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Hollow Religion
Messes, Choices, Faithful God Series
Judges 17 and 18
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Have you ever woken up one day and found yourself in a place where you just think, “How in the world did I get here?” Has there ever been a time in your life where you found yourself in a spot and you just think, “How did I end up in this spot?” Or maybe even worse, what if, right now, you are headed to that place, and you don't even know it? We've been in a study in the book of Judges, and we're coming near the end. We're almost to the close, and the structure of the book of Judges is pretty interesting. In the first part of the book, you have chapters 1 and 2, that basically give these two different introductions. And then you start to find the cycle of judges that goes in chronological order. One story after another, you get this large view of these warriors, these judges, that were supposed to come in and free their people from the cycle of sin.

And then you get to chapter 17, and from chapter 17 to the end of the book, you get two stories that act as a closing to the book of Judges. But what's interesting is, there are no judges mentioned in these final two stories. It's also interesting that it's not chronological. The events that take place in the last parts of this book are likely events that took place early on in the book of Judges, early on in the story, but the author puts them here to make a point. So, today, we're going to be looking at chapter 17 and chapter 18. And in these chapters, it may be helpful to think of it this way—as maybe one movie that you would watch, but you're going to have three main scene cuts, and each scene cut is going to have different characters from different places. But their lives are all going to interact at some point together in this story. We've got a lot of ground to cover. So, let's giddy-up; let's go. Chapter 17, Verse 1 says:

There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. 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.” 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.” 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 melted image. And it was in the house of Micah. 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. In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did what was right in his own eyes. (*ESV, Judges 17:1-6)

Now we've been looking at Judges from kind of a 30,000-foot flyover, but now we get into the story and start to go into it at ground level—the day-to-day life of the ordinary people in Israel and how their lives were. We're working out what they were doing, and we find already this dysfunctional family, right? We see this guy that goes, and he steals from his mom. Who steals

from their mom, right? He's probably thinking this is like taking candy from a baby, which also makes me think, "Who takes candy from babies?" Probably Micah, right? This guy! It's ironic that his name Micah actually means, *who is like the Lord*. Obviously, not this dude! And this isn't the Micah that is a prophet in the book of the Bible, later in the Old Testament. This is a different guy. But he steals 1,100 pieces of silver from his mom. This is no small amount. Later, we'll find that somebody makes an annual salary of 10 pieces of silver. This is 28 pounds of silver, and this is basically her life savings.

The other interesting thing to note, too, is in this time, people would live in clans. So they would be divided up into tribes and God had given these tribes different areas in the Israel/Canaan area, each a region. They would move into these, but you don't have neighborhoods with grids and streets and houses on every block. So, as they would move in, they would move in as a family group, and this clan could be up to three generations that would all live together. So think of aunts and uncles and cousins, nephews, nieces and brothers and sisters all in the same home together. And often it would kind of be like a little bit of a compound. They'd have a fence around it to keep the animals out, and also keep their animals in. They would have a house built that the animals could also be in. They would use it for the food storage and food preparation, and then several rooms within that home. And people would live in these different places.

So it doesn't surprise us that Micah may have heard his mom uttering this curse. Maybe she knew he had taken it, and she intentionally said it while he was there. Maybe she didn't know he had taken it; she just said it, but they were close enough where he heard it. Either way, he starts to get freaked out. Now it's not his guilty conscience that causes him to go back and tell his mom what he's done. Instead, he's worried about this curse. So he goes and he tells his mom, "**Hey, I took the money.**" And then what'd she say? "**Ah, blessed be my son.**" She utters this blessing. And look what it says, "**Blessed be my son, by the LORD,**" spelled in all caps. That's *Yahweh*, this personal term, this name for the God of Israel...Yahweh. So what did she do? "Well, my son restored the money to me, so I'm going to dedicate the money to Yahweh in the form of an idol, in the form of 200 pieces of silver." Now I believe that's less than she originally had, right? But that's 18% at least of it, because that's almost a good tip! And for God, that's probably good enough, right? So, we find already this family is starting to struggle with difficult things. And this is not that far out from them entering into the promised land and being given very specific instructions. In fact, just before the people entered into the land, Moses gathered them together and he gave them the laws of God. In fact, he had them bring some large stones, and put them into place as a place to remember. And they carved out on these stones, the law of God. And then Moses gathered the Levites together. And together, they gave this speech to Israel, and listen to what they said, Deuteronomy chapter 27, verse 15, the first thing in this speech:

"Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of craftsmen and set up in secret." And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen'. (*NASB)

I agree. That's not what God wants. Now, I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed but that seems pretty clear to me. If that wasn't clear enough, remember the other laws God had given them. Remember the 10 commandments? In Exodus chapter 20, verses 1-3, it said:

God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. (*NASB)

To which I could just hear this family say, “Wwwwait, we're not putting another God before You, Yahweh. We're worshiping You through an idol. See what we're doing here?” To which He would probably say, “Hey, read the next verse, verse 4: **You shall not make for yourself a carved image.** There's that part too, right? And then in the very end of this section, it gives us this key verse that shows us a scene cut is about to take place. It says, **“In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”**

So, in their own perspective, in the way “I” see it, from “my” point of view, according to “my” logic, this is how *I'm* going to operate.” Not to a set standard that God had given them. So what does that lead to? Well, Micah says, “Hey, I’ve got these idols. I'm going to build a little shrine in my home. In fact, I'm going to get an ephod.” What in the world is an ephod? An ephod was this fancy vest that the priest would wear in the tabernacle. It would be made with gold; it would have fine fabrics, there would be stones on it that represented the different tribes, and the priests would use this as they sacrificed in the temple. So, he makes his own. “I want to make my own for my own priest. In fact, I'm making my son my priest, even though my son is from Ephraim.” The only people that are supposed to be priests are those that are Levites, from the tribe of Levi. But it's convenient. “I'm going to just serve God in a way that's convenient to me.” And we get to the end (scene cut) and let's meet a new character. Verse 7:

Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there. 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. 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.” 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. And the Levite was content to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. And Micah ordained the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest.” (*ESV, 17:7-13)

So all of a sudden we meet a new character, a Levite, who comes walking through the hill country from the south, from Bethlehem up into Ephraim, and he comes across Micah's place. Micah asks him what he's doing there, which is a question we should be asking as well. Why is a Levite there? The reason is because he's out of work. Now listen, this is yet one more area where the children of Israel, the nation, has neglected what God has asked them to do. And he made it very clear. To help you see this, I want to take you to Deuteronomy again, except this time, I'm going to read from the New Living Translation, Deuteronomy Chapter 12.

Now just imagine you are the people that are really crossing the Jordan, and as you get in there, God's giving you very specific instructions, because this is a different land. The people living there don't serve your God. In fact, they are completely living their lives in a way that destroys everyone

around them, and it will continue to destroy them as a nation because their only chance to find life is through Yahweh, through following His ways. So before they get sent in they say, “Hey, you're going to encounter some things in there; be ready and follow this pattern so it will go well with you.” So, Deuteronomy, chapter 12, verse 1 says:

These are the decrees and regulations you must be careful to obey when you live in the land of the LORD, the God of your of your ancestors, is giving you. You must obey them as long as you live. (Verse 2): When you drive out the nations that live there, you must destroy all the places where they worship their gods—high on the mountains, up on the hills, and under every green tree. Break down their altars smash their sacred pillars. Burn their Asherah poles and cut down their carved idols. Completely erase the names of their gods! (I think He's pretty clear that He wants no idols. Verse 4:) Do not worship the LORD your God in the way these pagan peoples worship their gods. Rather, you must seek the LORD your God at the place of worship he himself will choose from among all the tribes—the place where his name will be honored.

