



SIGNS OF TROUBLE

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Judges 17:1-18:31
Eleventh Message
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Three years ago, I enlarged the lawn area in my back yard. I uprooted bushes, rototilled the soil, leveled the entire area, and planted grass seed. The grass began to grow, but so did the weeds. I took samples of them to a local nursery, and I was advised that a spray would take care of all the weeds except one species, Bermuda grass. No weed killer on the market would get rid of it, I was told. The only way to kill Bermuda grass was to kill everything in the area where it was growing and plant grass seed again. That sounded like a lot of work, so I decided to spray the other weeds and try to control the Bermuda grass. There wasn't much of it, and I didn't want to replant the entire area where it was growing. So I let it live. Over the past two years, that Bermuda grass, which began as a small patch, has taken over more than half my lawn. I have learned that its roots grow very deep and there is little chance of getting rid of it. "Devil's weed," the nursery man called it. Every week when I mowed, I couldn't even see the healthy grass; all I could see was Bermuda grass everywhere. It drove me to distraction. I decided to get ruthless. I bought the most potent vegetation killer I could find and put five applications of it on the areas where the devil's weed was growing. I turned the soil over by hand, rototilled again, and replanted grass seed over about half of the yard. I wish I had dealt with the problem earlier, when the weed was more manageable, rather than waiting until it took over half of my lawn. I suppose the Bermuda grass will probably come back, but for now my yard is "sin"-free!

Sin is like Bermuda grass: it begins its assault on our spiritual life by creeping in, little by little. We don't think it's a big deal; it's nothing to get too worked up about. But before long, we find ourselves completely entangled in and overwhelmed by foreign elements that have invaded our spiritual soil. What seemed a relatively minor problem at first grows into a monster of overwhelming magnitude.

How is it that we become so easily entangled in sin and spiritual darkness? And what signs do we need to be on the lookout for? This is the theme of the Old Testament book of Judges. Judges is the story of God's people, the nation of Israel, of their entanglement with sin and spiritual darkness, and how God delivered them time after time when at last they called out to him.

In our studies in Judges, we come now to the saga of that well known biblical character, Samson. Before we begin his story, however, I want to set the stage today by looking at events in Israel during the time of the Judges. We find this background information in the marvelous narrative of chapters 17-18 of this book. Chapters 17-21 do not follow chronologically the story of Samson, but rather are flashbacks to the period that followed on the heels of the death of Joshua. Chapters 17-18 form one unit of study, and chapters 19-21 another. Within these chapters we find two mentions of the verse that we have already found to be the theme verse of this book: *"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."* (Judges 17:6; 21:25). So these accounts in chapters 17-21 give a flavor of the sin and the darkness that had begun to penetrate Israel in the days of the Judges. These ancient narratives will help to alert us to the signs of trouble, for signs of sin, the virulent weed that can sneak into our lives.

Our story this morning is built around two characters, a man named Micah, and a Levite named Jonathan, and one tribe, the

tribe of Dan. Our focus will be on these elements as we begin reading our text.

Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. And he said to his mother, "The eleven hundred pieces of silver which were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse in my hearing, behold, the silver is with me; I took it." And his mother said, "Blessed be my son by the LORD." He then returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother, and his mother said, "I wholly dedicate the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son to make a graven image and a molten image; now therefore, I will return them to you." So when he returned the silver to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave them to the silversmith who made them into a graven image and a molten image, and they were in the house of Micah. And the man Micah had a shrine and he made an ephod and household idols and consecrated one of his sons, that he might become his priest. In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he was staying there. Then the man departed from the city, from Bethlehem in Judah, to stay wherever he might find a place; and as he made his journey, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah. And Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to stay wherever I may find a place." Micah then said to him, "Dwell with me and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, a suit of clothes, and your maintenance." So the Levite went in. And the Levite agreed to live with the man; and the young man became to him like one of his sons. 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 prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest."

