



## STRANGE TIMES

### Part 2

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We are continuing our look at a strange story from ancient Israel during the period of the judges. Those were strange times because, as the Book of Judges says, "there was no king in Israel, but every man was doing what was right in his own eyes." In other words, instead of respecting and obeying the law of God, they were doing what seemed right to THEM. Today, people would say that each person had their own truth or was living according to their own version of reality. This led to spiritual confusion and apostasy then, just as it has done today. In our time together last week, we saw how a man named Micah defrauded his own mother. He stole money from her that she had earmarked for the service of God. Micah's stealing was bad enough but what is bizarre is that her idea of dedicating the money to God was to use it to make an IDOL to worship! And that's exactly what she did, and it became one of several other idols in the house of her son, Micah. I pointed out that this was not some Gentile family in a foreign land, this was God's covenant people who had the law of God and were supposed to be living by it. The mess doesn't end there, however. This flawed philosophy even corrupted the religious establishment and finally, the overall culture. It's recorded in Judges 17 and 18, and if you want to review the background for the story, go back and read the first six verses of chapter 17. Today, we'll pick up in verse 7.

***"Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah; he was a Levite, and was staying there. 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. 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." 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 Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and lived in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!"*** (Judges 17:7-13)

Last week we learned about a family in ancient Israel that drifted into all manner of sin and moral confusion. Recorded in Judges chapter 17, it is the story of a man who stole a large sum of money from his own mother. When she discovered the theft, she was understandably upset and pronounced a curse upon the thief, not knowing it was her son. This man's name was Micah. When he heard that his mother was angry, he decided to admit his crime and return the money. This apparently was not because he was sorry for what he had done but because he knew he had better return it. When he confessed to her, instead of being angry, she is relieved and tells him how glad she is that he returned the money because she had dedicated that money to the Lord. While that sounds good, it's not what it seems. Her thinking is quite twisted. She says she intended to take the money and have it made into an idolatrous image. This woman is a Jew who lived under the law. The very first commandment flatly condemned idolatry, but I guess she thought she could serve God by worshipping a carved image, regardless of what the law said. She takes some of the money down to the silversmith and has him melt it down and make an image which she then gives to her son, Micah. He takes it to his house and puts it alongside his other idols and appoints his son to be a priest over this new and strange religion. If they lived today, we would call Micah and his mother church members. They were the people of God, but they certainly weren't living like it. And the ironic thing is, they didn't seem to think there was anything wrong with all of this. How do we account for that? The answer is found there in verse 6 where it says, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

This philosophy of "truth is whatever I say it is" or "my truth is my truth, and your truth is yours" led to their being no universal and absolute standard of right and wrong in the land. They had drifted from the shoreline of truth and were tossed and driven about on a sea of moral and spiritual confusion. This was manifest in the fact that you had a family (which should have been the first line of defense against apostasy) that had lost its biblical moorings and was just doing whatever seemed right to them but what they were doing was wrong and ungodly. And whenever our homes fall apart and there is no training in truth, godliness, and righteousness there, then society will ultimately fall apart. That's exactly what we're seeing in our own culture today. But it didn't stop there.

As we continue in the story, we see that this spiritual breakdown reached into every other segment of their lives as a people – including the ones who should have been crying out against it and bringing the people back to the God and what was right. I want you to see what happened when what we will call a "preacher" entered the picture. Notice in verse 7: "Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah; he was a Levite, and was staying there." Now, what comes to mind when we see the word "Levite"? Levites were the tribe of Levi and you may recall that was the priestly tribe of Israel. The priests came from this tribe. This is a young Levite, who if he wasn't a priest, would have been a temple worker of some sort. He was a religious leader, in other words. You see, it was the Levites who offered sacrifices for the people, led the people in worship, and generally set the tone for the religious condition of the people. For our purposes today, we'll call him a preacher. That's not exactly the same thing, but close enough to illustrate the point. This man was an influential religious leader. He should have been an example to everybody else of piety and devotion to God and to the Law. Now, it says he was staying here in Ephraim. What that means is that he had come there looking for work and to make his way.

So, let's read on in verse 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." Remember, Micah is the thief and idolator. "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.""

When Micah heard him say "I am a Levite", he knew what that meant. He knew this man was a priest or was of the priestly tribe and what had Micah just been looking for when his mother gave him another idol to add to his house? He was looking for a priest. Well, well. Isn't this fortuitous? We have a young, eager, impressionable man looking for a place to live and to work and we happen to have Micah who is looking for a priest to serve in his household temple of idolatry. Micah thinks, 'this couldn't have worked out any better', and he has a proposition for the young man. Verse 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." In other words, 'I've got a deal for you. I need a priest, you need a job, and if you'll let me hire you to be my priest, I'll reward you well. I'll give you a handsome salary, fine clothes and accoutrements, and I'll feed you well. You'll want for nothing if you'll come in and be my priest.'

