

## THE GRASS IS GREENER, BUT IS IT *BETTER*?

Judges 18:1-10

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I was visiting with a young businessman who had decided to make a change in his career path. He did so because he felt that he needed to earn more money quicker so that he could get ahead. By itself, that is not a bad thing to do, but sometimes it is not the best thing to do. Or to put it another way, “The grass may be greener, but it isn’t necessarily better or healthier.” My concern for him is that the immediate outcome of his decision may appear at first to reveal that his decision was a wise one. He is more easily able to pay his bills, but can his marriage and family sustain their healthy growth with the new demands upon his life? That’s what will determine, in the end, whether his was really the best decision.

It appears that every new generation wants to enjoy the pleasures of this life quicker, with less sacrifice, and without much forethought of the long term effects. Take this mundane example. On my recent study sabbatical, I came across an article written by the futurist Thomas Frye entitled, “Life as a Teenager in 1994, 2014, 2034; What a difference a generation makes.”<sup>1</sup> (A generation is considered to be a twenty-year period of time.) In this article, Dr. Frye reviews several areas of differences in the life surrounding a teenager, such as smart phone usage, driving habits, views on marriage, fashions, and shoes, and height and weight differences. He shows what life was like for the past generation, now, and what the next generation can look forward to.

Take, for instance, his observation about modern food consumption, lack of exercise, and the generational changes in height and weight. This morphing of the teenage body should raise the concerns of any parent or grandparent who cares about the health of the next generation. His statistics reveal:

1994 – An average 16-year-old boy was 5’9” and weighed 145 lbs.

A total of 13.7% of teens were considered obese.

2014 – An average 16-year-old boy was 5’10” and weighed 155.5 lbs.

A total of 27.9% of teens were considered obese.

Projecting out 20 years for the next generation and following the same trend lines between 1994 and 2014, he predicts this:

2034 – An average 16-year-old boy will be 5’11” and weigh 166 lbs. While there are some hopeful signs that obesity rates are beginning to level off, an actual cure for obesity is still only a dream.

Then, he closes his two-part article with a few final thoughts describing various activities and living conditions of teenagers today that reflect generational decisions. Here are just a few of his more tame observations:

- Of all 12 to 17 year olds living in the United States, 95% use the Internet.
- 10% of all children in the US (7.7 million) live with a grandparent.
- 37% of teens say their parents allow them to drink with them, a 10% increase from 2010.
- A recent report from the CDC revealed that 25% of teenage girls, ages 14-19, have a sexually transmitted disease.

What a difference a generation can make! The decisions we make today significantly affect the next generation. As I read this article, I couldn’t help but think of the spiritual lesson about generational change we can take away from our study of Scripture this morning. Like the hard to believe, hard to understand spiritual, moral, economic, and political changes that took place in the nation of Israel after they entered and took possession of the Promised Land, today we face the same possibility of detrimental spiritual, moral, economic, and political changes.

By way of review, let’s compare and contrast the life and wellbeing of the nation of Israel in the two books **Joshua** and **Judges**, which represent the first and second generation after Israel entered the Promised Land. The late Dr. Merrill F. Unger, a beloved and highly respected Bible scholar, put it this way:

|          |           |
|----------|-----------|
| JOSHUA   | JUDGES    |
| Freedom  | Servitude |
| Faith    | Unbelief  |
| Progress | Failure   |

|                      |                        |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Spiritual vision     | Earthly emphasis       |
| Fidelity to the Lord | Apostasy from the Lord |
| Joy                  | Sorrow                 |
| Strength             | Weakness               |
| Sense of unity       | Disunity, anarchy      |
| Sin judged           | Sin lightly regarded   |
| Victory              | Defeat                 |

*The New Unger's Bible Handbook* Merrill F. Unger, p. 129 (with a few changes).

The overall defeat for Israel came not just from their external enemies, various Canaanite tribes, but from within Israel and their various tribal disputes. The last five chapters reveal how jaded, how Canaanized, these people were as a result of having turned their backs on God. It's painful to see the reality of what can happen to a nation of people in one generation, or even in a ten-year period, as a result of ignoring the truth.

