



## Canaanites or is it termites?

Sermon – Melville Junction

Dean & Rachel Donaldson – 11 July 2010

Dean: Have you ever heard about “the butterfly effect” based on the Chaos Theory? It is postulated that something as small as the wind caused by a butterfly’s wing beat in Brazil could cause something as significant as a tornado in Texas. It’s an interesting theory, but have you ever stopped to consider if something like that could be true of our everyday choices and actions? That homeless person you greeted this morning, that lie you told your spouse etc...

Rachel: And seemingly (but not!) tangentially – what do you think is the worst thing God could do to you? Think about it... All will be revealed – stay tuned!

Dean: We are continuing in the story of God and us. Last week Steve took us through the first 17 chapters of the book of Judges. This book falls in the time after Joshua where the people of God (or the sapling) are living in the Promised Land but are generally not following God. There is a recurring theme: Israelites turn away from God, God raises up a judge to deliver them from the Canaanites that are oppressing them, Israelites live in harmony with God for a time but then turn away from God again. The only time they are interested in God is when they want something from Him, when they need His help. But remember the covenant that God made with Israel – He will be their God if they obey His commands.

Rachel: A covenant always involves 2 parties, requiring action from both sides.

Dean: Rachel and I are going to look at a difficult to understand, not well-known part of scripture today and show you how it actually is relevant right now in Melville in 2010. We are going to take you through 2 stories covered in Judges 17-21. I finally get to preach on the worst story in the Bible in my opinion because it falls into this part of our narrative. Rachel has stopped me preaching on it for ages now...

Rachel: Seems I can’t win everything... Have managed to stop him telling his UK toilet humour story though!

Dean: The first story is about Micah and his idols, a Levite and the tribe of Dan – the Danites. This story starts with Micah returning 1100 shekels of silver to his mother, his mother is so pleased that the money is returned that she says the silver will be solemnly consecrated to the Lord. She then takes 200 pieces and has it made into an idol (word used is both image and idol, but let’s call it what it was). The mother then gives this idol to Micah to put in his house where he has a shrine.

Rachel: Seems like a straightforward story, yes? However, I am a surgeon with Type A personality, and OCD tendencies that even Paul Rouillard admires. Which means my attention to detail is very very good. Firstly – Micah stole the cash from his mother and lied about it. Then the old girl’s so happy that she dedicates the money to God to make an idol – anyone spot the

deliberate error??? That thing that the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment talks about – do not make for yourself a carved image, or likeness of anything? But then she only uses a small part to perform this act of upside down logic – deliberate defiance of God, but it's for God so it's OK – have to assume she kept the rest for herself. Was many centuries before Ananias and Sapphira, so she can be excused for not knowing what happens to people who try and cheat God... All in all, not just a small oops to begin the story – the rot has already set in... But it'll be fine, cos at this point God is bound to step in and sort it all out, send someone in to correct Micah and point him back to God.

Dean: But God doesn't step in – verse 6 – “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Next part of the story – a Levite travels to Micah's home looking for a place to stay. Micah now has an idol as well as other household gods and an ephod (a priestly garment), and offers the Levite a job to be his household priest. The Levite agrees to this...Micah says “The Lord will be good to me since this Levite has become my priest”.

Rachel: More incongruities. Those of you that know and love me – you know I can't let them go! The very fact that the Levite was wandering around looking for a place to stay says to me that he wasn't a good, solid, priestly type. 3 verses later, my suspicions confirmed – he happily takes a paying job to supervise idol worship... And the whole relationship between him and Micah? First Micah wants the Levite to be a father to him, then he became like one of his sons – huh? Things fall apart... And then, the culmination of this particular rot – Micah graduates with honour in the school of warped logic and becomes an expert in self-justification. How does breaking the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment, then paying a Levite to sanction idol worship constitute pleasing God? Maybe my simple surgeon's brain is missing something, but I don't get that one!

Dean: Now the Danites, the tribe of Israel descended from Dan, don't have any land for themselves yet. So they send out 5 warriors to scout for land, on their journey they come across Micah's house...they find the priest, the ephod and the idols and ask the priest to enquire of God if their journey will be successful. He replies, “go in peace, your journey has the LORD's approval.”

Rachel: But he didn't actually ask God – just spoke as if God was speaking through him. Easy to do, and oh so tempting, especially if you've already broken a commandment. And I imagine really easy to believe that you actually do speak for God – being an official household priest and all, you're bound to have a direct line to God. But he's not the only guilty party in this – the 5 warriors merrily accept his word and continue on to....