Skipping to verse 12: **You must celebrate there in the presence of the LORD your God with your sons and daughters and all your servants. And remember to include the Levites who live in your towns, for they will receive no allotment of land among you. Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings just anywhere you like. You may do so only at the place the LORD will choose within one of your tribal territories. There you must offer your burnt offerings and do everything I command you.**

And I'm skipping on to verse 19. **And be very careful never to neglect the Levites as long as you live in your land.**

Skipping to verse 29 at the end. **When the LORD your God goes ahead of you and destroys all the nations and you drive them out and live in their land, do not fall into the trap of following their customs and worshipping their gods. Do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations worship their gods? I want to follow their example.' You must not worship the LORD your God the way that other nations worship their gods, for they perform for their gods every detestable act that the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters as sacrifices to their gods. So be careful to obey all the commands I give you. You must not add anything to them or subtract anything from them. (*NLT, Deuteronomy 12:1...32)**

Pretty clear! One of the things he wanted the people to do, he told them, “Hey, I'm allotting all these different places before you go into the land of Canaan. But the Levites, they won't have an allotment of land. Yes, they'll have some cities and some farmland. But as tribes in the nation of Israel, your job is to take care of the Levites because they are going to be the ones that are taking care of the tabernacle of God's things. So I don't want you to neglect them. Don't forget them.” And yet all of a sudden we see this Levite traveling because he's out of work. The nation of Israel has neglected him. And so he falls into a trap. He meets Micah and Micah says, “Hey, what are the odds? I knew God loved what I'm doing. Along comes this priest and I can have him in my home temple now, right? I can just have him join in. This is totally providential.” He's assuming

from his own perspective that God is somehow blessing him. “God is validating my plans!” although Micah is not really seeking God's plans, so he wouldn't know any difference, would he?

The truth is this, God does use circumstances in our lives. But God, in His work through those circumstances, will never contradict His Word. As God works in the circumstances of your life, it will always be consistent with what you find in Scripture, and what He's trying to do. In the Old Testament when people heard God's speak to them, 1) they knew for sure that it was God speaking to them, and 2) they knew exactly what it was that He said. It was very clear. And yet we read through Scripture, and our problem often isn't that Scripture isn't clear in what we should do. God is very clear. It's more often the case that we just don't want to really listen to what's so clear in Scripture. It's that we have our own plans and sometimes Scripture doesn't really fit into my plans. Sometimes it plays itself out in this question a lot of people ask: “What is God's will for my life?” That's not a bad question. There's no wrong intention in asking that question. But sometimes when we ask this question, we put the emphasis and priority on the wrong side of that don't we? We don't seek to find what God's will is. We're seeking to find what is going to happen in my life. What is God's will for my life? Let's make me priority number one because God, I've got these plans. I'm thinking about doing this, this, and this; I'm hoping this happens. And we want God to just adjust to our plans and validate them and put a stamp on them, approve them and make them happen. But what if rather than asking that we ask this, “God what is Your will?” and then we adjust our life to His will? What if, as we're looking out trying to see what God has got ahead, we would look right now where we're at and see if we're actively living out the things He's asking us to do in Scripture rather than asking Him to validate our prayers and our plans and our priorities. God's perspective is so vital in understanding what He may be doing through the circumstances in our life, but we have to seek His will and His perspective.

Now this priest had an opportunity. He could have come into the spot and he could have had incredible courage and instead of, “Micah, what are you doing?” it could have been, “This is an abomination to God. Break down those idols and burn them. There is only one place to serve your God and worship Him. And God has set that up.” But instead, what does he do? He thinks, “He's tempting me with silver. I've got a place to live...he's covering my living. This is all good. I got clothes out of the deal.” So he melts into it. In your translation it may say he *agreed to live*; the ESV says he *was content to dwell*. I think that hits at the heart of it. “This is good; this is good; I'll stay here.” No courage! In fact, in verse 13 we find Micah's true perspective of what he's trying to do: “**Now I know that the Lord will prosper me.**” It's all about *me* and what *I* can get out of the deal. “I'm just trying to play my cards right with God. I've got a priest now too. I think God is going to be good with that.” We have that statement again that starts out in chapter 18, verse 1 that shows us there's a new scene. So, again, we cut scenes. We move now down south, a little farther west, to this area where the tribe of Dan is at. Chapter 18, verses 1-2:

