

“Here Comes the Judge!” - A Study on the Old Testament Book of Judges
Session 9 November 18, 2020
The Aftermath Judges 17 - 21

Session 8 Recap

In Session 8, we looked at the final four (3 minor, 1 major) judges in this Old Testament book. Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon – the three minor judges – followed the rule of Jephthah, a period that did not end with peace. Ibzan from Bethlehem used marriages with his sons and daughters to create a power network for his family. This was a hint to the downfall of the leadership of the judges. Ibzan ruled for seven years. Elon, the Zebulunite, followed Ibzan’s reign for a total of ten years. Very little is known about his rule as Old Testament judge. Abdon followed the reign of Elon, for a total of eight years. Like Ibzan, Abdon used his family’s ties to create a power base for his family, especially his sons and grandsons. Abdon’s desire was to become king over the Israelite tribes. Finally, the last major judge was Samson. Samson was chosen before birth to be judge and to be raised to follow the vows of a Nazirite – no cutting his hair, no partaking of items from the grape vine, and no touching of dead animals/people. While the intent for Samson was to live a holy life, he violated two of the vows – dead animals and grape products – early on in his life. Samson had a love-hate relationship with the Philistines, with many of his womanizing temptations coming from this people group. His ultimate destruction was instituted by a woman, Delilah, who revealed his final vow to the Philistines, his hair. Even though Samson’s strength came from God’s presence in his life, this led to capture by the Philistines. In a final act of turning to God for strength, Samson was able to bring down the temple of Dagon (Philistine chief god), killing thousands of Philistines and himself. This left the tribes of Israel with no peace.

The Aftermath: 2 Appendixes to Judges

Judges 17-18, 19-21

Samson was the last in a long line of judges for the tribes of Israel. As chaos continued throughout the tribes, these last two “appendixes” to the Old Testament book gives us a glimpse of the day to day life within the tribes. While the previous focus was on the “judges”, these final five chapters show in detail what it meant for them to “do evil in the sight of the Lord”, with gruesome detail. The ultimate picture shown was a desperate need for leadership for all the tribes!

Aftermath Part One

Judges 17 – 18

The first appendix to the Old Testament book of Judges focuses on the religious dimensions of Israel's decline. Most of the story revolves around the man of Ephraim named Micah. (Micah serves as a "model" of all individuals in the tribes of Israel.) We enter a story that has already unfolded. Micah's mother had 1,100 pieces of silver stolen from her. (Interesting that this is the same amount Delilah received for manipulating Samson.) In response, she speaks a curse on whoever took them. The culprit is her own son, Micah. Micah confesses to her mother, and in return she "blesses him". From the outset, we see that Micah has some questionable morals, but not completely bad because of his willingness to return the money. In Hebrew, Micah's name means, "Who is like the Lord?" His name implies God is above all, yet Micah's next actions go against this meaning in his name.

Micah's mother, once the silver is returned, dedicates the silver to the Lord – by making a graven and molten image and placing it in the home of Micah. This act goes against the 2nd Commandment found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 4, which states "no one should make an image of Him," specifically for the act of worship. A graven/molten image would pale in comparison to the true nature of God. An image would also seek to reveal a specific "characteristic" of God. To create such an image shows that a human would be willing to worship a specific part of God or his character, instead of submitting one's own will to the full God! Notice, too, that the mother only used 200 pieces of the silver, not the whole amount to make the image!

Micah made a shrine with the idol (trying to replace Shiloh again as a worship center), made an ephod and household idols, and then consecrates his own son, that he could serve as a priest. (Remember, priests came out of the tribe of Levi – not just choosing someone.) Micah was making "religion" and "worship" convenient for him, following his own personal preference.

All these actions represent a larger scale picture of what was taking place in the tribes of Israel. Verse 6 sums it up the best, "every man did what was right in his own eyes." The same words will be repeated in chapter 21. This picture is what it is like when a society does whatever they see as appropriate, rather than following God. This is a religion of "preference", rather than a religion of faith. It is an easy religion, but not one that will bring blessing or rescue.