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. 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. 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?" And he said to them, "Thus and so has Micah done to me, and he has hired me, and I have become his priest." And they said to him, "Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether our way on which we are going will be prosperous." And the priest said to them, "Go in peace; your way in which you are going has the LORD's approval."

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 hu-

miliating them for anything in the land, and they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone. When they came back to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers said to them, "What do you report?" And 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. When you enter, you shall 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."

Then from the family of the Danites, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, six hundred men armed with weapons of war set out. And they went up and camped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. Therefore they called that place Mahaneh-dan to this day; behold, it is west of Kiriath-jearim. And they passed from there to the hill country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah.

Then the five men who went to spy out the country of Laish answered and said to their kinsmen, "Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod and household idols and a graven image and a molten image? Now therefore, consider what you should do." And they 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. And the six hundred men armed with their weapons of war, who were of the sons of Dan, stood by the entrance of the gate. Now the five men who went to spy out the land went up and entered there, 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. And when these 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?" And they said to him, "Be silent, put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. 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?" And the priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod and household idols and the graven image, and went among the people.

Then they turned and departed, and put the little ones and the livestock and the valuables in front of them. When 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. And they cried to the sons of Dan, who turned around and said to Micah, "What is the matter with you, that you have assembled together?" And he 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?'" And the sons of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest fierce men fall upon you and you lose your life, with the lives of your household." So 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.

Then 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. And 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. And they 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. And the sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. 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. (17:1-18:31, NASB)

I. Micah's Self-Made Religion (17:1-6)

Micah's name means, "who is like the LORD?" His character, unfortunately, falls far short of his exalted title: Micah was a thief. He stole eleven hundred pieces of silver from his mother, a considerable amount when we take into account the fact that a year's salary for a priest came to only 10 pieces of silver (17:10). Micah may well have learned his sharp practices from his mother for she, too, was a thief. She dedicated the silver to the Lord, but only gave 200 pieces. Furthermore, she compromised truth, and she neglected to correct or discipline her son for his misdeeds. Instead, she canceled out the curse with a blessing and dedication. Then she led the way to idolatry, giving the silver to a silver-smith.

Obviously, Micah's sin was idolatry. This was his area of darkness. He made a graven image (a carved idol coated with silver), and a molten image (an idol of poured silver), in violation of the third commandment, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (Exod. 20:4-5). Micah had a shrine, a place of worship; he had an ephod, priestly garments; he made household gods ("teraphim"), many of them small carvings used in the practice of divination, like the ones that Rachel stole from her father; he established a false priesthood, consecrating one of his sons as a priest in the house; and later he hired a Levite, Jonathan, to be his personal priest.

What was Micah's motivation in all of this? It was to gain favor with God, to advance himself with Yahweh. When he appointed a Levite to be a priest, he was so thrilled that he said, "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest." Later, according to our text, the tribe of Dan used Micah's idols to the same end.

In a word, then, idolatry was Micah's sin. He had established a household worship system. His was a self-made religion. He could have written the "Sunset" book on do-it-yourself religion. It was religion without revelation; religious practice without God's truth; a religion of convenience rather than a religion of obedience; a private religion rather than community involvement. But it was really worse than that. What is being referred to in this text is not some pagan idol or abomination. We don't find the names "Baal" or "Ashteroth" here. What Micah did was something much more subtle and dangerous. He had the right God (he called him "the LORD"), but he had a wrong worship. He was making images of God and worshipping this god falsely.

The key to understanding all of this is found in the last verse of chapter 18, "they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh." God's house was not far away. Worship was to be carried out only at the place designated by God, as the book of Deuteronomy stated, "the place which the LORD your God chooses" (Deut. 12:5, 14; 16:1-7). Micah had the right God but the wrong worship. He had taken religion into his own hands and placed it in his own home. The result of this was that nothing that he was doing distinguished him from the worship of all the Canaanite tribes. This was how they worshipped. Even though Micah proclaimed service to Yahweh, he acted like all the other peoples around him.