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. 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. (ESV)

So we started out again with that statement: **In those days, there was no king in Israel...** yet again, the same thing. In fact, we're going to find that same statement used four times before the book of Judges comes to a close. We never find it in the beginning chapters of the book of Judges, although it's evident and true all throughout it. So what does the author mean from this? We're going to keep digging in to find out. We find this tribe of Dan is looking for another place to settle, so they send out five guys to go up and they start to head up north, and they happen to come through the hills of Ephraim to Micah's house. Now, it says in verse 1 that they were seeking for themselves an inheritance to dwell in, for until then no inheritance was among them, for the tribes of Israel had fallen to them. So it seems like they're sitting there waiting for this inheritance that God had promised, this land portioned for them. But that's not the case. God had already given them this land. The book of Joshua describes how each tribe will have a specific location. As we get into the very first chapter of Judges, we find that some of those tribes go in and start taking that land over, and they would drive the people out of the land and take possession of the place that God had for them. But then, as we keep reading through Judges, chapter 1, we find that some people stopped doing that. Instead, they just start moving in next to those people. Instead, they just started taking the people that are there and making them their slaves. In fact, one tribe actually runs away from them because they're scared of the Canaanites that live there, and they get driven up into the hills (Judges, chapter 1, verse 34). You know which tribe that was? The tribe of Dan. So, there they are sitting scared, shaking in the hills, waiting and thinking maybe there's another place that we can go live, other than the spot that God had given us.

Now I'm also reminded of one other story that starts to kind of go into my mind. I remember another story where some other spies were scouting out the land. And they were going in, and there were 12 spies. Ten of them said, "We can't do this. There are too big people; there's no way we could take this." And two said, "No, God has given us this land." So, it starts to sit in the back of my mind. Verse 3:

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?" And he said to them, "This is how Micah dealt with me: he has hired me, and I have become his priest." And they said to him, "Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether the journey on which we are setting out will succeed." And the priest said to them, "Go in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of the LORD." 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. And when they came to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers said to them, "What do you report?" 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. 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." (*ESV, 3-10)

So, the tribe of Dan sent out five guys. They go up north, and as they go north, they happen to go by this house. Guess who lives there—Micah. As they're going by the house, they hear somebody speaking with an accent, maybe like if you were from Texas and you were headed up to North Dakota and you stopped by a gas station, and you heard somebody say, “Y'all know where I can find any sweet tea?” They're probably not from North Dakota, right? So they said, “What are you doing here? What's going on?” They talk to the Levite, and he starts to explain the story how Micah has taken him in, how he's a priest there now at his house. So then they asked a question, which is a really interesting question. They say, “**Inquire of God.**” Now notice their term of god that they use. It's a generic form of god. It's kind of the same type of term that would be used by the Canaanites when they refer to their gods. It seems like the people of Dan are starting to wonder as well. So he says, “Hey, inquire of your gods; see if it's going to work out for us.” And the Levite said, “Sure, yeah, go take it. It's going to be good.”

So they head up North to Laish, a hundred miles away from their original location where they set out. Now this area is not a huge area; they're expanding all the way up. And as they get up there, they see this place right at the foot of Mount Hermon. It's a beautiful area...easy pickings, peaceful people, right? This will be like taking candy from a baby. So they decide, hey, at this time there are tribes that have covenants with other people, and they look at this because as you would go into a land, if you could not find a spot, you would ask people that were living there if you could form a covenant, an agreement with them to live in that place. And each year you would take tribute to them. So you'd pay them for living in that place, and, in turn, you could live there. And then you would have the protection of them in that spot as well. Or, if you had a place that was established, you would form a covenant with the people that were around you—an agreement—and if somebody came in to attack you, they're probably going to attack them next. So you would work together to help build a defense system against anybody coming in.

