

GOD WITH US

Part 1: The Great Blessing

Genesis – Deuteronomy

1. God invited Abraham to Engage with His Promises.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives, and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

A GREAT NATION.

A GREAT LAND.

A GREAT NAME.

A GREAT BLESSING to ALL the families of the earth.

2. God invited Moses and all Israel to Engage with His Plan.

“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:4-6).

Israel was to become A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS to represent God to the world.

3. Israel (1st generation) failed to stay Engaged with God, and lost the privilege of going into the land.

“Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it. But My servant Caleb, because he has had a different spirit and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it” (Numbers 14:20-24).

An 11-day journey to the Promised Land turned into a 40-year walk in the desert.

GOD WITH US

Part 2: Conquest and Chaos

Joshua – Judges - Ruth

1. GAME ON for Joshua and a new generation; but they had to Engage with God’s rules to win.

“Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses” (Joshua 1:2,3).

The *only* way to experience the blessings of your relationship with God is through OBEDIENCE to His game plan.

2. Entanglement (with people-groups, beliefs and customs) killed engagement with God and His plan.

“Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the Lord to anger. So they forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroth” (Judges 2:11-13).

Engaging with the world (as God’s representative) and becoming entangled with the world are two very different things.

3. All along the way, God was looking for individuals who were willing to Engage with His plan.

“She went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech (Ruth 2:3).

God is always looking for a remnant of faithful people that He can engage with, to fulfill His plan to bring hope to the world.

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 1 – Entering the Promised Land
Joshua 1-4

Introduction

The book of Joshua is the story of how Israel, under Joshua's leadership, entered the Promised Land and took possession of it by conquering 31 Canaanite kings. Much of the book is devoted to stories of particular conflicts and the apportioning of the land among the 12 tribes after victory. There are deeper messages, however, in the book of Joshua.

Theologically, this book teaches us about *walking in obedience and faith with Yahweh*. The extent of Israel's conquest and appropriation of the land promised to Abraham (Gen.12:1-3) depended on their faithfulness to the covenant with Yahweh, made at Mt. Sinai. To the extent that Israel was faithful to the terms of the covenant, Yahweh would drive out the inhabitants of the land and allow Israel to take possession of it. On the other hand, if Israel was unfaithful to the covenant, then their possession of the land would be more limited. The book of Joshua, then, is a theological treatise on the importance of *walking in step with God and, thereby, enjoying the benefits of His favor in our lifetime*.

Nationally, it is clear in the book of Joshua that God was sending a powerful witness to the Canaanite nations and calling people to turn to Him in faith. At the same time, God was judging these nations for their sinful behavior over many centuries (see Genesis 15:16) and expelling them from their land. Yet, even in judgment, God was offering to individuals in every nation the opportunity to turn to Him in faith and be saved from destruction (eg. Rahab).

Personally, this book chronicles the faith-journey of people like Joshua, Caleb, Rahab and many others. We are given an up-close look how real people struggled to trust God and walk in His ways. There are *many* leadership lessons (and mistakes) in the book, which will be of special interest to all of us who are called to exercise leadership of any fashion.

God's charge to Joshua: 1:1-9

In the opening charge, God declared that *He had already given the land to Joshua and the Israelites*. No one will be able to stand before the God at work in Joshua.

“No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you” (1:5).

Yet, there is a condition that must be met in order to receive this divine protection. They must walk in obedience to the Covenant made with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai, and He would, in turn, drive out their enemies and allow them to inherit the land.

“This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for THEN you will make your way prosperous, and THEN you will have success” (1:8).

There is repeated emphasis here on being ***strong and courageous*** (1:6,7,9). Joshua's strength and courage, however, would not be found in his own power, wisdom or resources; rather, in the fact that *“the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (1:9).*

So often in life, our strength and courage is wrongly sourced. We try to muster up strength and courage from within ourselves. Yet, God encouraged (breathed courage into) Joshua, and told him to not be afraid, because GOD HIMSELF was the source of Joshua's strength. The Scriptures constantly emphasizes that THE LORD is our Helper, the SOURCE of our power. “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me” (Micah 7:7). “When I am afraid I will put my trust in You, in God whose Word I praise, in God I trust” (Psalm 56:3,4). True courage grows when we fix our eyes on God, and take our eyes off the wind, the waves, and ourselves.

Preparations to cross the Jordan: 1:10-18

Joshua instructed the leaders of Israel to prepare the people to cross the Jordan River within three days. He specifically reminded the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh of their previous commitment to accompany their brothers across the Jordan into battle, rather than staying on the east side of the Jordan in the land they desired to inherit for themselves (recall Numbers 32). As before, they again committed to go into battle with their brothers.

“They answered Joshua, saying, “All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you; only may the Lord your God be with you as He was with Moses” (1:16,17).

These “trans-Jordan” tribes would settle into their inheritance only after the Lord had given the entire nation victory together.

The tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh committed to fight with their brothers, rather than separating off and pursuing their own welfare. They were an ancient “Band of Brothers.” Like the ancient Israelites, the first Christians were a band of brothers and sisters, committed to advancing the work of God’s kingdom in their world. Who is your band of brothers and sisters? With whom do you share a significant commitment to advance God’s work, both in your own life, and in the lives of those around you?

Spies sent to Jericho: 2:1-24

Joshua sent two spies into the land. They were to take special note of Jericho (v.1). The spies were aided by a woman named Rahab, who had heard about the Lord’s mighty acts on behalf of Israel.

“I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt . . . for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (2:9-11).

There was *mutuality* in their agreement: The spies: *“If you don’t betray us, we will keep our promise and be kind to you when the Lord gives us this land” (2:14).* Rahab: *“I accept your terms” (2:21).* They all kept their promises and were true to their words.

Recall the fundamental *purpose* of Israel: to be a nation of priests representing Yahweh to the world so that people in other nations would have the opportunity to place their faith (trust) in Yahweh and be saved (see Exodus 19:5,6). Here, in the case of Rahab, we see this playing out. She was a harlot living in Jericho . . . but she had received the testimony of Yahweh’s character as demonstrated in His dealings with the people of Israel. She decided to place her trust in the God of Israel. ***“For the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (2:11).*** (Note how Joshua used similar wording to describe his faith in God: *“the Lord of all the earth” 3:11,13).* Thus, she hid the two spies and asked for

protection when Israel invaded her city. She was, in fact, protected and brought into the community of Israel (see 6:23-25).

But the story of Rahab gets even better! Rahab is mentioned three times in the New Testament. First, she is an exemplar of what it means to have *faith* in God (Hebrews 11:31). Second, she showed what it means to *demonstrate* one's faith through *works* (James 2:25). Third, and most importantly, Rahab married a prominent leader in Israel (Salmon, the father of Boaz – see Ruth 4:21) and found a place in the genealogy of King David and, ultimately, of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 1:5)!

The Old Testament narrative reads, primarily, on the 'national level.' It is much like watching the evening news as national events are covered. Yet, the story of Rahab gives us a glimpse into what was going on at the individual level. It is like one of those 'personal interest' stories inserted at the end of the evening news. In Rahab, we find an example of God's love and care for individuals. God was inviting men and women everywhere to exercise simple faith and to enter into a personal relationship with Him. But even more, we see in Rahab what God can do when a single soul turns to Him. God took this harlot from Jericho and turned her into a woman of great faith, and a conveyor of the GREATEST BLESSING of all – a Messiah and Savior for the world! It should come as no surprise, then, that when God the Son came into our world, He displayed consistent love toward "tax collectors and sinners." He even allowed a "sinful woman" to become the example of what it means to love Him and trust Him (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus was, and is, "the friend of sinners!"