A new character, a Levite, is introduced to the story. We are told he was from Bethlehem in Judah but traveling to find another place to stay. This would be extremely unusual for a Levite priest, who often stayed in their hometown to lead worship. The Levite travels to Ephraim and encounters Micah and his homemade shrine. Micah sees the opportunity to legitimize his home place of worship, and offers silver, clothes, and additional expenses to be Micah's personal priest. The Levite sold his priestly duty for a small sum of money, like how the Israelites had sold themselves off to immoral behavior. Micah now sees his shrine as "legitimate", but his true character is revealed – "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me..." While Micah revealed the religious downfall of the Israelites, the Levite represents the religious downfall of the sacred line of priests.

The story shifts to the plight of the tribes of Dan. In Joshua 19, the Danites had been assigned land to live in, but their lack of faith in God led the Amorites to force them from this land, destined to live as nomads in the hill country. The Danites were searching for land in the Northern territory to call home. The tribe sent out 5 spies to scope the land in the hill country of Ephraim when they come across the house of Micah. Hearing the voice of the Levite priest, they first ask why he is leading worship in such a place (recognizing the improper nature of it), but then ask him to seek God's counsel if they are heading in the right direction. The Levite confirms their journey, giving God's approval.

The five spies continue to the town of Laish. Upon observation, the spies see that the security for the city is limited, and no outside connection seems to be present. They return to their brothers and state this is the land we are supposed to inhabit. Notice that there is no mention of God's leadership or blessing guiding them into battle. Three crucial elements are missing, compared to previous conquests. (1) There was no oracle from God directly or through a messenger to take the land. Yes, they stopped at the shrine in Micah's home, but this is not legitimate in God's eyes. The oracle he pronounced in Hebrew ("The mission you are on is under the eye of the Lord.") could be interpreted in two ways. In their eyes, it was enough. (2) In previous battles/conquests in holy war, the strength and aggression were always on the side of the Israelites' opponents. In this case, the Danites had the strength and they were the aggressor. (3) Previous conquering during "holy war" prevented the conquerors from dwelling in the city that was destroyed or keeping any plunder for themselves. The resources/money was supposed to be dedicated to the Lord. The Danites do the exact opposite by

rebuilding the city, using the resources (even the items stolen from the false shrine in Micah's home) to benefit themselves.

As a part of this conquest, the soldiers of Dan stop at the home of Micah (encouraged by the five spies). The spies enter his home/shrine, while the rest remain watch outside, taking the items of value from the place of worship, including the graven idols and the ephod. The soldiers also took Micah's personal priest! He sold his priestly services to the stronger, higher bidder – the tribe of Dan. (This again reflects the downfall of the spiritual walk of the tribes.) Micah's confrontation with the tribe of Dan after they depart is very revealing. After questioning Micah and his supporters for coming upon them, Micah responds, "You have taken away *my gods* which I have made, and the priest..." Micah brought no focus on God, instead himself. Unfortunately, the tribe of Dan was doing the same.

The actions of the tribe of Dan were not right in the sight of the Lord either. While God had told the tribes earlier to clean out and destroy certain cities because of their idolatry and wickedness, Laish was not one of those cities. The Dan ventured outside their assigned land – land that God had intended for them – and carried their violence upon an unassuming, peaceful people. Instead of destroying a city because of its idolatry, the Danites were the one carrying the idols with them! The tribe changes the city name from Laish to Dan, even though it is not in the land designated to the Danites, so not rightfully changed. Finally, they use the idols to establish a worship center there. This goes against the desires of God, who appointed Shiloh as the place of worship. (One final note, we are finally given the name of the Levite priest – Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh. Jonathan is a direct descendant of Moses! How the Mosaic lineage has fallen.)

Aftermath Part Two

Judges 19 – 21

The second appendix to the Old Testament book of Judges focuses on the social dimensions of Israel's disintegration. Tribes fight against tribes. Lack of leadership is prevalent. The societal place of women, who were once seen as leaders – like Deborah, Jael, and Achsah – are now only seen as pieces of property. The individual stories we see in the final three chapters are a microcosm of the larger downfall taking place among the tribes.

