

SPIRITUAL SPIN ZONES

Judges 18:11-31

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Many of us are familiar with political spins that the media and politicians put on news events. One well-known news channel proclaims that it has a “no spin zone.” Really?

Spin zones are not limited to the arena of politics. We find them in the sports world, public education, and at all levels of society. Even we Christians have become very adept at creating our own spiritual spin zones, in which we put our own righteous twists on what the Bible clearly describes as immoral choices and behavior. We redefine our actions with new terms supported by faulty rational thinking.

For example, Pastor Clark Wrather tells of just a situation whereby two Christians he knew in college put their own spiritual spin on what they were doing so as to ignore God and get on with their lives. Both of these Christians went to church every Sunday. Both of them read their Bibles with some regularity. But spiritually, they were fooling themselves. These two young Christians fell in love, or at least lust. After a couple of months, they moved in with each other. The guy told Pastor Clark that he “could spend his whole life with this girl.”

So Pastor Clark asked him, “Then why don’t you marry her?”

“I will,” he said, “but we want to be together now. We can’t wait.”

Previously, this guy had had several failed relationships, and he really believed that this one would last. His ladylove became pregnant after a month of living together. At that point, their idyllic relationship started cracking apart. He wanted her to get an abortion. She wanted to keep the baby. He confided to Pastor Clark that he had a “real peace” about his decision that his girl friend should have an abortion, because “the baby would really mess up our live and God would not want that to happen.” This is the old lie that God would rather us to be happy than righteous. Not!

Eventually, the young couple quit talking to each other, and quit loving each other. Then she miscarried. She was devastated. He felt like God was really looking out for him, and took this to be a sign that God agreed with him on the baby. What an interesting spin he put upon his and her sinful actions.

He wanted to put the pieces back together with her, but those pieces had been smashed into little tiny bits by his lack of genuine concern for his girl friend. She left him, and has never spoken to him since. It is sad, because he is still unmarried. Maybe he would still have her, and they would indeed be married, if they had not been living under a spiritual delusion.

Many who come to know Christ live under spiritual delusions, brought about by putting a religious sounding spin on their immoral choices that lead to ungodly conduct. Unfortunately, this is nothing new. It has been going on among believers for millennia. And our text this morning reveals as much.

If you have your Bibles with you, please open them to **Judges 18:11**. This morning we are looking at the final act of a four-act play. Thus far in this reality drama, the tribe of Dan has decided to reject their God-given allotment of land in southern Israel and to look for more suitable, easier to live in “greener pastures.” They sent out five spies to investigate and found what they believed to be the perfect spot, up in the far northern end of Israel, near the farming community Laish. It had wide-open spaces for all of the family clans to have very productive farms with no political enemies or oversight. They could be themselves, answering to no one. It represented freedom to enjoy the good life. All they had to do was go up, wipe out an unsuspecting village of farming families who were a non-aggressive group of people, and take the property from them. Mind you, God had not given the Danites this land nor had they sought out God as to whether they should do this.

However, they had played the religious spin card by approaching what they knew to be a man named Jonathan, a Levite, who had been made an unauthorized Israeli priest for one family living in Ephraim. It was a very wealthy household in which one son, Micah, had built a religious shrine that employed Jonathan as his priest. The Danites had asked this Levite for a word from God as to whether they should proceed on their venture, and had taken what this priest said to them as being God’s support for them to sinfully

abandon God’s provision and call to be “salt and light” in southern Israel. At this point, an army of six hundred Danites were leaving southern Israel headed north to attack Laish.

We pick up the narrative at **verse 11**.

¹¹Then from the family of the Danites, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, six hundred men armed with weapons of war set out. [As we will see, these six hundred soldiers did not leave the rest of the tribe behind. The whole tribe went together, with the soldiers leading the way. Later, this positioning would change.] **¹²They went up and camped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. Therefore they called that place Mahaneh-dan [the camp of Dan] to this day; Behold, it is west of Kiriath-jearim.** **¹³They passed from there to the hill country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah.** **¹⁴Then the five men who went to spy out the country of Laish said to their kinsmen [the other six hundred soldiers leading the way], “Do you know that there are in these houses [a reference that this homestead was more like a compound made up of more than one family dwelling] an ephod and household idols and a graven image and a molten image? Now therefore, consider what you should do.”** **¹⁵They** [I believe this is a reference to the spies who had previously met Jonathan the Levite] **turned aside**

there and came to the house of the young man, the Levite, to the house of Micah, and asked him of his welfare. [Apparently, they met Jonathan outside Micah's house.] ¹⁶The six hundred men armed with their weapons of war, who were of the sons of Dan, stood by the entrance of the gate [to this family compound]. ¹⁷Now the five men who went to spy out the land went up and entered there [Micah's house], and took the graven image and the ephod and household idols and the molten image, while the priest stood by the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men armed with weapons of war.

