



JUDGES

IN THOSE DAYS ISRAEL HAD NO KING
EVERYONE DID AS HE SAW FIT

JUDGES 21:25

**GOD, WHO IS
RICH IN MERCY**

EPHESIANS 2:4



Seven Growth Group Bible Studies in the OT Book of Judges
Kenmore Presbyterian Church

GROWTH GROUPS

Growth Group is more than just a Bible study. We want to pray together, share our lives with one another, and encourage each other as we follow Jesus. At the heart of all this, though, is God's Word. It is our time studying the Bible that should shape everything else we do together.

AN INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

"In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25 NIV)

The OT book of Judges tells stories of valour, commitment and victory along with deceit, betrayal and injustice. In all this the discerning reader can see the fickle human heart exposed. In contrast stands the character of the LORD – unchanging, righteous, jealous, patient and merciful. He judges, but shows mercy, time after time, after time.

Reading Judges, we learn not only about our own sinfulness, but also about God's mercy. Our God truly is rich in mercy.

"All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest we were objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:3-5, NIV)

WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

We will cover most, but not all, of the book of Judges in these Bible studies. Here is the plan:

Study 1	1:1-3:6	A Slippery Slope
Study 2	3:7-31	God who Remembers the People who Forget (Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar)
Study 3	3:31-5:31	Unlimited God (Deborah and Barak)
Study 4	6:1-8:35	Fear God, not the gods (Gideon)
Study 5	10:6-12:15	A Humbling Salvation (Jephthah)
Study 6	13:1-16:31	The Surprising, Saving God (Samson)
Study 7	17:1-21:25	Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit

Study 1

A SLIPPERY SLOPE

Judges 1:1-3:6

Prayer

Pray for the things you have discussed since arriving today. Also pray for:

- newcomers to church in recent weeks
 - friends and family who are not yet Christians
 - some of the people in church with us
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How did we get here?

You know those movies which flick back and forth between the present and the past? The scenes from the past are often included to tell you why things are as they are now. Judges 1:1-3:6 is a bit like that. It gives a brief overview of the history of the Israelites from their entry into the Promised Land to the time of the Judges. It sets up the rest of the book, explaining why God raised judges in Israel and giving insight into Israel's response to them. We may look at the rest of the book of Judges and ask the question, "How did we get here?" Judges 1:1-3:6 tells us how!

The book of Judges begins with the Israelites in their new home: the Promised Land. Let's start our study by looking back at the book of Exodus, to see some of God's instructions for them in this land.

Read Exodus 23:20-33

1. How are the Israelites to treat the inhabitants of the land they will enter?
2. Why is this important?

Let's look at Judges to see what happened.

Read Judges 1:1-8

3. How do the Israelites go at obeying the commands of Exodus 23?
4. Who was responsible for their success?

Throughout chapter 1 of Judges, we see the conquest of various cities. Look at this map¹ to see the territory they captured.

¹Map courtesy of www.esvstudybible.org



Read Judges 1:21, 27-2:5

5. How well are the Israelites obeying the commands of Exodus 23?
6. What consequences do they face (2:3)?

Let's see what happened because of their actions. **Read Judges 2:10-3:6**

7. How does God respond to his disobedient people?

In Judges 2:10-3:6 the Israelites seem to follow a pattern of disobedience then remorse, followed by disobedience. Meanwhile God punishes and shows mercy. It might look something like this.



The Israelites are in a cycle of disobedience. If we look at the end of the book of Judges, we see that this cycle takes on a downward 'spiral'.

Judges 21:25 says, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." Remember how they appeared to start so well in chapter 1? The writer shows the Israelites' decline from obedience, to disobedience, to apostasy (turning away from God) and to anarchy! Over coming weeks, we will have a closer look at all this.

Think it through

8. What does Judges 1:1-3:6 teach us about the character of God?
9. In what ways do we see the sovereignty of God at work?
10. What effect do the actions of humans have on what happens?
11. In Judges 1:1-3:6 we see a progression, from obedience, to laxity, to outright disobedience and apostasy. In what ways might we be in danger of following a similar progression?
12. How does God keep us on track? What means does he use?
13. In what ways does Judges point us to Christ?

Judges 1:1-3:6 gives us the background to, and an overview of what happened in Israel in the time of the Judges. Over the next seven weeks as we study the remainder of the book, we'll see this period in history in more detail.

Prayer

Thank God for His grace and sovereignty that we see portrayed in the book of Judges and in Jesus.