When God condemns idolatry, he not only forbids the worship of false gods, he forbids the worship of himself, the one true God, by images. Such false worship robs God of his glory and leads people into spiritual darkness. Luther said, "Anything that one imagines of God apart from Christ is only useless thinking and vain idolatry." John Calvin wrote, "A true image of God is not to be found in all the world and hence His glory is defiled, and His truth corrupted by the lie, whenever He is set before our eyes in visible form. Therefore to devise any image of God is it-

self impious: because by this corruption His majesty is adulterated and He is figured to be other than He is.”

This then is the first sign of trouble, the first way we allow darkness to grow in our spiritual soil: our worship becomes man-made, convenient, and isolated. We think we can bless ourselves through self-devised ritual and routine. But this is not worship as God designed it, in the place he has designated, among the community he had chosen. We cease to worship the God of creation, the God of salvation, the God of redemption, in spirit and truth. Instead, motivated by our own personal desire for prosperity, we fill our lives with carvings and images. We begin to worship the teraphim.

It is obvious how this has happened throughout history. When the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms, Jeroboam invented a rival worship in the northern kingdom. He had the right God, but the wrong worship. We see this in the ornate churches of Europe that are now empty and lifeless. Right God, wrong worship. We see it in our own nation as the church has begun to stray from God’s truth, seeking to satisfy society rather than God. Right God, wrong worship. The weeds of self-made religion begin to grow, almost unnoticed at first, but before long they squeeze the very life of God out of our worship.

It’s easy to point the finger and say that this is what is happening in other churches, but not here among ourselves. But we must be careful here. Our own minds and hearts are equally susceptible to systems of worship that are not God-centered. We must evaluate our own worship, our own involvement with God. In our approach to God it is easy to allow ritual, routine, performance and self-invention to replace truth, obedience and holiness. When we think of idolatry, we shouldn’t confine our thoughts to the obvious things like sports, cars and careers. Our idols can look spiritual, and they can be approved by society. They can be things like images of Mary, church attendance, good deeds, a particularly spiritual friend, our spouse or children.

When I was a young Christian, a friend gave me a cross to wear as an identifying mark of my new faith. Soon that cross became a symbol of protection for me, signifying that God was with me. If I forgot to wear it, I felt a little unsure and tentative, uncertain whether God was with me. Now there is nothing wrong with wearing a cross, but if we look to it rather than God himself, we can fall into idolatry. One day I discovered that I had mislaid my cross and I was dismayed. Later, however, I came to see that God designed things that way because he wanted me to know that his presence with me did not depend on some outward symbol or image.

Whenever we look to anything or anyone other than God himself, we can fall into the trap of idolatry. The weed of self-made religion robs us of true worship.

II. A Levite’s Self-Seeking Service (17:7-13; 18:11-20)

Next, we encounter a Levite, a priest named Jonathan, “the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh.” Jonathan’s sin was selfish service. He was a spiritual ladder-climber, committed only to self-promotion and personal betterment. Now, make no mistake. There is nothing wrong with trying to better yourself, but in this case, Jonathan’s service was completely contrary to the will of God because Jonathan used God’s name to bring him advancement.

Jonathan had a storied career. It began in Bethlehem (17:7-8), which was not a Levitical city; thus he probably should not have been there in the first place. So he departed there to stay wherever he might find a place to settle down and begin to advance himself. He was not content with where God had him. He did not have the call of God on him. In his travels, Jonathan stumbled across Micah’s house and Micah, hearing that he was a Levite, made him a priest to himself and to his house. This, of course, was not God’s, but man’s call — a direct denial of the word of God. This was no small matter, as we see in the OT.

Once, when an ordinary Levite named Korah tried to act as a priest, God intervened by causing the ground to open up and swallow him (Numbers 16).

