

The Depth of Rottenness

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[0 : 0 0] Good, well we come now to our Bible reading, and perhaps you'd turn with me to the book of Judges in the Old Testament, chapter 17.

Judges chapter 17, and you'll find this on page 216, page 216. Now, Judges 17 and 18, we're going to read that tonight.

But I want to say a little bit about these two chapters by way of introduction first, because I hope that by doing so, the story itself will make a little bit more sense as I read it.

Now, these two chapters in the book of Judges form one story. The central actors in the story are a man called Micah, who appears nowhere else in the Bible.

He's not to be confused with the Micah who wrote a book of prophecy later on in the Bible. So we have Micah, who is a man of some substance, living in the hill country of Ephraim. And we meet his mother as well.

[1 : 0 1] We also have a young Levite from Bethlehem, whose name proves to be Jonathan. Though we don't discover that until the end of the story. And then we have five spies and 600 warriors from the tribe of Dan.

So we might call them Danites. Now, the story itself is not too difficult to follow. But the thing which is not immediately clear is how the reader is expected to evaluate the story.

The comings and goings of Micah and Jonathan and these Danites, we have to ask, are these men behaving well or are they men behaving badly? And the answer is they are men behaving badly, even though they dress up their bad behavior in religious claptrap.

Now, the author of Judges has been showing us over the previous 16 chapters how the people of Israel have come to be addicted to idolatry. Again and again, they abandon the Lord, their true God, and they begin to worship the fertility gods of the Canaanites.

And the Lord chastises them by giving them over into the power of some pagan oppressor. They then cry to the Lord in their despair for help. He sends them a savior, one of the judges, to rescue them.

[2 : 1 5] So for 16 chapters, we've been looking at the work of these famous judges. Gideon and Deborah, Jephthah, Samson, and the others. But these final chapters of Judges, chapters 17 to 21, are very different, and they're a kind of appendix to the book, in which the author shows us what life was really like in Israel at ground level at this time.

These five final chapters lift a curtain, as it were, on the very nasty things that were happening in the lives of individual Israelites, like Micah and Jonathan, and in the lives of whole tribes, like the Danites.

And the author of Judges is really saying to us, let me show you, for your instruction, dear readers, what life was really like in a corrupted Israel which had abandoned the true God.

You may feel, dear reader, that you have to hold your nose, but this is the stinking mess that Israel got herself into. And of course, there'll be lessons for us, for people of God in later generations.

Now, chapters 17 to 21 give us two stories, two tales of woe. The first is our passage for tonight, which is chapters 17 and 18, and the second story, which we'll look at, I hope, next week and the week after, is told in chapters 19 to 21.

[3 : 35] So, friends, here we go. Chapter 17, verse 1. Don't hold your nose, because we need to smell the rottenness of this undiluted. There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.

And he said to his mother, The eleven hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and also spoke it in my ears, Behold, the silver is with me.

I took it. And his mother said, Blessed be my son by the Lord. And he restored the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother. And his mother said, I dedicate the silver to the Lord from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a metal image.

Now, therefore, I will restore it to you. So when he restored the money to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into a carved image and a metal image.

And it was in the house of Micah. And the man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and household gods, and ordained one of his sons, who became his priest.

[4 : 48] In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Now, there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there.

And this man departed from the town of Bethlehem in Judah to Sojourn, where he could find a place. And as he journeyed, he came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah.

And Micah said to him, Where do you come from? And he said to him, I'm a Levite of Bethlehem in Judah, and I'm going to Sojourn, where I may find a place. And Micah said to him, Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, and a suit of clothes, and your living.

And the Levite went in. And the Levite was content to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. And Micah ordained the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah.

Then Micah said, Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest. In those days there was no king in Israel.

[6 : 05] 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. So the people of Dan sent five able men from the whole number of their tribe, from Zorah and from Eshterol, 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. 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? And he said to them, Well, this is how Micah dealt with me. He's hired me, and I've become his 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. And the priest said to them, Go in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of the Lord.

Then the five men departed and came to Laish, that's right up in the far north of Israel, 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.

[7 : 28] And when they came back to their brothers at Zorah and Eshterol, their brothers said to them, What do you report? 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. 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.

So six hundred men of the tribe of Dan, armed with weapons of war, set out from Zorah and Eshterol, and went up and encamped at Kiriath-Jerim in Judah. On this account, that place is called Mahanedan to this day.

