



When the Foundations are Destroyed

SERIES: *Fallen Heroes; Faithful God*

A tragedy in 1959 is the basis of a strange law in France. When hundreds died after a dam burst, President Charles de Gaulle passed a law that allowed a young woman to marry her fiancé who was one of those killed. Through the years, posthumous marriages continued to be performed in France, and Christelle Demichel is a recent example. Demichel decided to marry her fiancé who had been killed in a traffic accident. She appeared before a city official in Nice, France, wore black, carried a bouquet of yellow roses, and stood alone. Her absent groom had been dead for 17 months. She insists she's not in denial. "My husband is dead. I accept that. Even if I wish he had lived much longer and we had had children, I'm not fighting reality or the fact of his death. The wedding day was 'lots of fun,'" Demichel said. "I was determined that it shouldn't be The Funeral Part Two."

That's a rather bizarre story, but it illustrates something that can happen in our relationship with God. Through the years, we can get to this place where we pretend like we have a relationship with him, where we go through the motions of actually having him a part of our lives, but the reality isn't there. We go to church, we talk about him, we recall some of our good times together, but something is missing – God!

The final five chapters of the book of Judges illustrate for us what happens when we lose that vital sense of God's presence from our lives. Up until now, we've seen Israel in a downward spiral in their relationship with God. And yet we've seen God very much involved with them, sometimes in discipline, at other times in deliverance. In one way or another, God has been center stage. But starting in ch. 17, it's almost as if God exits the stage and leaves the cast to their own devices. Several times in these last few chapters the writer describes the situation like this, **"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes"** (17:6; 21:25). The really bizarre thing is that the main characters still pretend that they're doing what is right in *the LORD'S* eyes. They're basically on their own, but pretending God is with them. The whole scene reminds me of a verse out of the Psalms, **"When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"** (Ps.11:3). Judges 17-19 tell a story about what happens to us when the foundation of God's presence and truth have been destroyed; it's a story which will help us identify some of the first signs that our faith is really becoming something of a farce.

I. The story of Micah, the Levite and the Danites.

A. **Micah:** The first person on this stage is Micah.

"Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. 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" (Judges 17:1-6).

Micah's name means, "who is like the LORD?" But his character falls far short of his name: Micah was a thief. Not just an ordinary thief, but a thief who robbed his own mother! And he didn't just pilfer a few coins out of her purse, he took 1,100 pieces of silver; a small fortune. But Micah has a sensitive conscience, and when he overhears his mother call down a curse on the robber, he confesses to the crime. Back then, curses were taken very seriously, and he didn't want any part of it. So she forgives him and pronounces God's blessing on him to counteract the curse. So far so good, right? These seem like decent folks; not perfect, but normal and sincere in their faith. As a matter of fact, she's so proud of her son that she dedicates all the silver to the Lord. But here is where we get a bit concerned, because while she dedicates it all to the Lord, she only ends up letting go of 200 pieces, or one-fifth of the whole. But that's not the worst of it. Her idea of giving it to the Lord is to have the local silversmith melt it down and make a few idols! Then Micah takes them and sets up his own little shrine. He has an ephod, which are priestly garments; he has his own household gods, many of them to be used in the practice of divination, and he makes one of his sons a priest. Although this was in violation of the 3rd commandment, you get the sense that he thought he was doing right. That's what the writer says, "every man did what was right in his own eyes," Micah included.

B. The Levite: The next person on the stage is an unnamed Levite. Later in the story we will learn that his name is Jonathan. Let's pick it up in v. 7.

"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. 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. 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'" (vv. 7-13).

Jonathan leaves Bethlehem to look for a place to live, and not just a place but a job. He ends up in the hill country of Ephraim where Micah lived. When Micah finds out that he's a Levite, he figures this is his lucky day. The tribe of Levi was set aside to be Israel's priests and attendants at the tabernacle. Micah could use a good priest! His son had been doing a good enough job, but let's face it, he wasn't a Levite, and Micah really did want to do things the right way. So Micah and the Levite hammer out a deal: the Levite will earn a salary of 10 pieces of silver a year, room and board, and a clothing allowance. What Micah will get is even better. He says, "Now that I have a real priest I know that the Lord will prosper me!" You can see that Micah hasn't changed much since he was a boy. He's still thinking in terms of dollars and cents. But he's a lot more refined now. He's not stealing from his mother's safe any longer. He's cleaned up his act; he's got religion; he's trying to do the right thing.

