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Judges 17 - 21
The Tragedy and Danger of Sin

Public Reading: 17:1-13, and 21:16-25

It was my senior year of high school, in the spring. I was sitting in class, just like any normal day. And then, all of a sudden, the principal comes over the intercom, interrupting class, and tells all junior and senior students to come outside into the parking lot. Being high school students, we were happy to have any excuse to get out of class for a bit, so we cheerfully complied and filed out to the parking lot. And when we did, our cheerfulness immediately evaporated. There were two cars in the parking lot, smashed into each other, all the windows broken, smoke coming out. I won't describe all the details, but it was a graphic scene, involving a few of our classmates, even a couple of my friends, lying on the ground, one on the hood of a car. We heard sirens, and police cars, an ambulance, and a firetruck came flying over the hill, into the parking lot. They picked up one of my friends on a stretcher and loaded her into the ambulance. It was painful to watch.

Thankfully, to our great relief, there had not actually been an accident that morning. No one was hurt. It was all an elaborate scene put on by the school, local police, and the fire department. It was the week before prom, and they wanted to warn us against the dangers of drugs, underage drinking, and drunk driving by showing us the horror and tragedy of what it can lead to. They wanted to shock us, to give us a wake-up call.

I think that's exactly why we have this end part of Judges, chapters 17 - 21, in the Bible. I think it's meant to function like a wake-up call, a warning of just how tragic and horrible sin really is. And the reality is, we're often in *dire need* of such a wake-up call. We are all sinners, born with a totally depraved human nature. And yet, we are all tempted to make light of sin and not take it seriously; tempted to start to think that maybe human beings aren't really *that bad*, that sin isn't *that dangerous* - at least, not *our* kind of sins. We're all tempted at times to justify and give in to our sinful desires, to relax in our fight against sin. And that's why we all need to hear the wake-up call that comes to us from Judges 17-21, in the shocking, jarring accounts of human sinfulness and depravity that we see here.

As we've gone through the book of Judges over the last couple of months, we've seen Israel slowly spiral downward, drifting morally and spiritually into greater and greater sin,

idolatry, and the judgment of God. We've even seen God's deliverers, the Judges, get worse and worse each time, so that by the time we got to Jephthah and Samson, it was hard to even distinguish them from the wicked, pagan peoples around them. The book began with Israel's failure to obey God and wipe out the evil, pagan, idolatrous peoples of Canaan, the promised land - and now, by the time we've gotten to the end of the book, we see that Israel has become just like them - just as pagan and idolatrous, just as sinful and evil. That's what we see in our text today, this section of judges: just how idolatrous, sinful, and evil Israel has become. After seeing God raise up judges to deliver his people, time and time again, we expect that to happen this time - but it doesn't. There's no deliverer in this last section. Instead, it shows us just how bad things are, leaving us longing for a savior. As the book's focused on the judges, you may have wondered, "What about the priests and religious leaders of Israel at this time? Where are they? Or what about the common people? Was all of Israel really so spiritually lost?" These last 5 chapters answer those questions for us with an undeniable: *yes*, all of Israel, God's covenant people, even it's spiritual leaders, had become just as wicked and idolatrous. We see this in two main sections of the text: first, we see how religiously corrupt and idolatrous Israel has become, in chapters 17-18. Then, we see how morally sinful, broken, and wicked Israel has become in chapters 19-21. But lest we think these are just isolated incidents or extreme, radical examples, the text makes it clear that these final two sections are meant to generally describe Israel as a whole at that time. We see a sweeping, indicting statement framing this last section: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." We see this in the opening section (17:6), and again in the very last verse of the whole book (21:25). We even see part of that refrain, "In those days there was no king in Israel," repeated twice more in the course of the story (18:1; 19:1). The point is clear: these were dark days of spiritual and moral chaos; people weren't following the Lord - they were doing what was right in *their own eyes* - what *they thought was best*, according to their sinful hearts and desires. And so this section doesn't just show us how bad off Israel was - it shows us how sinful and depraved *all of humanity is*. It shows us that we all have wicked, sinful, depraved human natures, and just how horrible and tragic it is when we "follow our hearts" and do what seems right to *us and our own eyes*, rather than follow and obey God.

So let's walk through these two main sections of our text, walking through the stories as much as we can, and applying them to ourselves as a *warning* against just how terrible sin is.