Chapter 19 begins with the statement, “Now it came about in those days, when there was no king in Israel...” This statement points to the greater need of leadership among the tribes, appointed by God. Another Levite, this time traveling in the opposite direction (from Ephraim to Bethlehem), takes a concubine for himself. (In that time, a concubine had less privileges than a wife – providing sexual favors, offspring, and contributing to his estate. Most of the time, she did not have rights to an inheritance.) The woman left the Levite priest to return to her home. Two reasons are debated in biblical circles for why – (1) to commit adultery, or (2) he angered her. Whichever the reason, she was gone for four months. (To leave a husband was “impermissible” for brides or concubines during that time.) The fact that it took the Levite four months to seek her out says something about their relationship and his morals. Verse three says the Levite man “spoke tenderly to her”, echoing the exact words of Shechem to Dinah in Genesis 34 (where the man was in the wrong). After a few days in the home of her father, the Levite prepares to leave with the woman. The Levite is persuaded to stay two more nights before departure, with the father-in-law begging for another night.

The father-in-law went above and beyond in providing the hospitality required by law. His desire for the Levite to stay may have been personal – spiritually or politically – but they eventually depart. Notice, the desire of the woman is not taken into consideration. As they approach the town of Jebus (Jerusalem), it becomes late and the servant desires to stop in the city of the Jebusites. The Levite strikes this request down, saying they will not stay in a “foreigners” town (it should have been possessed by the tribe of Benjamin, but they failed to drive the Canaanites out). Instead they continue towards Gibeah or Ramah. They arrive in Gibeah as the sun sets, a town possessed by the tribe of Benjamin.

From the outset, things in the city do not seem right. There was no welcome party as the guests arrived. No one embraced the travelers to take them in initially. Only a man from Ephraim (not from the tribe of Benjamin) welcomes them into his home. His ultimate desire is for them NOT to stay in the court square. As they were eating, “worthless fellows” from the city come to the Ephraimite man’s home, demanding the “man” (Levite) to be presented to them so they can rape him. The older man refuses to give in. He protests making two claims: (1) the act that you intend is vile, and (2) this would violate the hospitality

code that has been offered. Instead, in a vial act, he offers his daughter and the Levite's concubine instead (treating women as property). The "wicked men" refused, but in turn, the Levite strikes his concubine and throws her out to the crowd. (The actions in Gibeah reflect the actions taken in Sodom in Genesis 19.)

As the day dawns, the woman is released, and she passed out at the doorway of the Ephraimite. One would expect the Levite to worry all night, but verse 27 says, "When her master arose in the morning..." In the morning, instead of tending to her injuries/weakness, he responds, "Get up and let us go." When she cannot get up, he places her on his donkey, and they return to his home in Ephraim. When he arrives home, seething from the encounter in Gibeah, the Levite takes his concubine and cuts her into twelve pieces, sending each piece throughout the tribes of Israel as a "call for action". (Scholars debate whether the concubine was alive or dead based on the previous verse, but the actions by the Levite are appalling either way.) The tribes are in outrage over the actions and demand a response. (Ironically, the Levite man was just as guilty for the concubine's death as the "wicked men" in Gibeah. He does not want recompense for his concubine, just vengeance on the men of Gibeah for how they treated "him".

The "call for action" led 400,000 men to gather at Mizpah (a city we were introduced to in the story of Jephthah, and the "sacrifice" of his daughter – not a good sign...). The description is that all the tribes, "from Dan to Beersheba" gathered. This designation was often used to talk about the entirety of Israel – with Dan being the farthest North and Beersheba the farthest South. For the first time since Othniel, the tribes are "united" – against one of their own tribes. The Levite recounted the story, with a few changes, of what happened in the town of Benjamin. (He said the men were going to "kill" him, and that they killed his concubine instead. He also said the "men of Gibeah", instead of SOME wicked men. He also failed to share that he was the one who gave her over to them.) No one is found "righteous" in this story.

The tribes rise up to lay siege on Gibeah for their actions. All the tribes are united in this call. Upon arriving at the city with thousands, they seek the city to answer the charges. The soldiers then demand that those who were guilty to be handed over to the tribes. The Benjamite city refuses. The tribe of Benjamin gathers 26,700 men to fight against the rest of the tribes – a true civil war. Family

and tribe first (“family and country first”), the tribe of Benjamin fight to protect the residents of Gibeah (whether they knew the full story or not).

