

- ***READ Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?"*** The older I get and the more I am able to observe the actions of others, the more I am absolutely convinced of the truths that are found within this verse. While each of us know our fair share of really good and decent people, many of whom are even in this assembly at this moment, we must also be honest and recognize that there are other people in our lives who we cannot say fit this description. There are people who live in this world who are sick to their very souls. They have been fully deceived by the schemes of the devil, and it has only led them down a very dark road that will eventually end with their destruction.
- I cannot for the life of me wrap my head around much of the wickedness that we see taking place in the world around us. Even just this week, many of us...hopefully all of us were heartbroken and saddened by the news that late term abortions are now legal and available in the state of New York. Babies were already subject to being murdered up to 24 weeks from the beginning of the pregnancy, but now babies beyond 24 weeks are subject to death *"at any time when necessary to protect a woman's life or health."* The issue with the new law itself stems from the ambiguity of the language of the law, and it opens up for just about anything to fall under the umbrella of a woman's *"life or health"* being in jeopardy. While lawmakers and women's rights activist rejoice, we are left heartbroken that the sick and deceived hearts of so many of our fellow human beings have allow such a thing to happen in a country that was once seen as a God-fearing nation.
- And yet, such vile and evil actions are nothing new to the human race. Throughout recorded history there have been heinous acts carried out by men. We could fill up our entire time of study simply listing the wicked deeds that can be found in the history books. One such book of history that details many of the low points of man's mortality is the Bible. Throughout Scripture we can find many wicked deeds committed by men, but possibly no section of Scripture is so dense with man's wickedness than what is found in Judges 17-21. In this text, which is believed by most to be out of chronological order and would more accurately fit into the beginning of the book of Judges following Joshua's death, we find the deceived and sick hearts of the people of Israel moving further and further away from the will of the God who had delivered them from bondage in Egypt. I would like to consider the wicked deeds that can be found these five chapters, the causes of such wickedness, and what we can learn from what took place in what could rightly be described as Israel's Darkest Days.

I. Israel's Wickedness (Judges 17-21)

A. Micah steals his mothers silver and creates his own shrine of worship and priesthood. (17)

1. We are introduced to a man of the land of Ephraim who's name is Micah. This initial information isn't all that telling, but **v.2** shows us that Micah is a thief who had stolen his mother's fortune of 1,100 pieces of silver. It appears as if the money had been stolen, and Micah's mom cursed those who had taken it. Lo and behold the thief was in fact her son, and she quickly reverses course in regards to the curse. She instead seeks to bless her son, and even gives the silver back to him. **(v.3)** Yet, before she gives it all back to him, she takes 200 pieces of the silver and fashions a graven image and a molten image that Micah would set up in his house as a shrine for idolatrous worship to these images. **(v.4)**
2. Micah then turns around and consecrates one of his sons as a priest over this idolatrous priesthood **(v.5)**, but Micah didn't stop there. A young Levite man happened to be traveling through the area of Micah's dwelling. Upon finding out that he was a Levite, Micah makes a deal with this young man so that he might become another priest in Micah's idolatrous priesthood because he's a Levite and that would obviously cause God's blessings to come down upon Micah's house. At least this was Micah's reasoning within his own mind. **(vv.7-13)**

B. The sons of Dan seek a land that they can call their own, steal the contents of Micah's house, and overtake Laish. (18)

1. Chapter 18 opens by informing the reader that the sons of Dan were on the search for land to call their own. The text tells us that they had not been allotted a portion of the inheritance of the promised land, but that isn't exactly the full story. The reality is that they had been given land and that can be found in **Joshua 19:40**. However, what we see earlier in **Judges 1:34,35** is that the people of Dan had not forced out the Amorites from their land. Therefore, any land they felt as if they lacked would have been a result of their own failures to cleanse the land.
 2. Nonetheless, we find five of the sons of Dan go out as spies looking for land and they come into the hill country of Ephraim where Micah's house was. They come across Micah's house and speak with the priest who tells them what is going on. Finding out he is a priest, they ask him to inquire of God whether or not they would be successful in what they were doing. The priest quickly responds for them to keep going on their way for they had the Lord's approval. There is nothing in the text that seems to indicate that was actually the case. **(vv.2-6)**
 3. The men continue on their excursion, and they come across a city in the north called Laish. The people of this town seemed to be quiet, peaceful, and living in security. It was exactly what these men had been looking for. The five spies return to their brethren and tell them about the land they had found in Laish that would be perfect for them, so 600 men of war from the sons of Dan arise and go up to Laish to take over this land. **(vv.7-12)**
 4. Along the way they stop in at Micah's house, but this time they take everything they can from the graven image to the ephod, the household idols, and even the great molten image. They even convince the Levite "priest" that he should join them as their priest because it's obviously better to be a priest of an entire people than just a single man's house. The priest liked the idea, and took off with the invading Danites. **(vv.13-21)** Some men from around Micah's house see what is going on, and seek to go take back Micah's possessions. The much more powerful Danites basically tell these men to scram and go back home before something bad happens...which is exactly what we find them doing. **(vv.22-25)**
 5. Chapter 18 ends with the sons of Dan completely wiping out the people of Laish, and taking the city for themselves which they rename...Dan. It was here in this new city that they set up the graven images and the Levite, presumably named Jonathan, and his sons served as priest over this city until it was taken away in the captivity. **(vv.26-31)** One interesting note is that Dan would be one of the two cities that Jeroboam would set up as places for people to go and worship the calf idols during the time of the divided kingdom. **(I Kings 12:28,29)** Seems as if the idolatry was long term.
- C. A Levite's concubine is sexually assaulted, left for dead, and eventually dismembered and sent to all the tribes of Israel. (19)**