We are looking this morning at the second of two chapters that go together, **chapters 17 and 18**. One of the things that both of these hold in common is two principle characters, Micah and Jonathan, Micah's household Levite priest.

|                |                  |
|----------------|------------------|
| Chapter 17     | Chapter 18       |
| Micah/Jonathan | Micah/Jonathan   |
| One Household  | The Entire Tribe |

**Chapter 17** is different than **chapter 18** in that **17** concerns an individual Israelite family, whereas **18** deals with an entire Israelite tribe, the Danites. These two chapters point not to just what happens to a single family or tribe that ignores God's direction, but these two chapters represent what happened to the entire nation during the period of the judges.

Interestingly, this same tribe of Dan was first mentioned in the three introductory chapters of **Judges**, in **1:34-35**, as one of the tribes that had been unable to subjugate the territory allotted to them. And now, as a sample of what all of Israel was like, they are raised up front and center again.

Let me remind you of the progression so far in our story. The first scene of our story was found in **17:1-6**. Those verses told us about an adult son of a wealthy mother who built a shrine in his home. His name was Micah. Although God had forbidden the use of all private shrines and worship centers and had ordered all cultic worship centers on tops of hills destroyed, Micah ignored God and chose to build a shrine in his home, to equip it with his own idols and ephod, and to install his own son as the family priest.

The second scene covers verses **7-13**. It involves the second key individual in the story, Jonathan, a drifter who happened upon Micah's home. He was a Levite who was looking for religious employment. Micah, who knew that his own son could never really be a priest because they were not of the tribe of Levi, saw Jonathan's arrival as a godsend, because now he could claim to have a real Levite priest overseeing his shrine. Obviously, Micah and Jonathan both realized that what they were doing was in violation of God's covenant with Israel, but they ignored that because this fit nicely into both of their plans of how they thought life should be lived.

When we come to **chapter 18**, we see the third scene in this four-scene vignette. Once again, with the opening of the chapter, we are reminded for the second time in nine verses, "**In those days there was no king in Israel.**" As an episode marker, this formula invites the reader to look back and interpret the preceding events in light of Israel's rejecting their true King of Israel, Yahweh, and doing whatever was right in their own eyes. In addition, this marker causes the reader to look forward with the expectation that something not so good is going to happen. Let's begin our reading of this third scene in our story with **18:1**.

**<sup>1</sup>In those days there was no king of Israel, and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for themselves to live in, for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel. <sup>2</sup>So the sons of Dan sent from their family five men out of their whole number, valiant men from**

**Zorah and Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to search it; and they said to them, “Go, search the land.” And they came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah and lodged there.**

Let’s stop right there for some clarification. The way this reads, if one didn’t know better, one would think that of the twelve tribes of Israel, somehow Dan was left out and never assigned by God a territory of their own in the Promised Land. But the fact of the matter is--they were!

It is helpful for the English reader to understand that the meaning of the words “**had not been allotted to them.**” has two ways to be interpreted, and both of them are in play here. The first is the idea of having something assigned to you. The second idea is of something “falling on the ground.” When you put the ideas together, you get the more complete picture of something being assigned to someone through the drawing of lots. And that’s exactly what happened in **Joshua 19:40-46**. The process that God had designed for the assigning of twelve territories to twelve tribes was done through the casting of lots. We read:

**<sup>40</sup>The seventh lot *fell* to the tribe of the sons of Dan according to their families. <sup>41</sup>The territory of their inheritance was Zorah and Eshtaol and Ir-shemesh, <sup>42</sup>and Shaalabbin and Aijalon and Ithlah, <sup>43</sup>and Elon and Timnah and Ekron, <sup>44</sup>and Eltekeh and Gibbethon and Baalath, <sup>45</sup>and Jehud and Bene-berak and Gath-rimmon, <sup>46</sup>and Me-jarkon and Rakkon, with the territory over against Joppa.**

Clearly, by lot, God had assigned the Danites land. The Danites originally received this area situated just west of Benjamin. This meant, of course, that each tribe was to accept the assigned portion as from God, and therefore without question, take it. For if God had directed in its choice, it should be the best territory for any respective tribe; furthermore each tribe could be

assured that if they sought out Yahweh's help, they would be victorious in clearing out the enemy, because God said it was to be theirs.