C. The Danites: Finally, in the 3rd section a group called the Danites come on the stage. This section is quite a bit longer than the others, so I won't read all of it. But let's read 18:1. **"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."** The Danites are one of Israel's 12 tribes. They're looking for an inheritance to live in. Needless to say, they had already been given one. Joshua 19 records that the tribe of Dan had been given land between Zorah and Eshtaol. Remember, Samson was from Zorah. He was a Danite. But at the beginning of Judges we're told that they failed to possess their assigned inheritance. Judges 1:34 says, **"Then the Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the valley."** So, like the Levite, they're looking for a new place to live, something a little easier to obtain than their original inheritance.

In the verses that follow they send out two expeditions for that very purpose. First, they send out five spies to find some good land they could settle down in. They want to do things right so they figure, "Moses sent out spies, so should we." The spies come to an area called Laish in the far north of the Promised Land, and they see that the land there is very fertile. Not only that, the people of Laish, probably Phoenicians, lived peaceful and quiet lives. The last thing they expected was someone to come along and take their land. Then, after the spies come back, the Danites send out a second expedition of 600 soldiers to take the city of Laish.

But in both expeditions, there is a break, when first the spies and then the 600 soldiers come to house of our friend Micah. When the spies discover that Micah has a priest, look what they say to him. **"They said to him, 'Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether our way on which we are going will be prosperous'"** (v. 5). It's pretty clear these guys want the Lord's blessing. They want to make sure he's behind this deal. And Jonathon hardly even has to blink an eye. **"The priest said to them, 'Go in peace; your way in which you are going has the LORD'S approval'"** (v. 16). So off they go. Later, when they came back with the 600 soldiers on the second expedition, they stop at Micah's house again and take this one step further.

"Then the five men who went to spy out the country of Laish 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.' 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. 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. 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?' 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?' The priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod and household idols and the graven image and went among the people" (vv. 14-20).

I hope you can see the irony in all of this. We sort of want to feel sorry for Micah, but we know that Micah himself is a thief, and maybe he's just getting a taste of his own medicine. And wasn't it Micah who had hired the Levite with an offer he couldn't refuse? But now he loses him because someone makes a better offer. I mean it sounds like the NBA! Meanwhile, you've got this Levite who is making out like a bandit. Now he has a bigger church and better salary! And don't forget the Danites. They want God's blessing so they steal an idolatrous priest on the way to battle. And guess what? They were successful. 18:27 says, **"they came Laish, to a people quiet and secure, and and struck them with the edge of the sword, and burned the city with fire."** They rebuilt the city and named it Dan in honor of their forefather of the same name. On the surface, it looks like "mission accomplished," as if God himself was behind this. But look at what the writer says in v. 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."** Do you get the feeling that something is wrong? They think they're worshipping God, but it's a farce. They're talking a lot about God, but he's not there; the house of God is in Shiloh.

II. If God becomes a means to our own ends, our faith becomes a farce.

We see in this story what happens when our relationship with God begins to disintegrate. We hold onto the form of religion, but our religion is basically self-serving; our relationship with God becomes a means to our own ends. *When God becomes a means to our own ends, our faith becomes a farce.* It's no longer about what God says is right, we're doing what is right in our own eyes, and what is right to us is always self-serving; it's always what we think is best for us. This plays out in our lives in the same ways it did with the main characters in this story.

A. Selfishness in worship: Take Micah. On the surface, Micah's sin was idolatry. He established his own household worship system. He had a self-made, do-it-yourself religion. My wife has worked for Sunset Magazine the past ten years. I love Sunset Magazine because it has really short articles with a lot of pictures, and it teaches you to do-it-yourself. It doesn't matter that I never really get around to doing it myself, but if I read the articles and look at the pictures at least I feel like I'm trying! Well, Micah could have written the "Sunset" book on do-it-yourself religion. It was religion without the direction of God's word. It was a privatized religion of convenience rather than a religion of obedience. It's interesting that we don't hear about Micah worshipping some pagan idol like "Baal." What he did was far more subtle. He had the right God but the wrong worship. According to Deut. 12, worship was to be carried out only where God said. Remember, all the time **"the house of God was at Shiloh."** But Micah made his own religion in his own home.

And what was his motive? It was selfishness. He wanted to be blessed; he wanted his house to prosper. This can happen to us. Our worship can become self-made, convenient, and isolated. We think we can prosper ourselves through self-devised ritual and routine. I see this in the world of sports. Athletes are very superstitious people, and often they create their own little religion. Before they take a free throw, they do the sign of the cross. When they cross home plate after hitting a home run, they point up to the heavens. But why are they doing it? Because God is God? Because God told them to in his word? No! So they can make the free throw and hit another home run. I found myself falling into this recently. My son and I were driving to one of his baseball games. We always try to pray about the game on the way, and I thought to myself, "We had better pray or he may not play well." And then I caught myself. Is that why we should pray? Shouldn't we pray because he is God?