Dean: ...Laish. There they find a quiet, unsuspecting and secure people living in a spacious land that lacks nothing whatever. The warriors go back and report all this, and the tribe of Dan then decides to attack these people and take their land. On the way there they stop at Micah's house again and steal all the household gods, the idol, and the ephod. And add insult to injury by persuading the Levite to work for them – a whole tribe rather than limit himself to one household.

Rachel: Seeing as God sanctioned their journey (did I miss something?), the quiet people in the spacious land are clearly a gift from God, yes? But more importantly – look at verse 14. The 5

warriors who scouted out the land told the rest of the war party about Micah's setup and told them "Now therefore consider what you will do." As a surgeon, I am trained to get rid of (the non-medical term) bad bits of the body, for the good of the person as a whole. A gangrenous foot, if left attached to your body, can literally kill you – not being melodramatic here. I have seen people die because they refuse to have surgery to remove the body part in which the cancer is growing. And so when the Danite war party is told to consider what to do, they should have cut the cancer out – destroyed Micah's household gods and idol, removed the Levite and sent him back to where he came from. But instead they appropriate the idols, and appeal to the Levite's ego – and it works. And so the cancer continues to take hold and spread.

Dean: The story picks up in Chapter **18:27...<sup>27</sup> Then they took what Micah had made, and his priest, and went on to Laish, against a peaceful and unsuspecting people. They attacked them with the sword and burned down their city.<sup>28</sup> There was no one to rescue them because they lived a long way from Sidon and had no relationship with anyone else.**

Rachel: So the people of Israel are depicted as being worse than the Godless, heathen Canaanites.

Dean: The Danites move into this land they have conquered and with the help of the Levite, worship Micah's idols. Chapter 18 ends by giving the name of our infamous Levite, and telling us that his sons were priests to the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. And they set up Micah's idols, even though the house of God was in Shiloh.

Rachel: And now for a line scripted for me by my husband: That is such a bizarre story, how do we make sense of it? And now back to the real me. Cancer or dead limbs do not go away. They spread and infect / affect the rest of the body. The wrong that Micah and Jonathan the Levite introduced by installing Jonathan as priest over idols, that the Danites perpetuated, became entrenched in that society and just a normal part of life really. Which lead to another monstrous thing happening – they set up Micah's idols "as long as the house of God was at Shiloh". Huh??? And everyone's OK with that? Easy to spot the wrong when looking in from outside, but when it's simply part of the fabric of your community and life it doesn't occur to you that it's anything other than OK.

Dean: The beginning of the next chapter, Chapter 19, goes like this: In those days Israel had no king.

Rachel: This is the third time in 3 chapters that this is stated – this is significant, the reader is to pay attention and take note of this. So surely God has had enough of this lot by now and will intervene?

Dean: But no – things continue in the same vein, the next story even more bizarre... Starts off with another Levite, this one from the hill country of Ephraim, and his concubine. This concubine was unfaithful to him and left him to go back to her family home in Bethlehem. The Levite then went to "speak kindly to her and bring her back". In Bethlehem, the concubine's father treats the Levite well and hosts him for a few days. Eventually he takes his concubine and heads home. But because they left late in the day, they are forced to sleep over along the way, but the Levite didn't want to stop at Jebus, because the residents were "aliens", not

Israelites. So instead they stop at a city called Gibeah, an Israelite town in Benjamite country, and wait in the town square for someone to offer them a bed for the night. No-one from the town is forthcoming, but eventually an old man living in (but not originally from) the city takes the Levite and his entourage in for the night.

Rachel: So it starts out in a fairly civilized fashion – concubine possible a bit dodgy for one of the members of the tribe of priests that God has set aside as his, to serve in the tabernacle, to remain holy. But otherwise this Levite seems a decent guy – not going after the unfaithful woman to beat her into submission, but to “speak kindly to her”. Then they start heading home, we assume having reconciled. However I hear warning bells going off when they stop at Gibeah – unfriendly bunch the Benjamites of Gibeah! And the old man says he’ll “care for all their wants”, but tells them very clearly not to spend the night in the square – to me that sounds like a warning. Does sound a bit extreme don’t you think? It’s not like they were planning to bed down in the middle of Hillbrow – how dangerous can a city in Israelite-occupied territory be?