Crossing the Jordan River: 3:1-4:24

The first act in the inheritance of the Promised Land was the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River by the hand of God. This event served two purposes: 1) It confirmed Joshua's role as the new leader of Israel (3:7). 2) It assured the people that Yahweh was going before them to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan: ***"Today you will KNOW that the LIVING GOD is among you" (3:10).*** The priests were instructed to lead the way by standing in the river while carrying the sacred Ark of the Covenant. Once the priests had obediently taken their stand in the river (a 'step of faith'), then the waters were stopped and the people crossed over.

Note: ***"It was harvest season, and the Jordan was overflowing its banks" (3:15).*** God did not part the waters during a dry spell; rather, He did His miraculous work when the waters were at their

highest. This is often God's way with His children. He does His greatest work in our most desperate circumstances, so that He may be glorified in and through us.

Not only was GOD glorified through this miraculous event, but: ***“On that day the Lord made Joshua a great leader in the eyes of all the Israelites” (4:14).*** Moses had led the 1st generation through the waters of the Red Sea. Joshua led the 2nd generation through the waters of the Jordan River. There is repeated emphasis in the book of Joshua on the *continuity* of God's work between Moses and the 1st generation, and Joshua and the 2nd generation: ***“Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you”*** (see 1:3,5,7,13,17; 2:10f, 2:24; 3:7,11,15-17; 4:10,14,23,24).

Influence in any place of leadership (family, team, work, church, small group, etc.) needs to be a result of faithful and humble courage and obedience to God. “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud (those who use position to demand respect), but gives grace to the humble. Therefore, humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, that HE may lift you up in His proper time” (1Peter 5:5,6).

After the people had crossed over, memorial stones were set up in order to commemorate this event for future generations. Twelve stones were set up in the middle of the Jordan where the priests' feet had stood (4:9), and twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan River were set up on the Gilgal side (4:20-24) to serve as a monument for future generations to remember God's faithfulness.

“When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, ‘What are these stones?’ then you shall inform your children, saying, ‘Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground.’ For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever” (21-24).

When we moved into our building, a co-worker (Debbie Brunk) went back to every location where OPC had met during our first 10 years of ‘wandering.’ From each location, she picked a stone, piling them into a mini-monument and gave it to me. Every time I look at it, I am reminded of God's faithfulness in leading and providing for this flock. That mini-monument is, to me, a major incentive to believe that God will be faithful to guide us and provide for His flock in the future. Is there some act of God's past faithfulness that you might want to commemorate in some way?

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 2 – The Thrill of Victory & Agony of Defeat
Joshua 5-8

Introduction

Having entered the Promised Land, Israel will now seek to conquer the first two city-states, Jericho and Ai. They will painfully learn the lesson that *victory is contingent upon obedience to Yahweh*. There are also two very significant Covenant ratification ceremonies in this section. In ch.5 the entire 2nd generation of males will receive be circumcised, which was the sign of the Covenant between Yahweh and Abraham's descendants (see Genesis 17:9-14). In ch.8 the nation will renew their commitment to the Covenant as they stand between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim and have the Law read to them, along with the blessings and curses associated with obedience and disobedience; a ceremony previously outlined for them by Moses before his death (see Deuteronomy 27).

Circumcision and Passover: 5:1-12

The opening line tells us that the Canaanite kings were already in dread of Israel, having heard how God dried up the river Jordan for them to enter the Land. “. . . *their hearts melted, and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.*” While God was breathing strength and courage into Joshua and the sons of Israel (1:1-9), he was removing all strength and courage from the enemy.

Situations that appear to be huge mountains to us, can already be weakened by God before we are even aware of it. Therefore, when we have received our marching orders from God to move forward, it is important for us to move forward by faith, realizing that God has gone before us to prepare the way to victory.

The circumcision of the entire 2nd generation of males was an important Covenant renewal ceremony (Gen.17:9-14); but it also served other important functions at this point in Israel's journey. *Now when they had finished circumcising all the nation, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the*

reproach of Egypt from you.” So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day (5:8,9).

- The act of circumcision was a huge test of the *faith* of Joshua and his army. Consider the fact that they were now within the borders of the Land of Canaan, subject to attacks from other kingdoms. Yet, God asked Joshua to *disable the entire army* for many days, while the men healed from the act of circumcision. They knew from their own history how vulnerable they were during those days of healing. Recall the story in Genesis 34:18-21 when the sons of Israel attacked the city of Shechem *while they were recovering from the wounds of circumcision three days later!*

God often invites us into extreme faith-building tests where we are desperately dependent upon Him for His provision and protection. He ‘disables’ our normal defenses, and asks us to trust Him entirely. During these times we can learn sweet lessons about God trustworthiness, love and faithfulness. It is during these extreme seasons of testing that God most often shows up as a Father Who cares for the well-being of the children He so dearly loves. If you are in one of those seasons of life, make sure you spend plenty of time with Him, pouring out your heart to Him and receiving, in turn, His assurances of love, breathed through His Word, His Spirit and His people.

- Circumcision also indicated that the *shame* of Israel’s past bondage in Egypt was now being “rolled away.” Yes, a period of past slavery in Egypt would always be part of Israel’s story; but it no longer defined their *identity*. Now they were *the people of God, the bride of Yahweh*. They were no longer the people in bondage, the slaves of Pharaoh.

Regardless of our past identity, it is important for us to receive and fully appropriate our new identity as children of God through Jesus Christ. “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as His children by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him” (Romans 8:15-17). As with Rahab ‘the prostitute,’ so with all the sons and daughters of God: The past will always be part of our stories . . . but God can make the remaining chapters a testimony of His grace and power, as we daily surrender to Him.

Israel celebrated the annual Passover Feast for the first time in the Land, on the outskirts of the city of Jericho. They also ate some of the produce of the Land for the first time, as the manna from heaven suddenly ceased falling upon them.

“While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal they observed the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year” (5:10-12).

The Passover Feast required every family unit to commemorate God’s past act of delivering them from Egypt with a mighty hand. This solemn act of remembering would have given them great hope as they were camped just outside of the tightly walled city of Jericho, about to enter into their first battle to take the Land.

Joshua met by the Commander of the Lord’s Army: 5:13-6:5

Just as Moses was met by the Lord at the burning bush and required to remove the sandals from his feet (Exodus 3:5), so now Joshua is met by the commander of the Lord’s army, and required to remove his sandals from the ‘holy ground’ (5:15). It is clear from this encounter that the Lord was sending His armies to fight for Israel. They would *not* be going into these battles alone. Read 2Kings 6:15-17 for Elisha’s very similar vision of the Lord’s heavenly armies coming to fight for Israel.

Most scholars believe that this was an appearance of the Son of God, in pre-incarnate form (a “theophany”). The reasons are: 1) the “man” is given divine honors, as Joshua fell to the ground in worship. 2) He is called “the Lord” when he continues speaking (6:2). Recall a similar appearance of the Lord as one of three travelers who came to visit Abraham on the way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:2,20,22; 19:1). Given the fact that “no man has seen God (the Father) at any time,” (John 1:18), it is clear that all appearances of God in both Old and New Testaments are appearances of the 2nd Person of the Trinity, God the Son.

The Lord gave Joshua an unlikely battle plan for the defeat of Jericho:

“See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and the

valiant warriors. You shall march around the city, all the men of war circling the city once. You shall do so for six days. Also seven priests shall carry seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark; then on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. It shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people will go up every man straight ahead" (6:2-5).

Joshua needed to know that he was not alone as he went into battle. He needed a "warrior God" to accompany him. Hagar, the Egyptian runaway maid (Genesis 16) needed a tender "seeing and hearing God" in her time of need. Moses needed a "miracle-working God of heaven and earth" in order to defeat the gods of Egypt and deliver Israel out of bondage. Peter, after denying Jesus three times, needed a "forgiving and restoring God." God is willing to come to each of us, in our time of need, just as we need Him. He can be a strong Father, a merciful Forgiver, a caring Shepherd, a wise Counselor, a tender Healer, a sympathetic High Priest, and so much more. What is your need right now? Whatever it is, God will come to you IF you are open to His visitation.