And along the way, may we see just how much we need God's grace, that we might better appreciate and delight in just how much mercy and grace God has poured out on us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

First, we see...

I. The Danger of Religious Corruption and Idolatry (Judges chs. 17-18)

Chapters 17-18 warn us against religious, spiritual corruption and idolatry by telling a story that revolves around an Israelite man named Micah. The story begins, in 17:1-6, by showing us the spiritual corruption of Micah and his household. We're first introduced to Micah as he is confessing to his mother that he stole 1,100 pieces of silver from her (a very large sum of money). She had previously uttered a curse on whoever stole it - but now, when she finds out her son's the thief, she instead blesses him! She said, "Blessed be my son by the LORD" (v.2). That's already pretty strange, isn't it? We don't bless people in the name of God for stealing! It gets worse. He gives the money back, but she dedicates it "to the Lord...for my son, to make a carved image and a metal image" (v.3). She gives lip service to God, to Yawheh, saying she dedicates the money to Him - but then she uses it to commission a couple of household idols to be made, which explicitly breaks God's commandments and prohibitions against idols! We see here rank spiritual hypocrisy and idolatry. What we see here is *syncretism* - and if you don't know what that means, syncretism is when different, contradictory religious beliefs are blended together. Just like we saw in the story of Jephthah, so we see here: this family gives lip service to God, but has a thoroughly *pagan view of faith*. They're trying to smush together the true God of the Bible with pagan idolatry - which really just means they are just as pagan, idolatrous, and unbelieving as the nations around them. And so, Micah makes the idols, adds them to his household shrine, and even makes his son a priest - further breaking God's Law (since only Levites could be priests, no idols or images were allowed, and neither were homemade temples). Everything about this is messed up. And v.6 condemns this homemade, do-it-yourself spirituality with our refrain, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Syncretism abounds in our culture today - just turn on the news or look at pop culture and see how often people throw around phrases like, "In God we trust," "have faith," or "Our thoughts and prayers are with you." Which God exactly? Faith in what? Who are you praying to? And then, out of the other side of their mouth, many of them will go on to say things that are

absolutely contrary to the Word of God, but wholly bought into the unbelieving ways of our culture today. Brothers and sisters, may we be on guard against syncretism and spiritual hypocrisy. May we not be a people that heap up empty phrases, giving lip service to God like Micah and his household, all the while harboring pagan views and idolatrous unbelief in our hearts.

So we have to ask ourselves: what idols are you tempted to worship today? Maybe you're not a Christian this morning; if you're not worshiping the Lord Jesus, then who, or what, are you worshiping? Maybe you do profess faith in Christ; but what false gods, what idols, are you tempted to put on the shelf next to Christ in the shrine of your heart? What are you tempted to worship, to live for, to find meaning and value in, other than God? Money and things, like a new car, new boat, bigger house? Your career and success? What people think about you? How many compliments you get at work or school or church? How many likes you get on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok? A person, or relationships? Or are your idols comfort and pleasure, things like sex, drugs, alcohol, maybe even bingeing too much entertainment? Ask yourself: what, or who, in your life do you value and desire so much that you're tempted to disobey God for? There lies your idol. Let us recognize and repent from our idols and worship God alone.

Next, in vv.7-13, a Levite passes through town. Micah convinces him to stay and be a priest at his homemade shrine. The priest sells out for a comfortable living. And Micah concludes, in v.13, "Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest." After all, everyone in Israel knew that only Levites were real priests! Surely having a Levite there proves how legitimate his shrine and idolatrous worship is, right? Surely this means that God approves of what Micah is doing, even blessing his ministry and worship? Of course, we know that's nothing but blasphemous nonsense - and that's just the point. Micah, his family and town, and even this Levite clearly do not know the Lord, His Word, or the Law given to Israel through Moses. And to make it all worse - we find out at the end of the story (18:30) that this Levite is none other than the grandson of Moses himself!

There are many people today who profess to be Christians, yet live lives that are utterly contrary to the Word of God, chasing after unrepentant sin and having nothing to do with church. But when you confront them on it, they, like Micah here, might try to say that God approves of and blesses their lifestyle. They may say something like, "Hey, don't judge me! I was baptized! I walked the aisle and said a prayer when I was younger!" "My live-in girlfriend and I hang a

cross on the wall!” “A minister presided over our same-sex wedding! Surely God has no problem with how I’m living my life! After all, just look and see how much he’s blessed me with all these earthly goods!” In fact, we even see entire churches that abandon the truths of the scriptures but assure us that God is pleased with them by pointing to all of their earthly success and numbers to justify their heresy and corrupt theology. But that’s not how it works. We can’t pretend God is pleased with us based on our feelings or earthly circumstances. The only standard of right worship and beliefs is the Bible, God’s inerrant Word.

