

Sermon 16: Judges 18: The Apostasy of Dan

OUTLINE

Spying out the land?
Holy war?

INTRODUCTION

How does a group of God's people become apostate? That what we are watching as we come to judges chapter 18. There are several things we need to remember in order to properly appreciate what we are seeing in this chapter. Firstly, this chapter is taken out of chronology. Although we have looked at Samson at the end of the time of the judges, this chapter takes us all the way back to the beginning of this period. 18:30 reveals to us that we are in the time of Moses grandson, a first generation conquest of the land generation. It is taken out of chronology because it is underlining the main problem the book of judges is highlighting, that each person was doing what was right in their own eyes, and that there was a deep need for a godly king to lead Israel. This is not a random sample but a particularly rancid one. Secondly, the corruption of the Levites and the apostasy of a whole tribe are the catastrophes that this chapter highlights. How quickly God's people turned from godly leadership, how quickly the Levites who were supposed to maintain the purity of God's worship and to teach the people properly has turned, and how completely a whole tribe turned to idolatry are the shock factors of this chapter. Thirdly, we must remember the opening statements about Dan and their reasons for being defeated by the Canaanites. 1:34, 'The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain.' Dan are given an allotment of the land, an allotment that does not include Laish. If you look at the maps at the back of your bible you will see that Dan had an allotment in the south on the coast and Laish/Dan was at the northernmost part of the land in the territory bordering Naphtali and East Manasseh. Dan along with all the other tribes of Israel were intended to be God's means of judging the idolatry of those nations, and it was their job to cleanse the land. The terms of the Mosaic covenant spell out that if a tribe keeps God's law God will bless them, they will be the head and not the tail, they will experience victory and not defeat. Dan experiences humiliating defeat. Why? Based on the terms of the Mosaic covenant, it is because they are sinful in some way. How do they experience victory, they first have to look within their own hearts, see their sin, repent before God; fix their relationship with God and then God will bless where He has promised. So as we come to this chapter, we need to go back in our minds to Dan's early days, see their situation as a desperate one where a whole tribe are unable to settle in their allotment because of their sin. And we are to interpret their actions in light of what they should be doing to secure God's blessing. Do they do the right thing or the wrong thing? We will see that they do the worst of all conceivable things. Judges 2:20-22, 'So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he said, "Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, ²¹I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, ²²in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not." God was testing Dan, but they fail. Fourthly, this chapter ends with a prophetic addition, some future prophet who copied the book of judges was inspired to connect the dots between Dan's present apostasy and future exile, 18:30. This is pointing us to read the pattern of their sin as a warning, as a test

case, as a pattern against which we can see why Judah was exiled in Babylon. This chapter becomes instructive then on how apostasy begins and how it ends.

You will remember that this story began in judges 17 with the thief Micah making idols, an ephod and a shrine, and appointing the grandson of Moses, Jonathan as his personal priest. That was the backdrop to what develops in this chapter. What began with a family now expands to a whole tribe as the leaven of idolatry spreads. Dan we will see are a tribe that does not obey God; does not trust God; does not remain faithful to God, and who will finally experience the judgement of God. The tribe of Dan become a symbol of apostasy. In Rev. 7:4-8 when the 144 000 sealed of every tribe of Israel, conspicuous by their absence is Dan. The chapter we have before us is part of why that is the case. This chapter is full of deep irony as it records the actions of Dan. Dan looks like they are obeying God's commands to take their inheritance but in fact they are disobedient at every step. For this reason the narrator ironically casts Dan's activities in terms of Israel's original spying out of the land, and conquest. We will see however that this is a false conquest for sadly those who should have been conquering and exterminating idolatry were conquered and became idolaters themselves. Our two points will look at their spying of the land; and their conquering of the land.

Spying out the land?

V1, In those days there was no king in Israel. And in those days the tribe of the people of Dan was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in, for until then no inheritance among the tribes of Israel had fallen to them.' Our section begins with the sad refrain which helps us to interpret all that is happening. There is no godly king to lead the people, no Adam like figure who will obey God and secure blessing for a needy people. The text does not add the second part that ordinarily follows, '...and every man did what was right in his own eyes.' But we have been trained by our reading of judges to include it.

Our story begins with Dan seeking an inheritance to dwell in. It may sound as if they have been overlooked in being given a land to dwell in but that is not true, Josh. 19:40-46 records that Dan had indeed been given an allotment. We know that Dan has not been able to drive out the Canaanites from their inheritance. God is testing them. Will they commit themselves to God, cry out to Him, walk in His ways and so receive His blessing or will these difficulties reveal what is truly in their hearts? Will they allow their failures to expose the sins they need to deal with and trust in God to help them overcome the difficulties before them, or will they seek the easy way?