We live in a great nation that has strong Christian roots. We put "In God we trust" on our coins. We say "one nation, under God" in our pledge. In our courtrooms, those who take the witness stand swear to tell the truth "so help me God." As our Presidents take the oath of office, they place their hand on the Bible. Even our Little Leaguers get in on the act. Before every all-star game they take off their hats and recite the Little League Pledge, "I trust in God..." Now, believe me, I'm all for these expressions of civil religion. But we're fooling ourselves if we think God is really all that impressed with this. God himself once said, **"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."** (Mt. 15:8).

It's easy to point the finger and say that this is what is happening in our society, but not here among ourselves. But we're also susceptible to systems of worship that are not God-centered but privatized and self-centered. We should evaluate our own worship. Are we allowing ritual, routine, and self-invention to replace truth, obedience and holiness? Has our worship somehow

become a means to our own end?

B. Selfishness in service: Micah isn't the only one who uses God as a means to an end. Look at the Levite – Jonathan. His issue wasn't selfish worship, it was selfish service. He was a spiritual ladder-climber, committed to self-promotion and personal betterment. There is nothing wrong with trying to better your situation, but in this case, Jonathan's service was completely contrary to the will of God because Jonathan was using the service of God to bring him advancement.

Jonathan had a storied career. It began in Bethlehem, which was not one of the 49 designated levitical cities, and so he probably should not have been there in the first place. So he left to find a place to settle down and begin to advance himself. He stumbles across Micah's house who makes him a family priest. This wasn't God's call, but man's. Later, the Danites make him an offer he can't refuse. What was Jonathan's response? **"And the priest's heart was glad"** (18:20). He was nothing more than a servant for hire, who would serve the highest bidder. He was using the 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 of God was really service of self.

This can happen to any of us. It can happen to me. I've been doing this long enough that I have good salary; a nice house; lots of freedom and respect. Is that why I'm here? What if a better offer came along? It can happen to you. It's very subtle. You don't feel like there is anywhere you make a difference. So you begin to serve within the church because that brings attention, influence and a sense of worth. Soon, instead of serving others to honor God, you begin to hire yourself 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 people you want to be with. Our desire for service becomes a mask, and we use service for our own advancement.

When one of my children comes to me and says, "Can I wash your car?" or some other apparently self-sacrificial thing, I know something is up; they want something from me. When we grow older, we get better at this and thus much less obvious. We become skilled at masking our ulterior motives and take pains to cover up our selfish hearts. The apostle Paul has a good 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."** (Phil 2:3-4). When our service of God becomes anything less, it's a farce.

C. Selfishness in living: There is one more example of using God as a means to an end, and that is the Danites. They're an example of selfish living. They wanted an inheritance, a place to settle. It wasn't wrong to want a place to settle, but they didn't want the place God gave them; that was too hard, too demanding. So they grabbed what he hadn't given them, and they hired a priest and set up a graven image just to make sure God was in the picture. They looked for a nice place where the natives were unprepared,

undefended and vulnerable. They 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. They were lazy; spiritually lazy. Spiritual laziness is a weed that will strangle the spiritual life that God wants us to enter into. This sin of not taking on what seems difficult, and being content to fight only what we know we can conquer, must be rooted out.

The land of Canaan represents our life in Christ. We're to enter in and possess that life in the same way that Israel was to enter in and possess Canaan. There are enemies in the land. Even though God gives us the land, we have to enter into the battle by faith, rooting out the deeply entrenched habits and sins that bind us. The temptation we face is the same one the Danites faced. The enemies seem very powerful, so we're tempted to look around for an enemy that we can defeat without a whole lot of faith. It may look good to those around us, but it falls short of what God wants us to possess. We stop using bad language, but we do nothing about gossip. We cancel our subscription to Penthouse, but we do nothing about our lust-filled thoughts. We give some money to the church, but we do nothing about our greed-infested hearts. We open up our home to people we like being with, but we turn away from the unlovely. We volunteer to do something in the church, but only what we feel we can handle, where there is not a whole lot of faith required. We take the path of least resistance.

I think this is the most prevalent sin of those who have walked with Christ for a long time – we become lazy in our battle against sin. We've fought some battles, we've conquered some sin, and we live a respectable life with God, but we stop fighting and taking new ground, and we end up stagnant and bored. When that happens, our faith becomes a farce.

Years ago, author Wilbur Rees wrote: "I would like to buy \$3.00 worth of God, please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, but not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want about a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3.00 worth of God, please." The problem with that prayer is that you can't really have \$3.00 worth of God. God doesn't fit into anyone's agenda; we fit into his. When our worship of God, or our service of God, or just our life with God becomes a means to our own ends, our faith becomes a farce.

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