Behold, it is west of Kiriath-Jerim. And they passed on from there to the hill country of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah. 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. 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. Now the six hundred men of the Danites, armed with their weapons of war, stood by the entrance of the gate.

[8 : 52] 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 priests stood by the entrance of the gate, with the six hundred men, armed with weapons of war.

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? 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 a clan in Israel? 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.

So they turned, and departed, putting the little ones, and the livestock, and the goods in front of them. 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.

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? And he said, you take my gods that I made, and the priest, and go away, and what have I left?

[10 : 06] How then do you ask me, what is the matter with you? 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.

And 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. But the people of Dan took, what Micah had made, and the priests 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.

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.

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. And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites, until the day of the captivity of the land.

So they set up Micah's carved image that he had made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us this evening.

[11 : 36] Well, do let's turn in our Bibles again, to the book of Judges, chapters 17 and 18, page 216, 217. What I'd like to do in this sermon this evening, is to look first, at the rottenness in Israel, as exemplified in our story, but then secondly, at the remedy for Israel.

Rottenness first, and then remedy. Let me give you a clue at this point. The remedy really comes in chapter 17, verse 6, and it's to do with a king.

And that may give you an idea of where we're going to end up. So I think I can promise you a gloomy first part to the sermon, followed by, I hope, a more encouraging final part to the sermon.

And just one other preliminary point, and this is a point, a general point, about how the Bible instructs us. Very often, the Bible presents truth to us by saying, not this, but that.

Let me give you one or two examples, of what I mean. Here's an example from Jesus' teaching. The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve.

[12 : 51] Not this, but that. And we understand the positive assertion, much more clearly, because it's contrasted with the negative opposite. Here's another example.

When the Apostle Paul teaches Christian behavior, he will typically say, and he says more or less this in a passage in Ephesians, he'll typically say, don't live this way, as the Gentiles do, with their minds darkened and their hearts hardened, but live a new lifestyle, according to the mind of Christ.

Don't lie, but tell the truth. Don't be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit. Here's another, from the Epistle to the Hebrews. Christ has entered, not into holy places made by human hands, but into heaven itself.

That's in Hebrews 9, and a little bit later in the same chapter. He did not offer himself repeatedly, but he has appeared once for all, to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Do you see it? Not this, but that. It's a simple structure, but it's wonderfully clarifying, because it helps us to see clearly, where the Bible draws lines, between truth and falsehood, and between godliness and ungodliness.

[14 : 07] And we need both sides of the truth. We need the negatives, just as much as the positives. We need the not-this's, just as much as the but-that's.

To use a phrase that Willie Philip, I've heard use, we need the necessary negatives. If we just have the positives, we shall end up in hopeless vagueness. So, for example, if we're to understand the glorious positive truth, that Jesus came to serve, we need to grasp the glorious negative truth, that he did not come to be served.

Now, in Judges 17 and 18, you won't find anywhere an explicit, not this, but that, construction. But the whole story is presented in just this way.

The author is saying to the readers, not this, Life lived as Micah and Jonathan and the Danites are living. It is a stinking corruption of the glorious life of the true Israel.

But, chapter 17, verse 6, if there had been a true and godly king in Israel at this point in history, there would not have been moral and spiritual anarchy with everybody doing just what they felt was right in their own eyes, imagining that they could make up the rules for themselves and plow their own furrow in whatever direction they chose.

[15 : 31] Well, friends, let's turn our eyes to the page and we'll look first at this rottenness and secondly at the remedy. Let's notice three aspects of the rottenness. First, these Israelites show a reckless contempt for God's law.

A reckless contempt for God's law. You get the impression from the story that Micah is a middle-aged man, perhaps the master of a small estate in the hill country of Ephraim. Certainly, it's a big enough establishment to provide lodging for the five Danite spies in chapter 18, verse 2, and big enough for Jonathan, the young Levite, to have his own house as part of the setup in chapter 18, verse 15.

So it was probably an extended farmstead. You'll find plenty of those in the countryside around us here with several buildings standing close to each other.

So if Micah was middle-aged, his mother was probably quite elderly. Now look at the conversation between them in chapter 7, verses 2, 3, and 4. It starts with a confession of theft.

