

CHAPTER 18

How idolatry crept into the family of Micah we read in the preceding chapter, how it was translated thence into the tribe of Dan we have an account in this chapter, and how it gained a settlement in a city of note; for how great a matter does a little fire kindle! The tribe of Dan had their lot assigned them last of all the tribes, and, it happening to be too strait for them, a considerable city in the utmost corner of Canaan northward was added to it. "Let them get it, and take it;" it was called Laish or Leshem, ~~(16947)~~ Joshua 19:47. Now here we are told,

- I.** How they sent spies to bring them an account of the place, who, by the way, got acquainted with Micah's priest (v. 1-6).
- II.** What an encouraging report these spies brought back (v. 7-10).
- III.** What forces were sent to conquer Laish (v. 11-13).
- IV.** How they, by the way, plundered Micah of his gods (v. 14-26).
- V.** How easily they conquered Laish (v. 27-29), and, when they had it, set up the graven image in it (v. 30, 31).

~~(0780)~~ JUDGES 18:1-6

THE EXPEDITION OF THE DANITES

Here is,

1. The eye which these Danites had upon Laish, not the whole tribe of Dan, but one family of them, to whose lot, in the subdivision of Canaan, that city fell. Hitherto this family had sojourned with their brethren, who had taken possession of their lot, which lay between Judah and the Philistines, and had declined going to their own city, because there was *no king in Israel* to rule over them, v. 1. It lay a great way off, separate from the rest of their tribe; it was entirely in the enemy's hand, and therefore they would sponge upon their brethren rather than go far to provide for themselves. But at length necessity forced them to arouse themselves, and they began to think

of an inheritance to dwell in. It is better to have a little of one's own than always to hang upon others.

2. The enquiry which this family of the Danites made concerning Laish: They sent *five men to search the land* (v. 2), that they might know the character of the country, whether it was an inheritance worth going so far for, and the posture of the people, whether the making of themselves masters of it was a thing practicable, what force was necessary in order thereunto, and which was the best way of making an attack upon it. The men they sent were men of valour, who, if they fell into their enemies' hands, knew how to look danger in the face. It is prudent to look before we leap. Dan had the subtlety of *a serpent by the way* (^{<014917>}Genesis 49:17), as well as the courage of *a lion's whelp, leaping from Bashan*, ^{<06322>}Deuteronomy 33:22.

3. The acquaintance which their spies got with Micah's priest, and the use they made of that acquaintance. It seems, they had know this Levite formerly, he having in his rambles been sometimes in their country; and, though his countenance might be altered, they knew him again by his voice, v. 3. They were surprised to find him so far off, enquired what brought him thither, and he told them (v. 4) what business he had there, and what encouragement. They, understanding that he had an oracle in his custody, desired he would tell them whether they should prosper in their present undertaking, v. 5. See their carelessness and regardlessness of God and his providence; they would not have enquired of the Lord at all if this Levite's mentioning the teraphim he had with him had not put it into their heads. Many never think of religion but just when it falls in their way and they cannot avoid it, like chance customers. See their ignorance of the divine law, that they thought God, who had forbidden the religious use of graven images, would yet own them in consulting an image, and give them an answer of peace. *Should he be enquired of by them?* ^{<06413>}Ezekiel 14:3. They seem to have had a greater opinion of Micah's teraphim than of God's urim; for they had passed by Shiloh, and, for aught that appears, had not enquired there of God's high priest, but Micah's shabby Levite shall be an oracle to them. He betakes himself to his usual method of consulting his teraphim; and, whether he himself believed it or no, he humoured the thing so well that he made them believe he had an answer from God encouraging them to go on, and assuring them of good success (v. 6): "*Go in peace, you shall be safe, and may be easy, for before the Lord is your way,*" that is, "he approves it" (as the Lord is said to *know the way of the righteous*

with acceptance), “and therefore he will make it prosperous, his eye will be upon you for good, he will direct your way, and preserve your *going out and coming in*.” Note, Our great care should be that our way be such as God approves, and, if it be so, we may *go in peace*. If God care for us, on him let us cast our care, and be satisfied that we cannot miss our way if he *go before us*.

~~OTIS~~ JUDGES 18:7-13

THE EXPEDITION OF THE DANITES

Here is,

I. The observation which the spies made upon the city of Laish, and the posture of its inhabitants, v. 7. Never was place so ill governed and so ill guarded, which would make it a very easy prey to the invader.

