

Place: Lurgan Baptist 4:3:2003

Reading: Judges 17:1-13,18:1-6 27-31

HEARTS OF IRON, FEET OF CLAY

15. SPIRITUAL JUNK FOOD

Several years ago I had the privilege of leading a group of believers on a coach tour through the Canadian Rockies. The scenery was breathtaking. One of the towns that we stayed in for a few days was the beautiful town of Banff. Unfortunately the day we chose to go up on the gondola to the top of Sulphur Mountain, was misty the view therefore would have been poor. You see, on a good day the view from the top of Sulphur Mountain is one of the most picturesque in the Rockies.

There you stand looking at peak after peak, stretching off into the distance in a sea of mountains. When the sun is shining, and the snow is glistening, the scenery is beautiful. On the top of the mountain, there is a tea house, as well as a herd of about thirty mountain sheep. They have become very tame and have taken to begging handouts from the tourists. They love anything salty and that is the problem. Those sheep are actually starving to death on a diet of peanuts, crisps, popcorn and hamburgers. As a result, the herd has been neglecting its normal grass diet, and consequently, the animals are losing weight, and the females no longer produce enough high quality milk to nourish their lambs. One of the park wardens said, “*Sheep develop*

a taste for this kind of junk. It is pathetic to see, but there is really very little we can do about it. I wish people would realise their kindness amounts to cruelty.” Those sheep have actually become “*junk-food junkies.*” Of course, it is not only four-legged sheep who have that nutritional problem. Many of God’s spiritual sheep are addicted to junk food, only it is the kind which produces spiritual malnourishment. They have become spiritual junk-food junkies. Now junk food is fascinating stuff. The problem with it is not that it tastes bad. It nearly tastes good. Nor is it that it immediately destroys us. It never does. The problem is that it has little or no nutritional value and it spoils our appetites.

My its just the same with spiritual junk food. When it spoils our appetite for God’s solid food and addicts us to what is only superficially satisfying the result is spiritual starvation in our own lives and danger to the lives of those who are depending on us. Now the passages we want to explore this present us with three kinds of spiritual junk food. At first glance they might not seem especially relevant to our situation, but as we probe a little deeper we’ll discover they are. Now do you recall the situation in the Book of Judges ? Do you remember that in this book we are on a spiritual merry go round. For sixteen chapters in this Book we have seen the downward spiral of the children of Israel. Do you recall the cycle of sin ? *Sin* (2:13) *Suffering*: (2:14) *Supplication*: (2:18) *Salvation*: (2:18) and then the cycle was repeated. No matter how often God warned them, they refused to learn the lesson of wholehearted obedience to God. Now in those chapters

the focus was on deliverers God raised up, especially the major judges, Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. But in the last five chapters the emphasis changes. Its probable that the events described in (Chapters 17-21) took place earlier in the period of the Judges, probably before the forty year rule of the Philistines. You see, the movements of the Tribe of Dan would have been difficult and the war against Benjamin impossible if the Philistines had been in charge at that time. So in these closing chapters the emphasis changes from the Enemy Without to the Cancer Within !

Here we have two stories which gave us an insight into the moral condition of the times. Together the two stories depict *Spiritual Apostasy, Moral Collapse, and Political Anarchy*. The first story presents us with three kinds of spiritual junk food.

(1) THE JUNK FOOD OF SYNCRETISTIC WORSHIP

Now that's a big word from a wee fellow like me. They are not using that word every day in Alanna Lighting. Well, let me tell you what it means. *Syncretism is melting pot religion, a little bit of this, a little bit of that*. Specifically, here it refers to Israel's tendency to combine or blend various elements of pagan Canaanite religion with the worship of Jehovah. it's the blending together of religious ideas into one system. Now is that not happening today ? Religious influences which the West once called pagan are penetrating into so Christendom. Do you ever royalty talking about “

many faiths,” ? Various forms of oriental religions are calling us to quiet meditation and self denial. Immigrants from all over the world have a given a new prominence to a variety of religious practices. Mosques, shrines temples now dot cities throughout the United Kingdom as superstition comes more and more to the fore. (1) Now I want you to notice several things about this worship.