In chapter 18, we see the religious corruption and idolatry of an entire tribe of Israel - the Danites - showing us that this pagan, idolatrous syncretism is by no means isolated to this strange family and mercenary priest out in the hills of Ephraim. The Danites come to town, meet the priest, and on their way to go conquer a new land, they rob Micah’s shrine and steal all of the household gods, no doubt thinking that this will give them a spiritual advantage in their conquest, showing their lack of faith in Yahweh and their faith in idols made by human hands. And then, in vv.19-20, they convince the corrupt priest, the Levite, to leave Micah and come be the priest for their whole tribe, saying, “Is it better for you to be priest the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?” And the priest’s heart was glad. He took the ephron and the household gods and the carved image and went along with the people.” You

This priest did not serve the Lord - he served himself. He served Micah, abandoning biblical worship and the one true God, serving at an idolatrous shrine, because he was greedy for money. He leaves Micah and becomes the idolatrous priest for the Danites because he’s driven by pride, and wants a “bigger platform for ministry” so that he can be seen as the priest of an entire tribe! The New Testament warns us against such false teachers and wolves arising in our church today. The Bible tells us that men like this are not qualified to be pastors, spiritual leaders and teachers; 1 Tim. 3:3 says a pastor, a spiritual overseer in the church, must not be “a lover of money;” 1 Pet. 5:2, speaking to the elders of a church, says, “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly.” 2 Tim. 4:1-4 warns us of false teachers who, like the corrupt priest we see here, distort biblical truths in order to give itching ears what they want to hear, catering to what people want in order to have a following and be well-liked, instead of being ministers of the truth of God’s Word. We must take great care and be on guard against such false teachers as this. Pastors must be held accountable to the biblical qualifications, being men teach

sound, pure doctrine, regardless of whether or not people like what the Bible says. We must be careful in who we appoint as elders and teachers in our church. It's also part of why we see the biblical example of having multiple elders, or pastors, in each church, to hold each other accountable.

But this isn't just a warning to church leadership; this warns each of us, so that *we would not be the kind of people that have itching ears*. Let us not ever be able that demand to be taught what *we want to hear and what conforms to our preferences*. Brothers and sisters, this passage is a *call to reformation!* It's a call for each of us to rightly know, understand, believe, and obey God's Word! It's a call for us to rightly worship God, as individuals, *and as a church*, in all that we say, do, and believe! Let us be a people that want to hear and believe what *God says*, in His Word! And I praise God that I can honestly say that this is our desire - *your desire* - as Bread of Life Baptist Church. Let us ever be a people of the Word; may we never abandon God, but may we ever grow in grace and truth.

But spiritual and religious corruption can never be separated from moral corruption, which leads us to the final half of our text, warning us of...

II. The Danger of Moral Corruption and Depravity (Judges chs. 19-21)

The final three chapters of Judges warn us against sin by showing us just how horrifying and tragic sin and immorality really is. And it warns us of this with a truly shocking and jarring story. In fact, these chapters contain what I believe is the darkest, most tragic, most painful to read story in the entire Bible. Just like the last two chapters, we see no deliverer, no good characters or heroes, in these final three chapters either.

The story begins in chapter 19 with another unnamed Levite who had a concubine - that is, essentially, a girlfriend that he sleeps with and is legally considered responsible as her husband, but she isn't fully considered a wife (perhaps he was already married to another). But the concubine is "unfaithful to him" (v. 2; though it's also possible the phrase means she was angry with him), and she leaves him, going back to her father's house. The Levite travels down to try and get her to come back, and the girl's father shows him incredible hospitality, treating him well for days. But finally, the levite grows impatient and decides to leave suddenly, even late in the day - and because of this, they can't make it all the way home before nightfall. So, they decide to stop for the night. But while they're passing the town of Jebus, he said to his servant, "We will not turn aside into the city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel, but

will pass on to Gibeah.” In other words, he doesn’t want to stay in Jebus, because they town is full of pagans; even though it’s in the middle of Israel, Judah failed to drive all the Jebusites out. The Levite is saying, “I can’t go stay there, as a foreigner, in the middle of wicked pagans! Who knows what abominable, evil things they might do to us! I’ll go stay in Gibeah, a town of Israelites, instead.” But the tragic irony of it all is that what awaits them in Gibeah is far worse than he can imagine.