1. It was ill governed, for every man might be as bad as he would, and there was no magistrate, no *heir of restraint* (as the word is), that might so much as *put them to shame in any thing*, much less *put them to death*, so that by the most impudent immoralities they provoked God's wrath, and by all manner of mutual mischiefs weakened and consumed one another. See here,

(1.) What the office of magistrates is. They are to be *heirs of restraint*, that is, to preserve a constant entail of power, as heirs to an inheritance, in the places where they are, for the restraining of that which is evil. They are *possessors of restraint*, entrusted with their authority for this end, that they may check and suppress every thing that is vicious and be *a terror to evil doers*. It is only God's grace that can renew men's depraved minds and turn their hearts; but the magistrate's power may restrain their bad practices and tie their hands, so that the wickedness of the wicked may not be either so injurious or so infectious as otherwise it would be. Though the sword of justice cannot cut up the root of bitterness, it may cut off its branches and hinder its growth and spreading, that vice may not go without a check, for then it becomes daring and dangerous, and the community shares in the guilt.

(2.) See what method must be used for the restraint of wickedness. Sinners must be put to shame, that those who will not be restrained by the shamefulness of the sin before God and their own consciences may be restrained by the shamefulness of the punishment before men. All ways must be tried to dash sin out of countenance and cover it with contempt, to make people ashamed of their idleness, drunkenness, cheating, lying, and other sins, by making reputation always appear on virtue's side.

(3.) See how miserable, and how near to ruin, those places are that either have no magistrates or none that bear the sword to any purpose; the wicked then *walk on every side*, ^{<1918>}Psalm 12:8. And how happy we are in good laws and a good government.

2. It was ill guarded. The people of Laish were careless, quiet, and secure, their gates left open, their walls out of repair, because under no apprehension of danger in any way, though their wickedness was so great that they had reason to fear divine vengeance every day. It was a sign that the Israelites, through their sloth and cowardice, were not now such a terror to the Canaanites as they were when they first came among them, else the city of Laish, which probably knew itself to be assigned to them, would not have been so very secure. Though they were an open and inland town, they *lived secure, like the Zidonians* (who were surrounded with the sea and were well fortified both by art and nature), but were *far from the Zidonians*, who therefore could not come in to their assistance, nor help to defend them from the danger which, by debauching their manners, they had helped to bring them into. And, *lastly*, they had *no business with any man*, which bespeaks either the idleness they affected (they followed no trade, and so grew lazy and luxurious, and utterly unable to defend themselves) or the independency they affected: they scorned to be either in subjection to or alliance with any of their neighbours, and so they had none to protect them nor bring in any aid to them. They cared for nobody and therefore nobody cared for them. Such as these were the men of Laish.

II. The encouragement which they consequently gave to their countrymen that sent them to prosecute their design upon this city, v. 8-10. Probably the Danites had formed notions of the insuperable difficulties of the enterprise, thought it impossible ever to make themselves masters of Laish, and therefore had kept themselves so long out of the possession of it, perhaps suggesting likewise to one another, in their unbelief, that it was not a country worth going so far and running such a risk for, which jealousies

the spies (and they were not, in this, evil spies) had an eye to in their report.

1. They represent the place as desirable: “If you will trust our judgments, *we have seen the land*, and we are agreed in our verdict upon the view, that, behold, *it is very good* (v. 9), better than this mountainous country into which we are here crowded by the Philistines. You need not doubt of living comfortably in it, for it is a place *where there is no want of any thing*,” v. 10. See what a good land Canaan was, that this city which lay furthest of all northward, in the utmost corner of the country, stood on such a fruitful spot.

2. They represent it as attainable. They do not at all question but, with God's blessing, they may soon get possession of it; for *the people are secure*, v. 10. And the more secure always the less safe. “*God has given it into your hands*, and you may have it for the taking.” They stir them up to the undertaking: “*Arise, that we may go up against them*, let us go about it speedily and resolutely.” They expostulate with them for their delays, and chide them out of their sluggishness: *Are you still? Be not slothful to go*. Men need to be thus stirred up to mind even their interest. Heaven is *a very good land, where there is no want of any thing*; our God has, by the promise, *given it into our hands*; let us not then be slothful in making it sure, and *laying hold on eternal life*, but *strive to enter*.

