



Dark Days

Lesson Aim: To note the confusion that the apostasy of Israel has wrought, confusion, both civil and religious.

L12. Text: Judges 18:15-26. **Date:** June 1959.

Topic: Idolatry; Sin: Of Israel.

The time when every man does that which is right in his own eyes is usually a time of trouble. Man is subject to a natural depravity which leads him into sin. No man is safe following his own conscience, unless that conscience is sanctified by the influence of God.

The period following the death of Joshua was a time of religious apostasy. Israel has shown a recurring cycle of sin, oppression, repentance, and restoration. In today's lesson we find a rival sanctuary has been set up and a renegade Levite has sacrilegiously assumed the functions of the sacred office of priest. The true sanctuary of Jehovah was located at Shiloh and the people could seek Him there. Instead, idolatry had become more firmly entrenched by the making of another idol. All who came into contact with this idolatry were defiled.

A man named Micah, who lived in Mount Ephraim, had stolen some money from his mother. She pronounced a curse upon it and he returned it to her. She declared her intention of making a graven image of it, and as Micah agreed, they caused the founder to do the work. (This was likely intended to be a means of worship to Jehovah but it soon was perverted into mere idolatry.) The idol was set up in the house of Micah who consecrated one of his sons as a priest. When a Levite came by, Micah hired him as a priest in the place of his son. This is the background of our study for today. (See Judges 17). All the evil which occurs in these dark days can be related to this spirit which seemed prevalent throughout Israel. The days of apostasy are always dark days.

EXPOSITION

I. It Is a Dark Day when Men Forsake God, 18:1-13.

1. Men forsake God when they fail to obey His commands, verse 1. In Joshua's final address to Israel, he admonished the nation to drive the inhabitants out of the land and fully possess their territory. Many years have passed and still this enemy lives in the land. The tribe of Dan is so confined by the enemy that they do not have land enough to live upon. Instead of placing their faith in God and attacking the enemy, they decide to move and locate in another place. This is the whole problem. If they had stayed in their place and possessed that land, the record of Judges 18 would never have been written. So back of all this trouble and idolatry is the failure to obey God.

The failure to obey God is actually idolatry. If God give a command and a man fails to obey because he has other opinions or out of self-will, he is putting himself alongside of God. This is idolatry and a direct breaking of the first commandment, Exodus 10:3. The man who refuses to obey is saying either that he is wise as God and need not obey. What man is there who has the nerve to say this?

2. Men forsake God when they depend upon human associations, verse 2-3. Upon the decision to move, a committee of five men was selected from the tribe of Dan and sent out to find a new home. They were interested in two things (1) good land and (2) a place they could conquer. On the way they stopped at the house of Micah to spend the night. They recognized the dialect of Micah's priest as being that of a different part of Palestine. Upon investigation it was found they knew this young priest. Let us observe that this is the first religious note in the narrative. The decision of the tribe of Dan to move and desert their original inheritance, the selection of the committee, and their travels thus far, all seem to be done without consulting the Lord. It is dangerous for men to make decisions and try to direct their lives without seeking the will of God. No man can really prosper under these conditions because sooner or later he will make a mistake of judgment which will be tragic.

3. Men depart from God when they trust in mercenary religious leaders, verses 4-5. The men from Dan inquire why the young priest is there in Micah's house and the priest honestly confesses, "He hired me to be his priest." The Danites knew that, as a descendant of Moses, the Levite had no right to be officiating at an idolatrous shrine. Yet, they offered no objection. If they had possessed the true spirit of Israel they would have been indignant

to learn that a sanctuary had been set up to rival Shiloh. It seems that instead of being angry, this occasion simply revealed the idolatrous propensities of their own hearts. They now ask the renegade priest to inquire at the oracle of an idol god to see if their way is right.

Thus does one sin lead on from another. From disobedience in possessing the land, to fellowship with a renegade mercenary priest, to giving approval to idolatry—thus goes the course of the Danites' sin. It is interesting to read the list of the "works of the flesh" in Galatians 5:19-21, observing that each sin mentioned is worse than the one before. Thus does sin's course always lead downward. The sin which one commits in darkness will be committed in the light if it is practiced often.

