

Micah's Meddling

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[0 : 0 0] And now, friends, as most of you know, last year, Heather and I had our first long service leave that we've ever had. We had a full three months and there was lots that we planned to do. Our goals were quite straightforward.

We wanted to spend lots of quality time together. We wanted to go around the world and do a little few side trips as we went. We wanted to do a world class walk. We wanted to visit friends, family and missionary friends, do some ministry and in fact, visit our future ministry location and suss it out.

But let me tell you, we had a great time. There's one photo that for me captures how I feel about all those three months. It is a photo taken after three days of quite tough walking at altitude along the Inca Trail.

It was mid-afternoon. The day was clear. The sun was at our backs and we climbed a hill and then we came over the top. And without warning, there it was spread out before us, a spectacular view of Machu Picchu.

Now, I think there might be a photo. There we are. It is one of the most amazing views that I've ever seen. And we took photos of it from a bit higher than this particular photo was taken. We took photos of our walking party standing in front of it.

[1 : 0 5] And then one of our friends said to us, look, come on, you've got to have a photo of yourselves on your own. And our friend, we're a bit further down at this point, took our camera from us, stood us in front of the view and took the photo.

And that's it. Friends, I have this photo. It's one of the desktop backgrounds that I have on my computer. And it regularly appears. And its appearance is enough to remind me of the whole three-month experience.

We had a great time together. Well, in the next few weeks, thanks, we can turn the photo off now. In the next few weeks, we are going to have snapshots of Israel. Now, they are not comprehensive, but they are representative.

They show the life of Israel after the period of the judges. And you see, we've traveled through 16 chapters of judges now. We've come to the last. In these last few weeks, we've come to our last judge, Samson.

And in the remaining five chapters, there are no more of them. No sense of forward movement. No typical cycles of Israel crying out and being delivered. No rest for Israel.

[2 : 0 9] We simply get representative snapshot stories. They are not everything that happened during this period. But they are like the photo of Heather and me in front of Machu Picchu.

They are representative stories, snapshots that capture the time, the period, the ethos. They summarize the situation of Israel at this time. And today, we are going to encounter one of them.

It is the story of Micah, his house of God, his shrine, and his interaction with some men of the tribe of Dan. Now, let's get started with our story for today.

However, to understand it, we need to remember the historical context. You see, Israel had entered into the land in the book of Judges. They conquered large sections of that land.

Judges 2 told us that the Lord was angry with Israel for violating his covenant.

[3 : 09] He therefore pronounced that he would cease driving the nations out before them. And he would use the nations present in the land to test Israel to see whether they would keep his ways or not. He would allow the nations to remain.

He would not drive them out immediately. And as we've seen, those nations caused real problems for the Israelites. In these last few weeks, we've seen one particular example. We have seen the Philistines during the time of Samson.

Now, the way that the Hebrew of chapter 17, our passage for today, goes, it implies that to understand chapters 17 to 21, we need to understand them as a continuation of the previous story.

So let's briefly remember what happened in the previous story and see how things flow into chapter 18. Way back in chapter 13, we were introduced to Samson.

And one of the things we saw about Samson was that he's a man who did what he wanted. In fact, we saw there was a particular phrase that was used of him. You might remember that after the spirit began to stir in him, he became attracted to a Philistine woman.

[4 : 13] He asked his father to get the woman for him. His father tried to dissuade him. And in chapter 14, verse 4, Samson says, Get her for me. She is the right one for me.

Actually, the language is a bit stronger than that. In the original language, it goes like this. Get her for me because she is right in my eyes.

Did you hear that? She is right in my eyes. And he used the same little phrase a little later in relation to the same woman. In verse 7 of chapter 14, our version says that Samson liked the woman.

Now, the actual word is she was right in his eyes. That is, she was good. Now, you could flip over to chapter 17, verse 4, and look at what it says.

Can you see it there? Chapter 17, our passage for today, verse 4. We're told, In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did what as they saw fit. Now, literally, it is the same phrase.

[5 : 13] Everyone did what was right in their eyes. Now, flip to the end of the book, right to the end of chapter 21. Look at the very last words of the whole of the book of Judges. They are these.