Victory at Jericho: 6:6-27

As instructed by the Commander of the Lord's army, the people of Israel marched around Jericho once a day for six days in a silent procession. The only sound was that of the priests blowing the shofar. On the seventh day they marched around the city seven times, still remaining completely silent *until* the Lord gave the command for all Israel to *SHOUT*.

"So the people shouted, and priests blew the trumpets; and when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted with a great shout and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight ahead, and they took the city" (6:20).

While the entire city was destroyed, Rahab the prostitute and her family were spared, as previously promised.

"So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives and placed them outside the camp of Israel. They burned the city with fire, and all

that was in it. Only the silver and gold, and articles of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord. However, Rahab the prostitute and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho" (6:22-25).

Only precious metals were to be kept and devoted to the Lord's treasury (6:24). This note sets us up for the tragedy that is about to happen in the next battle. One man's sin will take the nation down.

Defeat at Ai: 7:1-26

"But the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully in regard to the things under the ban, for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, took some of the things under the ban, therefore the anger of the Lord burned against the sons of Israel" (7:1).

It is a deep thought to ponder that one man, Achan, violated the ban on things taken from Jericho, yet, *God held "the sons of Israel" (the whole nation) responsible* for this sin. The whole nation was defeated at Ai because of one man's unfaithfulness!

"The men of Ai struck down about thirty-six of their men, and pursued them from the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them down on the descent, so the hearts of the people melted and became as water" (7:5).

Joshua, unaware of Achan's sin, complained to the Lord about this tragic defeat (7:6-9); but the Lord responded by telling him that there was sin in the camp (7:10-15). On the next day, the lot was cast and it eventually fell upon the family of Achan (7:16-21). He came forward and confessed his sin before all:

"Truly, I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then I wanted them and took them; and behold, they are concealed in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath it" (7:20,21).

As a result, Achan and his entire clan were put to death in "Valley of Achor" (valley of trouble). God's hand of discipline was, therefore, removed from Israel. (Compare this story with that of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5.)

In the case of Achan's sin, we see a very familiar pattern: "I SAW... I WANTED ... I TOOK." In the Garden of Eden, Eve SAW the fruit ... it was DESIREABLE ... and she TOOK it. King David SAW Bathsheba ... He INQUIRED about her ... then he TOOK her into his palace. James outlines the stages of temptation and sin similarly (see James 1:13-15). Aside from the impact upon our own lives, it is sobering to consider the collateral damage our sins wreak upon those around us. We sin – others suffer. It is a rule of life. This is one of the wise things we must learn to do when temptation appears in front of our eyes: We must weigh the costs of sin to ourselves and to those around us. While it is quite easy and tantalizing to imagine the immediate pleasures that will be ours because of an act of indulgence, it is much more difficult and necessary to sit and ponder the long-term implications of such a temporary indulgence. I SAW ... I COUNTED the cost ... I PASSED on sin's deadly offer.

Victory at Ai: 8:1-29

The sin having been rooted out of Israel, God gave them victory over the city-state of Ai. It is worth nothing that God gave to Joshua a *very different strategy* than the one given at Jericho.

“You shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king; you shall take only its spoil and its cattle as plunder for yourselves. Set an ambush for the city behind it” (8:2).

In the case of Ai, Joshua was to draw the army of Ai out of their city by pretending to flee in fear. Ai's army would chase Israel based on the misplaced confidence they had from their earlier success. Then, an ambush was to be set behind the army of Ai. In this way, Ai was completely defeated by Israel.

Yesterday's methods are not God's prescriptions for today's battles. God chooses different ways, in different seasons, to accomplish His will. This is why it is important at all times to be seeking the Lord, asking for discernment and guidance. Do not rely upon past successes and strategies for your way forward. Seek God specifically for the decisions, challenges and needs you have today.

The Law Read between Ebal and Gerizim: 8:30-35

Prior to his death, Moses instructed Israel as to a very important Covenant renewal ceremony once they were IN the Promised Land

(see Deuteronomy 27). They were to gather between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim and re-read the entire Covenant made between Yahweh and Israel. Representatives from six tribes on Mount Gerizim would then read the *blessings* associated with *obedience* to the Covenant. Representatives from six tribes on Mount Ebal would read the *curses* associated with *disobedience* to the Covenant. Joshua and all Israel followed exactly Moses prescription for this solemn ceremony of dedication.

Then Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, in Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the sons of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones on which no man had wielded an iron tool; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. He wrote there on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written, in the presence of the sons of Israel. All Israel with their elders and officers and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, the stranger as well as the native. Half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had given command at first to bless the people of Israel. Then afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel with the women and the little ones and the strangers who were living among them” (8:30-35).

Yesterday's commitments are not enough to carry us through today's competing agendas. There was a reason that God asked Israel to renew their vows to Him repeatedly (not only here, but also at annual festivals such as Passover, The Day of Atonement, the Feast of First Fruits, etc). Our hearts tend to wander even from the most sincere commitments made in the past. As the hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every blessing" puts it: "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart, O Lord and seal it; seal it for the courts above." Perhaps there is some past commitment that now needs to be renewed – a marriage commitment, a commitment to serve the Lord, a commitment to seek healing, a commitment to reconcile with someone. Ask God to show you if it is time to renew an important commitment.

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 3 – The Southern and Northern Campaigns
Joshua 9-12

Introduction

After the initial victories at Jericho and Ai, Joshua led Israel in southern and northern campaigns, defeating both individual kings as well as coalitions of kings that had banded together to repel the invasion. The Israelite encampment and base of operations was at Gilgal, where they had initially crossed the Jordan River. As the final note of ch.12 will make clear, thirty-one kings in all were defeated in this period of conquest. God was giving Israel the Promised Land (Genesis 12:1-3); but He was simultaneously judging the Canaanites for their sin, having given them more than 400 years to repent of their evil ways (see Genesis 15:16).

The Gibeonite Blunder: 9:1-27

The city of Gibeon was about 22 miles from the Israelite camp at Gilgal. After Jericho and Ai, it would have been one of the next cities conquered by Israel. Yet, the Gibeonites deceitfully sent envoys to Joshua, pretending to be from a far off country, asking for terms of peace.

When the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, they also acted deceitfully and set out as envoys, and took worn-out sacks on their donkeys, and wineskins worn-out and torn and mended, and worn-out and patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes on themselves; and all the bread of their provision was dry and had become crumbled. They went to Joshua to the camp at Gilgal and said to him and to the men of Israel, “We have come from a far country; now therefore, make a covenant with us” (9:3-6).

When questioned by Joshua as to where they were from, they told their very elaborate LIE with persuasive evidence: moldy bread, empty wineskins, and torn clothing. Joshua and his advisors examined the evidence and then made a fateful mistake:

“So the men of Israel took some of their provisions, and did not

ask for the counsel (literally, “the mouth”) of the Lord. Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live; and the leaders of the congregation swore an oath to them” (9:14,15).

Israel, thus, violated God’s command and entered into a peace treaty with the inhabitants of Gibeon. Once the Gibeonite scheme was uncovered, the whole nation grumbled against the leadership of Joshua (9:18). Yet, Joshua was forced to protect and defend Gibeon, having sworn on oath to do so.

“They did not ask for the MOUTH of the Lord.” They looked at ALL the obvious evidence; but they did not consult with GOD. We can get ourselves into some very bad situations when we fail to invite God, through prayer, to SPEAK into and GUIDE our decision-making processes. Joshua (and Israel) paid a heavy price in the case of the Gibeonite blunder. 1) His leadership credibility was called into question by his followers (9:18). 2) He was forced to use valuable resources to defend Gibeon in battle when the city was subsequently attacked by a coalition of 5 kings (chapter 10). 3) 400 years later, near the end of King David’s reign, there was a 3-year famine in Israel because King Saul, David’s predecessor, had attacked the Gibeonites, in violation of the covenant Joshua had made. Further, in order to remove God’s had of judgment on Israel, 7 sons of Saul had to be handed over to the Gibeonites to be put to death!! Read 2Samuel 21:1-14 for the full story. All of this happened as a result of a covenant that was hastily made in a moment when leaders failed to pray and ask for God’s direction. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek His will in all you do, and He will show you which path to take” (Proverbs 3:5,6). Lesson: Do NOT make major decisions without asking for GOD’S VOICE! If you have made a wrong decision in the past, without God’s counsel, recommit to seeking and doing His will, instead of your own. God can take you right where you are, and make straight paths for your feet.

