

"ISRAEL HITS ROCK BOTTOM"¹

Judges 17:1-21:25

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The Levite, the Danites, and Idols (17:1–18:31)

As bad as the situation in Israel was by the time of the Samson story, it nonetheless continues to get worse until, here in the final chapters, Israel hits the bottom. In 17:1–13 Micah (not the same man as the prophet Micah), an Israelite from the tribe of Ephraim, receives some silver from his mother (silver he had stolen from her and then given back), with which he makes an idol, adding it to his shrine that contains other idols and an ephod. Along comes a young Levite, apparently with no means of support, and Micah persuades him to stay and become his priest to lead in worshipping his household idols. Meanwhile, the tribe of Dan had been unable (or unwilling) to drive out the Amorites from their allotted territory (Judg. 1:34). So in Judges 18:1–31 they send scouts up north to find an easier area to possess, ignoring the tribal boundaries that Moses and Joshua had assigned. The scouts discover a city called Laish that looks prosperous and yet defenseless. So the tribe of Dan migrates north, out of their inherited portion of the Promised Land, to a new area that would be easier to conquer. Along the way they come across Micah and his pagan priest (from the tribe of Levi). They make a higher offer to the priest, and he decides to join the tribe of Dan to be their priest. He and the Danites steal the idols from Micah and take these pagan gods with them to their new home. Judges 18:30–31 notes that the tribe of Dan continued to serve these gods until they were exiled from the land. So the theological situation portrayed in this story is grim. Israelites are worshipping idols instead of the Lord, and Levitical priests are assisting. One of the tribes of Israel abandons their inherited allotment from God and moves to a new area. A Levite priest sells out to the highest bidder and steals some idols from another Israelite, taking them along with him for his new tribe to worship. This is a long way from Deuteronomy and Joshua.

Sodom and Gomorrah Revisited (19:1–30)

Yet things continue to get even worse. Another Levite travels from Judah to recover his runaway concubine (a secondary wife) (19:1–3). After partying for several days with the woman's father, the Levite, getting a late start in the day, takes his concubine and heads for home. As it gets late in the evening he bypasses a city of Jebusites and pushes on to the city of Gibeah in Benjamin, in order to spend the night in an Israelite town (19:4–15). An old man from Ephraim puts him up for the night, but a crowd from the city surrounds the house and demands that the Levite visitor be given to them for sexual activities (19:16–22). Recall that this is very similar to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, except that Gibeah is an Israelite city and Sodom and Gomorrah were Canaanite cities. It was sinful behavior such as Sodom and Gomorrah illustrated that led to God's judgment on the Canaanites carried out in the conquest. So this story in Judges 19 demonstrates in vivid fashion that Israel has not only failed to drive out the Canaanites from the land, but they have become just like the Canaanites themselves. The grim story continues. The callous Levite throws his newly recovered concubine out to the crowd,



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who abuses her throughout the night, dumping her back on the doorway in the morning after they are finished. Apparently she is now dead. The furious Levite cuts her up into twelve pieces and sends a piece to each tribe in Israel, calling for vengeance on the tribe of Benjamin (19:21–30).

Killing one another (20:1–21:25)

The other tribes of Israel descend on Benjamin and virtually destroy the entire tribe (just like they were supposed to do to the Canaanites, but didn't) (20:1–48). In Judges 21 the people of Israel then feel remorse for the loss of Benjamin, but since they have taken an oath (another dumb oath) not to intermarry with the Benjaminites, they do not see any way to help re-establish that decimated tribe. Eventually they concoct a way for the Benjaminites to steal wives from a worship festival in Shiloh (ironically a community that was apparently worshiping the Lord properly). The book of Judges then ends with the repeated phrase that points to the governing chaos: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (18:1; 19:1; 21:25 NRSV). So the end of Judges is disastrous for Israel. By the end of the book they are violating God's law and their covenant with him (Deuteronomy) in ways unimaginable. They are worshiping idols, and the Levites are leading them in this. They have become corrupt morally, sinking to the despised depths of the wretched Canaanite cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. They have ceased struggling to drive out the Canaanites and instead are becoming like the Canaanites. Finally, the Israelites turn on one another and annihilate one of their own tribes.

So What? Applying Judges to Our Lives Today

Judges illustrates for us quite graphically the tragic consequences of sin. Once people abandon worshiping God they usually quickly embrace the corrupt morals of their surrounding culture and spiral down morally and theologically until they hit the bottom with a big splash. The most amazing thing about the book of Judges is that the Bible does not end here. That is, after reading Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, one is surprised that the terrible sin of Israel in Judges does not simply bring an end to the story—God should destroy them and that's that. We get a good picture of how deep God's grace and mercy really are as we read on and realize that in spite of their terrible sin, God will send them real deliverers (Samuel, David, and ultimately Christ). Another lesson to be learned is from the tragic story of Samson. Here was a man given tremendous potential and tremendous opportunity to do great things. Yet Samson was selfish and self-centered, concerned only with fulfilling his personal pleasure. Thus he squandered his great potential and became a tragic figure (a bum, if we are honest). Thus Samson becomes a negative model for us, filled with character traits for us to avoid.