III. The Danites' expedition against Laish. This particular family of them, to whose lot that city fell, now at length make towards it, v. 11-13. The military men were but 600 in all, not a hundredth part of that tribe, for when they entered Canaan the Danites were above 64,000, ^(v. 13) Numbers 26:43. It was strange that none of their brethren of their own tribe, much less of any other, came in to their assistance; but it was long after Israel came to Canaan before there appeared among them any thing of a public spirit, or concern for a common interest, which was the reason why they seldom united in a common head, and this kept them low and inconsiderable. It appears (by v. 21) that these 600 were the whole number that went to settle there, for they had their families and effects with them, their *little ones and cattle*, so confident were they of success. The other tribes gave them a free passage through their country. Their first day's march brought them to Kirjath-jearim (v. 12), and such rare things had military encampments now become in Israel that the place where they rested that night was thence called *Mahaneh-dan, the camp of Dan*, and

probably the place whence they began their march between Zorah and Eshtaol was called by the same name, and is meant, ~~<071325>~~Judges 13:25. The second day's march brought them to Mount Ephraim, near Micah's house (v. 13), and there we must pause awhile.

~~<071814>~~ JUDGES 18:14-26

MICAH'S GODS STOLEN

The Danites had sent out their spies to find out a country for them, and they sped well in their search; but here, now that they came to the place (for till this brought it to their mind it does not appear that they had mentioned it to their brethren), they oblige them with a further discovery — they can tell them where there are gods: “Here, *in these houses*, there are an ephod, and teraphim, and a great many fine things for devotion, such as we have not the like in our country; *now therefore consider what you have to do*, v. 14. We consulted them, and had a good answer from them; they are worth having, nay, they are worth stealing (that is, having upon the worst terms), and, if we can but make ourselves masters of these gods, we may the better hope to prosper, and make ourselves masters of Laish.” So far they were in the right, that it was desirable to have God's presence with them, but wretchedly mistaken when they took these images (which were fitter to be used in a puppet-play than in acts of devotion) for tokens of God's presence. They thought an oracle would be pretty company for them in their enterprise, and instead of a council of war to consult upon every emergency; and, the place they were going to settle in being so far from Shiloh, they thought they had more need of a *house of gods* among themselves than Micah had that lived so near to it. They might have made as good an ephod and teraphim themselves as these were, and such as would have served their purpose every whit as well; but the reputation which they found them in possession of (though they had had that reputation but a while) amused them into a strange veneration for this *house of gods*, which they would soon have dropped if they had had so much sense as to enquire into its origin, and examine whether there were any thing divine in its institution. Being determined to take these gods along with them, we are here told how they stole the images, cajoled the priest, and frightened Micah from attempting to rescue them.

I. The five men that knew the house and the avenues to it, and particularly the chapel, went in and fetched out the images, with the ephod, and teraphim, and all the appurtenances, while the 600 kept the priest in talk at the gate, v. 16-18. See what little care this sorry priest took of his gods; while he was sauntering at the gate, and gazing at the strangers, his treasure (such as it was) was gone. See how impotent these sorry gods were, that could not keep themselves from being stolen. It is mentioned as the reproach of idols that they *themselves had gone into captivity*, ^(241D)Isaiah 46:2. O the sottishness of these Danites! How could they imagine those gods should protect them that could not keep themselves from being stolen? Yet because they went by the name of gods, as if it were not enough that they had with them the presence of the invisible God, nor that they stood in relation to the tabernacle, where there were even visible tokens of his presence, nothing will serve them but they must have *gods to go before them*, not of their own making indeed, but, which was as bad, of their own stealing. Their idolatry began in theft, a proper prologue for such an opera. In order to the breaking of the second commandment, they begin with the eighth, and take their neighbour's goods to make them their gods. The holy God *hates robbery for burnt-offerings*, but the devil loves it. Had these Danites seized the images to deface and abolish them, and the priest to punish him, they would have done like Israelites indeed, and would have appeared jealous for their God as their fathers had done (⁽⁶²¹⁶⁾Joshua 22:16); but to take them for their own use was such a complicated crime as showed that they neither feared God nor regarded man, but were perfectly lost both to godliness and honesty.

II. They set upon the priest, and flattered him into a good humour, not only to let the gods go, but to go himself along with them; for without him they knew not well how to make use of the gods. Observe, 1. How they tempted him, v. 19. They assured him of better preferment with them than what he now had. It would be more honour and profit to be chaplain to a regiment (for they were no more, though they called themselves a *tribe*) than to be only a domestic chaplain to a private gentleman. Let him go with them, and he shall have more dependants on him, more sacrifices brought to his altar, and more fees for consulting his teraphim, than he had here.