But as the tribe of Dan gets up to Laish and those spies seek it out, they realize this is a beautiful area right at the foot of the mountain, with plenty of water flowing down, so there are great spots for our fields. These guys are sitting there, and they have everything they need. They've sat back so much that they don't have any form of protection other than Sidon, but Sidon is over the mountains, clear up at the coast. There's no way they could get there in time. So they think they could go there and they could take it. Now there are some people that think this was still another tribe of Israel's territory, that Dan was now stepping on the toes of another tribe. But I think as you read the Scripture, I think as you look through the accounts of where the land is divided up, I think this is outside of the allotted portions of places that God had given. I think the people of Dan are so scared to actually have the courage to follow God and actually move into the place that He has set for them that they go outside of where God gave them. They go for somewhere that's easy pickings.

Now this story isn't at all like the story you'll find at Numbers 13 of those spies, is it? Because they come back and they're saying, “No, there are huge people there. There's no way we can do this without God.” But the people of Dan are looking for the place they can go work without God, something that would be easy for them. And so a remnant of them decide that they're going to go out. They come back and they report everything to the people back in the South. They say this, “God has given it into our hands. Surely this is providential. Surely God will agree with us in this

plan because this makes loads of sense.” So a group of people were now going to set it up. There will be a small remnant that stays back in Dan, and we get to verse 11:

So 600 men of the tribe of Dan, armed with weapons of war, set out from Zorah and Eshtaol, 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. And they passed on from there to the hill country of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah. 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.” 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. Now the 600 men of the Danites, armed with their weapons of war, stood by the entrance of the gate. 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. 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?” 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?” 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. (Vs. 11-20)

Now I see the author is trying to make a point, to see how many times it continues to repeat all the materials that were in that place. The shrine that Micah had put up, these idols and these things they're using not to worship God, but instead to insult Him. So we find these soldiers come back; they get all the other soldiers and the whole tribe starts moving north. They happen to come across Micah's place yet again. It seems like he's on this major trade route. The scouts—the spies—say, “Hey, remember there was that priest there with that stuff? What if we just grab that and go?” So they go in and talk to the priest. The priest at first tries to stop them until they present a case, “Hey, would you rather stay here and do this for one house, or rather do it for a whole tribe of the nation of Israel? And think what we can make in that!” So all of a sudden the priest is now considering, “Boy, I can make more, I can have more influence.” Then it says that his heart was glad. Surely this must be a God thing providing this for me, right? It's an amazing, incredible opportunity. Verse 21:

So they turned and departed, putting the little ones and the livestock and the goods in front of them. 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. 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?” 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?’” 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.” 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. (Vs. 21-26)

Finally, at this point in our movie all of the characters collide; they all meet. Micah realizes that his place has been robbed. He goes out after them, and starts yelling at them, “Hey, what are you doing taking my stuff? This is the god I made! This is my priest! If you take this, what do I have left?”

What a sad statement! His whole life had started to be formed around these false gods, this empty religion. It leads us to believe, too, that he had probably used these to make some money from his neighbors, the other people that joined with them. So they go out but the reality is that his gods are too weak. It only took five guys to come in and swipe them. The gods couldn't save him, and they didn't do a very good job protecting Micah either. It's also kind of ironic that the guy that started the story stealing from his mom, has now been stolen from. And yet it shows us how the cultural slide has continued to come into his life. Verse 27:

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. 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. 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. 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. So they set up Micah's carved image that he made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh. (Vs. 27-31)

We get to the end of this movie, and we start to see all of the characters unfolding for us. Do you notice the genealogy that has taken place? Assuming that there are no breaks in this genealogy, this shows us this story is taking place very early on in the book of Judges. But notice the names that are listed there. It says, **Jonathan, the son of Gershom, son of Moses**. Now if you're reading from the NASB, you probably see it says *Jonathan, son of Gershom, son of Manasseh*. Here's the deal: the spelling in Hebrew for Moses and Manasseh are different by one letter; they look very similar. And scholars believe that the Masoretes, when they are looking at this story, added the extra letter to Manasseh because of the disgrace of idols that are seen in the story. When you go look at the original text, you see that the letter is added above the lines that would make sense. So in NASB you see it saying Manasseh, and the NIV and the ESV, you see it's saying Moses.

