

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Things Fall Apart – (Judges Chapters 17 - 21) This week we bring to close our study of the book of Judges with two different stories, which collectively make up the conclusion. The tumult instigated upon the death of Samson, the topic of our study last week, awakened the people of Dan to the reality that the Philistines were their enemies. If Samson's judgeship as well as his death and suffering at the hands of the Philistines served to convince the lethargic people of God of the *badness* of the enemy, the second story reveals to Israel the fact that they too have sank lower than any other generation since inhabiting the land. Civil war and the near annihilation of an entire tribe is instigated by the events surrounding the gruesome delivery of body parts to each of the twelve tribes. Like a sidebar commentary, the statement reappears throughout the two accounts, *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* If this is an accurate summary for the period of the judges as a whole, it is epitomized by the climactic conclusion.

Part One: Micah, the Thief and Benefactor – The first of the two stories begins with a young man named Micah who stole a good deal of money (1,100 pieces of silver) from his own mother. You can tell from the outset that things are not off to a good start. When he overhears her pronouncing a curse on the thief, he is prompted, no doubt out of self-interest, to confess that he is the guilty party. When he restored the money, his mother immediately retracts the curse by pronouncing a blessing. It is the pronouncement of the blessing that is the most telling. She states, *"Blessed be my son by the Lord...I dedicate the silver to the Lord from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a metal image"* (17:2b,3). The fact that syncretism between the worship of YHVH and the surrounding Canaanite deities had become a hallmark characteristic of this period has already been mentioned in this class. This is a perfect example one more of the convoluted manner in which the people of God sought to sincerely worship the God of the covenant.

Arguably, the law of God was not as readily available then as it is today, and it is unlikely that the majority of the people were able to read. However, the breakdown was apparently two-fold: 1) parents were not teaching their children using the liturgical method Moses provided for oral instruction and memorization, and 2) the priests were not faithfully reading the words of God's law to the people at any of their assemblies. These failures, though not unique to the OT church, should be illustrative for the people of God in all ages as to the importance of biblical instruction even among an illiterate populace. When one considers the literacy rate of the western world, it becomes even more grievous to neglect the discipline of scripture reading failing to allow the worship of the church to be solely informed from what scripture commands.

Needless to say, Micah's mother took 200 pieces of silver (apparently the remaining 900 was used to pay the annual salary of the priest) and gave them to the silversmith who made a carved, metal image. Micah then made a shrine and put the image in the shrine along with an ephod, household gods

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

(teraphim), and ordained his eldest son to be his priest. His son would serve only temporarily, and was soon ousted by the young Levite, Jonathan, from Bethlehem-Judah. Micah ordained the young Levite and agreed to give him ten pieces of silver annually as well as clothing fit for his office. The declaration of Micah after ordaining the Levite is revelatory. He stated, *“Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest”* (17:13). This remark as well as the remark referenced above made by Micah’s mother, reveal a limited knowledge of how YHWH commanded his people to worship him, but one that was greatly convoluted and could not have been pleasing to the Lord regardless of the fact that it appears ever so sincere. The spiritual condition in Israel, the people of God, whom God himself redeemed from the slave pits of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, was such that pure religion was no longer distinguishable from false. This has been an oft repeated refrain throughout the book, and will continue to be the case until the divinely sanctioned monarchy.

The story continues with another cast of characters: a clan of 600 men from the tribe of Dan. When the tribe of Dan, no doubt discomfited from the antagonism spawned by the exploits of Samson against the Philistines, sought to emigrate from the land allotted to them to Laish in the northern boundary of Israel, they first agree to send out spies to search out the land and explore it. This section sounds very similar to the earlier accounts of Moses and Joshua sending spies into the newly entered land of Canaan. It almost gives an occasion for hope until we witness the detour they make to the house of Micah. They convince Jonathan to come with them to be a priest to their tribe, and steal the graven image from the shrine of Micah. This image becomes a fixed snare to the Danites well into the period of the monarchies and even through the divided kingdom and the Assyrian captivity. The story concludes with an interesting statement indicating a relationship between the veneration of the true tabernacle and the shrine of the Danites. Judges 18:31 states, *“So they (the people of Dan) set up Micah’s carved image that he made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.”*

Part Two: The Severance – The second story that makes up the conclusion to the book of Judges is by far the most grievous in all the book. The downward spiral that has been mentioned often throughout our study of this book becomes evident in the story here told. The people of God had successfully been awakened from their spiritual lethargy typified by the cohabitation with the enemy in the time of Samson, and have become convinced that the Philistines are “bad”, but they are about to learn another equally sobering lesson: so are they. They of all peoples, the recipients of the law of God – the instructions for living as a community of the redeemed; the ones with whom the Creator entered into a covenant, which they had repeatedly violated, they should have lived differently. It may have been an understandable excuse for the Philistines to live in a debased manner, worshipping idols living wickedly. Israel should have been different. Existentially, they were different, but pragmatically they were not. This realization becomes very clear in the story of the estranged concubine.

The second story begins with the same statement used in the previous story, almost as a disclaimer: *“In those days, when there was no king in Israel...”* What is implied but not explicitly stated is that every man did what was right in his own eyes. This introduces the story because the story illustrates what this looked like. The story continues, *“...a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. And his concubine was unfaithful to him, and she went away from him to her father’s house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months.”* Of all things, the story is about a Levite, a member of the priestly class who was traveling in the bush. He took a concubine (a second wife), and she was unfaithful. Now, the text does not tell us how she was unfaithful, simply that she was. Some think that she was guilty of adultery, others think

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

they simply quarreled, and she left to return to her father's house and by doing so was unfaithful. The root word in Hebrew for the English here translated as "unfaithful" is נֶאֱמָר, which means in its most common instance, "to commit fornication". Therefore, it is probable that she was unfaithful sexually to her husband. It should not be surprising that a Levite would pursue his unfaithful concubine even though the OT law was very clear that anyone caught in the act of fornication should be put to death. After all, the law of God was not readily known or at least not readily followed in the period of the judges. Here we see the Levite, sorrowful from the departure of his concubine willing to travel the distance to bring her back home. Whether he was truly intending to journey on to the tabernacle and serve his time there or whether this was simply a story he told to the men of Gibeah (Judges 19:18) to elicit sympathy, we do not know. Nonetheless, he went to Bethlehem to the house of the young lady's father to fetch her home again.

