

The Book of Judges

Lesson 24 - Chapters 16, 17, and 18

We'll finish up today with Samson, and also begin to deal with the concluding section of the book of Judges that is wholly different in character than the first 16 chapters. In fact, Samson and chapter 16 end the discussion of the *Shophetim* (the Judges) of Israel, at least within the book of Judges itself. The conclusion of the era of the Judges is therefore not discussed within the book of Judges, but is actually addressed within the books of Ruth and Samuel. And, by the way, we'll move on to Ruth and then go to Samuel upon ending our study of the book of Judges.

Our last lesson revolved around the subject of faith versus faithfulness, and of the betrayal of Samson by his Philistine girlfriend Delilah. As a brief review, I'd like you to recall that it can catch people by surprise to hear that faith is quite different than faithfulness. And the difference is basically that faith is a state or condition of mind and spirit, while faithfulness is acting upon that state. Faith of itself is passive; faithfulness is action. Faithfulness is a physical acting out or expression of our inner faith. A life that bears little or no signs of faithfulness doesn't necessarily mean that the person doesn't have faith; but it does mean that they are being disobedient and that they are spiritually going in reverse, or have reached dormancy. It is a dangerous (even fatal) position for a Believer, but due to the very nature of faithlessness such a person usually doesn't even recognize their precarious situation and when confronted with it usually denies it by stating their continuing faith in the God of Israel (and in the case of a modern Believer, faith in Messiah).

We saw that same principle playing out in the life of Samson. Samson maintained his faith in the God of Israel (so far as we know) throughout his life. However his faithfulness to His God ebbed and flowed and what we read about in the book of Judges usually centers on its low points. His lack of faithfulness led finally to the sad and utterly terrifying quote of verse 20, after his hair was cut off: ***"But he didn't know that ADONAI had left him."***

Let's re-read a short section of chapter 16 to get our bearings for today's lesson.

RE-READ JUDGES 16:19 – end

When Samson's insatiable lust for sex and beautiful pagan women finally overwhelmed him in the person of Delilah, he reached the point of no return. It would just be a matter of time before he was willing to make the all-important symbol of his special and holy Nazarite status before the Lord (his long and uncut hair) something he was willing to risk losing if it meant he could continue in his fleshly pleasures. I have no doubt that consciously he never thought that losing that symbol (and with it his set-apart relationship with YHWH) would actually happen; but

neither did he any longer value it so much that he would protect it at any cost, beginning with altering his behavior.

Samson was born for the purpose of bedeviling the Philistines; that meant he would have constant contact with them but it did not mean he was to become AS them. The Philistines were to be his project, and his enemy, not his closest friends (even if a cordial acquaintance with them at some level was inevitable). I point this out because it is common within Christianity for Believers with good intent to involve themselves in the lives of criminals, or prostitutes, or druggies, or the greedy or powerful, and when questioned about it claim that this is their calling (which it may, indeed, be). However it is also rather common to see that such a Believer begins to look more and more like those he came to rescue than the Savior who may have sent him. It happens that this Believer starts to take on the characteristics of the unsaved, but says it's so he may save them. The thing is that all too often this notion that we're rubbing elbows primarily of non-Believers as a means of doing something for God is that in fact we're doing it for ourselves. Sometimes it's as camouflage to hide our inner desires and other times it's a means to appear especially pious. Samson grew to feel more comfortable with the pagan Philistines than he did among his own people. Such a comfort level is quite dangerous and can lead to a serious downfall unless one increases his nearness to God, not decreases it or compromises it supposedly for the sake of fitting in with the group to which he is ministering.

Samson was captured and put into metal shackles; the Philistines had much experience with the inadequacy of ropes as a binding mechanism for him and weren't taking any chances. But they also permanently blinded him both as a humiliation and as a means of making him more docile. As a further humiliation verse 21 explains that they put him to work grinding grain. Now this humiliation is usually pictured as Samson handcuffed to a huge industrial grain grinder that was normally powered by an ox or a donkey. However no such thing is implied and all current archeological evidence is that that type of grain mill wasn't even invented until at least 700 years after his death. Samson merely sat at a standard stone grain mill and ground grain, a few handfuls at a time, from dawn to dusk.