1. Another Levite is then brought into the picture in **chapter 19**. This Levite had taken a woman from Bethlehem as his concubine. By law this woman was his wife, but she was seen as lesser than a woman who would've actually been called his wife. Nonetheless, this woman cheats on her master and ends up running away to her father's house where she stays for four months. **(vv.1-2)**
2. The Levite eventually goes after her all the way to her father's because he wanted to speak tenderly to her in an effort to persuade her to come home. He arrives at her father's home and the father is happy to meet him and have him in his home. **(v.3)** The father makes the Levite his guest for three days and during this time they eat and drink. On the 4th day, the Levite tries to leave, but the father keeps him hanging around just long enough eating and drinking in order to talk him into staying another night. **(vv.5-7)** On the 5th day, the father-in-law tried this tactic again, but this time the Levite stood his ground and made up his mind that he and his concubine were going to leave that evening. **(vv.8,9)**

3. They did in fact leave and they were able to make it as far as the land of the Jebusites. The Levite's servant suggests that they should lodge there with these people, but the Levite refuses to do such a thing. He says that they will continue further until they come to the land of Benjamin and the cities of Gibeah or Ramah. **(vv.10-14)** Once they reach Gibeah, they sit in the open square and wait for someone to show them hospitality. Unfortunately, no one is willing to do this until an older man who himself was not a Benjamite but a man from Ephraim invites them to stay at his own home where he provides for them and washes their feet. **(vv.15-21)**
 4. While they are enjoying their evening, the men of the city make it evident that they are of the sort of Sodom and Gomorrah for they want the Levite to come out so that they might know him sexually. **(v.22)** The old man pleads with them that they might not do such a thing. He even offers up his own virgin daughter and the concubine instead. The wicked men insist, but the concubine is eventually thrown into the square where she is raped, abused, and eventually dies as she tries to make her way back inside. **(vv.23-28)** The Levite returns home with her body, cuts her into 12 pieces, and sends a piece to each tribe so that they might know what had been committed by the men of this city of Benjamin. **(vv.29,30)**
- D. Eleven tribes of Israel rise up and nearly destroy the entire tribe of Benjamin. (20)**
1. The news of what has happened reaches the people of Israel, and they all rise up together at Mizpah so they they might figure out what to do concerning this great wickedness that had taken place in Gibeah. The Levite meets with these men and loosely tells them what has taken place. **(v.5)** He makes it seem as if they were trying to hurt him and took his concubine whereas we have read that the concubine was given. **(20:1-7)**
 2. Upon hearing what has taken place, the men of Israel rise up against Benjamin with 400,000 warriors so that they might punish Gibeah for this wickedness. **(20:8-11)** They seek to give Benjamin an opportunity to answer for what has happened, but instead Benjamin seeks to protect its own by raising up 26,000 men plus 700 valiant warriors of Gibeah to defend themselves. **(20:12-16)** The rest of Israel realize it is time for war, so they first inquire of God's will at Bethel. The Lord tells Judah to lead the charge, and the first battle that takes place the next day is a bloody one for 22,000 of the men of Israel fell. Benjamin scores a stunning upset. **(20:17-21)**
 3. The men of Israel regroup and once again go to the Lord for guidance asking if they should rise up against Benjamin again, and the Lord replies that they should. The second battle doesn't go much better than the first for another 18,000 of Israel are killed. **(20:23-25)** The people are dumbfounded by what is taking place, and again seek the Lord's guidance. This time the Lord says that He would deliver Benjamin into their hands. This is eventually done through an ambush, and Gibeah is over taken and burned to the ground, and 25,000 Benjamites are struck down. **(20:30-46)** Only 600 remain and they go into hiding while their entire city was completely destroyed and burned to the ground. **(20:47,48)**
- E. The eleven tribes realize what they have done to Benjamin and have to figure out how to help them obtain wives. (21)**
1. This would seem as if it were the end of this whole ordeal, but then the rest of Israel have a big reversal of heart and feel bad for Benjamin since they were nearly completely wiped out. With everything of Benjamin gone besides 600 men...the tribe would eventually die out. The other tribes could give them some of their own women, but they had just make a vow that such a thing wouldn't happen. **(21:1)** What are they to do? They eventually determine that the city of Jabesh-Gilead needed to be punished for not supporting the war effort, but they spared 400 young virgin women to be wives for the Benjamites. **(21:8-14)**