Side Note: Why no treaties with the Canaanites?

When reading the book of Joshua, it is clear that no peace treaties were to be made with the inhabitants of Canaan. The reason for this is found in the human propensity to be enticed into idolatry. Back in Exodus 34, after disciplining the nation for the golden calf idolatry, God gave Moses a strong warning for the future:

“But listen carefully to everything I command you today. Then I will go ahead of you and drive out the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Be very careful never

to make a treaty with the people who live in the land where you are going. If you do, you will follow their evil ways and be trapped. Instead, you must break down their pagan altars, smash their sacred pillars, and cut down their Asherah poles. You must worship no other gods, for the Lord, whose very name is Jealous, is a God who is jealous about his relationship with you. You must not make a treaty of any kind with the people living in the land. They lust after their gods, offering sacrifices to them. They will invite you to join them in their sacrificial meals, and you will go with them. Then you will accept their daughters, who sacrifice to other gods, as wives for your sons. And they will seduce your sons to commit adultery against me by worshiping other gods” (Exodus 34:11-16, New Living Translation).

God had a protective jealousy over His relationship with His people. He deserved and desired their devotion to Him alone. Yet, God knew that there would be a strong physical attraction between the sons of Israel and the daughters of Canaan. He knew that these women *would* draw the hearts of the young Israelite men away from their sacred traditions, including the exclusive worship of Yahweh. This very thing happened back in the book of Numbers:

“While the Israelites were camped at Acacia Grove, some of the men defiled themselves by having sexual relations with local Moabite women. These women invited them to attend sacrifices to their gods, so the Israelites feasted with them and worshiped the gods of Moab. In this way, Israel joined in the worship of Baal of Peor, causing the Lord’s anger to blaze against his people” (Numbers 25:1-3).

Notice the progression: “They will INVITE you ... You will ACCEPT ... They will SEDUCE you to commit adultery against Me” (Exodus 34:15,16). There is an important lesson for us here: God creates boundaries around our lives in order to protect and bless us, not to deprive and control us. “He yearns for intimate relationship and cannot stand it when someone or something else gets in the way, especially something as strong and powerful as idolatry” (Longman & Allender, *Cry of the Soul*, p.113). His “jealousy is not an ugly suspicion that shows weakness; but a virtue that has a noble purpose: the preservation of an exclusive relationship” (p.128). As James wrote: “... He jealously longs for the spirit He has caused to dwell in us” (James 4:5).

Thus, the reason for the no-treaty-policy was to protect Israel from stumbling into sin, leading to idolatry and then judgment.

Joshua defends Gibeon: 10:1-28

Fearing the invasion of Israel, five southern kings banded together and attacked the city of Gibeon. Joshua was forced to defend Gibeon, having entered into a covenant with them. Even though Israel had wrongfully made this covenant, *God was faithful to fight for Israel* (note the hailstones of 10:11) and give them victory over the five-king coalition. In fact, it was during this battle that God answered one of the most amazing prayers in the entire Bible – Joshua’s request for an extra long day.

Then Joshua spoke to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, “O sun, stand still at Gibeon, and O moon in the valley of Aijalon.” So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies. Is it not written in the book of Jashar? And the sun stopped in the middle of the sky and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day. There was no day like that before it or after it, when the Lord listened to the voice of a man; for the Lord fought for Israel. Then Joshua and all Israel with him returned to the camp to Gilgal (10:12-15).

What battle in your life seems most daunting? What seems impossible? What is creating fear in you? Ask God to give you some word or assurance of His will. Consult Him for wisdom and direction. Ask Him to fight the battle for you. You never know; sometimes God chooses to show up in the most unexpected and amazing ways! (Note the repeated emphasis on how God would fight for Israel: 10:8,12,14,19,25,30,32,42).

Summary of the Southern Campaign: 10:29-43

After defeating the 5 kings at Gibeon, Joshua led Israel on a campaign to conquer the entire southern part of the Promised Land. This he accomplished as God fought for Israel.

“Joshua struck them from Kadesh-barnea even as far as Gaza, and all the country of Goshen even as far as Gibeon. Joshua captured all these kings and their lands at one time, because the Lord, the God of Israel, fought for Israel. So Joshua and all Israel with him returned to the camp at Gilgal” (10:41-43).

The Northern Campaign: 11:1-23

The northern city-states, fearing Joshua’s power, banded together to defend themselves against Israel (11:1-5).

“They came out, they and all their armies with them, as many people as the sand that is on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots. So all of these kings having agreed to meet, came and encamped together at the waters of Merom, to fight against Israel” (11:4,5).

The phrase, “as many people as the sand that is on the seashore” is significant. God used this exact wording to describe how great the descendants of Abraham would become (see Genesis 22:17). Now, God’s great nation was being challenged by another great coalition of nations. Yet, God *continually* assured His servant Joshua that He would give him the victory (11:6). In the face of massive enemies, Israel could take all fear and turn toward the promised protection of God.

There are many references to FEAR in the book of Joshua. Fear is a God-given emotion that signals to us some form of danger. Fear is a red light on the dashboard of our minds telling us to take action. The real question is: What action will we take? When Rahab developed a fear of the Israelites and their God, she ran toward them in faith, placing her trust and confidence in Yahweh and His protection. When the Canaanite kings developed a fear of the Israelites, they resorted to self-protection (coalitions, schemes, strategies, attacks, etc.). We all face fear in various forms every day. Whenever you feel fear rising up within you, first ask God to show you the true source of your fear. Then, remember that you have a choice. 1) You can TRUST GOD in humble dependence, praying for His plan and protection; or, 2) You can SELF PROTECT by choosing to take matters into your own hands.

After overcoming the kings of the north, there is a summary of Joshua’s campaigns to capture the Promised Land:

“Just as the Lord had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did; he left nothing undone of all that the Lord had commanded Moses” (11:15).

The Scriptures give us an important insight into the reason behind the resistance of the Canaanite kings to the Israelite invasion:

“There was not a city which made peace with the sons of Israel except the Hivites living in Gibeon; they took them all in battle. For it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle in order that he might utterly destroy them, that they might

receive no mercy, but that he might destroy them, just as the Lord had commanded Moses” (11:19,20).

God had placed a *judicial hardening* upon the hearts of the Canaanite kings. In a judicial hardening, God takes an already hardened, obstinate heart and *confirms it* in the condition of hardness, so that His purposes might be displayed and advanced. This exact thing happened in the case of the **Pharaoh of Egypt**, who continually hardened his heart against the appeals of Moses and Aaron to let Israel depart from Egypt. Back in Exodus there was an inter-play in the text between Pharaoh hardening his own heart, and God hardening the heart of Pharaoh. In the case of the Canaanites, God had given them 400+ years to repent of their wicked ways, yet they had hardened their hearts against the patient mercy of God. Now, God was confirming them in that obstinate condition, so that His purposes would be fulfilled.

Hebrews 3 warns US about having hardened hearts against God's will for our lives. "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 3:7,15). Hardening of heart sets in when we repeatedly say NO to God's corrections and promptings: Ignoring His Word; failing to listen to the prompting of His Spirit; harboring bitterness and failing to forgive someone; not confessing our sin when we become aware of it; failing to fulfill an assignment He has given. Has God been trying to get your attention lately? Are you listening and responding to Him?