They get to Gibeah, but there’s no place for them to stay; they’re going to stay the night in the town square. But an old man, who’s also from Ephraim, just like the Levite, sees them and becomes immediately worried about their safety. He tells them not to stay in the square, but invites them to come stay in his house for the night. And then the story turns horribly tragic, starting in v.22. That night, “the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house, beating on the door.” I’m going to try to be careful and not give all the details here, because they really are quite graphic and disturbing. But the men of the city are demanding that the Levite will come out so that they can sexually assault him. Immediately this story reminds us of the story of Sodom, in Gen. 19, doesn’t it? This is a scene of gross, perverse immorality. But it gets worse. The Levite and the other man offer up the concubine, even the old man’s daughter to the angry mob! They refuse, filled with homosexual lust. But then, in one of the most heart wrenching scenes I can think of, the Levite pushes the concubine out the door. In the morning, the cold, calloused Levite walks out the door, and without any care or concern, says, “Get up, let us be going.” But there’s no answer; the concubine is dead. Like I said - it’s a heart-wrenching, painful story. We’re supposed to see here that Israel has become just as perverted, wicked, and evil as Sodom and Gommorah, filled with just as much sexual immorality, homosexuality, abuse and violence, selfishness, chaotic anarchy, and cowardly men who do not protect their women and children. This scene is pure evil, a moral outrage!

The Levite goes home, desecrates his concubine’s corpse, and sends pieces to all the tribes of Israel, calling all of Israel to come and witness this terrible injustice that has happened (while he, of course, conveniently leaves out the parts where he cowardly pushed her out the door and did nothing to save her). Then, in chapter 20, Israel gathers together in outrage to demand justice - but the tribe of Benjamin refuses to give up the men of Gibeah, so Israel declares war; they go seek God before going into battle, decide to destroy the tribe of Benjamin, and even vow that none of them will give their daughters in marriage to Benjamin. And this is

yet another scene of tragic irony. Remember where the book of judges started? Israel was supposed to come into Canaan, the promised land, and wage holy war against the pagan peoples, wiping them all out at God's command and refusing to intermarry with them, so that they would not become idoltrous and pagan like them. But Israel refused to do so, and *did indeed become just as idolatrous and pagan*. The tragic irony of it all is that now Israel is doing to one of their own tribes - Benjamin - what they were *supposed to do* to the Canaanites. Sure enough, God gives Benjamin into their hand, pouring out judgment against them - but only on the *third try*; the first two times, the Benjaminites wipe out tens of thousands of Israelites, so that by the end, more Israelites are killed than Benjaminites! So what's going on here? I think the point is that God is showing them - and us - that GOD was pouring out judgment on all of Israel through this, not just Benjamin. Yes, the crime at Gibeah was a moral outrage - but *all of Israel* was doing what was right in their own eyes, not just the Benjaminites.

And so, Israel wipes out the whole tribe of Benjamin - even the women and children (and we're never told here that this was the right thing for them to do) - until only 600 men of Benjamin were left. But then, in chapter 21, Israel laments what has happened to Benjamin; they lament that a tribe has been lost, they regret wiping out all of Benjamin. And they can't even let the tribe repopulate, because they have sworn that they would not give their daughters in marriage to these men that are left! And so, they decide to solve this tragic, broken situation with even more sin and injustice. First, in 21:8-15, they go and wipe out *another town* in Israel, across the Jordan; the town of Jabesh-Gilead hadn't sent any soldiers to the battle, so Israel thinks it's OK to wipe them all out, women and children and all, except for the virgins, whom they kidnap and give to the Benjaminites. It's easy for us to see that this is heinously wicked, isn't it? But Israel doesn't stop there; they come up with another stupid, sinful "solution." We see their second idea in 21:16-25, which we read earlier. You see, the 400 virgins they captured weren't enough for the 600 Benajminites - they needed 200 more. So, they tell these men to go and kidnap 200 girls during a festival, and the leaders calm the fathers down and keep them from doing anything about it afterwards. What we see here is one heartbreaking, moral outrage and tragedy followed by *even more* heartbreaking, moral outrage and tragedies. Israel is trying to fight fire with more fire; their solution to sin and evil is more sin and evil. It's sickening. And the book just ends there. It shows us just how messed up and broken Israel had become, closing with v.25: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