Now the Ten Commandments say, Thou shalt not steal. But Micah says to his mother here in verse 2, The eleven hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse and also spoke it in my ears, Behold, the silver is with me.

[16 : 55] I took it. So he's confessing that he's broken the Eighth Commandment. Now the Ten Commandments also teach us to honour our fathers and our mothers, a commandment which is contradicted by a man who lifts eleven hundred pieces of silver from under his elderly mother's mattress.

Verse 2 does not speak of a parent-honouring relationship. On the contrary, it suggests a household where relationships have broken down rather badly. Now Micah, having confessed his theft to his mother, gives the silver back to her.

In verse 3. And she then says something which will astonish anybody who knows the Ten Commandments. She says, I dedicate the silver to the Lord from my hand for my son to make a carved image and a metal image.

What's the old lady suffering from theological amnesia? I mean, she must have known the second of the Ten Commandments, you shall not make for yourself a carved image. And yet she not only organises the making of a carved image, she has the gall to dedicate this artwork to the Lord.

So what happens next? Well, verse 4. Micah returns the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother. She then, having supposedly dedicated it to the Lord, puts nine hundred pieces back under her mattress and gives the two hundred remaining to a silversmith who makes the idolatrous image.

[18 : 24] And the image is then set up in the household of Micah. Carved images, by the way, are horrible in the sight of God because they disastrously misrepresent him and distort him.

To reduce the God who created eleven trillion trillion stars to the proportions of a little statue that you can put on your mantelpiece. A statue that can neither speak nor hear nor smell nor act is a blasphemous misrepresentation.

And it's a very short step from making a statue of God to the point where you think that this little godlet on your mantelpiece is rather like the genie in Aladdin's lamp.

You rub the lamp, up comes the genie, just there to do your bidding, to bring you good luck and to bless your work. And so the God who made the universe is domesticated.

He's no longer awesome, no longer to be feared and served and loved. He's a kind of pet genie who says to you, your wish, sir, is my command. So Micah sets up the image in his house.

[19 : 29] But that's not all. Oh no. Why limit yourself to a teaspoonful of religion if you can have a whole pint? Look at verse 5. Let's have a shrine as well, says Micah.

A religious area in one corner of the house, perhaps the corner of the living room. And he says, let's have an ephod. That's a garment, like a tunic, which the priests of Aaron's line were to wear.

And he says, we'll have household gods. That phrase apparently could be translated a whole house of gods. And let's have a real priest to put inside the ephod.

So Micah carries out an ordination ceremony. And he ordains one of his own sons to be his priest. Now you'll appreciate that all this behavior is totally out of order.

We're still something like a century earlier than the days of David and Solomon. So there's no temple yet at Jerusalem. But the predecessor to the temple was completely in action, up and running.

[20 : 31] In fact, it's mentioned at chapter 18, verse 31. It's the house of God at Shiloh, the place where young Samuel served when he was a little boy. That was the place where the ark of the Lord was housed.

And that was the place where the priests served at the altar. That was the place where people offering sacrifices should bring their sacrifice as prescribed in the law of Moses. The law of Moses is very clear that Israel is to express her faith centrally at the house of the Lord, according to the regulations laid down in the book of Leviticus.

And the priests were all to be drawn from just one tribe, the tribe of Levi. Micah was not of the tribe of Levi, and so for him to ordain his own son as if he were a Levitical priest was to do exactly as verse 6 puts it.

Everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes, not in the Lord's eyes. So Micah is running a coach and horses through the law of Moses from verse 2 to verse 5.

And his mother, and his young son, are colluding with him. But that's not all. The story develops a pace in verse 7. A young man just happens to turn up at Micah's house.

[21 : 46] And he is a Levite of the tribe of Levi from Bethlehem. He seems to be footloose and fancy free, and he's going wherever the wind blows him. Micah says to him in verse 9, where do you come from?

Oh, he says, I'm a Levite from Bethlehem, and I'm happy to stay wherever I can get bored and lodging. A Levite? Oh, Micah's mind begins to work rather quickly.

Maybe Micah is a little bit uneasy about having ordained his non-Levite son as a priest. So he says, in a kindly and generous kind of way, look young man, stay with me and be my priest, and I'll give you a very good deal.

Ten pieces of silver per annum, quite a lot, a new suit of clothes per annum, many of us could do with that, couldn't we? And board and lodging. It's an offer that the young man simply can't refuse.