2. How they won him. A little persuasion served: *His heart was glad*, v. 20. The proposal took well enough with his rambling fancy, which would never let him stay long at a place, and gratified his covetousness and

ambition. He had no reason to say but that he was well off where he was; Micah had not *deceived him, nor changed his wages*. He was not moved with any remorse of conscience for attending on a graven image: had he gone away to Shiloh to minister to the Lord's priests, according to the duty of a Levite, he might have been welcome there (⁴⁵⁸¹⁶Deuteronomy 18:6), and his removal would have been commendable; but, instead of this, he takes the images with him, and carries the infection of the idolatry into a whole city. It would have been very unjust and ungrateful to Micah if he had only gone away himself, but it was much more so to take the images along with him, which he knew the heart of Micah was set upon. Yet better could not be expected from a treacherous Levite. What house can be sure of him who has forsaken the house of the Lord? Or what friend will he be true to that has been false to his God? He could not pretend that he was under compulsive force, for he was *glad in his heart* to go. If ten shekels won him (as bishop Hall expresses it), eleven would lose him; for what can hold those that have made shipwreck of a good conscience? *The hireling flees because he is a hireling*. The priest and his gods went in *the midst of the people*. There they placed him, that they might secure him either from going back himself, if his mind should change, or from being fetched back by Micah; or perhaps this post was assigned to him in imitation of the order of Israel's march through the wilderness, in which the ark and the priests went in the midst of their camp.

III. They frightened Micah back when he pursued them to recover his gods. As soon as ever he perceived that his chapel was plundered, and his chaplain had run away from him, he mustered all the forces he could and pursued the robbers, v. 22. His neighbours, and perhaps tenants, that used to join with him in his devotions, were forward to help him on this occasion; they got together, and pursued the robbers, who, having their children and cattle before them (v. 21), could make no great haste, so that they soon overtook them, hoping by strength of reason to recover what was stolen, for the disproportion of their numbers was such that they could not hope to do it by strength of arm. The pursuers called after them, desiring to speak a word with them; those in the rear (where it is probable they posted the fiercest and strongest of their company, expecting there to be attacked) turned about and asked Micah what ailed him that he was so much concerned, and what he would have, v. 23. He argues with them, and pleads his right, which he thought should prevail; but they, in answer, plead

their might, which, it proved, did prevail; for it is common that might overcomes right.

1. He insists upon the wrong they had certainly done him (v. 24): “*You have taken away my gods, my images of God, which I have an incontestable title to, for I made them myself, and which I have such an affection for that I am undone if I lose them; for what have I more that will do me any good if these be lost?*” Now,

(1.) This discovers to us the folly of idolaters, and the power that Satan has over them. What a folly was it for him to call those his *gods* which he had made, when he only that made us is to be worshipped by us as a God! Folly indeed to set his heart upon such silly idle things, and to look upon himself as undone when he had lost them!

(2.) This may discover to us our spiritual idolatry. That creature which we place our happiness in, which we set our affections inordinately upon, and which we can by no means find in our hearts to part with, of which we say, “What have we more?” *that* we make an idol of. That is put in God's place, and is a usurper, which we are concerned about as if our life and comfort, our hope and happiness, and our all, were bound up in it. But,

(3.) If all people will thus walk in the name of their god, shall we not be in like manner affected towards our God, the true God? Let us reckon the having of an interest in God and communion with him incomparably the richest portion, and the loss of God the sorest loss. Woe unto us if he depart, for what have we more? Deserted souls that are lamenting after the Lord may well wonder, as Micah did, that you should ask what ails them; for the tokens of God's favour are suspended, his comforts are withdrawn, and what have they more?

