

09/10/23

“Turning from Our Idols”
Judges 17:1-18:31

FCF: The tyranny of freedom

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The LORD is our king.

(magnet) We must turn from our idols and to Him.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Life is full of things we take for granted. Think of traffic signals. Where would we be without them regulating our movements? Drive in other parts of the world and you’ll come to appreciate these red, yellow, and green lights. It can be chaos, like the outer edges of the WalMart parking lot. There are no rules and so often, no movement. It’s total chaos. Which is where total freedom always takes you - total tyranny. And we simply cannot live like that.

We are moving into the third major section of the book of Judges. This is the conclusion, a sampling of what life was like then, of what the LORD was rescuing His people from. This is the transition period between the settlement of the land and the establishment of the kings.

SCRIPTURE READING: Judges 17:1-18:31**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

The Lion King - whether the movie or the musical - is the story of a king’s ascent. From the start, little Simba is named as king. But things take a turn. His father, Mufasa, is killed and frightened Simba flees. His uncle, Scar, takes control. The land and its creatures are withering and suffering. They need their king. But for Simba to be the king, he needs to be enthroned. He has to return so as to take his rightful place. Until then, the question remains, “Who is the king?”

Which brings us to Israel and the judges. “Who is the king?” Clearly, they need one (**READ Judges 17:6**). This sets the tone of the entire narrative. Who is the king? Who is in charge? Who is their sovereign ruler and deliverer? To whom will they trust, look, rely upon, and submit their lives to? The answer is becoming clearer, then for them and now for us. The LORD is our king. The LORD is our king. And so we must turn from our idols and to Him.

“Wait, what is this about idols?” you say. How does that come into play? Good question. Idolatry lurks in the background throughout. We cannot understand what is going on without addressing it. So let’s look at two things - first, the definition of idolatry. Second, the dynamics of idolatry. With that, we’ll see why we must turn from our idols and to the LORD, to our king.

I. DEFINITION OF IDOLATRY

First, the definition of idolatry. What are we talking about here? Let’s do an overview.

A) Common Assumptions

We’ll start with common assumptions. What comes to mind when you hear the word?

1. A primitive thing

“It’s a primitive thing.” Idols are just physical objects made of wood, stone, or precious metals representing a god and serving as a point of access to that god. They’re primitive and of the past.

2. Not a problem

So they're not a problem. "We've outgrown such things." And we would never worship them.

B) Biblical Teaching

Are you sure? That naive perspective falls far short of what the Bible teaches.

1. What it means

Idols are what Tim Keller called "counterfeit gods." They are anything we look to and lean upon for meaning, purpose, and direction. They can be anything in creation besides the Creator.

2. Range of possibilities

Which means there are a whole range of possibilities, including good things - family, children, our reputation, a solid career. But let's talk about the big three of our day - money, sex, and power. Those lie up on the surface. Down beneath are four more - power, control, comfort, and approval. Any of these deeper idols can press up to the surface and drive us in those directions.

3. Why it's a problem

"Okay, that's interesting. But so what? Why is that a problem?" It's a problem because we are all worshippers and we are all shaped by what we worship. As N. T. Wright said ([READ](#)):

When human beings give their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God. One of the primary laws of human life is that you become like what you worship; what's more, you reflect what you worship not only to the object itself but also outward to the world around." Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it (their preferences, their practices, their past histories) and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sex objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns. These and many other forms of idolatry combine in a thousand ways, all of them damaging to the image-bearing quality of the people concerned and of those whose lives they touch."

We are all worshippers, shaped by what we worship. Do you think that's worth a pause?

Illustration:

Sadly, many of us suffer from self-delusion here. We assume, "That could never happen to me." We are like crazed people walking in an open field in a thunderstorm; driving into a blizzard without any winter gear; swimming at the beach at dusk where sharks have been seen; ignoring doctors' orders about our diet and exercise because we know we have good genes.

Application:

Hear these words from the Apostle John ([READ 1 John 5:21](#)). These are the final words of this long letter. It's the first time the word "idols" appears. What's going on? Did John just forget to mention it? No. It's connected to everything he has just written. And needs to be said.

It's the greatest spiritual danger we face. John Calvin said our hearts are "idol factories." Martin Luther said that every violation of the Ten Commandments is first a violation of the first commandment - to have no other gods besides the LORD. Every sin begins there. Might this apply to us? Will we heed this warning? Will we listen? And, if not, why not? Why not?

The LORD is our king. We are idolaters. We must turn from our idols and to Him.

II. DYNAMICS OF IDOLATRY

Moving then from the definition of idolatry, we come to our passage and the dynamics of idolatry. How does it play out? Here in our text we have a case study with this man, Micah.