The former spies swiftly emptied Micah's sanctuary of all its venerated contents. This list of objects appears four times in this section and thus suggests the writer of **Judges** considers Micah's idolatrous behavior to be a grievous sin against God.

¹⁸When these [the spies] went into Micah's house and took the graven image, the ephod and household idols and the molten image, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" ¹⁹They said to him, "Be silent, put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest." [They told Jonathan to cover his mouth because they did not want Micah, Jonathan's boss, to know what they were doing.] "Is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?" ²⁰The priest's

heart was glad.

The fact that the priest had been hired by Micah was not lost on the Danites. Hence, the spies bribed the Levite to abandon his employer, steal his religious possessions, and join their migration. With classic appeal to the Levite's ambitious and opportunistic nature, they offer him the status of "pope" to an entire tribe/clan. So, why wouldn't he be glad! Jonathan had just received a new job with a significant raise in salary and positional status.

Jonathan's response reveals his character. It reminds me of a reporter's interview with three looters that he had seen leaving a store during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. He asked them what they took, and the first two told him off with profanity. The third man, however, said, "I got some gospel music. I love Jesus!" Like the looters, Jonathan, knowing that he was stealing from his employer, **"took the ephod and household idols and the graven image and went among the people. ²¹Then they turned and departed, and put the little ones and the livestock and the valuables in front of them."**

By positioning both the members of their families as well as their tribal possessions out in front of them rather than behind them as they had previously been, the armed men were now in a better position to defend against an attack from the rear, which they expected to happen when Micah discovered they had taken his priest and valuable idols from his shrine. In the Danites minds, this entire episode was far from over.

²²When they had gone some distance from the house of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house assembled and overtook the sons of Dan. ²³They cried to the sons of Dan, who turned around and said to Micah, "What is the matter with you, that you have assembled together?" ²⁴He said, "You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and have gone away, and what do I have besides? So how can you say to me, 'What is the

matter with you?’’

In Micah’s stating, **“You took the gods I made,”** he acknowledged that he had invented his own religious system. Ironically, it could not help him right then! Someone had stolen his gods! In turn, the angry Danites threatened Micah.

²⁵The sons of Dan said to him, “Do not let your voice be heard among us, or else fierce men will fall upon you and you will lose your life, with the lives of your household.” ²⁶So the sons of Dan went on their way; and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his house.

You almost feel sorry for this fool. Again, there is much irony in it all. In the first act of this play, back in **17:1-6**, Micah entered as a thief. In this closing scene for Micah, he found himself the victim of grand larceny.

In the last verses of **chapter 18**, we read about the tribe of Dan’s attack on the farming community of Laish.

²⁷Then they took what Micah had made and the priest who had belonged to him and came to Laish, to a people quiet and secure, and struck them with the edge of the sword; and they burned the city with fire. ²⁸And there was no one to deliver them, because it was far from Sidon and they had no dealings with anyone, and it was in the valley which is near Beth-rehob. And they rebuilt the city and lived in it. ²⁹They called the name of the city Dan, after the

name of Dan their father who was born in Israel; however, the name of the city formerly was Laish.

Encountering little or no resistance, the Danites destroyed a quiet and unsuspecting people. Archaeologists have noted some evidence pointing to an interruption of cultures at Laish during the Late Bronze Period. Such evidence possibly reflects the arrival of the Danites to the area.

An important chronological note is necessary here. This action by the Danites of taking the land is referenced back in **Joshua 19:47**, where we read this, **“The territory of the sons of Dan proceeded beyond them; for the sons of Dan went up and fought with Leshem [Laish] and captured it. Then they struck it with the edge of the sword and possessed it and settled in it; and they called it Leshem Dan after the name of Dan their father.”**

Since the book of **Joshua** was written while Rahab was alive, this tells us that this event that is spelled out even more in the book of **Judges** took place while Rahab was alive. Hence, this is proof that these two chapters happened at the very beginning of the period known as the Judges, with the very next generation that followed Joshua.