Summary of Kings defeated: 12:1-24

- Moses' victories: 12:1-6

Several kingdoms were subdued under Moses' leadership, before Israel entered the Promised Land. These trans-Jordan territories were then given to the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, being especially suited to their work as shepherds.

“Moses the servant of the Lord and the sons of Israel defeated them; and Moses the servant of the Lord gave it to the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh as a possession”

- Joshua's victories: 12:7-24

Thirty-one kingdoms were subdued by Joshua. The complete list is given here, city by city. The remainder of the book will outline the apportioning of these lands to the various tribes of Israel.

"He left nothing undone . . ." (11:15). Joshua fulfilled the mandate given to him by God, through Moses. Here was a man who SAW His God-given mission, SIEZED it, and COMPLETED it. Similarly, at the end of the apostle Paul's life, he wrote: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course . . ." (2Timothy 4:7). It was written of King David that he, "Served God's purpose in his generation, and then was laid to rest among his fathers" (Acts 13:36). We each have one live to live, one opportunity to live out a God-defined, God-designed destiny. Each of us has a special assignment from God. "For we are His craftsmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has planned in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). Question: Are you letting your life slip away? Or, are you seeking the Lord, asking Him to show you His purpose and plan for your life?

On a more general level . . . Jesus gave to His followers their marching orders to be His witnesses to the ends of the Earth (Matthew 28:18-20). How are you involved in finishing the work of taking the message of Christ to the people in your world?



GOD WITH US

Part 2: Conquest and Chaos

Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 4 – Canaan Divided among the 12 Tribes

Joshua 13-23

Introduction

Having successfully overcome the resistance of the 31 Canaanite city-states, Joshua divided the Promised Land among the 12 tribes of Israel. There were many pockets of remaining resistance, and the various tribes would have to trust God going forward to thoroughly overcome their foes. Yet, on the whole, the promise of a ‘great land’ for Abraham’s descendants (Gen.12:1-3) had been fulfilled. Now, Israel settles into her inheritance and begins to live out her true purpose as a ‘kingdom of priests’ revealing God to the world (see Exodus 19:5,6).



Instructions for dividing the Land: 13:1-14:5

Now Joshua was old and advanced in years, and the Lord said to him, “You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to possess” (13:1).

“Only allot the land to Israel for an inheritance, as I have commanded you” (13:6).

God told Joshua what portions of land still remained unconquered (13:2-6). God promised that He *would drive those people out* (v.6); but in the meantime, even the unconquered lands should be divided among the 12 tribes. God would work with each individual tribe to complete the work of taking *all* the land, as they trusted Him to give them the victory over their enemies.

9-1/2 tribes would receive their inheritance within the land of Canaan, west of the Jordan River. 2-1/2 tribes had already received their inheritance from Moses, in the lands east of the Jordan River (the ‘trans-Jordan’ lands).

There is often confusion as to the numbering of the “12 tribes” of Israel. Why are there 13 names, but only 12 tribes? This is due to the fact that the tribe of Joseph (Jacob’s 11th son) is rarely counted as one tribe. Rather, the “half tribes” of Joseph’s two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, *are* counted as one. (See Genesis 48:5 where Jacob indicated in his blessing that Joseph’s sons, born in Egypt, Ephraim and Manasseh, would be “as sons” to him.)

The tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe, was not given a specific part of the land; rather, they were granted towns, villages and pasturelands throughout the land. Their role as special servants of God *was* their inheritance.

“But to the tribe of Levi, Moses did not give an inheritance; the Lord, the God of Israel, is their inheritance, as He had promised to them” (13:33).

Caleb’s request for an inheritance: 14:6-15

Caleb was not one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Joshua and Caleb were 2 of the 12 spies that Moses had sent from Kadesh-barnea to spy out the Promised Land 45 years earlier (Numbers 14). They were the only ones who *believed that God would give Israel victory over the giants in the land*. The other 10 spies brought back a negative, dis-heartening report that led Israel to rebel against God and turn back toward Egypt. This rebellion at Kadesh-barnea was

a fateful turning point, leading to Israel being consigned to 40 years of wilderness wandering until that adult generation had died. Now, 45 years later, Caleb comes to Joshua asking for his own inheritance.

“You know the word which the Lord spoke to Moses the man of God concerning you and me in Kadesh-barnea. I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the Lord sent me from Kadesh-barnea to spy out the land, and I brought word back to him as it was in my heart. Nevertheless my brethren who went up with me made the heart of the people melt with fear; but I followed the Lord my God fully. So Moses swore on that day, saying, ‘Surely the land on which your foot has trodden will be an inheritance to you and to your children forever, because you have followed the Lord my God fully.’ Now behold, the Lord has let me live, just as He spoke, these forty-five years, from the time that the Lord spoke this word to Moses, when Israel walked in the wilderness; and now behold, I am eighty-five years old today. I am still as strong today as I was in the day Moses sent me; as my strength was then, so my strength is now, for war and for going out and coming in. Now then, give me this hill country about which the Lord spoke on that day, for you heard on that day that Anakim were there, with great fortified cities; perhaps the Lord will be with me, and I will drive them out as the Lord has spoken.” So Joshua blessed him and gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh for an inheritance. Therefore, Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite until this day, because he followed the Lord God of Israel fully. Now the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-arba; for Arba was the greatest man among the Anakim (14:6-15).

What a testimony of faith. Caleb was 85-years old, yet he was still asking for territory to conquer with God’s help . . . even territory *with giants in it!* ***“Perhaps the Lord will be with me, and I will drive them out as the Lord has spoken” (14:12).*** These giants were the descendants of the same giants that caused the other 10 spies to back out in fear at Kadesh-Barnea. Now, because of his faith, Joshua granted his friend’s request by giving him Hebron.

The territory of Judah: 15:1-63

Judah was given a massive tract of land in the southern part of Canaan. Their land was so vast that they could not inhabit all of it; therefore, the tribe of Simeon will later be allotted a share of land

within the borders of Judah's territory. Caleb's special inheritance was also within the territory of Judah (15:13-19). Again, mention is made of how Caleb (85 yrs. old) drove out the descendants of Anak (a family of giants).

“Caleb drove out from there the three sons of Anak, Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmi, the descendants of Anak” (15:14).

Three times we hear the phrase: “Caleb followed the Lord God FULLY” (14:8,9,14). This does not mean that Caleb was a perfect man; but it does mean he kept his heart in tune with his God. He walked by faith when others were overcome with fear. He kept his eyes on the character of God and His promises (“I WILL drive them out before you”) rather than the overwhelming circumstances of life. He did not shrink back when he saw that there were giants in the land because his view of God was bigger than his view of the giants. He was willing to stand against the crowd, when necessary. Except for Joshua, ALL of Caleb's contemporaries were dead and buried in the wilderness. Caleb, on the other hand, was still fighting giants and taking land at 85! What a TREMENDOUS EPITAPH to have written over his life at the end: He followed the Lord his God fully. Ask yourself: Do I have that “unique spirit for the Lord” that dwelt in Caleb (see Numbers 14:24). Do I “follow the Lord fully,” as Caleb did? The commitment to following the Lord fully is the foundation of courage, faith, usefulness and, ultimately, God's pleasure/reward.

There is a special note about Caleb as a father (15:15-19). He gave his daughter Acsah to Othniel as a wife, along with some land. As a special wedding gift, his daughter asked Caleb for springs of water (in addition to the land she already had). Caleb gave his daughter this “extra special” wedding gift, just as she requested. A tender warrior! He valued his daughter and her desires.

The territory of Ephraim: 16:1-10

The two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, received their shares of land in the central region of the land of Canaan. While Caleb (above) was able to send giants running, the tribe of Ephraim was unable to dislodge some Canaanites from their territory, so they absorbed them in as forced laborers.

“They did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites have lived in the midst of Ephraim to this day but have been made to do forced labor” (16:10).