In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. Literally, it reads like this. In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

Can you hear what's being said? Samson is part of an increasing trend. You see, he does what is right in his own eyes. But he's a leader of Israel. And before long, everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes.

The whole of Israel is sucked into this. But I think that's not the only thing about Samson that continues into our story for today. Let me show you. Do you remember Delilah from last week's chapter?

Now, since last week, I've revised one opinion that I stated last week. You see, last week I said she was probably Philistine. I'm no longer convinced about that. The text doesn't tell us what she was.

[6 : 16] I think I was probably wrong there. You see, we're not told in this passage whether she's Philistine or not. However, what the passage did tell us was her negotiations with the Philistines and how they made her rich.

Do you remember that? But each of the leaders of the Philistines promised to give her what? Do you remember? 1,100 shekels of silver each. And I think there were five. There were five cities in the Philistine territories.

And I think you multiply the 1,100 by five, you get 5,500 shekels of silver this woman had. Five by 1,100. And she succeeds.

Samson is captured. He's shorn. He's weakened. And his hair grows. And then with God's help, he's victorious. Even as he dies. Now, with all of that behind us, let's move into our passage for today.

And as I said before, verse 1 begins in a way that indicates we're meant to see it as a continuation. So imagine you've just been reading the previous chapter. And you just read on into this chapter. Let's look at what it says.

[7 : 17] Did you hear it?

A man named Micah. He has a mum. His mother has 1,100 shekels of silver. It's a tantalizing reference, isn't it? It's the only time in the Old Testament where there's an amount such as this.

1,100 shekels. And we can't help think, is the mum Delilah? Has her son taken one of the stashes of 1,100 shekels of silver that cost Samson's capture?

And then we begin to think, don't we? Could Micah be Samson's son? No, we don't know. They're all just tantalizing little references, aren't they? We'll never know the answer to that second question.

I think we can be more sure of the first question. However, if we read the story, I cannot help thinking, and I'm now reasonably confident, that the woman in this story is Delilah.

[8 : 28] It just all seems too coincidental. Anyway, all we can do is ponder this momentarily. And we're now driven to the story. And whoever this woman is, she has a son, Micah.

And he has 1,100 shekels. And it was stolen from her. And when it was, what did she do? She uttered a curse about it. However, it was her son, Micah, who was the thief.

And he confesses to it in verse 1. And then she does nothing that you'd expect. She blesses him in the name of the Lord. It's not something you'd do if your son had done this to you, is it?

Now, speaking about the Lord, let me tell you another thing. The name Micah has both a long form and a short form. Both are used here in the text.

The long form is only used twice. And the long form incorporates the name of the Lord. Remember, the name of the Lord is Yahweh. Micah's long form of name means the Lord, Yahweh, is incomparable.

[9 : 28] This long form of Micah's name is only used twice in the chapter. One in verse 1 and one in verse 4. So with that in mind, let's return to the story, see what we can get out of it.

We've seen this woman with 1,100 shekels, perhaps blood money. This man steals that from his mum. She curses. He returns the money. She blesses him and gives it back.

And in verse 3, she consecrates silver to the Lord. And she takes 200 of it and gives them to a silversmith who uses it to make an idol. Actually, our version of the Bible is not quite right.

Other versions capture it. It's not an idol. It is a carved image and a molten image. A carved image and a metal image. Both are explicitly prohibited in the law of Yahweh in Deuteronomy 27, verse 15.

When Israel enters the land, they are to repeat curses and blessings to each other. And the very first curse they are to utter is this one.

[10 : 25] Cursed is everyone who makes a carved image and a metal image. A thing detestable to the Lord. The work of skilled hands and sets it up in secret. Now look at what's happening here.

Look at the end of verse 4. Skilled hands of a silversmith are engaged. A carved image and a metal image is made. Then they are set up in secret and they're put into Micah's house. Friends, the ironies of these four verses are enormous and they are overwhelming.

In the previous story, multiples of 1,100 shekels have been paid to destroy Samson, the judge of Yahweh. Now that money is being used by the son of probably the same woman.

And a portion of that money is being used to make a carved image and a metal image. And those images that represent Yahweh are then being set up in the house of the son of this woman. And those images that represent Yahweh are then set up in secret by a man whose name is Yahweh's incomparable.