Later, the spies of the Danites entered Micah’s house and stole his idols. At first, Jonathan tried to stop them, but then the Danites made him an offer he couldn’t refuse: “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?” they asked. What was Jonathan’s response? “And the priest’s heart was glad” (18:20). He was nothing more than a servant for hire, a priest who would serve the highest bidder. He was using the supposedly spiritual community to increase his status and wealth. His service was not intended to help others find God, nor was his desire to bring glory to God. His apparent service for God, in the name of God, was self-service.

Failing to be content with who we are and using service to selfish ends is a sign of trouble. If we allow it, this is a weed that can grow unchecked in the spiritual community. We are not successful in finding our place in the world, so we begin to look around for a spot where we can fit in. So we begin to serve within the church because that brings attention, status, influence and a sense of identity. Soon, instead of serving others simply for the joy of serving, because we have no interest other than self-advancement, we begin to hire ourselves out to the highest bidder: to the situation that carries the most honor; to the opportunity that will bring the most recognition; to the need that will bring us closer to the pastor or the people we most want to associate with. Our desire for service is merely a mask, and we use the spiritual community for our own advancement. This is a dangerous weed that can choke and stifle our own spiritual life and the life of the body of Christ where we worship.

Gaston, the villain in the recent Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast*, took pains to appear caring and serving, but all of his service was only self-service. Although he wanted everyone to believe he was a great guy, all he was interested in was his own advancement. At times, it is easy for us to see this trait in our children. When one of my children comes to me and says, “Can I vacuum?” or some other high-sounding, apparently self-sacrificial thing, I know something is up: they want something from me. When we grow older, of course, we become more subtle and thus much less obvious. We become better at masking our ulterior motives, and we take great pains to cover up the desires of our selfish hearts.

The apostle Paul has a salient word for us here: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:3-7). Paul has another appropriate word, in his letter to Timothy: “godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment” (1 Tim. 6:6).

The weed of selfish serving robs us of the joy of true spiritual service.

The final element in our story centers around the tribe of Dan.

III. The Danites’ Easy Living (18:1-10, 27-31)

The goal of the Danites was simple: they wanted to gain an inheritance. We find this in 18:1, “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.” Joshua 19 records that Dan’s assigned inheritance lay between Ephraim and Judah, but in the first chapter of Judges, we see that they failed in this assignment: “Then the Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the valley”

(1:34). So the tribe of Dan was scouting around, looking for a place they could call their inheritance, when they found this nice little spot. Laish at first glance might seem to be a real prize, but on closer examination it turned out to be a quiet colony of Phoenicians, isolated from their allies, far from Sidon. Easy pickings for the Danites. They knew Laish was there for the taking.

The sin of the Danites is not hard to recognize. Easy living was their devil's weed. They had not taken what God had given them; instead, they grabbed what he had not given them. They looked for a comfortable place where the natives were unprepared, undefended, and thus vulnerable. The Danites chose a place and a people they knew they could defeat — and they didn't have to trust God for the results. They chose the easy place and the easy way. God had called Israel to war, and Dan had refused to fight his battle. And it was not that they were committed to peace, but because they were dedicated to ease of life. In the song of Deborah, from chapter 5 of Judges, the prophetess and judge asked the question, "Why did Dan stay in ships?" (i.e. stay at ease?) (5:17). It was because ease was what they were looking for.

The judgment of the tribe of Dan was severe. In 1 Chronicles, where the list of tribes and families in Israel is given, Dan is the only tribe that is totally ignored. In Revelation 7, when 144,000 Hebrews carry out a special ministry, Dan is not mentioned. "Dan did not take what God had given to them," wrote one commentator, "and they took what God had not given them. In the process, they lost all that they had."

This sin that is pictured for us by the tribe of Dan, the sin of easy living, is another sign of trouble, a weed that can strangle the spiritual life that God wants us to enter into. This sin of not taking on what seems difficult, and being content fighting with and defeating only what we know we can conquer, must be rooted out.

