

# JUDGES—WEEK 14

## LIFE WITHOUT A JUDGE



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)  
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

Samson ends his life by killing the Philistine leadership. After that, there is no judge or king, and everyone does what is right in his own eyes.

The collapse of their civilization is horrifying.

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Joshua, Week 14 — Life Without a Judge  
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1 Judges 16:23–31 (ESV)

*Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to rejoice, and they said, “Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand.” And when the people saw him, they praised their god. For they said, “Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us.” And when their hearts were merry, they said, “Call Samson, that he may entertain us.” So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars. And Samson said to the young man who held him by the hand, “Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them.” Now the house was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained.*

*Then Samson called to the LORD and said, “O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.” And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines.” Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life. Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had judged Israel twenty years.*

Notice that everything the Philistines do in this passage is oriented toward one thing—partying. They throw a party in honor of Dagon, even though he had nothing to do with how they defeated Samson.

*And when their hearts were merry*, (drunk) they bring out Samson as a freak show. He’s being led by a *young man who held him by the hand*. They think that the lion tamer has the lion under control.

But the situation is ripe for disaster. *All the lords of the Philistines were there*. If Samson can attack this crowd, it’ll be much more significant than him killing a bunch of soldiers or other non-royalty.

Furthermore, *on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women*. That seems odd to us, but flat roofs you could walk on are common in the Middle East. This is a large venue, presumably with a colonnade supporting the roof. Knock out a couple of the columns in the middle and the center caves in, destabilizing the whole structure. Everything comes crashing down.

A few of the people on the roof might survive the fall, but the lords underneath are goners.

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*So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.*

That’s not just about quantity; it’s about quality.

The Philistine leadership is wiped out.

2 Judges 17:1–5

*Now there was a man from the mountains of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. And he said to his mother, “The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you, and on which you put a curse, even saying it in my ears—here is the silver with me; I took it.”*

*And his mother said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my son!” So when he had returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, his mother said, “I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son, to make a carved image and a molded image; now therefore, I will return it to you.” Thus he returned the silver to his mother. Then his mother took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to the silversmith, and he made it into a carved image and a molded image; and they were in the house of Micah.*

*The man Micah had a shrine, and made an ephod and household idols; and he consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.*

This scene is such a train wreck that there’s not much to say, except that things are obviously descending into chaos. A man steals a vast sum of silver from his own mother but then fesses up and returns it. For a moment, this looks like a story of repentance and redemption.

But no. The mother then uses some of the silver to make idols. Next, the son makes an ephod and consecrates one of his sons as *his* priest (literally, “priest to him,” לֹא לְכֹהֵן, lo l-kho-hen). That’s even worse than making idols.

What makes this especially creepy is that the son knows the law. He’s setting up a Levitical-style priest, while blatantly violating the rules—his son isn’t a Levite and the priesthood isn’t a private office.

The affrontery to the LORD is great, fully informed, and very specific.

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What the son does is worse because, to paraphrase Paul, he is *without excuse*—he should know better.

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. — Romans 1:18–21*

We who know the truth have an obligation to that truth. God’s blessings come with responsibilities. This extends beyond just not doing bad things. God saved us for a purpose. That isn’t partying in heaven.

We each have a job to do. If you’re not sure what that is, just get involved in something and let it grow.

To paraphrase a famous 1977 commercial, “A life is a terrible thing to waste.”

3 Judges 17:6

*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

Is a king the answer to Israel's problems?

No, God makes this clear when He tells Samuel in 1 Samuel 8:9 to warn Israel about what a king will do.

*And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. ... Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." ... "However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them." — 1 Samuel 7:15, 8:4, 9b*

So, if having a judge is so much better than having a king, why even mention not having a king? And why connect it to the main problem—that *everyone did what was right in his own eyes*?

A king can lead Israel in righteousness. Deuteronomy 17:14–20 spells out how a king should rule Israel.

*"When you come to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me,' you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses; one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. ... Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel." — Deuteronomy 17:14–15, 18–20*

If they had a king (a good king, who ruled according to these rules) he would set the right standard and all would be fine, but right now they have no judge and no king and they're going to hell in a handbasket.

They seem rudderless because they are rudderless.

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Sound familiar? Our society is rudderless. Many are doing what is right in their own eyes, and it's amazing some of the things people think are right. It's not working for them; yet they can't see that.