Study 2

GOD WHO REMEMBERS THE PEOPLE WHO FORGET

Judges 3:7-31

Prayer

Pray for the things you have discussed since arriving. Also pray for:

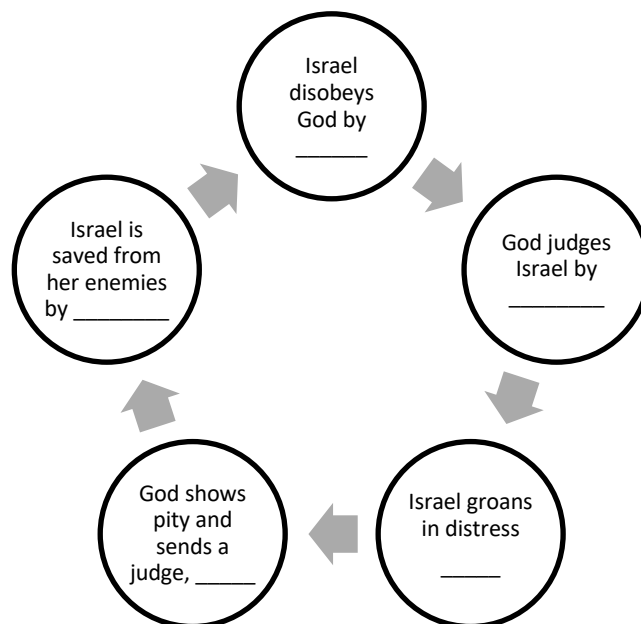
- other Growth Groups
 - friends and family who are not yet Christians
 - some of the people in church with us
-

Discuss:

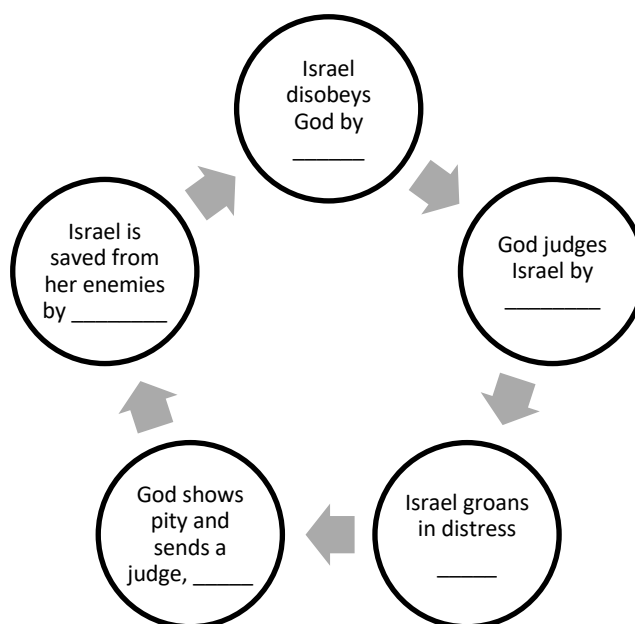
How should we respond when someone keeps making the same mistake again?

Read Judges 3:7-11

Last week we discovered that Israel follows a cyclical pattern of disobedience. In this week's passage we see this cycle played out in more detail. Have a go at adding the details of Judges 3:7-11 to the following cycle diagram.



Now read Judges 3:12-30 and see if you can fill in the details of the cycle again.



Things aren't looking good in Israel! God promised to give them the land of Canaan when they left Egypt, but because of their disobedience they had to wait through 40 years of wandering in the desert before they could enter. Now that they're in, you'd think they'd be grateful, but they keep forgetting about Him and find themselves trapped in an endless cycle of sin.

1. Each cycle ends with God rescuing Israel. Does this mean that He ignores their sin?
2. In what ways do we see God's sovereignty at work over both Israelites and non-Israelites?

Think it through

3. Why do you think God keeps persevering with the Israelites, rescuing them when they keep disobeying Him?
4. In what ways might we follow the pattern of the Israelites?
5. Read Romans 5:6-11. What elements of God's character, displayed to the Israelites, do you see in His dealings with us?

Prayer

Spend some time praying together, thanking God for His grace and mercy to the disobedient, including us.

Study 3

UNLIMITED GOD

Judges 3:31-5:31

Prayer

Pray for the things you have discussed since arriving today. Also pray for:

- Children in the life of our church including Youth Group, KPC Kids.
- Plans for Carols and Kids Club, and those you can invite.
- Some people in the My ChurchSuite Directory pages.

Discuss:

How does God view half-heartedness?