But, due to extreme pressure from both the Canaanite tribes of the Amorites (**1:34**) and the Philistines (**Judges 13-16**), the Danites never really sought out God's help to take the land. They thought that since they were a small tribe and were outnumbered, they didn't stand a chance. They totally underestimated God's faithfulness. After all, what had God done at Jericho and in Israel's flight from Egypt? He did what He had always done--pulled off the miraculous. As a result of their lack of faith and obedience to actually even try to remove the Amorites and Philistines, in the end, they never secured their position there.

The Danites should not have been surprised at finding powerful and entrenched Canaanite tribes implanted in their allotted territory. They should have expected that they would have to exercise initiative and fight for the land.

It never ceases to amaze how basically lazy we human beings are. For forty years, the Israelites had been living under God's provision and protection. He had provided food for them. All they had to do was gather up the manna and quail and cook it! In addition, He held their hand every step of the way into the Promised Land. So now, they appear to be living under the illusion of entitlement. "God ought to just give us the land and move these people out. Why should we work for our own land or even take the risk of being killed?" Somehow, they found that challenges or problems in life were a sign of God's abandonment, and they did not accept the reality that in this world we will live facing numerous difficulties. Problems are not abnormal, but normal. Only in heaven will we not be pressed down by challenges.

We are very blessed at Crossroads to have so many volunteers who do not have the disease of entitlement. As members of a faithful family, most of you take an active part on a regular basis, putting your shoulder into service here in some manner or another. You have really taken seriously the Biblical concept that the church is a family and not an organization. A few of you can't do as much as others because of physical limitations, and we understand. On the other hand, some of you who could have reason not to serve because of physical limitations don't let those stop you! You are amazing and a huge

encouragement to many of us. We are grateful to you. We have very few attenders who merely come and leave, as though they were invited guests. That's one of the reasons there is such warmth of fellowship among us.

For the Danites, the idea was not that they weren't given a place to live, but rather that they had failed to do their part to clear out the Canaanites who had previously been living there.

If you could actually see the land they were given, you would understand that they should, in fact, have been delighted that God had assigned to them this particular land. It was one of the most highly sought after pieces of real estate in Israel, back then and today. So much of it was lowland with rich soil that was easy to farm.

But they just weren't satisfied with what they had, and that they had to work hard to possess it. In their minds, there just had to be a place where the grass would be greener. So their frame of mind was, "Let's go look for it!" And that's what we find taking place here. The tribe of Dan ignored God's gift of land and his command to possess it. Hence, the movement of Dan to look for and eventually move to new quarters was wrong. They were modeling the theme of these last five chapters: **"Every man did that which was right in his own eyes."**

The tribes commissioned five Danites to go search for a new home for their tribe. They are called **"valiant men."** This expression literally means "men, sons of strength and wealth," which should probably be translated as "noble men." They were successful and had proven themselves to be men who examined things closely and made wise decisions.

According to **verse 2**, the men spent the night at Micah's, giving them time to see his shrine and its religious objects. But also, they noticed something else! Let's continue reading about their hunt:

**<sup>3</sup>When they were near the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young man, the Levite; and they turned aside there and said to him, "Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this**

**place? And what do you have here?"**

Notice several things: First, these men immediately recognized Jonathan's voice. In other words, Jonathan was no stranger but previously known to them. One can only speculate how they knew Jonathan, but apparently this Levite drifter in his sojourning had spent some time in Danite territory. Maybe he saw the danger that surrounded the Danites and decided to move some place a little safer. We don't know for sure, but we do know that they recognized his voice and thus him.

And by their three rapid-fire questions, the reader can tell that these five men were very surprised and curious about his presence there. Their first question, "**Who brought you here,**" implies that Jonathan had not been led by God to come to Micah's house, because, as the second question highlights, Jonathan as a Levite had no business as a priest serving in this home! As a Levite who apparently wanted to be a priest, he should have been, as every Israelite knew, down below in the valley just a few miles walk in the Tabernacle at Shiloh, not here.