(a) INITIATED BY MAN:

There was a man living in the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. It's a great name which means,

“ *Who is like the Lord ?*” In Micah's case however, he did not live up to his name. What do we know about him ? Well, for one thing he had:

1. A WEALTHY HOME:

Look at (17:2) Can you imagine the kind of home this would be where 1100 shekels of silver were lying around for anyone to take. Do you recall that the lords of the Philistines each gave to Delilah a similar sum ? (16:5) Look at (17:10) which tells us that the Levite was delighted to get a job which paid him 10 shekels of silver a year. So you get the impression that this was a wealthy home. My do you realise that your wealth is a gift from God ? The Book of Deuteronomy says this,

“ *It is He (God) that giveth thee power to get wealth.*” (8:18) Paul poses the question, “ *what hast thou that thou didst not receive ?*” (1 Cor 4:7) 1.

2. A WICKED HEART:

He was a thief, who had stolen 1100 pieces of silver from his mother. But Micah was also a very superstitious man. He heard his mother cursing the thief in the name of God and he was terrified. So he brought the money back and his mother responded with a blessing. “*Blessed be thou of the Lord my son.*” (17:2) Then she encouraged him into idolatry. (17:4) So Micah set up a shrine, a house of gods, complete with a priestly garment (the ephod) a molten image (an idol of poured silver) a graven image (a carved idol coated with silver) and a number of portable gods, called teraphim. He went one step further and ordained one of his sons as a priest. Do you see what Micah was doing ? He was reflecting the mood of the times. Look at (17:6) No doubt Micah was influenced by Canaanite practices for the Canaanite’s worshipped with the aid of images. You see, this was religious syncretism the blending together of Canaanite practices with the traditional worship of Jehovah. Now it is important to notice that Micah was not worshipping Baal or a false god. He was trying to worship the true God, by his idols. Did you see (17:13) ? 1:2:

3: A WEAK MOTHER:

For not only did his mother not correct him, but she actually led him into idolatry. One of the saddest things of our time is the number of parents who have no true values to communicate to their children. Their children even steal from them, but they receive no discipline or correction. Speak to any school teacher today. What is the major problem ? My the major problem is not a lack of school discipline but a lack of home discipline.

Is Micah’s home not a picture of many to day ? Where money is the “*god*,” the family worships, where children steal from their parents and lie about what they do, where family honour is unknown, and where the true God is unwanted. Television provides all the “*images*,” the family will ever want to “*worship*,” and few worry about “*thus saith the Lord.*” (a)

(b) REPUDIATED BY MOSES:

Micah’s shrine may have been very beautiful. It may well have been a tourist attraction. But God hated it. It was the homemade worship of a man-made god. You see, God’s Word was very specific in relation to:

1. THE PLACE:

According to (Deut 12: 1-14 16:1-7) there was to be one place of worship in Israel, and the people were not permitted to have their own private shrines. Now all the time that Micah had his house of “*gods*,” where was the house of God ? (18:31) Now Shiloh was just over the hill from where he lived. He could have walked there easily, but he was too busy playing church in his own home. 1.

2. THE PRIESTHOOD:

Micah firstly chose his own son, then a Levite (17:10) but this was in direct disobedience to the Word of God. We need to understand that the “*priests and the Levites*,” were not synonymous. The priests were the

sons of Aaron specifically set apart by God to minister unto God in the priests office. (Exod 28:1 Num 3:10) They were in charge of the worship of Jehovah, but the Levites were the workmen of the Tabernacle. (Exod 6:18 Num 3:5 Heb 7:5) You see, only the descendants of Aaron could serve as priests. 1:2:

3. THE PROHIBITION:

Micah was not worshipping Baal or a false god, but he was trying to worship the true God by his idols. Now what had the Lord to say about that ? (Exod 20:4-6) ? You see, God not only forbids the worship of false gods but the worship of the true God by images. The first commandment tells us Whom we must worship, the second commandment tells us, How we must worship Him. The first points out the true Object of Worship, the second the true Manner of Worship. John Calvin was right when he said, “ *A true image of God is not to be found in all the world and hence His glory is defiled, and His truth corrupted by the lie, whenever He is set before our eyes in visible form. Therefore to devise any image of God is itself impious, because by this corruption His majesty is adulterated and He is figured to be other than He is.* ”

Do people actually bow down and worship images statues and shrines ? Listen to the decree from the Roman Catholic Council of Trent, “ *The images of Christ and the Virgin Mother of God and of the other saints are to be had and to be kept especially in churches and due honour and veneration are to be given them.* ” Is that a violation of the second

commandment ? Yes ! When people make images of their gods and then kneel down and worship them, do they break this commandment ? Yes ! When Protestant churches bow down before their creeds, ceremonies, candles and crosses, do they break this commandment ? Yes ! You see, idolatry is not dead. Its not a relic of the past, it is a constant problem for every believer. That is why we need to pray with the hymn writer,

“ The dearest idol I have known,
And worship only Thee.”