The territory of Manasseh: 17:1-13

Manasseh's territory consisted of two parts: one west of the Jordan and one on the east. Special mention is made of the daughters of Zelophehad, a man who had no sons. These 5 women were granted their share of their father's allotment, along with the other male descendants of Manasseh. This was in keeping with the previous promise made to them by Moses (Numbers 27:1-7). Once again, the failure of Manasseh to take full possession of their land, due to Canaanite resistance, is noted.

“Yet the people of Manasseh could not take possession of those cities, but the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land. Now when the people of Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not utterly drive them out” (17:12,13).

Ephraim and Manasseh ask for more territory: 17:14-18

Due to the size of their populations, Ephraim and Manasseh asked Joshua for additional land.

The people of Joseph said, “The hill country is not enough for us. Yet all the Canaanites who dwell in the plain have chariots of iron, both those in Beth-shean and its villages and those in the Valley of Jezreel.” Then Joshua said to the house of Joseph, to Ephraim and Manasseh, “You are a numerous people and have great power. You shall not have one allotment only, but the hill country shall be yours, for though it is a forest, you shall clear it and possess it to its farthest borders. For you will drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong” (17:16-18).

It seems that Ephraim and Manasseh were *hoping* that Joshua would send his army to subdue to Canaanite warriors for them (v.16). Yet, Joshua put this responsibility squarely on the shoulders of those asking for the privilege of additional land (v.18). *YOU will drive out the Canaanites . . .*

The Land divided among the 7 remaining tribes: 18:1-19:48

Seven tribes still needed their allotment of land. Joshua commissioned them to send out men to survey the remaining land and divide it into seven suitable portions. Again, he delegated the responsibility to the tribes to bring back their suggested divisions of the land. Then, Joshua cast lots in order to give each tribe its inheritance.

You can't expect leaders to do for you what God wants to do directly in and through you. Joshua applied a great leadership principle: Empower others to do the work, rather than trying to do it all yourself. Joshua challenged those with desire to own the responsibility for fulfilling that desire. When these tribes asked for more land, he assured them that they WOULD drive out the enemy; yet, he also invited them to exercise more faith in order to take that land with God's help. God wants each of us to learn to walk with Him, and trust Him for God-sized victories. Perhaps you have (or had in the past) a new vision or idea for ministry. Maybe you even presented the idea to those in leadership over you, hoping that they would 'make it happen.' Another approach is to develop a prayed-over, workable strategy for how you and your team might make your God-given ministry vision a reality. Then, go to your spiritual leaders and present both the vision and the strategy, and volunteer to lead the effort.

A City for Joshua: 19:49-51

“When they had finished distributing the several territories of the land as inheritances, the people of Israel gave an inheritance among them to Joshua the son of Nun. By command of the Lord they gave him the city that he asked, Timnath-serah in the hill country of Ephraim. And he rebuilt the city and settled in it.”

It is almost an afterthought to mention; just a few brief lines with no great fanfare. Joshua, in keeping with the manner of a great “servant-leader,” was the last to receive his inheritance. He did not claim the first and the best. He was willing to take the last and the least.

Cities of Refuge designated: 20:1-9

Cities of refuge were places where someone could flee for safety if they had *unintentionally* caused the death of someone. Relatives of the deceased, who wanted to avenge the blood of their relative, could not touch the one who had fled into the city of refuge.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews, the writer draws on “cities of refuge” to make a point about our security in Christ. We have “fled for refuge” to Christ (Hebrews 6:18), who shields us from the judgment of God against our sin. As we remain “in Christ” we are protected from death. What a beautiful thought that Jesus is our place of refuge!

Cities allotted to the Levitical Priests: 21:1-45

The tribe of Levi was not given a specific territory; rather, they were granted cities and pasturelands throughout the Land of Israel. From these cities they could 1) fulfill their cyclical duties in the Tabernacle, and 2) earn their sustenance and provide homes for their families. This section ends with a summary of God's faithfulness in giving Israel the "Promised Land."

"Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass" (21:43-45).

God was FAITHFUL to KEEP HIS WORD and FULFILL His stated promises!

East-of-Jordan Tribes sent to their lands: 22:1-9

Having fulfilled their promise to fight with their brothers, the tribes of Manasseh, Gad and Reuben were dismissed by Joshua to go back across the Jordan to the eastern lands they had previously asked for. Given their geographical separation from the other tribes, Joshua gave them a special charge to remain faithful to the covenant made between Israel as a nation and Yahweh.

"Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, and to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments and to cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul" (22:5).

This charge to faithfulness would have included honoring the location of the Tabernacle at Shiloh. They would need to travel across the Jordan several times each year to attend national festivals.

Before they moved east of the Jordan, these tribes decided to build a massive stone altar. When Joshua and the other tribes heard about the building of this altar, they *immediately assumed* that it was an act of idolatry on the part of Manasseh, Gad and Reuben. In fact, Joshua and company had already decided to go to *war* against these trans-Jordan tribes for their idolatrous act!

“What is this breach of faith that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away this day from following the Lord by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against the Lord?” (22:16).

Actually, when they spoke directly with the leaders responsible for this altar-building project, they discovered that their motives were not idolatrous, rather, just the opposite: to preserve *true worship* for their future generations.

“No, but we did it from fear that in time to come your children might say to our children, ‘What have you to do with the Lord, the God of Israel? For the Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you people of Reuben and people of Gad. You have no portion in the Lord.’ So your children might make our children cease to worship the Lord” (22:24,25).

The real purpose of the altar was to say: *We on the east side of the Jordan are WITH YOU who live on the west side.* It was a memorial signifying their UNITY as one nation. Once the true motive was clarified, all of the suspicion and commotion immediately evaporated, and all the tribes were of one mind.

Unchecked assumptions are lethal to relationships. We can so quickly come to conclusions about other people – their motives, intentions, thoughts – when we fail to check our assumptions. Pete Scazzerro (Emotionally Healthy Spirituality) teaches the skill of checking assumptions. When you find yourself making an assumption, go to the person and ask: “May I have permission to check an assumption?” Once you are granted permission, then state honestly and respectfully your assumption. “It seems that you ...” “Is that a correct assumption?” Don’t state your assumption as a fact; rather, as an observation that you are genuinely puzzled about. Then, give the other person the freedom to validate, invalidate, or correct your assumption. The bottom line: *In order to remain healthy and free from suspicion, relationships require clear, direct and respectful communication.* (See Matthew 18:15 for similar instructions from Jesus, when dealing with “sin issues.” Go directly to the person and clear things up!)

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 5 – Joshua’s Farewell Speech
Joshua 23,24

Introduction

Having conquered the Canaanites and divided the land among the 12 tribes of Israel, Joshua now delivers his final charge to the nation, prior to his death. This speech is a stirring call to faithfully love God, so that His favor might continue to rest upon them. They had *inherited* the land; but to *enjoy it* and *remain in it* they must remain faithful to the terms of the covenant made at Mt. Sinai. Joshua will challenge the people using his own personal example of faithfully loving and serving God all the days of his life. His final charge will contain solemn notes of warning, since Joshua saw evidence indicating that the people were already compromising their faith in and commitment to Yahweh.

The Charge to Israel’s Leaders: 23:1-16

Joshua was “old and advanced in years” (roughly 110 yrs). He first called the leaders of Israel together (elders, heads, judges, officers, v.2), and charged them to be faithful to walk with God. He began by reminding them about God’s consistent faithfulness His people:

“You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you. Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain - the nations I conquered - between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. The Lord your God himself will push them out for your sake. He will drive them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the Lord your God promised you” (23:3-5).

Joshua challenged the leaders to finish claiming their full inheritance of land with faith and confidence, because they had already seen God fight for them up to this point. Then, Joshua called them to fulfill their part of the covenant with Yahweh:

“Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the

left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now” (23:6-8).