Micah seems to be well off, the smells drifting from the kitchen suggest that Mrs. Micah is a good cook, so the young man goes into the house. And Micah, a dab hand by now at ordinations, ordains the young man, and the young man becomes like a son to him.

[22 : 54] And Micah says, rubbing his hands with glee, in verse 13, now I know that the Lord will prosper me because I have a Levite as my priest. Now let's just pause there to reflect on what is really going on.

Micah and his mother and his son and this young Levite from Bethlehem are all recklessly transgressing the law of Moses in all sorts of ways.

They're breaking the Ten Commandments blatantly, they're disregarding the teaching of Moses about priests and Levites, and centralized worship in the house of God, and yet they don't seem to be aware of what they're doing.

And they're using religious language. Blessed be my son by the Lord, says the old mother piously in verse 2. I dedicate the silver to the Lord.

Verse 3. How does she do it? By crashing her way through the Ten Commandments. It shows what can happen to people who have sprung from an environment of real faith, but have actually turned their hearts against the Lord.

[24 : 03] They can use the language of faith while denying the reality. I think of this in terms of us today. A family today could have real Bible-taught Christian faith in the parents' generation.

Christian faith Then, in the second generation, because the children respect their parents and don't want to hurt them, you can have a pretense of Christianity involving the use of Christian language.

But in the third generation, the family has descended into open agnosticism. Now, in Britain today, there are plenty of real Christians, thank God, and there are plenty of whole families of real Christians where the children and the grandchildren really trust and love the Lord.

But there are also families where there's what you might call a family memory of Christianity, but no present reality of faith and commitment. And yet, there can still be a certain amount of Christian language.

Well, my granddad, yes, he was a minister in Drumna Droghet in the 1950s. And, you know, Christmas, wonderful, Christmas coming up. We would never miss going to carol service at Christmas time.

[25 : 12] It's just so lovely. The traditions, the candles, the crib, the mince pies. It's lovely. And, you know, we gave baby Archie a Bible at his baptism back in September. The language of Christianity yet without the reality.

Well, there's the first thing. Let's turn now from a reckless contempt of God's law to a second element in this picture of national breakdown, and that is a false perception of providence.

Let's look at this first from Micah's point of view. Let's try and put ourselves in the shoes of Micah. Perhaps as Micah looks back over the years with hindsight after the events of chapter 17, he might say, how the Lord has blessed me.

I'd stolen mother's silver, that's the truth, and she had cursed the thief, which was yours truly. And yet, God blessed me so much through the confession of my sins.

My mother forgave me, bless her little socks, and as a result, her prayer life was renewed and her generosity to the Lord was opened up. Doesn't the Bible say God loves a cheerful giver? And her generosity, it all led to the establishment of my shrine and my idol dedicated to the Lord.

[26 : 28] And what happened next? Was this a God incidence or what? The Lord sent me a Levite so that now I could have a real priest. Look again at verse 13.

Now I know that the Lord will prosper me because I have a Levite as priest. Now let's look at this from the point of view of the Danite warriors as we go on into chapter 18.

The Danites might have said as they looked back in later years, they might have said it was wonderful, wonderful, just like Moses sending the spies up into Canaan. We sent our spies up into the far north, up into Laish.

But how kindly the Lord provided for us. our spies, as it happened, took bed and breakfast at the house of Micah and they recognized the voice of a young Levite there.

Some God incidence that was. And he was a real priest. So our men asked him to seek God's guidance for their mission. And he came straight up with it.

[27 : 26] He said, verse 6, go in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of the Lord. Isn't God good? So our five boys, they went on northwards, found a wonderful stretch of country.

I mean, the people who lived there were undefended and unsuspecting, ripe for the plucking, you might say. So our spies came back with a really good report. They said, the land is very good.

The people are unsuspecting. The land is spacious. For, verse 10, notice the language, God has given it into your hands. So we set off with an army of 600 people.

The Lord blessed our every move. We called at Micah's house. We took his carved image, which would be a wonderful protector for us. And we persuaded the young priest to come with us.

We said to him, verse 19, isn't it better for you to be priest to a whole tribe than just to one household? And the Lord put it into his heart to follow us.