(c) APPRECIATED BY MANY:

For did you notice the spread of it in these chapters ? It grows from an idea in Micah’s mother’s mind to a reality in his family, then it was transmitted to a tribe for the Danites reenact Micah’s folly. (118:31) And surely the cult of the Danites may have provided some of the stimulus for Jeroboam the First to inject idolatry into Israel. (1 Kings 12:29) Do you know what the ultimate result was ? A nation in captivity ! From a mother to a family, to a tribe, to a nation ! My is syncretistic worship not spreading today ? Look at the many who wear lucky charms, read the daily horoscope, rely on mystics and gurus, place their faith in some form of superstition. My man made religions abound, indeed the apostles warn that in the last days such activity would increase. Therefore “ *Beloved believe not every spirit but try the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world.* ” (1 Tim 4:1 1 Tim 3:1 1 Jn 4:1) (1)

(2) THE JUNK FOOD OF EGOTISTIC SERVICE

You see, the story moves from Micah to Jonathan the Levite. (18:30) Now there is one phrase here which is stated twice which tells us a great deal about this wandering Levite. (17:8-9) In other words, he set out from Bethlehem looking a place to better himself. Now that was a perfectly natural ambition, except that in this case it was totally contrary to the will of God. You see, if you look at the context you will notice that there were three stages in Jonathan's service which he thought was taking him further up the spiritual ladder but was actually taking him deeper into sin. Notice that for Jonathan there was:

(a) AN ABANDONMENT OF GOD'S CALL:

Look at (17:7-8) Now this man was a Levite and Levites were men who had the call of God upon their lives. (Num 3:5) When Joshua led the people into the Promised Land forty eight cities had been allocated to the Levites for their personal use. (Num 35:1 Josh 21:1) Bethlehem, however was not one of them. He was probably there because the people of Israel were not supporting the tabernacle and its ministry with their tithes and offerings as God commanded them to do. Why live in one of the levitical cities if you're going to starve ? (Num 18:21-32 Deut 14:28-29 Neh 13:10) You see, when God's people grow indifferent to spiritual things, one of the first evidences of their apathy is a decline in their giving to the work of the Lord, as a result everyone suffers. Now here is

Jonathan a Levite, but instead of seeking the mind of God, he sets out to find a place to live and work, even if it meant abandoning his calling as a servant of God. *My its always a great temptation to a pastor or evangelist to move on to a place where he senses that he would be better cared for.* You see, Jonathan was an opportunist moving from place to place. God had given him an area of service, and, had he lived faithfully within the sphere of his divine calling, the Lord would have extended his area of ministry. But he was committed to self-promotion and to personal betterment. Do you know what one of Satan's most subtle devices is ? To get a Christian dissatisfied with the circumstances of his life and the area of ministry the Lord has given him. Have these thoughts never crossed your mind ?

" I should be better known. I should be in public more. I should be paid more. I should receive more praise. " Its subtle is it not ? Some believers won't do a job because they think that it is beneath them, or they will leave a church because no pays enough attention to them, or they will pout because some else is more important than they are. Here is Jonathan refusing to be satisfied with God's arrangements for his life. (a) Now many pastors and elders have been there, ready to move on for whatever reason. Several years ago I was preaching in one of our churches. I knew some of the elders in that church and I knew that it was the custom when there were visiting preachers that the elders would open up the meeting ! So I was somewhat surprised when one of the deacons led for me that morning. After the service was over I enquired what

was wrong and one of elders whom I greatly respected said, “ *Denis we have a spot of trouble, and some of the elders have stepped down for a while to see if things will settle.* ” Calling him by name I asked, “ *Where do you get that in the N.T ?* ” Do you know that old phrase ? When the going gets tough the tough get going. Jeremiah wanted to resign. Do you know what he said ? “ *Then I said, I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name. But His Word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.* ” (Jer 20:9)

Jeremiah resigns and then declares immediately that he cannot resign, he quits but he cannot quit. Do you feel like quitting ? Then let me ask you, “ *Who called you ?* ” If men called you, then maybe you should quit, but did God call you ? (a)

(b) AN AGREEMENT TO MAN’S TERMS:

Do you see what happens when two men who have no principles get together ? (17:10) Micah wanted to a proper Levitical priest and the Levite wanted a job, so suddenly the Levite is an ordained member of the clergy. But this was man’s clergy and not God’s. For as we have noted this was a direct denial of the Word of God for only the descendants of Aaron could act as priests.