Dean: Very. The story gets PG rated now... not for the sensitive listener. During the night a mob of “wicked men” come to the old man’s house and demand that he send the Levite out to them so that they can have sex with him. The old man says they should not do such a despicable thing but should rather have sex with his virgin daughter and the concubine. Eventually the Levite sends his concubine out to the men, they gang rape her all night, letting her go at dawn. She makes it back to the old man’s house, but dies on the doorstep.

Rachel: Horrific, yes? No redeeming features at this stage. And to emphasize its horror – has anyone heard a similar Old Testament story? Yep – that would be Sodom in the days of Lot. Story is almost exactly the same, difference being no-one was sent out to the men of Sodom for them to abuse (Lot did have the advantage of 2 angels in the house with him). But the point is that the reader is being told that these men, circumcised men from the tribe of Benjamin, were more depraved than the men of Sodom. Again – my surgeon’s hands are feeling the need to cut out the bad bits, the cancer, the rottenness. This is very obvious rot – like a cancer or gangrenous limb.

Dean: The story gets worse. The Levite comes out in the morning, finds his concubine lying on the doorstep, and discovers that she’s dead. No immediate reaction – simply loads her body onto his donkey and returns to their home. But once back home, he chops up her body into 12 pieces and sends them out to all the tribes of Israel. The Israelites respond...19:30 - **Everyone who saw it said, "Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Think about it! Consider it! Tell us what to do!"**

Rachel: So the question begging to be asked is “Why do such a bizarre thing?” I think it’s because of the opening statement of this chapter in Judges – “In those days Israel had no king”. There was no higher authority for this Levite to appeal to for justice – no judge, no king. Of course there was a much higher authority – God – but by this time the Israelites are so far gone that it doesn’t occur to anyone to appeal to God for justice. And so the Levite appeals to the wider community, to everyone living “throughout all the territory of Israel”. And what also strikes me is the overwhelming shock and disbelief that this elicits from the people of Israel. It’s like cancers I’ve seen – when the person arrives at hospital for the first time, with some

horrendous tumour growing out of some part of their anatomy, it really is shocking to see. But the person is often fairly unphased by it, and when you question them about it, they'll tell you very openly about how it's been there for months/years, but it started small so they didn't really pay too much attention to it. And yes – it has been getting bigger, but it hasn't really bothered them until now. I remember a lady who came to Casualty late one night, complaining about her leg ulcers. When we examined her, the ulcers were a non-event – small and clean, but we found a huge mass inside her abdomen, which various tests showed to be a form of cancer. How long had it been there? Oh – 6 months doctor, but it doesn't bother me. So can you sort out my ulcers? And so it was with the people of Israel – the previous 3 chapters have shown us that all was not right, that they as a nation were actually far from God, but it didn't bother them until this massive manifestation of evil.

Dean: So the other 11 tribes of Israel go to war with the Benjamites when they refuse to hand over the wicked men of Gibeah who carried out this monstrous crime. The war is bloody (about 80,000 people die). Virtually the entire tribe of Benjamin is wiped out – all the women, children and animals; with just a handful of their men left hiding in the wilderness. **Now the Israelites turn to God and weep:** how is it possible that God could allow one of the tribes of Israel to exist no longer. They now have a dilemma – both men and women are needed to produce children if the tribe of Benjamin is to recover. But there are only men left and the other Israelites have sworn an oath not to give their daughters to the Benjamites. Thus the Benjamites were going to die out. The other 11 tribes come up with another plan – they kill an entire village, saving the 400 virgins for the Benjamite men. The village's crime? They didn't attend the gathering of the tribes to discuss what to do about the crime committed against the Levite's concubine. However 400 women were not enough, so another cunning plan was made. During the annual festival of the Lord at Shiloh (where the house of the Lord was), the Benjamite men were told to hide in the vineyards and take the women from Shiloh as they came out to dance at the festival. This way the Benjamites could continue as a clan and no-one broke their oath because they didn't give their daughters to the Benjamites – the Benjamites took them.

Rachel: Essentially – total chaos! Other 11 tribes demand that Benjamites hand over the criminals, Benjamites refuse. They go to war against Benjamites, without asking God if that's how they should deal with the problem. They get beaten twice – finally wise up and ask God's input, he gives them victory, Benjamites nearly wiped out. And now that we've nearly wiped you out, we're very sad and sorry about it, and now are determined that you won't be wiped out. Go figure... So now we'll slaughter a whole bunch of other people to get some virginal wives for you. And when the number of virgins isn't high enough, we'll resort to trickery to get you some more wives. Reads like a very bad soapie, yes?