And then the third question revealed even more of their surprise, "**And what do you have here?"** In my mind's eye, I picture them either picking up in their hands the idols or pointing to the ephod. These were items known to be forbidden outside of the Tabernacle or anywhere for that matter! Now understand, their questions are not questions of condemnation. They are questions of investigation. They were trying to figure out this man. As we will see, they had no problem with his playing loose with God's Law that governs priests, worship, and idols.

The young Levite answered their question in **verse 4**. He said to them, "**Thus and so has Micah done to me, and he has hired me and I have become his priest.**" He told the truth. He told them that he was engaged in "religion for hire."

Figuring as such, these sharp and focused businessmen immediately wanted to see if somehow they could hire him. In order to do so, they needed to put him to the test. We read in **verse 5**, "**They said to him, Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether our way on which we are going will be prosperous.**"

Their reference to God using the generic designation of Elohim, a common term used by the Canaanites to refer to their gods, rather than Yahweh, the covenant name of the God of Israel, is telling. Typically, if you really wanted to know God's will at that time, your request would be framed, "Is this the will of Yahweh, the covenantal God of Israel?" In addition, we note that rather than go to where the Tabernacle was located just a few miles away to seek the High Priest and the only proper ephod for guidance, they asked this false priest to consult his false ephod for an answer from God. Why? Because they knew what God would have told them, had they asked Him: "Go back and conquer the land I already gave you." Like apostates of all ages, they were seeking a minister who would tickle their ears with what they wanted to hear.

In response to their request for a word from God, the Levite quickly answered them, "**Go in peace; your way in which you are going has the Lord's approval.**" Contrary to the NIV and some other modern translations, Jonathan does not declare outrightly that the mission will succeed, only that, literally, "The course on which you are going is before the Lord." This could mean that it has the approval of Yahweh's watchful eye, but it could also mean the opposite, that is, the conduct of the scouts and the Danites as a tribe is under critical scrutiny by Yahweh.

Jonathan's blessing was in generic "fortune cookie slogan" terms about their journey. He did not commit himself to their success. He simply told them what they hoped to hear, that they had God's approval. But in doing this, Jonathan invoked the covenant name of the Lord in vain, to win their confidence, by sounding somewhat of a Yahwehist. This was a clear violation of the fourth commandment, "**You shall not take the Lord's name in vain.**"

How ironic is this scene of the men from Dan meeting with Jonathan! It would be funny, if it were not so tragic. Men on a sinful mission meet with a sinful Levite, and want to know from a righteous God if their mission will be successful. And the sinful Levite sent these sinning men on their way with God's blessing!

In any case, the scouts interpreted it positively, and they confidently left, continuing their search for a new home. We read:

**<sup>7</sup>Then the five men departed and came to Laish and saw the people who were in it living in security, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and secure; for there was no ruler humiliating them for anything in the land, and they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone.**

The five Danites continued northward about one hundred miles and finally came upon an area they felt would be ideal for their needs, for three reasons. First, they discovered the isolated town of Laish that they believed could be captured fairly easily. According to **verse 7**, its advantages were that it was a “**quiet and secure**” site, meaning there was no dominating local political or military ruler or local sheriff to submit to.

Second, because the regional ruler’s office is far away in Sidon, they could continue to do as they pleased. Sidon was a Phoenician settlement on the Mediterranean coast known primarily for trade and commerce rather than war. Hence, the Danites observed that where there’s no combat, there is time for commerce!

It was also true at this time that the citizens of Laish had no treaty with the Aramaeans to the north and east. In other words, they had no allies who could readily offer assistance if an enemy made a surprise attack. Both of these crucial factors, the Sidonians living far away and the Aramaeans living far away and not having a treaty with them, would contribute to the city’s destruction at the hands of the approaching Danites.

Third, it enjoyed an isolated location that also suggested there would be no interference with other Israelites who might object to the Danites religious practices.