2. They insist upon the mischief they would certainly do him if he prosecuted his demand. They would not hear reason, nor do justice, nor so much as offer to pay him the prime cost he had been at upon those images, nor promise to make restitution of what they had taken when they had served their present purpose with them in this expedition and had time to copy them and make others like them for themselves: much less had they any compassion for a loss he so bitterly lamented. They would not so much as give him good words, but resolved to justify their robbery with murder if he did not immediately let fall his claims, v. 25. “Take heed *lest angry fellows run upon thee, and thou lose thy life*, and that is worse than losing

thy gods.” Wicked and unreasonable men reckon it a great provocation to be asked to do justice, and support themselves by their power against right and reason. Micah's crime is asking his own, yet, for this, he is in danger of losing his life and the lives of his household. Micah has not courage enough to venture his life for the rescue of his gods, so little opinion has he of their being able to protect him and bear him out, and therefore tamely gives them up (v. 26): *He turned and went back to his house*; and if the loss of his idols did but convince him (as, one would think, it should) of their vanity and impotency, and his own folly in setting his heart upon them, and send him back to the true God from whom he had revolted, he that lost them had a much better bargain than those that by force of arms carried them off. If the loss of our idols cure us of the love of them, and make us say, *What have we to do any more with idols?* the loss will be unspeakable gain. See ^{<17120>}Isaiah 2:20; 30:22.

<17127> JUDGES 18:27-31

THE CONQUEST OF LAISH

Here is,

I. Laish conquered by the Danites. They proceeded on their march, and, because they met with no disaster, perhaps concluded they had not done amiss in robbing Micah. Many justify themselves in their impiety by their prosperity. Observe,

1. What posture they found the people of Laish in, both those of the city and those of the country about. They were quiet and secure, not jealous of the five spies that had been among them to search out the land, nor had they any intelligence of the approach of this enemy, which made them a very easy prey to this little handful of men that came upon them, v. 27. Note, Many are brought to destruction by their security. Satan gets advantage against us when we are careless and off our watch. Happy therefore is the man that feareth always.

2. What a complete victory they obtained over them: They *put all the people to the sword*, and burnt down so much of the city as they thought fit to rebuild (v. 27, 28), and, for aught that appears, herein they met with no

resistance; for the measure of the iniquity of the Canaanites was full, that of the Danites was but beginning to fill.

3. How the conquerors settled themselves in their room, v. 28, 29. They built the city, or much of it, anew (the old buildings having gone to decay), and *called the name of it Dan*, to be a witness for them that, though separated so far off from their brethren, they were nevertheless Danites by birth, which might hereafter, by reason of their distance, be called in question. We should feel concerned not to lose the privilege of our relation to God's Israel, and therefore should take all occasions to own it and preserve the remembrance of it to ours after us.

II. Idolatry immediately set up there. God had graciously performed his promise, in putting them in possession of that which fell to their lot, obliging them thereby to be faithful to him who had been so to them. They *inherited the labour of the people, that they might observe his statutes*, ~~954~~ Psalm 105:44, 45. But the first thing they do after they are settled is to break his statutes. As soon as they began to settle themselves they *set up the graven image* (v. 30), perversely attributing their success to that idol which, if God had not been infinitely patient, would have been their ruin. Thus a prosperous idolater goes on to offend, *imputing this his power unto his god*, ~~3011~~ Habakkuk 1:11. Their Levite, who officiated as priest, is at length *named* here — *Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh*. The word *Manasseh*, in the original, has the letter *n*, set over the head, which, some of the Jewish rabbin say, is an intimation that it should be left out, and then *Manasseh* will be *Moses*, and this Levite, they say, was grandson to the famous Moses, who indeed had a son named Gershom; but, say they, the historian, in honour of Moses, by a half interposition of that letter, turned the name into Manasseh. The vulgar Latin reads it *Moses*. And if indeed Moses had a grandson that was rakish, and was picked up as a fit tool to be made use of in the setting up of idolatry, it is not the only instance (would to God it were!) of the unhappy degenerating of the posterity of great and good men. Children's children are not always the crown of old men. But the learned bishop Patrick takes this to be an idle conceit of the rabbin, and supposes this Jonathan to be of some other family of the Levites. How long these corruptions continued we are told in the close.

1. That the posterity of this Jonathan continued to act as priests to this family of Dan that was seated at Laish, and in the country about, till the

captivity, v. 30. After Micah's image was removed this family retained the character of priests, and had respect paid them as such by that city, and it is very probable that Jeroboam had an eye to them when he set up one of his calves there (which they could welcome at Can, and put some reputation upon, when the priests of the Lord would have nothing to do with them), and that this family officiated as some of his priests.

2. That these images continued till Samuel's time, for so long *the ark of God was at Shiloh*; and it is probable that in him time effectual care was taken to suppress and abolish this idolatry. See how dangerous it is to admit an infection, for spiritual distempers are not so soon cured as caught.