Dean: The story ends with...21:25 In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

Rachel: My version says "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." That's the 4<sup>th</sup> statement along those lines in Judges 17-21. You get the point. Doing what they wanted to led to horrific wickedness, which led to massive bloodshed and total chaos – once the downward spiral begins, it picks up momentum rather dramatically.

Rachel: Which brings me back to my original question – what is the very worst thing that God can do to us? Lots of bright people out there, I'm sure you've worked out where I'm headed. Another surgical illustration. Paul really wanted me to use flesh-eating bugs in the sermon somewhere, so I will. Dean's not the only one who can get gross in public... Let me tell you about necrotizing fasciitis, otherwise known as flesh-eating bacteria. It all starts with a small, simple infection. Can be a tooth infection, a small skin cut or graze that gets infected, that gets ignored and not treated. Then the bacteria causing the infection spreads like wildfire underneath the skin, killing all the tissue. But the skin initially looks normal, so the person doesn't seek medical help. And by the time they present to the hospital, they are horribly sick – the whole body has been affected by this initially minor infection. And the only way to treat this flesh-eating bacteria is to surgically remove all the dead tissue, as well as any that looks dodgy. Which often leads to disfigurement, requiring plastic surgery later on. You end up feeling like a butcher, like you're mutilating the person. But it is literally the only way to save his/her life – immediate aggressive removal of dead tissue. And 24-48 hours later you take them back to theatre and remove any other tissue that is dead. And you repeat this until only healthy, living tissue remains. The worst thing I can do for such a person is to leave them alone – admit them to the ward, give them antibiotics, and hope that they'll be better in the morning. They'll end up a decent looking corpse. And so it is with God – actually the worst thing He can do to us is to leave us alone, not correct us, not discipline us. Yes – character building is often sore and uncomfortable, but the other option is so much worse. As these 5 chapters in Judges so clearly illustrate, left to ourselves, things fall apart. Romans 1:24, 26, 28

Dean: When I look at these stories I can't help but notice how they began – progressed and then turned into complete massacre. At any point in the story somebody could have made a relatively simple decision to do what was right in God's eyes to change the course of the story entirely.

Dean: Micah could not have stolen his mothers' money, not had a shrine, and not employed a Levite for selfish gain. His mother could have given the silver to the house of God in Shiloh as she originally said, the Levite definitely knew better, should not be working in a house to promote idol worship, should not have used the name of the LORD to sanction the Danites quest and so it goes.

Dean: The same is true in the other story, why does a Levite have a concubine? When the men of Gibeah want him to come out, what would be the correct response? Jesus shows us the correct response – you step out and give your life for the sake of others. The Benjamites could have handed over the wicked men etc.

Dean: At so many points in the story someone could have simply done what was right. Which brings me back to my original thought...have you ever stopped to consider what the consequences of our simple actions today could have down the line. Choices, both positive and negative.

Dean: I have also been looking quite carefully how we often relate to God today and wonder if we treat God in the same way as the Israelites did in these stories. Think about it for a moment, we chase after the blessings of God; we hold God to our take on his side of the covenant –

that He should keep us safe, heal our sick and provide for our needs. Think about the times we most often pray or draw close to God – mostly when things are going wrong, we challenge God. God if you are really God then you will do this or that. I think that it is fine to expect God to be faithful and true but the challenge is for us to live up to our side of that relationship. To obey everything that Jesus commanded (Matt28), these two sides of the equation need to be working together. Our focus should be on how we need to respond to God and let God get on with the business of being God.

Dean: Think about this, you say some pretty unloving things about someone when they are not around (first mistake). They find out about it so you lie to cover up your indiscretion – I can't believe you can say that...the person who told you that has twisted my words they are ...(next mistake) – this person goes back to that person and so in escalates until we eventually turn to God and ask Him how He could allow the relationship to have broken down like that. Sound familiar?

Dean: What you do today, tomorrow and every other day counts. If we (the church) get it wrong – things can go very wrong (look at history). But it takes a few individuals or one church to get it right to change to course of history towards God. And that is the most amazing thing that God has gifted his people with, the ability to bring light into a dark place.

Rachel: So some important take home messages that come out of this last section of Judges, these 2 seemingly random, bizarre stories. Firstly – even the difficult, hard to make sense of parts of the Bible have meaning and relevance to our lives today. Next – the worst thing that God can do to is be spectator rather than participator. And finally – there is no such thing as a small, insignificant decision or action.