A fourth reason that Laish became a dream home for the Danites is mentioned later in **verse 10**. It was “**spacious**,” meaning there was a lot of land for a small tribe to live the easy life.

And fifth, it occupied a beautiful location on the southwestern foothills of Mt. Hermon. Because of the rain and waters coming off the mountain, this area was a perfect land for agriculture; there was no lack for anything there. It was even better than the land allotted to the Danites in the south. For sure, the grass appeared to be greener.

The writer catalogued all the benefits of Laish in **verse 7**, and later in **verse 10** he signaled that the Danite scouts were excited over the potential they saw in this city for their own people. They could hardly wait to get home to tell their brother Danites what they found. We read:

**<sup>8</sup>When they [the five men], came back to their brothers [down south] at Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers said to them, “What do you report” <sup>9</sup>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 sit still? Do not delay to go, to enter, to possess the land. <sup>10</sup>When enter, you will come to a secure people with a spacious land; for God has given it into your hand, a place where there is no lack of anything that is on the earth.”**

When the five finished giving their report, everyone who listened to them saw the stark contrast to their present situation. This new home would be their new “Promised Land.” In addition to what they saw, these men would use the Levites’ blessing to rationalize the slaughter of the Laishites.

Keep in mind, they never checked with God. Instead, **“Every man did that which was right in their own eyes!”**

Too often, we find ourselves in the flesh, making decisions without wise counsel. Or we don’t seriously consider that wise counsel when it is given, or we don’t wait long enough to hear from God. Often we want something so

badly, and it looks so good that we go for it, claiming that it's God's direction. It could be doing something for financial security, or marrying someone so that your kids have a father or a mother, any father or mother.

How often we live our lives as independent mavericks, making decisions without considering the benefit of outside counsel from someone who knows our local situation. Often times we subconsciously don't seek counsel, because we don't want to hear anything that would keep us from fulfilling what we want to do. The good thing about an outside observer who knows the territory is that he can help us evaluate whether or not the benefits we see are major or minor. In addition, outside observers can see the drawbacks that we might miss--drawbacks that can significantly change the wisdom of a decision. But typically, that's not what "every man who does what's right in his own eyes" wants to hear.

History reveals that the apparent green grass of Laish would prove deadly to the tribe of Dan. We will see that next time.

Friends, we can rationalize all kinds of decisions and moves in our lives, just like the Danites, without ever seriously seeking God's counsel or the counsel of godly persons around us who know us and the situation we are considering. If you are about to make a decision about a move, a purchase, or a major commitment of some kind, hit the pause button one more time. The best decisions are made when we humble ourselves before the Lord and other Godly persons and ask the question, "Is this best for You, Lord, and me?"

Take just one example: You wish you had a spouse like someone else's spouse, and you see a way to get them to marry you, yet you disregard the Biblical grounds for you not to get divorced or not to marry a particular divorced individual. It matters not how much you think they love you, how much they make you feel good, or how secure and provided for you might think you will be if you violate everything God says in order to do what is right in your own eyes. It will not come to bless you.

Or maybe there is a quick way for you to make a lot of money. The Bible warns against get rich quick schemes. **Proverbs 14:12** is the truth. It warns, "**There is a way that seem right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.**" That's the verse that hangs over the tribe of Dan. That's the verse that hangs

over the lives of those who seek to get the answers they want so as to fulfill the desires they have, totally ignoring what God's Word or conventional wisdom says.

Oh God, transform our hearts and spiritual ears so that we become soft toward Your voice and be ready to do Your will, as difficult as it may seem at times. We want to seek Your face and to trust You to deliver us from our enemies in Your due time. In the meantime, Jesus, grant us your courage to live as you lived in the face of difficulty, unjust circumstances, and surrounded by ungodly people who would deceive and take advantage of us for their own purposes. Oh Jesus, you are our King. We commit to following you, even though there is no king in America. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>[Life As A Teenager In 1994, 2014, 2034 - Futurist... <http://www.futuristspeaker.com/2013/09/life-as-a-teenager-in-1994-2014-and-2034-what-a-difference-a-generation-makes-part-2>]