V2, 'So the people of Dan sent five able men from the whole number of their tribe, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to explore it. And they said to them, "Go and explore the land." And they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there.' They choose the easy road. Instead of the people repenting and seeking the face of God, they sent out spies to go and search out the whole of the land of Israel, not their inheritance. Instead of dealing with the enemies before them, instead of searching their hearts and committing themselves to doing what they had been commanded to do, they looked for an easier way. The word for 'able men' is literally 'heroes' implying that these were men who were physically accomplished and competent. Sadly though these 'able men' were able in all but the most important ways—spiritually. And so in the nascence of repentance and now with deciding how to

obey God because the path appointed for them was too hard, they began their journey to apostasy. In the land of Ephraim they come across Micah and his little home cult. This raises the question, does God punish our hardheartedness with the sins that we desire?

V3, 'When they were by the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young Levite. And they turned aside and said to him, "Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? What is your business here?" Here we see that the famous grandson of Moses is recognized and questioned. The questions, who brought you here, what are you doing here, and what is your business demand certain answers which will reveal Jonathan's heart.

V4, 'And he said to them, "This is how Micah dealt with me: he has hired me, and I have become his priest." God did not lead him; he is not doing the Lord's will; nor is he the Lord's priest. And they said to him, "Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether the journey on which we are setting out will succeed." ⁶And the priest said to them, "Go in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of the Lord." The Danites are as spiritually blind as the Micah and Jonathan. They see no problem with someone owning and appointing his own Levitical priest, as well as their own place of worship. They are looking for a bit of luck themselves so they try to get some divine guidance. Something that should have been done with repentance and with a legitimate priest in a legitimate way before setting out on this quest. The Levite plays the part of religious blesser and gives a positive sounding response. With a little investigation you will notice that his words are ambiguous enough to hedge his bets as well. Instead of interpreting the law of Moses to the Danites and assessing their failure in light of the law, he adds the expected religious positivity making sufficient ambiguous religious noises to fulfil his expected role. We see the heart of false religion right here, the blessing of God upon sinners without having to deal with sin. God becomes a cheerleader in our corners who exists to make our plans come to pass. This is not the God of the gospel. The gospel begins with bad news, that we are sinners, that we cannot come into the presence of God, that we must be judged. God holds all the cards and He is a judge who must judge us. But then because God is gracious He stoops to provide grace to an unworthy people. In the gospel all pretense of being good people, all false ideas about God who is merely there to help us, all false ideas about religion existing to get some blessing on our ideas is put to death. But Micah, the Levite and the Danites are deceived and do not understand the heart of the gospel message. We are sinners alienated from God and we need God to provide a Savior that we might be reconciled to Him. We have to come in repentance and faith, and submit ourselves to His Lordship and Law. More important than Dan having a homeland is Dan's standing before a holy God. Instead of this priest fulfilling his role in giving the bruise of a friend he confirms them in their error.

V7, 'Then the five men departed and came to Laish and saw the people who were there, how they lived in security, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and unsuspecting, lacking nothing that is in the earth and possessing wealth, and how they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone.' Laish was 207 kilometers from where they had been sent from, about as far away as you could get from the place where they should have been obeying God. You will notice that narrator plays with our emotions as we read the description of these Canaanites. Now, were the Canaanites good guys or bad guys? They were bad guys, they were being dispossessed of the Land because of their idolatry. The narrator however casts them in the role of victim so that Dan will

appear more like a villain. They are unsuspecting and vulnerable, they have no contact with other groups and so no back up if they get attacked. They are a sitting duck ripe for the plucking, low hanging fruit and easy pickings for a tribe that is not being strengthened by God and only has to depend upon their own strength.

The spies go home to report, and listen to their report and imagine these were the spies that had originally been sent out by Moses to spy out the land, and then remember that they are not applying this to the place that God been apportioned to them, v8-10, 'And when they came to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers said to them, "What do you report?" ⁹ 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 do nothing? Do not be slow to go, to enter in and possess the land. ¹⁰ As soon as you go, you will come to an unsuspecting people. The land is spacious, for God has given it into your hands, a place where there is no lack of anything that is in the earth." Notice how these people who are clearly outside of God's will, whose failure in battle is proof of their sin have to now determine God's will. They cannot rest upon the revealed word of God which would condemn their faith and hearts, no they have read the tea leaves, they have to say to themselves, because it is easy and the way seems open it must be of God. There is a warning here to those who want to think God is for their plans because things seem easy. The clear light of the Word of God must be our guiding light not the ease of the situation.

Holy war?

V11-13, 'So 600 men of the tribe of Dan, armed with weapons of war, set out from Zorah and Eshtaol, ¹² and went up and encamped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. On this account that place is called Mahaneh-dan to this day; behold, it is west of Kiriath-jearim. ¹³ And they passed on from there to the hill country of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah.' Despite the rousing call to war, only 600 respond, they camped in Judah on their way, and came again to Micah. V14, 'Then the five men who had gone to scout out the country of Laish said to their brothers, "Do you know that in these houses there are an ephod, household gods, a carved image, and a metal image? Now therefore consider what you will do." Not only are the Danites stealing unappointed land but unappointed gods too. Why did the spies raise the matter this way? Likely it was because they felt 'blessed' by their good fortune and credited that to Micah. They were hoping to secure blessing for their future by hijacking God, a priest, and some religious paraphernalia. Once again we see the assumptions of false religion. God is usurped and taken on our terms not His. Blessing is thought to be able to be controlled by having the right religious actions and activities and not determined by relating to God as He has revealed, namely through faith, repentance and a sacrifice for sin.

