother then took some of the silver and had an artisan make a couple of silver images from it. Micah set up a shrine for these idols, and consecrated one of his own sons as a priest for the shrine. Soon a wandering Levite happened by and Micah grabbed him and made him the priest of the shrine, instead of his son. You ask, "What is going **on** here? Is this the people of God we're reading about?" That's exactly the reaction the writer of Judges wants you to have. This is how low the spiritual conditions in Israel had sunk during the dark days of the Judges.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. Spiritual decline opens the door for syncretism.

Have you ever heard the word “syncretism” before? Syncretism is the fusion of two or more different religious systems. Syncretism is “melting-pot religion,” and syncretism happened many times in Israel’s history. When the people would fall away from following the Lord and turn to foreign gods, they would adopt a mixture of religious beliefs. 2 Kings 17:33 says, *“They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away.”* Only a major spiritual revival would eliminate this mixture of beliefs and practices, such as the sweeping revivals in the days of King Hezekiah and King Josiah.

Syncretism certainly was widespread during the dark days of the judges, and we see it right here in Judges 17. This chapter is just one of many illustrations that the writer of Judges could have given to illustrate the spiritual anarchy that existed during the time of the judges, when *“everyone did that which was right in his own eyes”* (v6). Notice the syncretism that is going on here. When Micah returned the stolen silver, his mother said, *“May you be blessed by the LORD, my son!”* But then she turned around and used the silver to make graven images – a direct violation of the second Commandment! And notice the reason that she gave for making the images – it was because she had dedicated the silver to the **Lord** (v3)! Can you believe it? That’s syncretism! Making idols and yet saying it’s for the Lord -- as if they’re going to **worship the Lord** with those things?

But that’s not the end of it! Micah took the silver images, as well as other idols that he had, and put them in his homemade shrine. Then he consecrated one of his sons to be a priest for the shrine! Still later consecrated a wandering Levite to be his priest! God’s Law strictly forbade such actions, but Micah had become completely brainwashed. Verse 13: *“Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!”* What a mixture of beliefs and practices -- syncretism! He had idols and a homemade shrine and self-appointed priests -- and yet somehow he thought that the Lord, the God of Israel would bless him as a result?

What led to this mixture of beliefs and practices? Spiritual decline! Spiritual decline always leads to syncretism. Do we see spiritual decline today in our nation? Yes, we do! Do we see syncretism in our nation today? Yes, we do! We don't have to go to foreign countries to see syncretism; we can see syncretism right here in our own country. Look at Christmas and Easter. What do Santa Claus and Rudolph and commercialism really have to do with the birth of Jesus Christ? What do the Easter bunny and egg hunts and fancy clothes have to do with the Resurrection? That's syncretism!

However, syncretism is more subtle than those obvious examples. What about wearing a cross? If you're wearing a cross as a testimony or a conversation piece so that you can have an opportunity to share the gospel, fine. But if you think that wearing that cross somehow protects you from evil, that's syncretism. How about putting a religious image in your car or home, or a religious statue on your lawn, thinking it will somehow protect your car or your house? That's syncretism. What about the false notion that you can appease God or please God by going through some kind of religious ritual or by giving money to the church? That's syncretism.

All of this mixture of beliefs and practices is a result of spiritual decline. Spiritual decline opens the door for syncretism.

2. Spiritual decline opens the door for self-seekers.

The Levite in this story is certainly was a self-seeking opportunist, wasn't he? The Levite deliberately broke God's Law because he saw a good deal for himself! Look again at verses 10-11: *"Micah said to him, "Dwell with me, and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten shekels of silver per year, a suit of clothes, and your sustenance." So the Levite went in. Then the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man became like one of his sons to him."* So for room and board, clothes and a good salary, the Levite sold himself out and became a renegade priest for Micah and his idolatrous shrine.

In Judges 18, we'll see that this Levite eventually left Micah and wrongly became a priest for the tribe of Dan, because they offered him more fringe benefits and more prestige! And because of the spiritual decline in Israel, no one found any fault with any of this. Everyone was doing what was right in his or her own eyes.

Spiritual decline not only opens the door for syncretism, but it opens the door for self-seekers. One of the reasons why this Levite from Bethlehem was wandering around the countryside was because of the spiritual decline in Israel. The Levites, remember, were supposed to live in Levitical cities, in one of the 48 Levitical cities that were situated throughout the land, and they were to be supported by the rest of the people because they were doing the Lord's work at the Tabernacle. But Bethlehem was not a Levitical city, and it is obvious that this wandering Levite was not busy in the service of the Lord or being supported in the Lord's work. This lack of regard for God's regulations for the Levites triggered self-seeking motives in this Levite.

Sadly, today we see self-seeking people who are involved in so-called "ministries for the Lord" for selfish purposes. Sometimes these people start with good motives, but gradually they begin to primarily look for a position with a good salary or social power or even political and religious prestige. Spiritual decline opens the door for self-seekers.

Practical Application

Beware of "idols" creeping into the church!

Normally you don't expect to find idols in the church, right? But if there's syncretism in the church, there can be modern-day idols in the church. Micah thought that he was worshipping the Lord -- but it was really idolatry.

Remember, idolatry is not only the worship of false gods, but it is also the false worship of the true God. Because of syncretism, many Christians end up making their favorite religious "idols" in the church more important than the Lord Himself! Have idols such as a certain favored format of worship, or music for worship, or liturgy for worship, or even the décor and style of the sanctuary for worship crept into your church?

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