Read 3:31-4:3

1. Look back over the diagrams from study 1 and your notes from study 2. How does the passage we've just read compare with the cycles of previous weeks? What's the same? What's different?

Read 4:4-10

2. Is Barak obedient to God (v6, 8)?
3. Who will secure victory for Israel?

Read 4:11-24

Verse 11 begins by telling us that Heber the Kenite has moved his tent and now lives in a different place from the rest of his people. Whatever Heber's reasons for the move, God used his placement in Zanannim in a mighty way!

4. Who secures victory for Israel? By what means?
5. How does Barak's attitude (v8) affect the outcome of these events?

Women in Judges

In Judges 4-5 women are most worthy of commendation. Deborah and Jael are the ones who 'come through with the goods. They are used by God to fulfil pivotal roles in Israel's success over her enemies. This is noteworthy when we consider this was probably not the expected role of women in Israelite society.

However, this passage may read more like an indictment against weak-willed men than a paradigm of female leadership. For example, it was a shameful thing for a man to be killed by a woman, so much so that in Judges 9:53-54 we find a servant spear his master with a sword so that it won't look like a woman was responsible for his death!

Perhaps what we are meant to see is that Deborah and Jael act as they do to fill a void left by weak-willed men!

Read 5:1-31

6. Judges 5 is a recap of, or commentary on Judges 4. Think about the various characters we have read about today. Which characters does this chapter commend? Why?
7. Who does this chapter condemn? Why?
8. How does Judges 5 portray God's involvement in events?

**Think it through**

9. The narrative of Deborah and Barak is both graphic and messy. We might be tempted to skip over this passage of Scripture! What should we do with 'messy' passages like this?
10. In what ways might we be tempted to be like Barak and say, "Yes, I'll obey, but only if... "?
11. Is half-hearted obedience acceptable to God? (compare Revelation 2-3)
12. In what ways do you see God's grace demonstrated in this passage?
13. How can this passage help us think through repentance, obedience and faith in the life of a Christian (e.g. "obedience of faith" in Romans 1:5)?

In Judges 4-5 we see God at work through willing and unwilling/half-hearted agents. Of course, our whole-hearted obedience is what He requires, however this passage shows us that God is not limited by limited obedience. Humans might be, but God isn't!

Prayer

Pray together, thanking God for His abundant grace, and for His power that is not limited by our limited obedience. Ask for His help to obey wholeheartedly.

FEAR GOD, NOT THE GODS

Judges 6:1-8:35

Prayer

Pray for the things you have discussed since arriving. Also pray for:

- plans for Christmas, carols, Christmas services, evangelistic events, etc
 - people in the My ChurchSuite Directory pages.
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Discuss: What does it mean to fear God?

Read Judges 6:1-10

We may well read this passage and think, "Here we go again."

1. Why is Israel suffering as they are (v1, 10)?
2. Are they crying out in repentance, or are they just seeking relief from suffering (v6-7)?

Read 6:11-24

3. Why does Gideon think that God is not with the Israelites? Does this complaint sound familiar (in Israel/ in our day)?
4. Do you think Gideon is making excuses for disobedience (v14ff), or is he genuinely struggling to trust that the LORD will be with him?
5. Can you remember other times God promised to be with His people? (v16)²

In 6:25-32 we see Gideon following the LORD's instruction (albeit fearfully). He destroys his father's altar of Baal and builds an altar to the LORD. This is a vivid portrayal of what should be happening in Israel: the LORD should be worshipped as God, not the pagan gods (6:10).

The altar to Baal belonged to Joash, Gideon's father. We get the hint that maybe Joash is beginning to see who is really in control. He says, "If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar." (6:31). Thus, Gideon is called "Jerub-baal", which means "Let Baal contend with him" (6:32). The one true God, who is to be feared is the one who is with Gideon and helps him. The other gods pale in comparison. Is there any need to fear them?

² If you have time, take a look at Exodus 3:12 and Joshua 1:5.

Think it through

6. Is there any way we might become fearful of the things that could be false gods in our day?
7. How can you make sure you're fearing God (in the sense of 'reverent fear'), not the gods?

Read 7:1-23

8. Why does God whittle down Gideon's army so much?
9. Undoubtedly, a great military conquest ensues. Who is responsible? What do the Israelites do to contribute?
10. Look ahead to 8:22-23. How does Israel ultimately react? How does Gideon respond?