Moses' son Gershom, Gershom's son Jonathan. The priest that we've seen throughout this story, just this few of generations down from Moses who set up for the people, “Hey, here's the way you should live as you go out into this country,” is now going to be one of the people that's leading an entire tribe into idolatry, away from God.

In fact, later when the nation of Israel is divided up into the North and South Kingdoms, and Jeroboam has the Northern Kingdom, he gets worried that people in the North are going to start

traveling down to Jerusalem to worship God at the temple. So he sets up his own place of worship. and he brings in these golden calves into this place of worship. Do you know where that place was? Laish! Dan! The same place where this tribe of Dan has decided to go and take up residence. They are now full-blown into worshipping God, exactly doing the opposite of everything God has so clearly just instructed them.

We also see one other thing that's really interesting to note. The last words in this whole chapter says, "*So Micah had carved up an image that he had made as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.*" Shiloh was a location, we're not sure exactly where the location was at, but many scholars believe it was actually within the allocation that was divided up and given to the tribe of Ephraim. So, it's very likely that this Shiloh, this place of worship where the tabernacle was still in place, where the covenant was still there—the ark of the covenant—where God instructed people still go worship was just a few miles down the road from Micah's house in the hills of Ephraim. And yet what does Micah do? "I don't want to go there. Instead, I'm just going to make my own god. I'm going to serve him the way I want to serve him right here, right now." **In those days there was no king in Israel and everybody did what was right in his own eyes.**

We set up our own standards, don't we? "I'm going to do it my way, the way I want it." So we decide, "Hey, I'm just going to figure out what I think should be good or bad. Maybe I'll set a standard of truth that I'm going to operate by in my life. I can make that decision."

Now God's word, we know, is *a standard that is unchanging*. It's true for all people, all places, all times. What we find in it is true for us today, just as much as it was thousands of years ago. But yet sometimes we operate and say, "You know what? I see the culture, what the culture is doing that's really bad. I'm not going to do that. So, as long as I kind of stay 'this far' back from the culture, I'll be okay." But the problem is the culture continues to creep; the culture continues to slide. So as the culture slides, we slide with it. But we don't notice it because we say, "I'm staying my distance; I'm going to stay back. I just want a convenient God."

Micah starts to make a choice. "I just want to worship here in my house. I want to make my own idol." The Levite makes a choice. "I just want to have a job. Maybe it's not where God wanted me to be, but it seems like it's an opportunity from God." The tribe of Dan says, "I don't have the courage to follow God and what He wants, so I'm going to go find something outside of the boundaries that He's given us."

And we continue to slide until one day we look at the culture and say, "At least I'm not there!" But then we turn around and realize, "How did I get here? I am so far from where God has asked me to be. Instead, I want a god that I can just put in my pocket, a god that looks a lot like me, a god that would want what I want, a God that would validate my plans, a God that is okay with the will that I have for my life." And when we do that, we operate like a king in our own life, don't we? In the book of Judges there were tons of kings, in fact everyone thought they were their own king. They didn't want to follow the one true King, Yahweh. They wanted to try and do their own thing and try to stretch and bend the rules as much as possible.

Church, I wonder in your life, as you study Scripture, how many times do you say, "Well, I'll just do the next thing." Or, "This isn't that bad." Or, "When I evaluate my life compared to the culture,

I think I'm still doing ok." And yet God has given us a clear picture of what sin is, and what His will is in our lives, and what He asks us to follow. The question that we're going to have to ask ourselves is *Will I let Him be the King in my life?*

Jesus, thank You so much that You've given us these stories to remind us of the devastation of sin, the way it creeps into our life. God, so often this comes because we want a convenient God. We want a God that fits into our life, not a God that we need to adjust our lives to. And it slides, and all of a sudden, we start to look like the culture around us, and we don't even notice it. But the reality, then, is that when people look at our lives, they don't even notice You either. We are not a light to people around us. We're indulging in sin, and we live these empty, hollow lives. God, we know You have more than that for us. Help us to be people that follow Your truth courageously, no matter what, stay on Your path, and seek You as our King. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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