Michael Wilcock in his commentary on the book of Judges, notes that it is the thoughtlessness of the father as well as the folly of the Levite that started the chain reaction.¹ It might even be stated that the unfaithfulness of the concubine that caused the Levite to journey to Bethlehem to retrieve her could be as justly identified as the catalyst behind this whole ugly affair, we simply cannot draw the line. What is clear is that sin has a way of affecting the sinner and all who are affiliated with the sinner. Sin and its consequences are pandemic in this regard. The father of the concubine does detain the Levite longer than he should, but if his hospitality is excessive it is further highlighted by the lack thereof when the Levite eventually does leave and journeys into the land of Benjamin. It is here in the land of Benjamin that things start to really get ugly.

The first sign that all is not well in Gibeah, a town belonging to the tribe of Benjamin, is the lack of hospitality shown the traveling party. In the ancient near east, refusal to show hospitality to a stranger was considered extremely heinous and reprehensible. Scripture teaches that, as Christians, we should be diligent to show hospitality, because some have unknowingly entertained angels (Hebrews 13:2). The people of Gibeah did not show hospitality to the Levite and his concubine. It was only when an aged farmer from the hill country of Ephraim came in from the fields and saw them settled in the town square that he invited them home to his house. Later they would receive attention of the unwanted variety from the people of the city.

Reminiscent of the ungodly cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, "*...the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house, beating on the door. And they said to the old man, the master of the house, 'Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him.'* And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, 'No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly, since this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing.'" The master of the house then offers his virgin daughter and the man's concubine to the ruffians in an attempt to detract them from seeking to molest the Levite. Then, in an act as vile as their own, the Levite thrusts his concubine to them and bars the door. In the morning when he gets up to leave, he sees his concubine, whom he traveled all this distance to retrieve fallen and lifeless on the doorstep. He speaks harshly to her, and then places her on the back of his donkey to return to his house.

When he arrives in his house he does something that would make the stomach of any decent human being churl, this was the intended purpose. He cuts his concubine's dead corpse into twelve pieces and sends the pieces to the elders of the twelve tribes of Israel along with a note describing what happened.

¹ Wilcock, Michael. *The Bible Speaks Today, The Message of Judges*. Pg. 168
Baney, Lesson 16 Winter/Spring 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Thankfully, the reaction of the tribes is as one would hope. Nothing has been able to unite the twelve tribes since they appeared before the Lord in chapter one of Judges seeking his guidance regarding whom should first ascend to attack the Canaanites (Judges 1:1). They have now gathered to explore what happened and what should be done about it. Judges 20:1-2 states, *“Then all the people of Israel came out from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembles as one man to the Lord at Mizpah.”* Appropriately enough, Mizpah means, *emotional bond* in Hebrew. This one atrocious deed caused the people of God to assemble in a manner that had not been done since the generation of conquest. They exclaimed that such an action as that perpetrated against the Levite and his concubine, *“...has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day...”* (19:30). The people of God were finally united against a common enemy. Unfortunately, the enemy was not the Canaanites, had Israel united “as one man” in order to drive out the Canaanites, no doubt, the history of this period would have been much different.

Nevertheless, Israel has now united. They agree to go against the tribe of Benjamin in battle. It takes three endeavors, but their rash decision is eventually considered a success. 50,000 men of Israel and 25,000 men of Benjamin lay dead at the end of Israel’s first civil war. With success imminent for the people of Israel, they are then confronted with the stark possibility that an entire tribe was about to be annihilated within Israel. The national identity of the people of God was physically at stake much as it had been spiritually for the past few generations. They therefore, made concession so that the remaining 600 men of Benjamin could marry and raise families, thus supplanting the tribe. It is interesting to note how different history would have been had they not made this concession. When one considers that King Saul as well as the Apostle Paul were both from the tribe of Benjamin, it seems no small feat to revive the endangered tribe.

What this experience made known to the people of God was the reality that, “everyman doing what was right in his own eyes” was not working. The Canaanite influence on the people of God was *bad*, and they were just now beginning to realize it. They were also confronted with the sober truth that they too, the people of the covenant, were *bad*. Much like the Levite’s concubine they had been unfaithful to God. God had sought them out, but they continued to be molested by the Canaanite neighbors whose gods they refused to destroy. Therefore, much like the Levite’s concubine, they had become fragmented – spread out across the land of promise as if strangers in it. What now? As if to answer this question (and possibly offer a meager explanation for the events of the previous twenty-one chapters) the writer of Judges finishes the book with the haunting summary, *“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* (21:25).

Conclusion: As our time in the book of Judges comes to an end, we reflect back on the lessons of this book, and realize the extended mercy of God to a people who least deserve it. In this observation, we can see ourselves, knowing too well the gross darkness of our own hearts and the ways in which, *doing what is right in our own eyes* is a renunciation of the divine kingship of God. What role will a king play? The role of someone who can demonstrate to us how we should live. This was a task that every king failed, every king, that is, except *the King*: the root and offspring of David, the true Judge who lived a perfectly sinless life. The book of Judges creates within us a longing for this true King.