Think it through

11. When might we be in danger of boasting that our own strength has saved us (7:2)?
12. Think of a time when you have felt that your resources were low and then felt that they have then been made lower still. What encouragement can you take from the way God worked through Gideon?
13. Read 2 Corinthians 12:9. How can we show our fear of God in times of weakness?

Memory verse challenge

Here's a challenge: Why not set yourselves the goal of memorising 2 Corinthians 12:9? (or part of it)

See who can remember it next week!

Things are looking up in Israel, but if we read ahead, we realize that it doesn't last for long, and we're back to that point of thinking, "here we go again... again." Having acknowledged God's rule in Israel, Gideon makes an ephod (a tunic worn by a priest) out of the spoils of battle. Israel treats it as an idol. Then, after Gideon dies Israel forgets God and follows the Baals. Indeed, here we go again. The Israelites run after the very thing God instructed them not to (6:10). But their repeated disobedience comes at a cost. God gives Israel periods of rest (8:28), but this is the last time. As we will see in the coming weeks, Israel does not rest from disobedience, so Israel will not rest from conflict.

Prayer

Have a read of Psalm 81 together and pray that we would indeed "Sing for joy to God our strength" and walk faithfully with Him.

Study 5

A HUMBLING SALVATION

Judges 10:6-12:15

Prayer

Pray for the things you have discussed since arriving. Also pray for:

- Give thanks for generous financial giving to church – and pray for planning for next year.
- Pray that we would see KPC growing as we each grow in knowing Jesus, living for Jesus and sharing the truth about Jesus.
- people in the My ChurchSuite Directory pages.

Memory Verse challenge

How did you go at memorising 2 Corinthians 12:9?

Things are looking pretty bad in Israel. Last week we saw how God used Gideon to achieve a great victory for Israel. But after Gideon's death, things go downhill rapidly. Gideon's own son, Abimelech,³ is appointed king in Israel, but only after murdering his 70 brothers! After Abimelech come two more judges, Tola and Jair, but the commentary on their periods of rule is brief (Judges 10:1-5). We know that they lead Israel, but that's about all. In the passage we're looking at today, we're going to see God's ongoing work to save Israel. However, along with this salvation comes a costly lesson.

Read Judges 10:6-16

1. Have a go at filling in this table: -

Countries God has saved Israel from in the past (v11-12)	Countries whose gods Israel has since followed (v6)	Countries who are oppressing Israel (v7-9)

2. What parallels do you see?

³ Abimelech was a common name of Philistine kings – which makes it an interesting name for Gideon to give his son. It is not a Hebrew name, but it sounds like the Hebrew for "my father is King". You'd think his name is not an accident!

Israel wants salvation (v10), but from affliction which they've brought upon themselves (v13-14)! And the source of the salvation that they need is the Saviour who they have rejected (v10, 15).

3. We see here two responses from God: refusal to save (v13), and compassion (v16). What do these two responses tell us about God's character?
4. And how do we see God's unchanging character continue into the New Testament?

Read 10:17-11:11

5. Do you see any parallels between the treatment of Jephthah by his brothers, and Israel's treatment of God (10:6-16)?
6. What change was required of Israel/ the Gileadites (a sub-group of Israelites)?

It's a theme that runs through the Gospel isn't it, salvation by a rejected Saviour? Look at Isaiah 53:1-7. Prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, this passage is 'Messianic', meaning that it refers to Jesus, the Messiah who was to come. At the cross, salvation was bought by a rejected Saviour. But like the Israelites, we too must change. We must stop rejecting the Saviour and humbly ask for His help (Romans 10:9).

Salvation costs us our pride. We can't hold onto it, thinking we can save ourselves by our own efforts. The Gileadites needed to come to this same realization before they asked Jephthah to lead them. Tragically it would appear this is a lesson Jephthah himself fails to learn.

Read Judges 11:29-40

7. Who saved Israel (v29)?
8. Was Jephthah right to make this vow? Was he right to keep it?

Jephthah's vow is a feeble and unwarranted attempt to 'secure' a military victory from the LORD rather than humbly asking the LORD for help and trusting Him. Jephthah treats the LORD in much the same way as the pagan nations treat their gods – whom they 'pay to perform' by offering sacrifices. Jephthah's attitude towards the LORD is arrogant or ignorant, or both.

While Jephthah (more so his daughter) appears pious by following through with the vow, they are in fact sadly misguided – and ultimately disobedient. Their piety is in fact gut-wrenching folly. The irony is that Jephthah becomes like the Ammonites – offering a human sacrifice – something which the LORD has specifically condemned.⁴

Think about it

9. Though Jephthah's is an extreme example, aren't we all susceptible to misguided piety? What do you think?

The victory over the Ammonites is further marred, let's read on.