A) Details

Let me just give you a flyover summary, hitting some details worth noting in the passage.

1. 17:1-7

In 17:1-7, we have this introduction. Micah steals from his mother. She forgives him but holds back in what she promises to the LORD and makes an idol. Micah takes this to outfit a shrine of his own. And he ordains one of his sons to be the priest. This is so “off” at so many levels.

2. 17:8-13

In 17:8-13, a wandering Levite shows up. We don’t know why no one has taken him in up to this point but Micah decides it’s time for an upgrade to his shrine and hires the Levite as the priest.

3. 18:1-31

Again, so much is so “off” here. We move to chapter 18. Now we have the Danites. They failed to take their apportioned land, head north, consult Micah’s priest, and make plans. On their way to conquering an innocent town, they steal the objects from Micah’s shrine and his priest.

B) Disintegration

Such are the sordid details. Throughout, we see a disintegration, a societal corruption.

1. Spreading infection

A spreading infection from a household, to a Levite, to a whole tribe. It’s like a contagion.

2. Sobering entanglement

A spreading infection and a sobering entanglement. The spiritual and moral insanity are growing together. It’s like two trees, rooted in the same ground, intertwined and living off one another.

C) Disappointment

But note not just the disintegration. We see some profound disappointment as well.

1. Great desire

What has been Micah’s great desire? (**READ Judges 17:13**) It’s a foolish assumption on his part mixed with a selfish ambition. In essence, he wants to control God through his religious activity.

2. Great distress

But how well does that go for him? For any of us? How well does his false religion, his idols, his counterfeit gods provide and protect him? (**READ Judges 18:23-24**) It’s a pathetic scene. They’ve thieved from a thief. All his grand hopes and plans are gone. And so too are his gods.

That’s what idols do. They promise and never deliver, always leaving us disappointed.

Illustration:

Put another way, a god you can control can’t really help you. So imagine this scene. Lex Luthor has finally captured Superman. He’s lured him to an island hideaway and infected the Man of Steel with kryptonite. He’s alive but with no powers and serving now as Luther’s butler.

But one day a giant asteroid is spotted, barreling towards Earth and on a direct path to smash into Luthor's island. But he has no savior. Superman is under his control. He can't help.

Application:

A god you can control can't really help you. Going back to our text, let me ask this question. Who or what, if taken away from you, would leave you with nothing - like Micah watching the Danites march off with his shrine and priest? What gods have you made? Those gods can be lost. In what or who have you placed your hope and trust? They can't help you.

We need a God we cannot control, one not of our own making. We need a God who cannot be taken away. We need the One Peter was talking to one day ([READ John 6:66-69](#)).

Jesus is who we need. The LORD is our king. We must turn from our idols and to Him.

CONCLUSION:

So where does this leave us? To the degree you can immerse yourself into the text, you can feel the longing for the King. Micah's name means "who is like Yahweh." Well, we are longing for the true Micah. He has built this false pseudo-sanctuary place to meet with God. We are longing for the true meeting place, the One who came and "tabernacled" among us. Micah has hired out a priest, one who lived for himself, looking for opportunities for upward mobility. We are longing for the One given to downward mobility, who came from heaven to earth, living not for himself but living and dying for us. The people then were longing. So are we.

Is that just a pipe dream? Is there any hope? Well, even at the end of chapter 18, we have mention of "the house of God at Shiloh." There really was a place that the LORD met with His people. Mention is made twice of a king. Even as we are told there was no king in those days, that is a hint that there would be. From the line of David would come the Son of David.

We've looked at the definition and dynamics of idolatry. We need the Deliverer. His name is Jesus. By submitting to Him, we have the power we long for. By surrendering to Him, we have the control we long for. In remembering His comfort, we have the comfort we long for. By rejoicing in His approval, we have the approval we long for. His is the power, the control, the comfort, and the approval. He is the object of all our deep longings, the end of all our searching.

The French mathematical genius, Blaise Pascal, spent years running from God. But eventually, he encountered God's life-changing grace. How did it happen? Eight years after his death, a note was found sewn into Pascal's coat that recorded his powerful conversion ([READ](#)):

The note read in part: "Year of grace 1654, Monday 23 of November ... from about half past ten at night to about half an hour after midnight, FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certitude. Heartfelt joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. God of Jesus Christ. 'My God and your God.' ... Joy, Joy, Joy, tears of joy ... Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. May I never be separated from him."

That joy and peace like a fire in the heart, surging into something beyond words, can be ours. It can be yours today. The LORD is our king. We must turn from our idols and to Him.

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