Now, I want you to see that this young man doesn't begin to ask Micah questions. He doesn't seem to be concerned about what Micah is wanting him to do. He doesn't inquire as to why he needs a priest or what he has going on his house. This young man needs a job, and Micah is willing to not only give him a job, but it would be a job that would be hard to turn down. So, if this man were not a priest, it wouldn't be hard to imagine that he would at once seize such an offer – but – he IS a priest. He should be the one who is standing in the gap and who will cry out against what Micah is doing. But that would upset the apple cart. That would mean no job; no money; nothing to eat; nothing to wear. So, what does he do? Verses 11 and 12: "Then the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man became like one of his sons to him. So, Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and lived in the house of Micah." Now, we may think 'a man has to eat, and he has to live' but not if it means compromising his principles and compromising truth. Here is a young man who is not a preacher with principles but rather what Jesus later called in John 10:12-13 a hireling who looks out for himself instead of the sheep and as a result the sheep fall prey to wolves. Read on and we'll see why this young man was such a failure. Verses 12-13: "So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and lived in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!"

Can you see what Micah is thinking? 'I have found a religious leader or a preacher (we might say) who says that what I am doing is alright – if nothing else, by his silence – and therefore Micah thinks that he is okay in the sight of God himself. Friend, preachers, elders, teachers are all a part of God's plan for preaching the gospel, instructing the church, and guarding the faith against sin and false doctrine but sometimes preachers are compromised, and they will lead people in the wrong direction. Preachers and elders are men just like everyone else. Some are not qualified. Sometimes they are ignorant and the blind end up leading the blind. Some preach for the wrong reasons. And some know better and are wolves in sheep's clothing. I don't say that to make you cynical about preachers but to warn you that they are not the standard of right and wrong – the word of God is. And if he is preaching the word of God wonderful. I can tell you this, if he IS preaching the word of God, he's probably not going to be very popular. He's going to run into a lot of trouble and opposition. He may be run out of a church or run out of a town. He may be ostracized and labeled. He may struggle financially. Paul suffered all of those things! Do you know why? Because as he said to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:26-27 "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the

whole counsel of God.” He told the younger Timothy to “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” (2 Timothy 4:2-5)

Micah needed someone to tell him that what he was doing was wrong and he needed to repent and return to the law of God. This young man should have had the courage to do that, but he was too eager to find and keep a job, you see. And listen; when preachers and elders and teachers do not stand in the gap and as Isaiah once said ‘lift up their voice like a trumpet and show my people their sin’, then a important bulwark that supports the truth and helps uphold the integrity of God’s house fails and people are lost.

You ask, ‘is it wrong then for a church to pay a preacher’? Is it wrong for a preacher to be concerned about supporting his family? Not at all! Listen, the bible commands the church to support those who preach the gospel. Did you know that? It doesn’t tell preachers to go and beg for money and make merchandise of the gospel. It doesn’t teach that preachers should become wealthy and live in the lap of luxury. In fact, any preacher who is not willing to sacrifice and suffer for the cause he serves is not worth the salt in his bread and is not worthy of the name ‘gospel preacher.’ Paul said in 1 Timothy 5:18 that an elder is worthy of the church’s financial support. “For the Scripture says, “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE AN OX WHILE IT TREADS OUT THE GRAIN,” and “THE LABORER IS WORTHY OF HIS WAGES.””

Paul himself, at times, took support from various churches according to 1 Corinthians 9:9 in order that he might forego a secular job that would tie him down but rather devote his time to the ministry. He also, at times, refused to take such support because he didn’t want to be accused by some of preaching for money. Paul’s motive was never to get rich off the back of the church or to use his preaching as a ‘cloak of covetousness’. So, it’s not wrong for a preacher to accept a church’s financial support when he’s faithfully preaching the gospel and doing the work of an evangelist. Nor is it wrong for a church to want a man to come and work among them and help them become the church they should be. The problem arises when, instead of supporting a man because he’s faithful to God and doing the work of God, when we pay a preacher to be our hireling, do our bidding, or do our work FOR us. That’s the difference. A man who is beholden to a paycheck so that he will compromise or withhold the truth is a shame and disgrace to the ministry and needs to go get an honorable secular job.

There are some wonderful men of God who preach the truth in love and sincerity. But there are also those who won’t speak up and speak out and as a result even the people of God are allowed to drift into sin and error. Preacher, elder, teacher; you have a grave responsibility that you will give an account to God for in the Day of Judgment. This young priest in Judges 17, failed and because this was the condition in religion, at least so far as this time and place was concerned, there was no conscience among the people against sin. Every man was going what was right in his own eyes.

When we read on into chapter 18, you’ll see the ultimate consequence of this. Not only was Micah’s home a mess, this supposed man of God did not help but rather reinforced the problem and then there came along some men from another tribe – the tribe of Dan who were on a nefarious mission. They met this young man and asked for his counsel. What did he do? Well, join me next week, the Lord willing, and we’ll find out. It’s a sad story of the downward spiral of a people because people did not respect the unchanging law of God, but instead did what was right in their own eyes. They result was the strange

times of that period, and it's the cause of the confusion and moral and religious chaos we see about us today.

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