Read Judges 12:1-7

10. How does the war portrayed here differ from other battles in Judges?

The book of Judges here takes a tragic turn. The Israelites have wavered between obedience and disobedience, between following God and rejecting Him, but they have remained united as a nation. Now, we see infighting. Salvation here is marred by civil war, brought about by the offense taken by Ephraim at being left out of the attack on the Ammonites. The nation is wounded by the wounded pride of Ephraim.

In this study we've observed that salvation requires humility, and surely there is no place for pride in salvation.

Read Philippians 2:5-11

11. How costly was our salvation?
12. How does this passage tell us to respond?

Prayer

Close in prayer, asking God to help you to have the mind of Christ, our humble Saviour.

⁴ Leviticus 18:21 specifically forbids child sacrifices to Molech – the Ammonite god (1 Kings 11:33)

Study 6

THE SURPRISING, SAVING GOD

Judges 13:1-16:31

Prayer

Pray for the things you have discussed since arriving. Also pray for:

- newcomers to church.
- opportunities to talk about Jesus with our neighbours, work colleagues, family, friends.
- people in the My ChurchSuite Directory pages.

Throughout our studies of Judges, we've seen God use a range of characters to achieve His purposes. We've seen Him use men who are reluctant (Barak, Gideon) or rejected (Jephthah). God doesn't necessarily follow our ideas of what an ideal leader might look like! In this study we will see God again use an unlikely source to rescue Israel. We will see the work of our surprising, saving God.

Read Judges 13:1-7

1. Do the Israelites express repentance, or even sorrow at the current situation?

Even so, God intends to save them (v5)! Let that truth sink in for a moment. Is it possible that we are so familiar with the concept of salvation and the grace of God that we're not amazed when God saves those who are in active rebellion against Him?? Now read Romans 5:8 together.

Back to Judges 13:1-7...

2. This is not the first, nor the last time God promises a child to a woman who seems incapable of bearing one. He uses barren women (Sarai, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth) and a virgin (Mary). Why do you think He might do this?
3. Read verses 4-5, 7, and 14. Why do you think these details are repeated?

What is a Nazirite?

A Nazirite was an Israelite who made a vow of consecration to Yahweh. During the period of his consecration, he was to abstain from alcohol, stay away from dead bodies and not cut his hair. You can read more in Numbers 6.

Even before his birth, Samson is dedicated to God. In this chapter we are given insight into how God plans to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Now let's see how He used the grown-up Samson to achieve His purposes.

Read Judges 14:1-20

4. Does it look like Samson is living as one who is dedicated to the LORD? (Note that the 'he' in verse 4 refers to Yahweh. God was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines).
5. Is there *any* indication that Samson was seeking to follow God, or acknowledge Him?

And yet, God uses Him! Samson wants to marry a woman from the very tribe he's supposed to be defeating. We may rightly feel a sense of shock and surprise (his parents agree, v3!). Even behaviour which seems entirely out of place is used by God to achieve a victory against the Philistines, however.

6. What is the source of Samson's remarkable strength (v6, 19)?
7. In this episode we also see a chink in Samson's armour. What is his weak point (v17)?

Read Judges 15:9-13

8. How does Judah treat the Philistines?
9. How should they be treating the Philistines?

What follows are details of Samson's victory over the Philistines, striking 1,000 men with the jawbone of a donkey. This great salvation is marred by hints of sadness. In the previous chapter Samson has married a Philistine. Now, in chapter 15, he's hand-delivered to the Philistines by the men of Judah, people who are supposed to be on his side (v11-13)! What is the rest of Israel doing, while Samson attacks the Philistines? They're helping their enemies, the very people who oppress them!



Read 15:18-20

Finally, a bright spot! It seems Samson is at least aware of the source of his strength (v18), and we find Israel under the leadership of a judge once more

(v20). Sadly, however, this doesn't last for long. Once again, Samson is weakened by a woman. He sells the secret of his strength for love. Apparently, this is more important to him than obedience to God. So, Samson suffers at the hand of the Philistines. Sound familiar? **What happens to Samson is really a lot like what happens to Israel as a nation.** They obey, then they disobey by cavorting with the people who should be their enemies, so they suffer at the hands of the enemies they've allied themselves with.