Grinding grain was considered woman's work and for such a manly man as Samson to be reduced to doing such a thing (after his notorious exploits) it made him utterly impotent and laughable to his enemies whom he had harmed so much in his heyday. But while he was languishing away in prison, something else was happening: his hair began to grow back. If one gives it a little thought a good question would be: why would the writer of Judges record such an obvious and trivial thing as the very natural action of Samson's hair growing back? After all this would happen to anyone under almost any circumstance. Of course the answer is that the inspired writer has something more in mind here and it implies a re-examination by Samson of his relationship with God and recognition of his personal failings. Samson was ready to acknowledge his sin and was going through the terribly painful process of true repentance. And repentance would lead to some degree of spiritual strengthening and some amount of restoration of his Nazarite status. This is a pattern for us to all be acutely aware: 1) if we are unfaithful, our spiritual strength will deteriorate. 2) As our spiritual strength deteriorates our usefulness to the Kingdom of God and His purposes for us begins to evaporate. 3) When we have become so unfaithful (we cross a line known only to God) as to cause God to react, God can choose to depart from us (at least in the sense of being an active protector or influence in

our lives). 4) And when that happens our fall or destruction is certain.

The good news is that even when we have finally come to destruction, if we recognize our sin, sincerely repent and confess it, then the Lord will return to us. However that return may not be immediate or how or to the same degree or even for the same purpose as before our fall. Samson was in a glorious position for a long time; he was one of but a handful of Judges over Israel. Samson was feared and revered by friend and foe. The earth trembled wherever he walked and he was invincible. But as we'll soon see, even though he returned to God and God returned to him, his new much deteriorated condition bore little resemblance to the past glory. Sin has consequences (lasting consequences); forgiveness doesn't mean those consequences will be totally averted here on earth. It merely means that the Lord will not count that sin against us and thus cut us off from Him in eternity.

As happened on regular occasions the elite of the Philistines gathered at their Temple to offer a sacrifice. The chief Philistine god was Dagon, or Dagon. And while it was not for the express purpose of mocking Samson that they assembled, they did offer up thanks to Dagon for handing Samson over to them.

Dagon is usually depicted as in the form of half-man, half-fish (after all the Philistines were called the Sea Peoples and their territory crawled along the Mediterranean Sea). However Dagon's function was as the god of grain and harvest, so fertility also played a role in Dagon's sphere of influence. No doubt it was an agricultural festival of some sort that was underway in Philistia. What is even sadder than Samson's pitiful condition is that the God of Israel was seen by the enemies of Israel as defeated by Dagon the god of the Philistines; and the Lord is always concerned that the actions of His set-apart people not reflect badly on Him or give His enemies false cause for celebration. Don't think any of that has changed. Notice today that whenever any of the Arab nations make gains against Israel, or Israel moves forward thinking that their own strategies and military might are the path to victory, that Allah gets the credit. And by definition that makes Yehoveh seem weak and impotent to the unbelieving Muslims, thus distorting God's true nature. All evidence is that Islam is growing at a much faster rate today than Christianity and that is not because of God, it is because of the unfaithfulness of His followers that makes us seem weak and God's enemies seem strong. Everybody wants to hitch they're wagon to the perceived winner.

Once the revelries of the Philistine festival were in full swing and people were drunk and feeling full of themselves, they decided it might be fun to bring out Samson so they could deride him and mock him. But in prison, in the most unimaginable horror that were the prisons of old, Samson had changed (but not entirely). He had apparently come to terms with God such that God saw it as repentance and thus returned some measure of strength and divine purpose to Samson. So when Samson was chained to the two primary supporting columns of the Temple to Dagon, he was able to push on them causing the roof to cave in.