I want to apply this text on two levels. The first has to do with sin. The land of Canaan, as we have already seen, represents the Spirit-filled life in Christ. Christians are to enter into that life in the same way that Israel was to enter in and possess the land of Canaan. There are enemies in the land, of course. Even though God gives us the land and promised victory, we must enter into the battle by faith, rooting out the deeply entrenched habits and patterns that hold us captive. The temptation we face, however, is the same temptation the tribe of Dan faced. The enemies seem very powerful, so we are tempted to look around for an enemy, like Laish, that is isolated and unfortified, one that we know we can defeat in a battle that does not require faith; then we hold up our victory as a monument to our faith. It looks good, but the trouble is, we stop there. We take it easy, and don't take the land that God wants us to possess. We stop using bad language, but we do nothing about gossip. We cancel our subscription to Playboy magazine, but we do nothing about our lust-filled thoughts. We give a monetary gift to an individual or a church, but we do nothing about our greed-infested hearts. We open up our home to people we enjoy being with, but we turn away from the unlovely.

The second way of applying this text has to do with our being careful to not put ourselves in situations where too much faith is required of us, in circumstances where too much risk is involved. Thus, we always take the path of least resistance. Easy living. We don't reach beyond our known capabilities. We don't want to leave our comfort zone. This is the way to a dull life, however. There isn't much adventure involved, and thus vital faith in Christ is never truly experienced.

I grew up with this kind of mentality. I was always afraid of anything I felt was too difficult for me. While I did very well in school, I always took the path of least resistance lest I fail. I took

only the courses I knew I could conquer, so I virtually guaranteed my own success. I worked as an engineer for 10 years, and soon that career became a comfortable and safe haven for me. But then I became a pastor. When I took that step 10 years ago, I had no idea how much that would stretch me. I have experienced some very difficult times in the ministry, times of great doubt and confusion. It would have been easy for me to quit, and, in fact, quitting would have been consistent with my past. But for some reason this time I didn't want to take the path of least resistance. I wanted to confront the most entrenched and fortified cities in my life. I guess I was willing to risk more to experience God's power beyond what I already knew about. This is how God wants us to live. He wants us to bypass Laish and go on to take the cities and fight the battles we feel we cannot win. It is then we will experience the surpassing greatness of his power at work in us.

Here is how one writer has put it: "There is no greater danger faced by North American Christians than the love of ease. It is so tempting to carve out a Laish for ourselves — a quiet little island of peace where we can live in affluence and forget all about the needy world outside, and the enemies of the gospel, and the radical claims of Jesus Christ on our lives. Why fight when we can sleep? Why sacrifice when we can settle down?"

The weed of easy living robs us of a true experience of the power of Christ.

This then is the historical, cultural, and spiritual framework of the book of Judges. These are the three weeds, signs of trouble leading to darkness and slavery to sin, that can grow in our spiritual soil: self-made religion, like the religion practiced by Micah; self-seeking service, like Jonathan practiced; and easy living, the downfall of the Danites. These weeds begin to grow almost unnoticed. At first, it doesn't seem they will become major problems. Bermuda grass is green, and as such it doesn't look that much out of place in a lawn. You think you can control it. If you keep the grass cut short, it won't appear all that bad. But if you don't deal with it, soon it will take over completely. In the same way, if we don't deal with the weeds of darkness, they will take over and ruin our spiritual garden. This is the message of the book of Judges.

"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." The book of Proverbs has a counterpoint to this theme verse from Judges: "*There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death*" (Prov. 14:12). The framework of the book of Judges may be spiritual darkness, but this very book also declares that God's light shines in the darkness; that his life can resurrect us from the dead; that his power can release us from bondage. Just as God raised up judges to save the nation of Israel, so too God has sent his Son Jesus to save us and set us free from these trappings of darkness. And when we see this God for all his glory, then we indeed worship in spirit and truth and serve with a pure heart, confident that the God of creation and redemption is with us to take on the most overwhelming foes.

It is often in the midst of darkness that God's light is most clearly seen. This is where we will begin next week in the story of Samson. God raised up Samson and brought him to faith, and he used the mighty warrior and judge to deliver the nation of Israel almost in spite of himself.

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