How do you work all that out? What a mess. And look at verse 5. We get some more information about Micah. Our version tells us that he has set up a shrine. Literally, he's set up a house of God.

[11 : 35] Now we already know he's got a carved image and a metal image in it. But now we're told that he has an ephod and some household gods as well. He's got his own priest and one of his own sons installed as a priest.

Friends, here is all the paraphernalia of syncretism and idolatry. Prohibited images, unauthorized location for a house of God, seemingly dedicated to God by a man who bears the Lord's name.

However, the name for his house of God uses the generic name of God, not Yahweh. It uses a name that could be applied to any deity. Everything here breaks God's law.

It is all screwed up. Anarchy is existing in Israel. Idolatry is. And we cannot help asking, what has Israel come to?

What is going on here and where will this end? Well, verse 6 tells us. The refrain that characterizes these final chapters tells us. Such things happen in a world where there's no king over Israel.

[12 : 34] Such things happen in a world where everyone acts like Samson. Where everyone does what is right in their own eyes. And if such things happen in such a world, what else might be in store?

Well, friends, let me warn you that it will only get worse. Read on. Between now and next week. Our chapters today only open the door on some of the worst things.

Our chapter next week will open the floodgates. And it will get worse. Anyway, let's press on with our chapters for this week. Look at verses 7 to 12. I'm going to take a fairly quick run through this, but stick with me.

There's a shift in focus. We hone in on a young Levite. The tribe of Levite is the priestly tribe. This young Levite resides in Judah. Now, where most Israelites, you see, were allotted a portion of the promised land, Levites were not.

They were not allotted any land. Anyway, in verse 8, this Levite leaves Bethlehem in Judah and he searches for some other place to stay. Perhaps, I think, some place to minister.

[13 : 39] In his search, he comes to Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim. And Micah questions him. And the Levite says, I'm after some place to stay. Micah offers him a place to stay and be a priest.

Apparently, Micah then replaces the son that he'd appointed just previously, ousts his son and puts this Levite in place. This young Levite then almost takes the place of his son in another way because he becomes like one of his sons.

And Micah, you can imagine, thinks he's got it made. He's got his own house of God. He's got his own images of God and religious paraphernalia. He's got a priest of the right tribe, a Levite.

And he thinks he's got God in his pocket. Look at verse 13. And Micah said, now I know that the Lord will be good to me since this Levite has become my priest. I mean, I don't know where he gets all of that from because he's broken so many laws getting there, hasn't he?

But let's not forget this man overseeing this. This man who's got this house of God with this Levite priest, with all this idolatrous stuff, is a man who stole money from his mum.

[14 : 45] What's more, he's got a Levite in charge who's taken the job for money, which is not what Levites should be doing. Moreover, he presumably, the Levite had presumably seen the contents of what was in the house of God and knew it to be illegitimate.

Now look at chapter 18, verse 1. We get the abbreviated refrain that characterizes these chapters. We're told in those days Israel had no king. In other words, in those days there was no restraint.

And this is what happens when you get no restraint. And with that said, the focus shifts. It alights on Samson's tribe. You see, Samson was from the tribe of Dan. And now we focus in on a group of Danites.

They've got some similarities with the young Levite. They too are looking for a place, a place where they might settle. Presumably, they haven't yet had their allotment of land. They haven't got it yet.

And they're seeking to change their situation. Anyway, in verse 2, they send five leading men on an exploratory mission to spy out the land and to explore it.

[15 : 44] And eventually they arrive in the hill country of Ephraim and stop right at the household of Micah. And they recognize the voice of a young Levite. I suspect what that means is they recognize his southern accent. Okay?

I don't think they recognized him in particular, but perhaps his language. So they ask after his story in the second half of verse 3. And then they ask, and he tells them verse 4.

Then they ask him to inquire of God in verse 5. Now, we're not told anything about what the young Levite does. He offers no prayer. He does nothing with the cult paraphernalia.

He doesn't investigate the proposal. Our version just says that the journey will meet with the Lord's approval. Actually, the literal says that the matter is in front of the Lord. It doesn't say approval or not approval.

So the Danites leave with all of that. And they press on with their explorations. And in verse 7, they come to Laish. Laish is noted for being a group of people living carefree and prosperous lives with apparently no allies and no enemies.