2. However, the math does add up there, so they devise a second scheme. This scheme revolved around taking advantage of the daughters of Shiloh as they danced on their way to a yearly feast that was to take place. The Benjamites were to hide in wait and snatch the young women up as their wives. This fulfilled the need for the wives of Benjamin. **(21:19-23)**

I don't know about you, but these are some of the most bizarre chapters I have ever read within the Scriptures. There is just so much that can be pointed out as being wrong. There is thievery, idolatry, illegitimate priesthods, stealing of land, adultery, homosexuality, rape, murder, revenge seeking, overkill, and the stealing of women for marriage. Did I miss anything? I think we get the picture, but I have to ask the question...How is it possible for things to get to this point? How could the children of Israel have gotten so off track? Thankfully, the text twice tells us exactly why this has taken place, and that can be found in **17:6 & 21:25**, *"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."*

II. How did Israel get to this point?

A. There was a lack of strong leadership.

1. Remember, I am of the mindset that these events are out of chronological order of the other events that have taken place in Judges. I believe that these things would have taken place just after Joshua's death. Joshua was a great leader of God's people, but after his death it seems that no one stepped up to take his place as the physical leader of God's people. This only allowed for the people to have no one to keep them in line. There was no one to set the proper example.
2. Sure there were leaders to some degree. Micah, the Levites, and the men of war were leaders but these were not the strong men of leadership that could be seen within men such as Moses, Joshua, and Caleb. Micah was a thief. The first Levite was a fraud. The second Levite allowed his concubine to be raped and murdered. The men of war nearly destroyed an entire tribe of their own people. This void being left only allowed for the second part of **17:6 & 21:25** to take place.

B. Everyone did as they pleased.

1. It allowed for everyone to simply do as they wanted to do. There wasn't anyone to stop Micah from being a thieving idolatrous fool. No older and wiser Levite stopped these other men from being fools. No strong leaders of Gibeah stood of to stop the wickedness that was taking place within this city of the Benjamites. No one stopped to think what would happen to the tribe of Benjamin if they killed all of the women and children.
2. It is interesting that there were random times when different people would stop to inquire of God's will on different matters, but they continued to hear what they wanted to hear. I do wonder what would've happened if they heard something they didn't want to hear. We'll never know for sure, but we can clearly see that these people only wanted to do what they wanted to do and it led to wickedness of nearly every sort.

III. What can we learn from Israel's darkest days?

A. The value of strong leadership cannot be understated.

1. It doesn't take us all that long to look at the history of numerous organizations or bodies and to come to realize what happens when people don't step up with strong leadership. Why is our country in the shape that it is in? Poor leadership. Why are American families so messed up? Poor leadership. Why are churches struggling in many ways? Poor leadership. There is a reason so many people are staunch in their belief that everything rises and falls on leadership. If we are tired of seeing failure all around us then we must step up and be the spark that ignites change. We must strive to be the strong leaders that are setting the proper example.

2. This whole account of these days in Israel's history only further emphasizes in my mind the need to be sure that we are giving effort to raise up the next generation of leaders. If people have leadership that are keeping them going on the straight and narrow, then they need to be sure that they are preparing men to step up to do the same things and take their places once they are gone. Our current leaders are not going to be around forever. Leaders come, work hard while they can, but eventually they move on or step down and other people have to take their places.
3. We can help with that effort by taking strides to make sure that those who are young people right now as already thinking about taking on roles of leadership one day. Sure that means that young men are thinking about becoming shepherds, deacons, and preachers within the Lord's churches, but I'm also talking about young men and women who are preparing themselves to be strong husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and disciples. We need to put time and effort into these people right now to prepare them for as long as possible so that they can be ready to step up when that time comes in their own lives. If they are not ready when that time comes then let it only be in spite of our efforts to help them be so.

B. When men seek after their own desires, they will only find destruction.

1. This is so important because it is the people in these positions of leadership as shepherds, deacons, preachers, but most especially husbands, wives, fathers and mothers who are charged with making sure that those who they have influence over are coming to know the will of God and coming to recognize that Jesus is our King. It is up to us as current leaders to stress the need for respect of the ways of God, so that the upcoming generations will see and understand that their ways and desires will only lead them down their own road of dark days.
2. Everything that we have seen this morning can be traced back to the selfishness and pride of men. A man stole his own mother's money. This same man built up his own house of idols and established his own priesthood. The Danites stole land that wasn't theirs because they lusted for it. The wicked men of Gibeah followed their fleshly desires. On and on it goes...and look where it led each of these men. It led them to destruction and further wickedness, and we will only follow the same past of disaster if we seek to follow our own desires.

While there are many parts of Scripture that are beautiful and full of encouragement, there are other parts of the Bible that are simply dark. They are vile and full of wickedness, and they simply show us the ability that we have as men to carry our heinous deeds. Therefore, we must remember what we started with this morning, our hearts are deceitful and exceedingly sick. We must guard against such wickedness, and only strive to allow God to transform our hearts into parts of us that push us to seek after his will in all things. We ourselves are living in dark days, but may God strengthen us and bless us to stand up as strong leaders and only seek His will in all things.