4. Men depart from God when they accept the counsel of a rival religion, verses 6-13. The Danites ask the priest to inquire of God if they were on the right way. (Observe that they do not use the name "Jehovah," the covenant name of God.) The inquiry is addressed to God through the idol and it is seriously questioned if the Lord had anything to do with the answer. The response of the oracle is "*Go in peace: before the Lord is your way wherein ye go,*" verse 6. This expression could be interpreted either good or bad, though the Danites took it as an approval of their way. The priest could pretend either interpretation if the journey was a success or if it was not. The most serious point here is that the representatives of the tribe of Dan, one of the twelve tribes in Israel, was seeking counsel at the altar of an idol god. Oh, the depravity of a human heart!

There are still many Christians who are exposing themselves and their children to the corrupt doctrines of religious sects. Literature is taken into the home and "witnesses" are invited there likewise. It is well to know the error of the false religious systems, but only one well founded in the faith should expose himself to them lest he be led into error. Let the Christian approach the Bible with a prayerful and willing heart, depending on the Holy Spirit's help, and he will know the truth! "*But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed,*" Galatians 1:8.

II. It Is a Dark Day When Men Steal From One Another, 18:14-18.

1. Theft may be performed under the guise of religion, verse 14. When the new location of the tribe is settled and the people prepare to move, the spies remember the oracle of the priest of Micah had come true. They began to consider whether perhaps this priest and his oracle would be valuable to them in their new settlement. The agreement is that it would be

profitable. Of course the only way they can get the image and priest from Micah is to take it by force or to steal it. Since the idol was composed of eleven hundred shekels of silver (17:2), it was very valuable. Stealing it would be the equivalent of stealing any other thing of value in Micah's house. The Danites try to defend their theft by placing a religious motive upon it. That makes the theft no less serious.

The Bible recognizes the right of the individual to hold property. Any action by an individual or a government to deprive the individual of the right or personal property is wrong socially and religiously. The so-called "communism" (having all things in common) of the early Christian church (Acts 2:44) was strictly voluntary (Acts 5:3-4). Those who try to defend communism or socialism on this basis are wholly without warrant. No one has the right to deny another of ownership of property against his will.

2. Theft involves an element of deceit, verses 15-18. When the warriors of the tribe of Dan drew near Micah's house the five men (who had been here before) took the Levite to consult with the six hundred soldiers at the gate. (The soldiers were on their way to capture the city where the tribe planned to settle.) The five left the Levite there with these men and returned to the house where they took up the idol and slipped it out of the house. The Levite is easily persuaded to follow them. Thus the pretended friendly visit with the priest (at least so it seemed to those of Micah's house) was in reality the working of a plan to steal the idols and the priest from Micah. Deceit is one of the prime tools which Satan uses in the performance of his business. The true Christian is marked by his open face and freeness from hypocrisy and deceit of any kind.

III. It Is a Dark Day When Religious Leaders Seek Personal Advantages, 18:19-21.

John Wesley once said, "of course I love the carpeted pulpit and the cushioned chair. But where is my love for Christ unless I trample these all under foot to serve Him?" God have mercy upon the nation, denomination, or congregation where religious leaders are motivated by mercenary or other personal advantage.

1. One may serve to work for personal profit, verses 4, 19. The priest of Micah (who was actually a Levite) was honest to admit that he was so serving because Micah had hired him. His pay was ten shekels of silver and a suit of clothes, annually, and his food. At least we must respect the Levite for being honest. However, when he has the opportunity of increasing his congregation by moving from the house of Micah to the tribe of Dan, he is

ready to go. Observe that he did not inquire of the will of his god. When the opportunity presented itself the idol was simply packed and carried away. One wonders how people could trust in such a god!

