

Judges 18:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod, and the teraphim, and the graven image, and went in the midst of the people.

Analysis

And the priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod, and the teraphim, and the graven image, and went in the midst of the people. The priest's response reveals his true character: "the priest's heart was glad" (vayyitav lev-hakohen, וַיֵּטֵב לִבְהֹכֵהֶן, literally "and it was good to the heart of the priest"). The verb yataav (יָטַב, "was good/pleased") echoes the Danites' question about what was "better" (v. 19), showing the priest accepted their pragmatic calculus. His heart's gladness demonstrates that his token resistance (v. 18) was superficial—he needed only minimal persuasion to abandon Micah for greater opportunity.

The listing of stolen objects—ephod, teraphim, graven image—emphasizes his active participation in the theft. He didn't passively accompany the Danites but personally "took" (vayiqach, וַיִּקַּח) the idolatrous items, becoming principal actor rather than reluctant accomplice. His position "in the midst of the people" (beqerev ha'am, בְּקֶרֶב הָעָם) indicates full integration into the Danite migration—protected, honored, and central to their community. This contrasts with his earlier marginal status as household priest to an isolated Ephraimite (Judges 17:10-12).

The priest's gladness exposes the heart's deceitfulness (Jeremiah 17:9). He found joy in theft, betrayal, and false worship because his heart valued position over faithfulness, comfort over conviction, and human approval over God's approval. Jesus warned, "No man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24), yet this priest attempted exactly that—maintaining religious profession while serving mammon.

His failure warns against pragmatic ministry that evaluates opportunities by worldly metrics (influence, compensation, prestige) rather than biblical criteria (faithfulness, truth, obedience). True ministers find gladness in pleasing God regardless of worldly advancement (Galatians 1:10, 1 Thessalonians 2:4-6).

Historical Context

The priest's rapid acceptance of the Danites' offer reflects the transactional nature of privatized priesthood during the judges period. Unlike the divinely ordained Levitical system where priests served by birthright and divine calling, Micah's priest served by employment contract (Judges 17:10—ten shekels of silver yearly, clothing, and sustenance). When better employment appeared, he switched employers without moral qualms. This parallels ancient Near Eastern priests who served as hired religious professionals, moving between temples and patrons seeking optimal compensation and status.

The objects he took—ephod, teraphim, graven image—were portable, allowing the Danites to establish immediate worship at their new location. Ancient Near Eastern cult sites required sacred objects, priestly personnel, and established rituals to legitimize them. By taking both priest and cult objects, the Danites secured everything needed to establish their tribal sanctuary at Laish/Dan. The subsequent narrative (v. 30) confirms this shrine continued until the Assyrian exile, making this theft the foundation for centuries of false worship in northern Israel.

The priest's placement "in the midst of the people" suggests honor and protection. Ancient Near Eastern priests enjoyed special status, exempted from military service and manual labor, supported by offerings and tithes. The Danites' treatment of their new priest indicated they valued him highly—positioning him centrally in their migration, protecting him with armed warriors, and presumably promising substantial compensation. However, this worldly honor came at the cost of spiritual integrity. The priest traded faithful service to God for comfortable service to men, a transaction resulting in temporal gain but eternal loss (Mark 8:36).

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does the priest's 'glad heart' reveal that worldly success can become an idol replacing genuine devotion to God?
2. What warning does this passage give about evaluating ministry opportunities by worldly metrics versus biblical faithfulness?
3. In what ways can Christians distinguish between legitimate vocational advancement and compromise-requiring career moves?

Interlinear Text

וַיִּטֵּב was glad H3190	לֵב heart H3820	הַכֹּהֵן And the priest's H3548	וַתֶּחֶם and he took H3947	אֶת H853	הָאֵפֹד the ephod H646	וְהָאֵפֹד H853
וְהַתְּרָפִים and the teraphim H8655	וְהָאֵפֹד H853	וְהַפֶּסֶל and the graven image H6459	וַיֵּבֶ א and went in H935	בְּקֶרֶב the midst H7130	הָעָם: of the people H5971	

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