Look with me at the next verse, **verse 30**. It has several interesting items worthy of mention. It reads, **“The sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land.”**

The Gershom referred to here is the eldest son of Moses and Zipporah, referenced in **Exodus 2:22**. It is this reference to Moses that catches the devout Hebrew reader off guard. Indeed, the rabbinic scribes, centuries after the original text had been copied several times over, found the association of Moses’ name with such abominable idolatrous behavior so objectionable they refused to accept the statement as it was written, and inserted a superscripted Hebrew *nun* between the first two consonants, transforming the Hebrew name Moses into **“Manasseh.”** Hence, the ESV translation is the preferred and correct translation of this passage.

Rashi, the Hebrew exegete (1040-96 BC), explained that the superscripted *n* (the small, raised up high letter *n*) was inserted to protect the honor of Moses, but the *n* was suspended to show that “**Manasseh**” was not the real reading.

The second significant observation is that until now, we didn’t really know this Levite’s name. I gave it to you early on, but for someone sitting down to read these two chapters, this is the first time the name Jonathan occurs. The identity of the Levite is climactic in the story. By holding back the Levites name until now, and disclosing that he is the grandson of Moses, the writer of **Judges** essentially crushes the Jewish reader under an emotional literary load of bricks. Shock, dismay, disbelief, a helpless feeling of tragedy--these are the reactions to the realization that the grandson of the man to whom God gave the Ten Commandments (including commandment number one against false worship) became the exemplar of violating the first commandment!

This genealogy of Jonathan also chronologically ties the story to the earliest years of the period of the judges, showing us how fast the average people in Israel had turned their backs on God on their own, without evil judges or leaders or people of influence. It just goes to show you that godliness is not genetic! It doesn’t matter if you are Billy Graham or a Billy goat. Even when parents do their best to raise their kids and grandkids to respect the Lord and to submit their lives to Jesus Christ, they still have wills and can choose to ignore all of the best and most loving instruction we provide. Moses, filled with the Holy Spirit, taught and commanded us with the words of **Deuteronomy 6:1-9**. Yet his own grandson Jonathan turned his back on the Lord.

There are no guarantees that even with the best effort and the best of intentions, parents will always raise Godly children. There is a supernatural aspect to what is happening in children’s lives over which we have no control. Parents may be blessed by having all of their kids follow the Lord. But those who are ought to be careful about taking too much pride in it, because they just as easily could have given the same effort and the outcome be different.

This individual historical documentary closes with this final thought in **verse 31**, “**So they set up for themselves Micah’s graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh.**”

Because the writer of **Judges** finishes this section with the mentioning of the house of God at Shiloh, he is making the point that the Danites' idolatrous sanctuary stands against the legitimate house of God at Shiloh. The Danites were the first tribe to establish idolatry publicly in Israel. And according to **verse 30**, Jonathan's lineage made sure that Dan would become established as a primary cult center.

Dan was one of the smaller tribes and had few warriors. When you look at the map, you see that they were given a prime piece of property, because when the enemy was removed, they would have been surrounded by other stronger Israeli tribes who could come to their aid in times of trouble. But they ignored God's gift and directive to take the land. They left it behind in search of greener pastures, and they thought they had found them.

So, what happened to the tribe of Dan after it had re-established itself in Laish and founded this apostate cultic site that would challenge the true worship of Yahweh?

Dr. Charles Dyer is an Old Testament professor who earned both a four-year masters of theology degree, as well as a Th.D., an additional three-year program, and made sixty-seven trips to Israel in twenty-two years. Some of those trips were summer-long backpacking trips throughout the land of Israel with graduate students. As a result of his extensive knowledge of the land, he is one of a few non-Israelis who has earned an official Israeli certificate to be an historical guide. In addition, in the late 90's, looking toward the visit of the Pope to Israel, the Israeli government, which had known of Dr. Dyer's ongoing extensive travels throughout Israel and the discovery of several important, but non-typical tourist sites, asked Dr. Dyer which of these unusual sites would he recommend they make some improvements to for the betterment of their tourism. The site at Dan was one of those sites.

I remember the day I stood amidst the archeological diggings of the tribe of Dan, in what was once Laish, with Mt. Hermon in the background. There were thick high walls, a worship center, and a large altar the Danites built so that they would not have to travel to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple there.

There I sat, with about fifty other folks, listening to Dr. Dyer explain the

tragedy of the tribe of Dan. Dan was the first tribe of Israel to feel the brunt of the Assyrian's savage attack, when they stormed into northern Israel to conquer it in 722 BC. There they were, in the wide open spaces, vulnerable, exposed as a small tribe, with no other Israelite tribes to support them. When Assyria came through and attacked Dan, it was so destroyed that there is no record of the tribe's existence today. Dan as a tribe has virtually disappeared.