[16 : 51] They're not part of any coalition, nor are they prepared for any attack. They're just people living at peace. The scouts return home in verse 8. The spies are asked for a report.

They say to their fellow Danites, let's go for it. Their judgment is that God has indeed gone before them and that he's put the land into their hands. And so in verse 11, 600 Danites set off, armed for battle.

In verse 13, they come to Micah's house. The five earliest spies remember what they saw in their last visit. And so they go to the house of the young Levite in verse 15.

There are 600 men with them. OK, it's quite an army. They're armed for battle, standing at the entrance of the gate. And the five spies greet the young Levite.

And in verse 18, they go into Micah's house to steal the image, the ephod, the household gods, the carved image and so on. And the Levite questions them in verse 18. He says, understandably, what are you doing?

[17 : 51] The conversation is vivid and full of repetition. But the young Levite has 600 armed men standing in front of him. Who's he going to argue with?

Anyway, he puts forward the question, verse 18. What are you doing? They tell him literally to put a hand upon his mouth and to come with them. So, you know, shut up, come. They remind the man who had earlier been looking for a place, this young Levite.

But it's much better to serve a tribe as a priest than a single man's household. So, you know, do you want a better position? Come with us.

We'll give you lots of people, not just one man. And this young man's ambition has been tapped into. In verse 20, it says it was good to his heart. So he steals the ephod, the household gods, the carved image.

He apparently leaves the metal image behind, perhaps a little bit left for Micah. And then he goes with them. Perhaps in the expectation that they will have someone pursuing them, they put their valued things in front of them.

[18 : 55] Why? You put everything in front of you. Normally, the flocks and the herds and the kids and so on, they'd follow after in case you met an enemy. But no, they put them in front of them because they expect the enemy is coming from behind them.

That they're going to be chased by Micah and his men. And sure enough, verse 22, Micah catches up with them along with his mates. They overtake the Danites. They confront them. There's a bit of sort of argy-bargy that ensues and the discussion is revealing.

You see, I want you to think about this for a moment. What does a true God do? A true God carries his people, doesn't he? And can you see what's going on here?

Here we have God's people arguing about illegitimate young priests and blocks of metal and religious paraphernalia that they're carrying about. This is how far Israel has deteriorated.

God himself is totally disregarded by this flock of men. What matters is things you can steal and carry around. What does not matter is God who can carry his people.

[19 : 59] Anyway, in verse 25, the Danites say, don't argue with us, literally. Don't lift your voice with us. Then they threaten. They say that if shouting and arguing continue, the risk is that some of the bitter in spirit men might retaliate and some lives might be lost.

Micah realizes he's beaten, verse 26. And in a world where everyone does what is right in their own eyes, might prevails. And Micah turns tail and he goes home.

And that brings us to verse 27. Now, I need to tell you that the people of Laish are never described in terms of ethnicity. They are not described as Canaanites, Amorites, Perizzites, Philistines or anyone else.

They're simply described as a group of people at peace, secure. That does not mean that the actions of the Danites is not legitimate. It just poses the question.

And given that everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, the question is a moot one. Is what the Danites do a legal act or not?

[21 : 01] Is it legitimate? And the question is only reinforced by verse 28. They appear not to belong to anyone. No one comes to their rescue because they are distant. They have no relational links with anyone else.

Anyway, the whole thing closes with the naming of the city in verse 29. It's named after the ancestor of the tribe. Dan. However, you preserve the previous name as though we are being reminded of the previous people there.

And then there's a final reflection in verses 30 to 31. In verse 30, we return to the stolen cultic objects. And finally, we're told the name of the Levite. Can you see it there?

Here's Jonathan. Son of Gershom. Son of Manasseh. Or you might read. Jonathan. And I think this is probably the right reading. The son of Gershom. The son of Moses.

Then we are told that he and his sons were priests from the tribe of Dan until the people went into exile. And then we're told that the idol remains in use all the time that the house of God was based in Shiloh.

[22 : 06] And the point's very strong. The northern sanctuary, that is where these tribes are from, had its roots in goods stolen numerous times by unscrupulous people who did what was good in their own eyes.