We know the rudder. We have the compass. So, what can we do? Should we be involved in politics?

Politics isn't wrong, but it poses risks, and it isn't the final answer anyway. The fundamental answer is just to be the compass—to point in the right direction. This is tricky because we're not perfect and will make embarrassing mistakes. Politicians aren't perfect either, so we should be careful to not hitch our wagons too tightly to those stars. Lastly, we must patiently endure being criticized, even ridiculed.

Our job is simply to stand for truth as best as we can and wait for God to open people's eyes.

4 Judges 17:7–13

*Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah; he was a Levite, and was staying there. The man departed from the city of Bethlehem in Judah to stay wherever he could find a place. Then he came to the mountains of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, as he journeyed. And Micah said to him, “Where do you come from?”*

*So he said to him, “I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am on my way to find a place to stay.”*

*Micah said to him, “Dwell with me, and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten shekels of silver per year, a suit of clothes, and your sustenance.” So the Levite went in. Then the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man became like one of his sons to him. So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and lived in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!”*

Recall that Micah had ordained one of his sons as a priest. That was awful as his son isn't a Levite. Now he encounters a Levite and “improves” his situation by replacing his non-Levite priest with a Levite one.

This is the kind of error that happens when *everyone* does *what is right in his own eyes*. Micah thinks his recruiting a personal Levitical priest improves his situation from “good” to “better.”

In reality, it only reduces the number of crimes he's currently committing from four to three (household gods, homemade ephod, personal priest).

He's still an outlaw.

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This is like a driver who slams into a telephone pole but thinks he's still pretty good because of all the ones he missed. The idea that you're expected to miss all the telephone poles seems to him to be insanely strict. “Nobody's perfect!” That sounds good, but it makes no sense in this case.

Without an absolute standard of reference, anything can be right in one's own eyes. Is stealing wrong? (It's not in the animal world.) Is making a “rolling stop” at a stop sign wrong? Is fishing without a license wrong? Is hunting deer out of season wrong? Is eating animals wrong? Is eating a bald eagle wrong?

Our civilization depends on a common understanding of the answers to zillions of questions like this, and on the enforcement of that understanding. We love to debate these things, but the enforceable laws are only those that have been properly enacted by a duly elected representative legislature.

All of this ultimately traces back to a foundational ethical standard. For our civilization, that's the Bible. We value human life above animal life because humans are created in God's image. We build upon this foundation (e.g., protecting bald eagles) but it's still rooted in scripture.

Recent attempts at abandoning this structure (e.g., “occupy” and the CHOP/CHAZ district in Seattle) were disasters. They did what is right in their own eyes, and their total failure was obvious to all.

5 Judges 18:1–6 (ESV)

*In those days there was no king in Israel. 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 Eshtaol, 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, “This is how Micah dealt with me: he has hired me, and I have 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.”*

How is it that *no inheritance among the tribes of Israel had fallen to them?*

Because they failed to fully conquer the land the LORD gave them.

*The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain. The Amorites persisted in dwelling in Mount Heres, in Aijalon, and in Shaalbim, but the hand of the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labor. — Judges 1:34–35 (ESV)*

So, now they’re looking for someone else to conquer. Besides being just plain nasty, this is in direct violation of what God told them to do. Somehow this is right in their own eyes. Wow.

So, they go down to Ephraim and bump into Micah’s priest, whom they recognize. It takes them a while to get past the shock of seeing him there, but eventually they make sense out of it all.

But then, amazingly, they seek his council and his blessing.

Even more amazingly, they get it.

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The Danites’ mission will go on to succeed. That speaks volumes about God’s grace. How can something so wrong gain His blessing?

That’s a tough question, but it’s also the story of our lives. We are like the Danites. Saul, who became Paul, was like the Danites. In the stoning of Stephen, God let everyone involved succeed in their evil act.

*Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. — Acts 7:58 (ESV)*

History is complicated. Saul’s path to salvation was, like our path, complicated.

The whole Old Testament is the story of the path to the Messiah. It’s a mess, but that’s to set the stage.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Name a successful suicide mission.
2. What is our "responsibility"?
3. How can we best "be the compass"?
4. What, besides the Bible, is our ethical foundation?
5. When have you seen evil seem to succeed?

*Items for prayer:*