The soldiers go to Bethel to seek how the battle should go, and the response (as was in Judges 1) is that “Judah should go first.” In the first stage of the battle, the Benjamites are victorious, killing 22,000 men. (Remember, the tribe of Benjamin was settled in the hill country. They had the “higher ground”, and the passages up to them would prevent large masses of soldiers.) After the first battle, they return to God asking if they should continue (“crying to the Lord” as in the Judges’ cycle). “Yes” is the response, but victory is not promised. The second day is no different, this time 18,000 of the Israelite soldiers fall. The soldiers again return to God, weeping as before. This time the high priest, Phinehas, seeks the Lord’s counsel. (This is the only time in the entire book of Judges that the ark of the covenant is mentioned. Reveals the lack of spiritual focus for the nation as a whole! Phinehas is also the high priest during the time of Joshua. With the location of the ark in Bethel, and Phinehas as chief priest, some scholars believe this event happened in the early days of the time of the Judges.) This time, the Lord’s response, “Go up and this time I will deliver them into your hand.”

This time, the soldiers set up an ambush on the tribe of Benjamin. They “flee” to draw the Benjamite soldiers away from their strong hold and attack them with full force when they reveal themselves. This time the tribes of Israel were victorious, killing 25,100 men of Benjamin. The battle was a bloodbath. The tribes of Israel kill all but 600 men of Benjamin, and then they turn their swords on their cities as well, killing all the rest of the men, women, children, and animals. War turns into genocide. The surviving 600 fled to the wilderness near the rock of Rimmon. The question that remains is will an entire tribe of Israel be wiped off the face of the earth.

The tribes of Mizpah had promised not to marry any of their daughters to a son of Benjamin. (Another foolish vow...) Knowing this would result in the eventual death of an entire tribe, the tribes gathered turn to the Lord. Their question shows their ignorance, “Why has this come about in Israel, that one tribe would be missing?” (The answer can be found if they look in the mirror.) They desired to put the blame on God instead. The tribes burn an offering to God but depend on their response instead. Another vow (!) stated that any tribe/city that did not lend their support would be killed. The city of Jabesh-gilead had not sent

any troop support. So, the tribes turn their wrath on them, killing all the men, while also killing all the women who were not virgins. Among the city, 400 virgins are gathered and taken to marry off to the remnant of Benjamin, a “sign of peace” with the tribe. Tribal loyalties were the ultimate focus, instead of God’s guidance.

Two hundred Benjamite men were still without wives. The “solve” this problem, the tribes encouraged the remaining men of Benjamin to lay in wait outside of Shiloh at their next vineyard festival. When the women of Shiloh come into the vineyard, go snatch your wife and take them back to the land of Benjamin. Since the “wives” were not “given” by their fathers, they would not be cursed for allowing their daughters to marry men from Benjamin. Ironic that a uniting of tribes to “vindicate” the death of a woman, eventually led to the same council giving permission to steal “women” from a vineyard.

The final verse is a repeat of what was stated in Judges 17:6, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” The tribes of Israel went from being led by God into the Promised Land, to a collection of tribes with no moral compass or spiritual discipline at all. Their focus was solely on themselves. Human desire and corruption had replaced God’s ultimate desire for his people – to turn to Him. The need for a king, should be replaced by a need for the KING! God was still at work!

Questions to Reflect On...

While the tribes of Israel were seeking “something”, the truth is that they could have had “everything” if they turned to God. How is it liberating to have Jesus as your “everything”? What difference does this make in how you treat others – family, coworkers, and friends?

The tribes of Israel, especially Benjamin, put “family/people/tribe” before God? How does this resonate in your life? Do you battle this challenge too? How does knowing Christ’s forgiveness shape this challenge?

What one lesson do you take away from our study of the book of Judges? How can you apply that lesson to your daily life?

New Study during the Season of Advent...

“Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas”

by Adam Hamilton

A Five Week Study on the titles/names used in the New Testament stories given to Jesus at birth, and how they reveal the deep truths about who He is and what His coming means.

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*****Copies of the book can be ordered on Amazon or Cokesbury. Highly recommended for this study!*****