No minister worthy of the name will be guilty of using a congregation as a stepping-stone to something bigger and better. Though the Lord often rewards diligent service by such advancement, the modern minister must seek to be sure it is the Lord's call and not mere ambition that leads from one place of service to another. God have mercy upon the man who is motivated by any lesser motive and upon the congregation with whom he works.

2. Such a person will have little loyalty to God or his people, verses 20-21. The Levite was not even thoughtful enough to "resign" to his employer. He joins in the theft with the six hundred soldiers from the tribe of Dan and leaves without Micah knowing of it. How happy he was that he had been promoted even if it did involve deceit and theft! We need not be surprised to find this happening. The person motivated by base motives of self advancement will not be concerned about other people except as they contribute to his benefit.

IV. It Is a Dark Day When Men Trust In a God They Must Defend, 18:22-30.

1. A false god must be protected by his devotees, verses 22-24. If it were not so very serious it would be amusing to watch Micah and the men of Dan argue over their god. The loss of the images and the priest affected Micah's neighbors, since they believed their welfare was endangered. Thus they join in pursuit of the Danites who had stolen their gods. Imagine the worshippers of a god having to unite to defend their god!

Isaiah 44 is a remarkable passage dealing with the foolishness of idolatry. He compares the making of an idol with the eternity of Jehovah. When the enemy comes he must put his god on a horse or in a cart and run for safety. Instead, Jehovah is our Creator and when the enemy comes He fights for us. The man who is content today with morality, wealth, church membership, or anything else, as a substitute for Jesus Christ is an idolator and will surely fall in judgment.

2. Zeal for a false religion leads on to other sins, verses 25-26. Micah's objections to the Danites' theft of his idols and priest falls on unconcerned ears. Instead of making some sort of settlement with him, they threaten his life unless he goes back home and leaves them alone. This sets out two lessons: (1) That they who dare to commit theft will be easily

induced, if needful to secure their ill-gotten spoil, to commit murder also, (2) That where power is with unprincipled oppressors, to complain of injustice is often only to provoke further injury.

Oh that Christians had the zeal for their Lord that Micah had for his idols. Many of us are shamed by such devotion as he shows. How lightly do we sometimes value spiritual realities in comparison with material advantage. Yet, when his means of worship was gone Micah cried, *“I have nothing left,”* verse 24. The hidden joys of the Spirit, if once they are lost, are worth our crying, *“What have I left?”* God, give us such zeal for eternal things.

3. A false god is no aide to its devotees, verses 26-30. Mere force was the law in this day. When Micah saw the people of Dan were too strong for him there was nothing left to do but let them take the idols. The god was unable to either defend itself or aid Micah. We can hope Micah went back home a wiser man, having had experimental proof of the vanity of idols. Whatever lessons this event may have taught Micah, it teaches us some very important lessons. (1) Those who trust in a false religion will someday find themselves without hope, their false confidences having been abolished and their refuge swept away. (2) No foundation will stand but that which God has laid. (3) Let us do away with all methods of religion and hopes of salvation except that which is centered in God’s Son. Let us now and forever embrace the whole truth of the gospel of the grace of God. Only thereby can we have a religious inheritance which no man can steal.

The tragedy of this occasion is found in Judges 18:31, *“And they set them up Micah’s graven image, which he made, all the time that that house of God was in Shiloh.”* The tabernacle, the true place of worship of Jehovah, was in Shiloh all the time these men were fighting, stealing and arguing over the idols. Such disturbance was for nothing. Those who got the idols were no better off than those who lost them. The idolatry instituted by the Danites on this occasion was a curse to their tribe in all the years until the captivity of the Northern Kingdom, 722 B.C. God have mercy upon those who have a make-believe, synthetic religion!

QUESTIONS

1. How did Micah’s idol come into being?
2. Why did the Danites choose to move?
3. Tell of the priest who served Micah’s idol.
4. What proposition did the Danites make to the priest?

5. Why is it wrong to render religious service for personal profit?
6. Describe the making of an idol mentioned in Isaiah 44.
7. Is there still a sin of idolatry among unbelievers?
8. Give two lessons you have learned from our study.