In those days it was typical that supporting pillars were not one large carved piece, but rather were some smaller cylindrical sections stacked up to form a pillar. So Samson was able to push one of those sections on each pillar far enough askew that the column's stones no longer lined up and so they crumbled. Many examples of that era of ancient temples in the

Middle East have been found and catalogued, and it was common for them to be quite large. It was also common that the roof was used for the regular folks to gather (like the overhang above a porch) and watch the ceremonies below as conducted by priests and dignitaries. In this case we're told in verse 23 that the chiefs of the Philistines were there, meaning at the least the kings of the 5 major Philistine cities, the same ones who hired Delilah to deceive Samson.

The ground floor of the Temple under the roof was full, and the roof itself was crowded. Undoubtedly the crowded condition of the roof made its total collapse easier, so that when Samson made the pillars that held it up unstable the weight of 3,000 people on that roof contributed to its buckling. We're told that in his death he killed more of God's Philistine enemy than he had in his many run-ins with them during his life.

And that's what I was getting at a couple of minutes ago. The Lord determined that the last act of Samson, a redemptive act of sorts, after Samson had repented sufficiently that the Lord decided to return to him in some measure, would also mean the end of his life. Unlike the earlier part of his life, during a more faithful time, when the adoring women and children that followed Samson around and praised him after the many times he had bruised the Philistines, this time the only songs that would be written for him would be as a memorial. The only honor he would get was to have his crushed body entombed along with his father's. It didn't have to be that way, but Samson couldn't see that before the Lord had departed from him and his eyes were gouged out.

This is why Pastors and Rabbis and simple teachers such as myself beg you and exhort you to be faithful, and not merely have faith. Samson died in a state of grace but as a broken and shamed man. Samson could have been honored today as King David is honored; but instead Samson chose the way of the flesh and preferred fellowship with God's enemies rather than with God's people. Samson had so ruined the unique gift that the Lord had given to him that all that was left for him was to lose his life in one final act of personal revenge; an act that at least served a purpose in God's Kingdom. Yes, just as in the past, it was always Samson's passions and lusts that led to the conflicts he caused, and then avenging and revenging that cycled back and forth between he and the Philistines, even at his death it was not God's instructions for him to kill all those Philistines, it was a personal act of anger and payback for their treatment of him.

Verse 31 explains that Samson's family came to the demolished Temple to fetch his body and bring it home for proper burial. All known cultures of that era were greatly concerned with the corpse, and thus it was the norm for relatives of a fallen enemy to be given free passage to retrieve the body of a loved one. According to the bible and all known records, Samson was an only child. The "brothers" spoken of here (those who came to claim his body) are meant in a general sense, not in the sibling sense. These were members of Samson's clan, doing their duty as next of kin. Samson's judgeship ended after a 20 year run. Let's move on to the final section of the book of Judges.

READ JUDGES CHAPTERS 17 AND 18 all

We read these two chapters together and without stopping to get a better sense of what was going on here. But before we start dissecting these paragraphs let me point out a couple of important features.

First: Judges chapters 17 through 21 (the end of the book) are usually called “appendices” by biblical scholars and there is good reason for this because these chapters don’t even deal with any Judges at all; rather there is apparently some general information here that is meant to add to our overall understanding of the era of the Judges.

Second: as often happens in the bible these final chapters are not in chronological order. So even though Samson was the next to the last judge (Samuel being the final one although he was more of a transitory figure ushering Israel from the era of the Judges into the era of the kings), what we just read did NOT come after Samson. In fact because of the chapters’ main subject material (focusing on the Tribe of Dan) this probably occurred at least 200 years before Samson. Generally speaking most Jewish scholars (ancient and present) and a fairly broad majority of Christian scholars put these events during the time of the FIRST judge of Israel, Othniel.