This text doesn't just show us how messed up and broken Israel is; it's shows us how messed up and broken *we are*, how sinful and depraved all of humanity is. Pretty much none of the characters in this story are named - and I think the reason why is so that we can see that these people reflect sinful humanity in general. This shows us how wicked and evil sin is, how dark and perverse the human heart is. There was no godly king to bring order and discipline, so everyone just did what they thought was right. The implication is clear: the natural human being is a totally depraved sinner; we are all born with a human nature, bent to rebel against God and do what is wicked and evil. And lest we think that these are arbitrary categories, that sin isn't really that bad - these stories show us that there really is undeniable evil in this world, and that sin and immorality is utterly revolting, horrifying, and tragic.

We've had decades of Disney movies and people like Oprah telling us that, deep down, everyone's really a good person. We're told we just need to "follow our hearts," that what we want, deep down, *must be truly good*. But if we start to believe that, then we need a wake-up call to what the Bible says, that we are all born with a sinful nature, and our sinful hearts and flesh will lead us astray. We live in a culture that, more and more, rejects the existence or authority of God, rejects the category of *sin*, and tells us that morality is subjective and relative. We might start to think, "People aren't that bad. Who am I to tell someone what to do or not to do? What's so bad about fornication, homosexuality, no-fault divorce, pornography, and transgenderism?" It's all too easy to grow soft on sin and think we know better than God.

This can even happen to Christians, even in the church. Maybe you're not tempted to deny total depravity and our sin nature. Maybe you're not tempted to endorse homosexuality, transgenderism, or abortion. But maybe you *are* tempted to start to relax your moral standards in your own life. Maybe you're tempted to relax in your fight against sin. Maybe you're tempted to think, "What's the big deal if I have a few, "small" sins in my life - if I look at things I shouldn't when no one's around, or if I have a few too many drinks at the end of a long week, if I lie here and there, if I gossip and tear people down in order to fit in with the girls at school, if I start participating in the filthy jokes and raunchy conversations in the locker room? What's the big deal if I yell at and disrespect my spouse, or if I disobey my parents and disrespect them? What's the big deal if I don't obey everything God says, if I don't commit to a church family, if I don't strive to study and obey God's Word?" If you've found yourself letting up your guard and relaxing in your fight against sin, then you need to be reminded of just how bad, just how

horrible, tragic, and corrupting, sin really is. You need a wake-up call. We need to see sin and disobedience as the horrible, tragic outrage that it really is. This is a call for us repent from our sin and *wage war* against it!

Sin is not attractive; it is nothing to flirt with. Sin leads to horrifying, tragic consequences, but not just in this life - it condemns our souls to Hell. Because we're all sinners, we all deserve the eternal wrath of God! Like Israel, we need a King to come; but not an earthly king - we need a deliverer, a savior, to save us from our sins! And praise the Lord! Just such a savior, just such a king, has come! Jesus Christ, the God-Man, has come! He is the Son of David, the true promised King, and yet also, the Son of God! He lived a perfect life, without sin, perfectly obeying - unlike us, or anything other human being ever! - and yet he did so, *for us*, as our deliverer and king! Then he died on the cross, paying the penalty our wretched sins deserve; but then he rose again, defeating our sin, Satan, and even death! He rose victorious, ushering in His Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven! And he promises that we can live in His kingdom forever, in paradise, peace, and eternal life, with Him as our King, if we will repent from our sin and idolatry, to Christ in faith, and trust in His grace alone to save us!

Brothers and sisters, no matter how wicked and perverted your past may be, if you're in Christ this morning, your future is eternal life in the glorious Kingdom of God, purely by His grace! And this means your *present* is no longer dominated by the darkness and sin of this world; let us pray and strive to walk as citizens of the Kingdom of God, growing in Christlikeness by His grace!

And if you're not a Christian this morning, I plead with you: turn away from all your idols, confess your sin, no matter wicked it may be, and turn to Jesus, believing that He really will forgive you, love, and save you! Trust in Jesus as your only King, Savior, and God! Then profess your faith publicly in baptism, showing that you've been born again. If you have any questions about this, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.