There was some money that possibly was death money tied to the death of the last judge. Micah failed to honor his mother. He stole her money. That money was used for an idol.

Micah took a legitimate priestly lad and sewed him into an idolatrous system. That priest colluded with its theft again for the sake of career development. It was then installed in a city that was unquestionably, that probably, that had a questionable right to exist in Israel.

No one in the whole story acted rightly. Can you see anyone who did right in this story? Anyone? The people involved are simply those who do what is right in their own eyes.

And it is not surprising that such people end up in exile. Prince, what do we make of this? What does God want us to take home from this story? Well, there are lots of ways to go, but I want to alight on the stress of the passage itself.

[23 : 16] Do you remember chapter 17, verse 6? Our narrator told us, In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Then in chapter 18, verse 1, we're reminded, In those days Israel had no king.

The implicit view is that kings will solve the problem of idolatry and anarchy that we see here. And friends, let me tell you, kings should have solved the problem.

If the kings of Israel were like the kings that were outlined in Deuteronomy 17, kings of Israel would have solved the problem. But history tells us that they didn't solve the problem.

Just listen to some snippets from 2 Kings 17. We're told about the end of this northern kingdom where Dan is based, along with its temple. And we're told that the king of Assyria came under the hand of God and he carted them off into exile.

And we're told this. All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

[24 : 19] They worshipped other gods and followed the practices of the nations that the Lord had driven out before them, as well as the practices of the kings that the kings of Israel had introduced. The Israelites secretly did things against the Lord their God that were not right.

From watchtower to fortified city, they built themselves high places in all of their towns. They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree.

At every high place, they burned incense as the nations whom the Lord had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that aroused the Lord's anger. We're only left then with the tribe of Judah, aren't we?

And their brothers, the Simeonites. But then we're also told. Even Judah didn't keep the commands of the Lord their God. They followed the practices that Israel had introduced.

And therefore, the Lord rejected all the people of Israel. He afflicted them and he gave them into the hands of plunderers until he thrust them out of his presence.

[25 : 27] Friends, the book of Kings are full of references to the kings of Israel. And the constant refrain is overwhelming. They did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

It's said of David as far back as 2 Samuel 12 verse 9. And it's said of king after king in 1 and 2 kings until you get to the last of them.

Look at Zedekiah in 2 kings 24 verse 19. And the end result is that God does what he said. He thrust them out of his presence and he cast them into exile. 2 kings 24 verse 20.

Friends, the solution to humans doing what is right in their own eyes is not found in the kings of Israel and Judah. For they are made of the same stuff as Adam and Israel.

But there is a glimmer of hope. And it can be found in the echoes of Samuel's story as the books of Samuel opened. Do you remember how the books of Samuel opened? You see, Samson's story tells us of a certain man who had a barren wife.

[26 : 32] So to the books of Samuel, they open with virtually the same words as the story of Samson. But in the books of Samuel, this barren woman produces another dedicated child.

And this dedicated child grows into a judge and a prophet who will anoint a young shepherd boy who will become king. And as I've already said, David was not perfect.

However, through him, God promised that another would come. And this king would deal with the problem of everyone doing what is right in their own eyes. He will live and rule as humans and kings were meant to live.

And he will deal with sin once and for all. He will establish the reign of God on earth. He will enable the forgiveness of sins. And because of King Jesus, God's spirit will be poured out on all of those who believe in him.

A thing that we're remembering today, because today is Pentecost. And he will begin that process of sanctification and transformation on the people of God. By the work of the spirit.

[27 : 39] And eventually they will be like him. For they will see him as he is. And be in his presence. Friends, do not trust any other. This king is the only hope for a world bent on doing what is right in their own eyes.

And friends, we are seeing a world where this is repeated day after day after day after day, isn't it? We hear it in the news every day. There's only one king who can sort this out.

So let us pray for him to touch people's lives. Or let us pray for him to come. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, we think of our world where everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes. We pray for our world, Father.

We pray that you turn the people of our world to the Lord Jesus. Father, we also pray that you might bring the Lord Jesus.

[28 : 52] So that you might end this situation where people are bent on doing what is right in their own eyes. Rather than what is right in your eyes. And Father, we pray these things in the name of Jesus.

Amen.