As an aside concerning why the bible is often not in chronological order: it is because the Hebrews were less concerned with time and more concerned with the subject matter. In other words, while modern writers and teachers generally have a greater concern to present a story based on the order that things happened, the ancient Hebrews held a greater concern to present a story based on connecting the major elements of the story even if it took place in different eras. Thus since Samson was from the tribe of Dan, these so-called appendices deal with the tribe of Dan and the history of the tribe of Dan especially in how they had fallen so far away from the Lord and what happened when they abandoned their territorial allotment to move north to easier pickin’s.

Third: these chapters affirm something that I taught you in our very first lesson a few months back (the Introduction to the book of Judges) and that is that the entire purpose and tone of the period of the Judges (and the biblical record of that period) is to demonstrate that Israel in particular, and all mankind in general, NEEDED a king. That precept generally flies in the face of most mainstream Christian commentators who say the opposite; that the book of Judges demonstrates that God did not want Israel to have a king (the idea being that God wanted to be their king and so to have an earthly king was an inherently sinful desire). Yet the very words of this book, the pattern God lays down from Genesis to Revelation that shows that mankind (and perhaps all beings, physical or spiritual) MUST have a king to guide them, and then the fact that throughout the New Testament Yeshua is called a “king” and “a king forever” (in fulfillment of OT prophecy) says that it cannot possibly be that God doesn’t want man to have a king. The issue is WHICH earthly king, not WHETHER there should be one.

We will find several places in these appendices the words, “At that time there was no king in Israel”, and usually that is further amended with the words, “thus every man did what was right in his own eyes”. In other words one caused the other; the lack of a king led to each man choosing his own way. Israel’s refusal to have a king caused a kind of spiritual anarchy to develop within the tribes. What we must see is that since chronologically speaking these final

chapters should (from the modern perspective) actually be placed at the beginning of the book of Judges as a preface to the book of Judges rather than as an appendix at the end, the entire premise for what goes on in Judges and the deteriorating condition of the tribes of Israel that we observe as we read the book can be summed up in those words: “At that time there was no king in Israel and thus every man did what was right in his own eyes”.

Israel needed a king and Israel is going to have a king (as will all mankind) in the form of Jesus the Messiah for all eternity. And although Yeshua is God, he also bore the form of a human and will apparently bear whatever NEW form humans will have beginning in the 1000-year reign and then beyond when things change again.

With that as a background let’s take a look at the story of Micah.

Verse 1 of Judges 17 begins with placing a man named **Mikhayahu** in the area of “the hills of Ephraim”; we will get no better details on his exact location than this. Apparently this man’s given name at birth was **Mikhayahu**, which means, “who is like God”. This is of course a very honorable name imbued with the hope of a great destiny. Interestingly however we will see that the name **Mikhayahu** is shortened in the following verses to Micah. Micah is NOT short for **Mikhayahu** nor is it a nickname; for it means, “who is like” (the reference to God is dropped for good reason).

The story begins with a startling admission from Micah: he has stolen 1100 pieces of silver from his own mother but now wants to give it back. Why this sudden bout of conscience? Because he overheard his mother pronouncing a curse on the thief. The Rabbis say it was no accident that Micah’s mother spoke this curse within his hearing because she knew full well that her son was the thief and this overheard curse (she hoped) would provide the incentive for him to come forward and return the stolen funds.

Immediately when the son confesses and offers to give back the silver the mother blesses him. You see the deal is that in the biblical days curses were taken very seriously. We can call them superstitious if we like, but to the people of that day it was understood that being the subject of a properly worded curse from anybody put you under the darkest of dark clouds. The scholar and author J. A. Motyer put it this way: **“in the ancient world a curse was not a mere sound on the lips but an agent sent forth; an active agent for hurt”**. People went to great length to appease the issuer of a curse IF they were fortunate enough to learn that such a curse had befallen them. Further, the curse of a parent was considered the most potent kind, second only to a curse issued by God Himself. So by the mother making sure her son overheard the curse (rather than doing it privately as was more usual) it offered the son the possibility of a way out (something most mothers can easily understand).