They begin by greasing up their coveted priest by showing concern, v15, 'And they turned aside there and came to the house of the young Levite, at the home of Micah, and asked him about his welfare.' This casual exchanging of greetings was done with 600 armed men standing around in an intimidating way, v16, 'Now the 600 men of the Danites, armed with their weapons of war, stood by the entrance of the gate.' Pretenses are dropped as they rob what to their minds is a temple of YHWH, v17-18, 'And the five men who had gone to scout out the land went up and entered and took the carved image, the ephod, the household gods, and the metal image, while the priest stood by the entrance of the gate with the

600 men armed with weapons of war. ¹⁸ And when these went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the household gods, and the metal image, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" Jonathan makes a mild protest and gets a better offer, v19-20, 'And they said to him, "Keep quiet; put your hand on your mouth and come with us and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?" ²⁰ And the priest's heart was glad. He took the ephod and the household gods and the carved image and went along with the people.' The fickleness of the Levite is evident as this offer makes him glad as it helps his career and his desire for recognition and importance. Here we see what is truly important to the Levite, it is not his calling to honor God and the privilege of serving as a Levite but the trappings of his role. He was doing this as a job, with a mercenary spirit. The compromise and change of loyalties betray that he is in it for himself not God. In v21 we see that the Danites are willing to pillage their own countryman and steal the rest of Micah's property, 'So they turned and departed, putting the little ones and the livestock and the goods in front of them.' The Danites have not stopped and looked at their own hearts to see their sin, and so their sin has grown. They have taken land not theirs; trusted in their own strength to fulfill their own desires, they have not repented, not trusted in God. When it comes to God they have treated Him as a cheerleader, and uncritically stolen God as an idol and a self-appointed priest, thinking that all that is needed to have blessing is the trappings of religion and not a putting away of sin and a trusting in God while obeying Him. And now instead of dealing with the enemies of God and God's people the Canaanites, they are stealing from their own.

Micah tries to fight for what is his but he is powerless to stop it, v22-25, 'When they had gone a distance from the home of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house were called out, and they overtook the people of Dan. ²³ And they shouted to the people of Dan, who turned around and said to Micah, "What is the matter with you, that you come with such a company?" ²⁴ And he said, "You take my gods that I made and the priest, and go away, and what have I left? How then do you ask me, 'What is the matter with you?' " ²⁵ And the people of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest angry fellows fall upon you, and you lose your life with the lives of your household." ²⁶ Then the people of Dan went their way. And when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his home.' Now is Micah a good guy or bad guy? He has acted like a Canaanite and the thief has been stolen from, the false idols that he made have been removed. God is no doubt enacting a punishment here but we are still set up by the narrator to feel bad for Micah. This again is a rhetorical effect made to show up how sinful Dan are being. We have here a little of what Habakkuk experienced. Habakkuk mourned the sin of Israel but was shocked when God promised that a more evil people Babylon would bring the justice of God, that is the same effect we feel here. God is using the wicked to punish the less wicked. This might help you as you think about who wins the elections in the various countries around the world, and the wars that go on around the world. Too often we think that one side is righteous and one unrighteous, more often than not it is a case of God using the wicked to punish the wicked.

Dan's defeat of Laish gets 2 verses, v27-28, 'But the people of Dan took what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him, and they came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting, and struck them with the edge of the sword and burned the city with fire. ²⁸ And there was no deliverer because it was far

from Sidon, and they had no dealings with anyone. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth-rehob. Then they rebuilt the city and lived in it.' The narrator finds the incidents of spying out the wrong land, travelling 207 kilometers to the wrong land, stealing someone else's gods and plundering a fellow Israelites goods more important than the military conquest itself. You come away from this victory going, where is God, this was not done by God's blessing because God's people were obeying God's law. You sense that this was done in the strength of the flesh and according to the ways of the flesh.

V29-31, 'And they named the city Dan, after the name of Dan their ancestor, who was born to Israel; but the name of the city was Laish at the first. ³⁰ And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. ³¹ So they set up Micah's carved image that he made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.' You have heard the saying, 'from Dan to Beersheba' this means from the northern most point to the southernmost. Here is where Dan is named from. Dan will become infamous because when Rehoboam causes the split between the 10 northern tribes and the 2 southern tribes, Jeroboam will place a shrine at Dan. Dan will be the natural choice because we see here that Jonathan will become a foundation for the Northern tribes apostasy resulting in God punishing the 10 tribes with Assyrian exile.

Our text ends with two houses of worship, two priesthoods, two ways to God. The tabernacle which we know is a picture of Christ and His work for us, and Dan's false manmade religion. This is the choice that stands before every person. Will we like Dan, Micah and Jonathan carve out our own religion and way to God or will we submit to the way that God has appointed, in the OT it was through the types and shadows of the priesthood and sacrifices, in the NT we know that these were always pointing to Jesus Christ who was both priest and sacrifice for our sins to reconcile us to God.