Read Judges 16:23-31

10. Are there any elements of this episode which you find surprising or ironic?

Yet again, we see Yahweh work through weak vessels. This is no great military victory after which the brave commander rides home with fanfare and ceremony. Rather, it is a messy victory, achieved in the death of God's chosen servant, who is at this moment weak and humiliated. Ironic, isn't it? God works a surprising salvation!

Think it through

11. Do you know what your weak spots are, where you are most vulnerable to temptation? (compare James 1)

12. How can you guard against yielding to temptation?

Prayer

Pray together considering the things you've discussed today.

Study 7

ISRAEL HAD NO KING, EVERYONE DID AS THEY SAW FIT

Judges 17:1-21:25

Prayer

Pray for the things you have discussed since arriving today. Also pray for:

- Those who are going through challenging times.
 - Conversations with our neighbours.
 - people in the My ChurchSuite Directory pages.
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The book of Judges falls neatly into three parts:

Judges 1:1-3:6 - Introductions: We are reminded of Israel's failure to fully possess the land of Canaan, and we are told the Lord leaves the nations to test Israel. We are introduced to a cyclical pattern of rebellion, judgement, salvation and rest.

Judges 3:7-16:31 - Body: These chapters give an account of the judges whom the Lord used to save His people and to lead them. However, it would appear each judge is less effective than the one before – certainly they each have significant flaws, and Samson is barely recognisable as a judge at all.

Judges 17:1-21:25 - Conclusion: A summary of the state of the nation of Israel.

On our way through the last 13 chapters, we have witnessed the downward spiral of the nation of Israel. Now in the final five chapters of the book, we see the result. In Judges 17:6 we are introduced to a refrain that echoes through this section as the narrator passes his judgement on Israel - "in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." The final verse of the book leaves it ringing in our ears.

What is truly amazing is, as we read on through the Old Testament, that the Lord in his boundless mercy provides a king for this rebellious nation. Then another king, and another king – and ultimately His own son, Jesus. But, back to Judges.

These last five chapters fall into two parts:

Judges 17-18. A sad portrayal of the total religious decline of the nation. We watch the Israelites make their own gods!

Judges 19-21. A sordid account of the utter moral failure of the nation of Israel. We watch them destroy their own people.

We will spend some time considering the shorter of the two parts. Come to Judges Chapter 17.

Read Judges 17:1-6

1. What things strike you as odd, foolish or downright wrong in these verses?

Micah's name literally means "Who is like Yahweh?" which simply adds to the irony and farce you have just identified in the passage.

The narrator's summary in 17:6 is justified –

everyone *is* doing whatever they see fit (perhaps we are also to call to mind Samson who went after what was good in his eyes - with disastrous consequences).



Read Judges 17:7-13

2. What things strike you as odd, foolish or wrong in these verses?

Verse 13 could not be a more brutal condemnation of Micah! And in the very next verse (18:1) the narrator reminds us of his refrain (cf. 17:6). Let's read on.

Read Judges 18:1-10

Well it is a small world, isn't it (v3)!

3. How is the city of Laish described? (v7, 10, and take a glimpse ahead at v28)

If the Levite knew Laish, then perhaps he didn't really enquire of the LORD (v5-6) but took a calculated risk that the men of Dan could conquer defenceless Laish. Sad fact is though that the Danites have turned their back on their allotted territory and fertile plains – because the Amorites have confined them to the hill-country. Laish is simply an easy alternative (18:1 compare 1:34).

Read Judges 18:11-31

4. Consider the Danites in these verses – how are they portrayed?
5. What about the Levite – what drives him?
6. Cast your eyes back over the number of times the narrator mentions Micah's idols (v14, 17, 18, 20, 24, 27, 31). What do you suppose the narrator thinks of Micah's gods?
7. Finally, reflect on Micah, comparing these verses: 17:13, 24, 26... and of course, 17:2! What are we to make of him?

It's a sad story, told with controlled sarcasm and irony. We really have only scratched the surface. There are three more chapters of equally damning evidence (chs.19-21) – the nation of Israel truly is a mess.

Think about it

8. How much do you think we, as sinful human beings, ought to see ourselves in this narrative?
9. Why would God be so patient with the Israelites, giving them second, third, fourth... chances?

When we consider the way the Israelites are caught up in sin, we are reminded again that our God truly is rich in mercy. Perhaps the best way to finish our time in Judges is to read some verses from the New Testament, as we reflect on the richness of the gospel of Jesus.

Read Ephesians 2:1-10

Prayer

Thank God for his incredible mercy to us – in Jesus.