The charge Joshua gave to Israel’s leaders here, at the end of the book, mirrors the charge God gave to Joshua at the beginning:

God to Joshua: ***“Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left . . .” (1:7).***

Joshua to leaders: ***“Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left” (23:6).***

These bookend charges reflect the central message of the entire book of Joshua: Strength arises within us as we cling to our God and walk in His ways. This, and this alone, is the path that leads to experiencing God and His will for our lives.

God breathed courage into Joshua’s spirit (chapter 1), and Joshua in turn breathed courage into other leaders’ spirits (chapter 23). But WHY do we need constant encouragement to trust God? Why is it so hard for us to believe that God will be our strong rock and defender in the future, even when we have seen Him work on our behalf in the past? Because FAITH FADES WITHOUT REGULAR ENCOURAGEMENT. New situations present themselves every single day, forcing us to choose between FAITH and FEAR. The admonition from the book of Hebrews is a great reminder to us all: “But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13). This is why community is so important. We need one another to maintain a strong faith-life!

As Joshua concluded his admonitions to the leaders, he appealed to their hearts.

“Now behold, today I am going the way of all the earth, and you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one word of all the good words which the Lord your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed” (23:14).

He warned these leaders that just as God had brought them *into the land*, so He would also evict them *out of the land* IF they failed to cling tightly to Him. Note the 3x repeated use of the phrase, “*OFF the good land*” (vv.13,15,16).

“When you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the Lord will burn against you, and you will perish quickly from off the good land which He has given you” (23:16).

“You know in all your hearts and in all your souls . . .” Joshua was not just an “intellectual follower” of God; he was a “heart and soul follower.” There is a HUGE difference. Pastor Dave Hughes pointed out to me the difference between “informational discipleship” (accumulation of knowledge about God) and “transformational discipleship” (seeing heart and soul transformation in our lives, and other’s lives, as a result of our knowledge of and experience with God). The apostle Paul wrote: “Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up” (1Corinthians 8:1). Paul demonstrated transformational discipleship as he poured his own walk with God into the lives of others (1Thessalonians 2:7,8). How do we move from information to transformation? Through prayer, pondering, reflecting, meditating and discussion IN COMMUNITY . . . the truths we know about God will make the 18-inch journey from our heads down into our hearts and souls, where they become convictions. This is where a real relationship with God thrives.

The National Gathering at Shechem: 24:1-28

Having addressed the leaders, Joshua then called the entire nation to a solemn, covenant-renewal ceremony at Shechem. How fitting that Joshua would gather the nation to Shechem. This was the very place where, some 600 years earlier, God first told Abraham that He would someday give his descendants the land of Canaan.

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him (Genesis 12:6,7).

Joshua gathered the nation to this sacred, historic spot and invited them to renew their covenant with Yahweh, their God. They had *received* the land as their inheritance. Now, in order to *retain* the land, they must renew their commitment to love and serve Yahweh exclusively. This final speech from the lips of Joshua, one of Israel’s greatest leaders, begins with a historical overview.

Historical Review: 24:1-13

A lot had happened since the call of one man, Abraham, back in Genesis 12. Now, Joshua gives Israel a review, hitting on the

highpoints of their roughly 600-year history as the people of the promise. The focus is on the major acts of God that have brought Israel to their present position as occupants of the Promised Land.

- The call of Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates (v.2,3)
- Abraham's descendants: Isaac>Jacob>12 sons>into Egypt (v.4)
- Moses & Aaron; God delivers Israel from bondage in Egypt (v.5)
- Red Sea crossed; Pharaoh's army defeated – Israel is free (v.6,7)
- Moses defeats the trans-Jordan opponents (v.8-10)
- Joshua defeats the Canaanites in the Promised Land (v.11,12)
- Summary: ***“I (God) gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you have lived in them; you are eating of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant” (v.13).***

Joshua's Final Charge: 24:14-28

This charge is powerful, emanating from the heart of a man who, because of his own faith, had earned the right to issue such a strong, forthright challenge to his people:

“Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (24:14,15).

CHOOSE YOUR GOD! Joshua challenged his people to make their choice to follow either the gods that Abraham left behind in the land beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites (Canaanites) in this land.

But as for me and my house, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD!

If you are the head of a household, you must set the spiritual direction of the home. Create the environment for others to experience the one, true God. Lead the family in Bible reading and prayer; participate fully in the work, worship and life of the Church; set the example of what it looks like to have a real relationship with the living God. Don't let your family drift spiritually. Be like Joshua: point the way to loving and serving God!

The nation immediately declared that they WOULD remain faithful to serve the Lord exclusively.

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God” (24:16-18).

Yet, Joshua did not seem to receive their answer very well. In fact, he made them *repeat their commitment three times!*

Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.” But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the Lord.” Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.” “Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied. “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the Lord our God and obey him” (24:19-24).

Why did Joshua press them so hard on their sincerity? Because he had already seen clear signs of wavering. Many of the tribes had failed to trust God for the full occupation of their designated lands. Canaanites were allowed to remain in the land, with their idolatrous practices. In fact, he knew that many of the Israelites were keeping pagan idols with them at that very moment! ***“Throw away the foreign gods that are among you . . .” (24:23).***

As his final act, Joshua formalized the people’s commitment by setting up a stone monument at Shechem:

So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a

witness against you, so that you do not deny your God.” Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance” (24:25-28).

Spiritual compromise is always costly. The tendency to mingle idolatry with the worship of Yahweh had a long history in Israel: Rachel, Jacob’s wife, brought her father’s household idols with her when she and Jacob returned to Canaan (Genesis 31:19). Israel worshipped the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32). All through the 40-year period of wandering in the wilderness, the Exodus generation carried idols with them (Amos 5:25,26 and Acts 7:42,43). Here, at the end of Joshua’s life, he was calling them to “throw away the foreign gods that are among you” (24:23). How costly was Israel’s compromise with idolatry? The book of Judges will begin to tell that sad story. Suffice it to say that idolatry became Israel’s complete downfall for the 700 years following Joshua, leading God to repeatedly cast them out of the good land that He had given to them. It was not until after the cruel Babylonian captivity (586 B.C.) that Israel was finally cured of her constant compromise with idolatry!

How do we, today, compromise with idolatry? You may not have a metal shrine to some foreign god in your house; but you still might worship other gods: the god of money, the god of pleasure, the god of sex, the god of status, the god of possessions, the god of comfort, the god of success, the god of self, the god of beauty. Take some time this week to go before God and search your heart. Ask Him to point out to you any idols that may be compromising your walk with Him. Remember, idolatry (spiritual compromise) will always be costly in the long run. Jesus said: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24). Choose THIS DAY whom YOU will serve!

Epilogue: The death of Joshua: 24:29-33

Joshua’s death and burial is recorded. Also, the burial of Joseph’s bones is noted (see Genesis 50:24,25). The death of the high priest, Eleazar son of Aaron, is also noted. A generation is dying off - the generation of those who were familiar with God’s mighty deeds in bringing Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. The torch is being passed to a new generation - those who are IN the land. Will they remain faithful to the covenant? Will they serve the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Joshua? That question will be answered in Judges, the next book!

“Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the Lord which He had done for Israel” (24:31).

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

EXTRA:
Life of Joshua
October 24th & 25th

Joshua's Keys to Success:

1. Joshua learned from a godly mentor.

Exodus 32:17 - When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, There is the sound of war in the camp."

2. Joshua invested in his relationship with God.

Exodus 33:7-11 - Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the tent of meeting. "Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

3. Joshua exercised great faith.

Numbers 14:6-9 - Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them."