Here's a question for you: How many sons did Jacob have? Twelve. When God determined to set up the nation of Israel, he allotted twelve areas that would be plots of land for twelve tribes. Keep in mind that the tribe of Levi was not allotted any land. So to make up for the extra plot, God chose to give Jacob's son Joseph two parcels of land, one for each of Jacob's grandsons, Manasseh and Ephraim. This is why, when we read certain lists of the tribes of Israel, we find thirteen tribes mentioned, rather than just twelve.

So when we read about the tribes of Israel during the period of the conquest, there are really thirteen tribes mentioned. I tell you this, because I want you to notice what we read in **Revelation 7:4-8**. This passage is prophetic, dealing with that future period of time known as the Great Tribulation. As we read these verses, count with me the number of tribes mentioned here.

⁴And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

⁵From the tribe of *Judah*, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of *Reuben* twelve thousand, from the tribe of *Gad* twelve thousand, ⁶from the tribe of *Asher* twelve thousand, from the tribe of *Naphtali* twelve thousand, from the tribe of *Manasseh* twelve thousand, ⁷from the tribe of *Simeon* twelve thousand, from the tribe of *Levi* twelve thousand, from the tribe of *Issachar* twelve thousand, ⁸from the tribe of *Zebulun* twelve thousand, from the tribe of *Joseph*

[Ephraim] **twelve thousand, from the tribe of *Benjamin*, twelve thousand were sealed.**

What do you notice about the tribes listed here? There is no tribe of Dan! Why? I have not read of any commentators who disagree with this answer, but the answer Dr. Dyer and others give is that Dan's rejection of God was so severe, and was deemed so wicked in that it ran its own cultic worship center in competition with the Temple in Jerusalem, that God wiped out that tribe forever! Hence, the move to the greener grass proved to be the deadliest decision of the tribe's life. Once they fell, they were never heard of again! They are not mentioned again.

While I attended Dallas Seminary, I had the privilege of sitting under the well known and highly respected preacher of the day, W. A. Criswell. He was not only very informative in his expositional preaching style, but he was almost as entertaining to listen to because of his dramatic southern drawl delivery. One of Dr. Criswell's trademarks in his preaching style was his use of repetition to emphasize a point. An example of this is seen in his commentary of **Revelation** on this passage. If you had ever heard him preach, his preaching manner was so distinct that you can even hear his voice as you read his printed written word. Of this subject of the tribe of Dan's absence from the list found here in **Revelation 7**, Dr. Criswell states: "Where is the tribe of Dan? You won't find it in glory. You won't find it in heaven. Dan went into idolatry, and Dan went into oblivion. And in the roll call of heaven, there's no tribe of Dan."

We often have no idea how far-reaching the effects of our personal sin will be. But we know this: If Micah, if Jonathan, if the tribe of Dan has anything to teach us, the far reaching effects of sin will never be good.

When looking back at these two chapters, we see that the writer of **Judges** portrays individual Israelites and an entire tribe as faithless and opportunistic. There is not an admirable character here. No one displays any devotion to Yahweh; no one demonstrates any concern for national well-being; no one behaves with any integrity. The Israelites have become as shameless in their religious expression and ethical conduct as they need to be to get their way. They were no different than the Canaanites.

People think that it is okay with God if they worship him on their terms and not His. But these chapters conclude that to do so will have devastating effects. When people choose to ignore God's commands and refuse to worship Him in His ways, they are in peril of God's wrath.

But it doesn't have to be that way! And this wasn't 100% true of all of Israel. There was a believing remnant--people who were far from perfect, but nonetheless, seeking to know God and follow Him. They sought his face and His blessing, even during this period. And those who did, He blessed. We see this in the shining examples of Ruth and Boaz.

Today, regardless of your past, Jesus came to die on the cross to forgive your sin and to transform and rejuvenate your heart and life. Jesus said, "**I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.**" If you have already trusted Christ, but recently have lived as though He does not exist, ignoring what you know to be right, proper, and true, then don't keep going the way you are. Stop putting your own spiritual spin on how God wants you to live. Turn back to Jesus. Seek his face and forgiveness and He will pick you up where you left off and continue to finish the work He has begun in your life.

If you have never trusted in Christ, why don't you this morning. Regardless of your age, Jesus makes a difference in the lives of those who seek him. He will remove your shame and guilt, give you a new name, and call you his child and a saint. He completely embraces you, not because of what you have done or failed to do, but because of Christ's finished work on the cross on your behalf. He loves you and we do too. Even though none of us have arrived, we want to be an encouragement to you to walk with us, together growing up in Christ, more in love with the One who loves us as no other.