[28 : 29] Micah, of course, he was upset, but the interests of a whole tribe surely weigh more heavily than the interests of a single household. And when we got to Laish, it was as easy as falling off a log.

The people put up no resistance. We burned the city down, but later we rebuilt it and we called it Dan. And we established the now very famous shrine of Dan, complete with carved image.

And, best provision of all, our priest was not just any old Levite. He turned out to be, verse 30, a descendant of Gershom, the son of Moses.

If any, my greater adventure was ever blessed by the Lord, it was surely ours. Now, friends, you can see I've been speaking rather ironically. But I've been speaking like that because the account itself is written with heavy irony.

We're supposed to read it that way. The key to understanding what the author of Judges is saying comes in chapter 17, verse 6. Everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes.

[29 : 32] Now, that sentence is not ironic. That is the true view of things. That's God's view of things. So Micah and his mother and Jonathan, the so-called priest, and the Danite warriors, despite their Lord this and Lord that language, they are religious anarchists.

They're following simply their own plans and desires. and they're pretending to themselves that the Lord is blessing them and that they're following his will. Well, actually, they're doing no such thing at all.

Now, isn't this a warning to our own hearts? These chapters show us that it's possible to pretend to ourselves that we're following the Lord when in fact we're simply doing what is right in our own eyes.

Let me give just one example of this kind of self-delusion and I've come across this once or twice. It's possible for a Christian man to go through a rocky patch in his marriage.

He tires of his wife, finds her difficult or irritable, assumes that it's all her fault. And while this is going on, he falls in love with another woman, a Christian woman.

[30 : 44] So he divorces his wife and he persuades this other woman to marry him. And then he says, how the Lord has blessed me. I now have a wife that I get on really well with.

But the man has just broken the commandment against adultery. The Lord hasn't blessed him. The man is reading his personal story through spectacles of self-deception. That's what Micah did.

That's what the Danites were doing. But the true assessment of all these events is given us in that final sentence of chapter 17, verse 6. How then can we know if our conduct and our life is blessed by the Lord?

How can we know that we're not deceiving ourselves? Surely the answer is by measuring our conduct against the standards that are taught here in the Bible. If we are learning to love the Lord and to love his ways as the Bible teaches them, of course he will bless us.

Now his blessing may include episodes of pain and difficulty as it did in the life of Joseph for example or the Apostle Paul. But we shall be under his providence and at the end of our lives we shall be able to trace the kind provisions of his guiding hand.

[32 : 02] Well now let's notice thirdly and very briefly how the actors in our story have a foolish reliance on the trappings of religion. This is one element in false religion a foolish reliance on the trappings of religion.

Micah wants something that he can touch with his hands and look at with his eyes. He wants a solid silver statue and he wants a special place for his religious activities so he makes himself a shrine and he wants a human priest who will give him advice and guidance who will enquire of the Lord for him when some important decision has to be made.

He even wants an ephod a richly embroidered garment to dress his priest up in. And then you'll see in the words of chapter 17 verse 10 then he can call him father even though the priest is obviously a much younger man than Micah himself.

When I was a Church of England vicar sometimes I'd be taking funerals quite often taking funerals and always because regulations required it I would be dressed up in my black and white Church of England robes.

And sometimes the undertaker thinking that he was being very correct would call me father. Would you like me to walk in front of the coffin father or would you prefer me behind?

[33 : 26] What I would really prefer Mr. Fotheringay is that you wouldn't call me father at all. I didn't say that but I thought it. Now this is human religion the world over.

Something special to touch somewhere special to go you have your shrine your special building someone special to do religion for you and special clothes for your father and your priest to wear.

Now Christian people need none of these tangible things. Our father is in heaven our only priest is the Lord Jesus we have no need of special buildings or statues or embroidered garments and we can know the Lord for ourselves each of us personally it's him and us we have access to him 24 hours a day wherever we are.

well let's leave all that gruesome rotten stuff behind us the not this part of the message and let's turn to the but that part of the message and it's the but that part of the message that provides the remedy for all this religious corruption and rottenness.

Chapter 17 verse 6 again in those days there was no king in Israel. the implication is that the author of Judges is writing in the days of the kings quite possibly quite probably during the reign of David a century or so after the period of the judges.

[34 : 58] The rule of David is bringing order and cohesion and a degree of godly discipline back into the land of Israel. Now it was always God's purpose that his people should be ruled by a king.