This Levite had refused to be satisfied with God’s arrangements for his service, but now he had made his own, and he was satisfied. At least for a while. Then in (Ch 18) we have the third stage of his career. (a) (b)

(c) AN ATTAINMENT BY LIFE’S STANDARDS:

One day, five spies sent out by the tribe of Dan came across Micah’s house (18:3) They asked him for a blessing and he obliged. This contact bore fruit for this Levite who was climbing the spiritual ladder. For some time later when the tribe of Dan was moving north they came to the house of Micah (18:13) stole his idols and carried off his shrine. At first the Levite tried to stop them but then Dan made him an offer he could not refuse. (18:19) The answer of course, was that it was better for a Levite not be a priest at all. But that carried little weight for we read in (18:20) By the standards of this life that was a step up the ladder. *The Levite was getting a promotion.* There is an old story about a preacher who had received a call from a larger church. But was it God’s will for him to go ? Someone from his present smaller church called by one day to talk about it, and he was met at the door by the pastor’s little daughter. “ *Where are your Mum and Dad dear ?* ” “ *Oh,* ” she said, “ *Dad’s upstairs praying about the move and Mom’s downstairs packing.* ” To be honest usually the preacher packs and the wife prays. But look at this Levite from no job, to ministering to a family, and now to a tribe, but there is a sad note when we discover his identity in (18:30) Actually it could equally be translated, “ *Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses.* ” And Gershom was a son of Moses. (Exod 2:22 18:3) It’s a stark reminder that it does not do any good to have a godly ancestor, if you do not the Lord yourself. *Godliness is not genetic !* (2) That is service in which self is promoted ! Is self being

promoted in your service for the Lord? Are you looking for a place or are you seeking God's place? Are you content to be what God wants you to be, where God wants you? Or are you like Jonathan climbing the ladder of Christian promotion, wanting prominence, attention, praise?

You see, you don't have to be a pastor to develop a professional attitude to the Lord's work. Who are you serving yourself? Your church? Your society? Or are you serving the Lord Jesus? (1) (2)

(3) THE JUNK FOOD OF MATERIALISTIC LIVING

Look at (18:1) Now we are not to understand from that statement that Dan had been omitted when Joshua divided up the land.

(a) In Joshua: The DIVISION of the Land:

For the territory allocated to them by Joshua was between Ephraim and Judah, stretching out to the Mediterranean. (Joshua 19:41-46) But Dan had refused to trust God by driving out the Amorites, and as a result Dan was forced into the hills to live in a small area between Zorah and Eshtaol. (1:34 18:2) This was far from being satisfactory so:

(b) In Judges: The DECISION of the People:

Dan had two choices. As a tribe they could repent of their unbelief and trust God as they entered into battle

with their enemies. Or they could look for a new area, where the natives were unprepared, undefended and vulnerable to a sneak attack.

1. Dan chose the EASY PLACE:

They found it to the north in Laish (18:7) a rich fruitful area. (18:10) Arthur Lewis writes, “ *Water comes from every rock and hill pouring down from the nearby mountains of Lebanon. This part of Galilee is green and overgrown with all forms of vegetation. The tribe of Dan had seized upon a veritable paradise on earth.* ” 1.

2. Dan chose the EASY WAY:

For the citizens of Laish could be easily taken. Love of ease was the dominating factor in the thinking of the Danites! My Is it not so tempting to carve out a Laish for ourselves, a little island of peace where we can live in affluence and forget all about the needy world outside, and the enemies of the gospel, and the radical claims of Jesus Christ on our lives? Why fight when we can sleep? Why sacrifice when we can settle down? One thing is sure. If you want to live in Laish and settle down you'll have to become an idol-worshipper!

(18:31) Your idol will be ease, comfort, materialism as you let the world go on its way to hell! But don't miss the consequences of this commitment to easy living.
a:b

(c) In Chronicles: The DECLENSION of the Tribe:

For in the Book of 1 Chronicles, when the list of the

tribes and families in Israel is given, Dan is the only tribe which is the totally ignored. (6:60) Dan did not take what God had given to them and they took what God had not given them. In the process, they lost all that they had. Indeed Dan is not even mentioned among the 144,000 Jewish believers who will carry out a special ministry for God in the Tribulation, after the Rapture of the church. They chose the easy way and vanished into obscurity. Spiritual Junk Food ! (1) (2) (3) Do you have any junk food in your spiritual diet ? It may be Micah's food of man-made religion ! It may be Jonathan's product, self-seeking service ? Or could you have the Danites taste ? A love for easy living. Perhaps you have a combination of all three. Be careful, for you are what you eat.