Thus the son admits his crime to her, returns the ill-gotten gain, and his mother responds by neutralizing her curse upon him with a blessing; all parties are relieved. But Micah’s questionable character is now revealed to us and thus the honorable name of **Mikhayahu** is removed from him and he becomes merely Micah from here onward.

In this we also see that Micah came by his less than stellar character, honestly. His mother

says in verse 3 that as a result of her son being forthright and admitting his wrongdoing she is going to dedicate the 1100 pieces of silver he has returned to her to Adonai (what it says in the original Hebrew is Yehoveh, thus there is no doubt that what is about to occur is strictly in reference to the God of Israel). But then she turns around in the next verse and gives less than 20% of that dedicated money to a silversmith in order for him to make a god image for the household. It is presumed that she kept the other 900 pieces of silver for herself.

The thing is this: we are witnesses to what sort of perverted thing must have been repeated a thousand times over in the tribes of Israel during the time not long after Joshua and his divinely led leadership ended with his death. The mother dedicates the money to YHWH, and then keeps the vast bulk of it for herself. The money she does give is used to make a Torah-forbidden image of Yehoveh. And even that is selfish because she will use it only in her own household. It's about to get worse, though.

It seems that Micah owned a "house of God", or in Hebrew a Beit-Elohim. In other words Micah's family had set apart an area of their house, or perhaps built a small sanctuary, where they performed their own rituals and observances. The molten image of silver would be the centerpiece of the sanctuary as the Beit-Elohim was to be in honor of YHWH, the God of Israel. Even more Micah had a priestly ephod manufactured to be used in the services AND consecrated one of his sons to the priest who officiated the services. Wow; where do I start?

I'm sure most of you are shaking your heads at such a rebellious perversion of the Torah commands by the Lord's own people, and this but no more than a few decades (if that) after Joshua's death. But does anyone think that Micah and his mother and household were doing this for the purpose of committing an evil? Did they go into this endeavor thinking, "let's go against God?" Were they bound and determined to be wicked? Of course not. They thought they were doing something GOOD. They thought they were being righteous. Their intention was to be seen by God and man as especially pious people.

They certainly had knowledge of the Law of Moses because they created an ephod (mandated in the book of Leviticus to be worn by the high priest), and they dedicated all to Yehoveh by name. But what they did is what it seems that God's people eventually tend to do: take the parts of the Word of God they like and do them, and ignore the rest.

Folks, Christianity is as guilty of this as were Micah and his mother. Judaism has fallen into the same abyss. I could go on and on with examples but the one that perhaps has had more negative effect on the course of Christianity over the centuries than any other is the false manmade doctrine that the Law, and the Torah, is dead and gone, "nailed to the cross" of Jesus. Because (as I've demonstrated scores of times) Yeshua Himself foreknew men would try to do this and so stated as clearly as could be imagined to an enormous crowd in Matthew 5:

CJB Matthew 5:17 "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. 18 Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened. 19 So whoever disobeys the least of these

mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

How could something so clear, right from the mouth of Our Savior, be ignored? Because we prefer to do things our way.

Orthodox Judaism has established the principle that Rabbis are the ultimate religious authority for them and in fact have every right to change, add, or subtract from the Law as they see fit. In fact the Talmud says that even God cannot interpret Scripture for this authority is given only to the Rabbis. This in my opinion was the fork in the road that has led Judaism back into the wilderness, for it says in Deuteronomy:

CJB Deuteronomy 4:1 "Now, Isra'el, listen to the laws and rulings I am teaching you, in order to follow them, so that you will live; then you will go in and take possession of the land that ADONAI, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 In order to obey the mitzvot of ADONAI your God which I am giving you, do not add to what I am saying, and do not subtract from it.

Do NOT add, and do NOT subtract from the commands of God. But it has been done regularly over the centuries with disastrous results.

We'll continue the story of Micah next time.