Way back in Genesis chapter 17 the Lord promised Abraham Abraham that kings would be descended from him.

In Deuteronomy chapter 17 the Lord tells Moses what kind of king the king of Israel should be when the time comes for a king and his greatest quality in Deuteronomy 17 is that he should be a man who loves and reads and knows God's laws so that he should be able to lead the people of Israel according to the law of Moses.

The reason Samuel became upset when the people asked him for a king was that they were asking for the wrong kind of king a king just like the kings of the Gentile nations some petty tyrant who had no interest in leading the people by God's law and God's word but a true king of Israel a man after God's own heart was exactly what the people needed.

So the author of Judges here in chapter 17 verse 6 although he doesn't say much about the king is clearly delighted that he is living in times when a godly king like David is preventing the situation where everyone can do whatever is right in his own eyes.

[36 : 31] These two chapters here in Judges are one of the most important passages in the whole of the Old Testament about false and corrupt religion although they're not well known chapters and the answer they give to false religion is to have a true king whose authority channels the disciplined and lovely rule of God into the lives of the people so that they no longer do their own thing but learn to live their lives according to the life-giving word of God.

It is simple isn't it and the application to our own situation is as plain as the nose on your face. We live in a society today where to a great degree not entirely but to a great degree everybody is doing what is right in their own eyes.

What is truth to people who are not Christians? Now that's an old question isn't it because Pontius Pilate asked just that question when the truth in person was standing looking at him.

But it's today's question as well. many people today feel that it's impossible to grip any idea as being true in any final or absolute sense.

In many areas of life the goal posts haven't merely moved they've been taken off the pitch altogether. The touch lines have gone too and the penalty area.

[37 : 57] It's all gone hasn't it? Now this is obviously the case with sexual morality but it creeps into almost everything. draining rapidly out of our society is the idea that two human beings can look each other in the eye and know that they share a common understanding of what is right and wrong in human behavior and thinking.

And this is the consequence of relegating the Bible to the margins of our national life. Isn't it wonderful then that even though many people in Britain don't acknowledge him Christian people rejoice in our king.

Our king being of course the Lord Jesus. To become a Christian, many of you have been Christians for years but some are quite new Christians, to become a Christian is to submit to the gracious and gentle rule of this king.

To become a Christian is to leave that wilderness where there are no more goal posts and touch lines and penalty areas and to take up residence in a realm of order, delight and peace.

We need discipline. Jesus is the good shepherd and the good shepherd disciplines and rules and loves and cares for the sheep. We need a king because by nature we are anarchists and anarchy leads to tears and despair in the end.

[39 : 21] Jesus our king also is willing to yoke himself to us. Take my yoke upon you. It's as though he and I are both oxen plowing under the same yoke.

Take my yoke upon you he says and learn from me for I'm gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

It's something definite but it's light, it's delightful. Some of you are becoming members of this fellowship, this church, this evening. You already acknowledge Jesus as your king but in joining yourselves to this particular band of pilgrims, you're committing yourselves in a more definite way to the joyful life of not only serving king Jesus but of getting to know him better and better.

That's what the Christian life is all about, getting to know him better and better. Let us therefore love our king, love him. Let us delight in our king. Let us listen to our king's voice as we read the Bible.

Bible. Let us read the words of the Bible regularly and hungrily like a hungry man sitting down to a very good dinner. Let us rejoice in the sheer goodness and kindness and mercy of the Son of God whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light.

[40 : 43] Let us rejoice that we no longer have the intolerable burden of trying to work out for ourselves what is right in our own eyes. We are freed from that now. We belong to a king who cares about us and who teaches us how to put one foot after the other.

In those days there was no king in Israel. But in our days, today, in our hearts, there is a king, Jesus, the Son of Man, the Son of God, our Saviour and our joy.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. dear Lord Jesus, we confess that there are indeed areas within our hearts and lives where we are still in rebellion against you.

But our prayer is that you will more and more conquer our hearts with your wonderful love and kindness to us. fill our minds and our thinking more and more, we pray, with the wonder, the greatness, the delightfulness and the glory that is you.

And deepen in our hearts a hunger to know you better and better, we pray, that the marks of your lordship in our lives should be more and more seen and that others should be drawn to you.

[42 : 16] and we ask it to the honour and glory of your great name. Amen. Amen.