4. Joshua committed to radical obedience.

Joshua 6:3-5 - March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout

5. Joshua emphasized personal choice.

Joshua 24:14-15 - Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 6 – Judge Deborah
Judges 1-5

Introduction

The book of Judges covers the first 350-400 years of Israel's history after they settled into the Promised Land. Their *purpose* as a nation was to be a “*kingdom of priests among all the nations*” (*Exodus 19:5,6*), representing God to the rest of the world. Sadly, however, Israel's witness to the nations was compromised from the outset as they quickly adopted the religious practices of the Canaanites that remained among them. As a result of their failure to obey God and fulfill their true purpose, God allowed Israel to be oppressed over and over again by other nations. Under the weight of oppression, Israel would repeatedly cry out to God for forgiveness and deliverance. Thus, God raised up “judges” – leaders empowered to rescue Israel from their oppressors. While the stories of these individual judges are very interesting and impactful, the broader message of the book of Judges is more sobering: Israel failed to fulfill her part in the covenant with Yahweh and, as consequence, experienced all of the curses that were promised (Deuteronomy 27,28). By the end of the book, there was total spiritual anarchy in Israel, as “*every man did what was right in his own eyes*” (*Judges 21:25*). Thus, the title *Chaos* seems fitting for this section of the Bible.

Further conquests led by the tri be of Judah: 1:1-26

After the death of Joshua, much territory *within* the land remained to be conquered. The question arose: WHO would lead Israel in war, now that Joshua was dead? The answer came from God: The tribe of Judah would lead the charge. Judah would later become the tribe through which Messiah came. Much more land was successfully taken under the leadership of Judah. In this context, Caleb's personal conquests are mentioned again (refer back to Joshua 15:13-19). This seems to point to Caleb's ongoing role as a leader, since he was from the tribe of Judah.

Yet, in spite of the leadership of the tribe of Judah and men like Caleb, the repeated refrain in this chapter emphasizes Israel's failure to trust God to occupy their entire inheritance:

“But they (Judah) could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had iron chariots” (1:19).

“But the sons of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem” (1:21).

“But Manasseh did not take possession of . . .” (1:27).

“Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites . . .” (1:29).

“Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of . . .” (1:30).

“Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of . . .” (1:31).

“Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of . . .” (1:33).

“Then the Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the valley” (1:34).

This issue of incomplete occupation of the land (partial obedience) becomes the major issue in the book of Judges as the Canaanites who remained entrenched ended up seducing Israel away from pure devotion to Yahweh.

In a passing note about Israel's treatment of one of the captured Canaanite kings, we gain an insight into a major principle at work in God's dealings with these nations: Retributive justice. “But Adoni-bezek fled; and they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes. Adoni-bezek said, ‘Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to gather up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me.’ So they brought him to Jerusalem and he died there” (Judges 1:6,7). In the New Testament, the “Golden Rule” says: Do to others as you would have them do to you. In the Old Testament, the “Retribution Rule” says: It will be done to you as you have done to others. The harsh judgment the Canaanites received from Israel reflected God's sovereign, retributive justice over the way they had treated others during the 400 years of His patient waiting.

The Lord's rebuke against Israel: 2:1-5

Now the angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, ‘I will never break My covenant with you, and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have

done? Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; but they will become as thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you.'” *When the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. So they named that place Bochim; and there they sacrificed to the Lord (2:1-5).*

Israel’s sin was that of *partial obedience*. They compromised at critical points in their commitment to God. (Note the phrase: “*But you have not obeyed Me.*”) As a result, their lives were marked by thorns and snares in the form of temptations and testing from the very Canaanites they failed to drive out. (Note God’s response: “*I will not drive them out before you.*”) God was responding in keeping with Israel’s obedience *or* disobedience. This passage sets us up to understand the entire book of Judges: Partial obedience led to repeated departures from God, resulting in divine judgment and suffering for Israel.

Partial obedience (half-hearted following) is a self-defeating strategy. We usually engage in partial obedience to protect some part of our lives that we do not trust God with. Instead, we trust ourselves to manage that part of life (a relationship, a job, a hobby, a resource, a skill, a dream). We cannot give God the whole pie, so we give Him only certain parts, keeping the other parts under our own ‘safe’ control. Yet, the very parts we keep under our own control most often become the very things that bring us pain in the long run. These competing “gods” end up taking us down. Jesus ran into many people who wanted to follow him partially (see Luke 9:57-62). Some would follow only if they could maintain their safety and comfort. Others would follow only if they could hold tightly to earthly family commitments. Still others would follow only if they could make other relationships a priority. Jesus invited them all to go back home! He said: “No one who puts his hand to the plow, and keeps looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Joshua’s death & Israel’s apostasy: 2:6-10

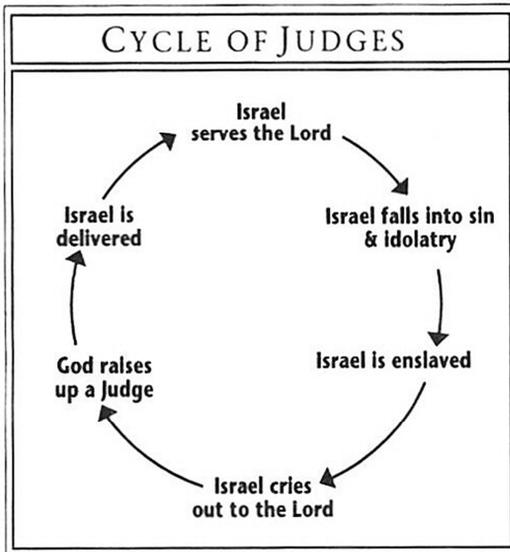
Joshua’s death is recorded again (see Joshua 24:29-31). The point here, however, is to highlight Israel’s drift away from devotion to Yahweh in the generations that followed Joshua.

The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the Lord which He had done for Israel . . . and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel” (2:7,10).

Every generation **MUST** see and experience the goodness and greatness of God **FIRSTHAND**. No generation can live off of the faith-life of the previous generation(s). Both Joshua and Caleb had seen and experienced the miracles of God in bringing Israel out of Egypt. They experienced for themselves the provision and protection of God during the 40-year wilderness period. They were men of faith when it came to spying out the Promised Land, and believing that God would help them overcome the giants. They fought with faith-based courage once in the land. But now the torch was being passed to the next generation. God has no grandchildren. Each generation needs its own personal set of stories where God has showed up for them. **IF** a generation fails to **ENGAGE** with God in firsthand experiences, then the “faith” of that generation will quickly become a lifeless, intellectual idea. Such “faith” will quickly cave under the forces of the world.

The Sin-Cycles in the period of the Judges: 2:11-3:6

This summary passage is critical in understanding the entire book of Judges. It summarizes a Sin-Cycle that occurs over and over again throughout this 350-400 year period of Israel’s history.



Near the end of each cycle, God raised up a “judge” to rescue Israel from their oppressor. Judges were not what we, today think of as “judges.” They were typically strong military leaders (although Deborah would be a clear exception) who led the nation valiantly. They also mediated cases for the Israelites. The names of the judges and the years of their leadership are as follows:

Othniel 40yr > Ehud 80 > Shamgar 1 > Deborah 40 > Gideon 40 > Abimelech 3 > Tola 23 > Jair 22 > Jephthah 6 > Ibzan 8 > Elon 10 > Abdon 7 > Samson 20.

(Though not included in this list, **Samuel** was actually the last of the judges and served to transition the nation into the monarchy period where they had kings like the other nations.)

What does it mean when the text says that Israel abandoned God in order to “*serve the Baals*” (2:12,13)? In the land of Canaan at that time, it was believed that local deities such as Baal and Ashtoreth (Baal’s female consort) controlled a region and would either reward or punish people if they did not worship (serve) that local deity. The Israelites were unwilling to trust that Yahweh, their God, was all-powerful and supreme over these local deities. They feared incurring the wrath of Baal and Ashtoreth, more than they feared displeasing Yahweh and being disciplined by Him. Thus, they “served” (i.e., met the requirements of) the Baals, instead of living within the will of Yahweh.

They “abandoned the Lord” (2:12,13,17; 3:7). God knows what it feels like to be abandoned. Even Jesus, our sympathetic High Priest, knows what it is like to have His own Father turn His face away from Him, while hanging on a cross. Perhaps you have been deeply wounded by someone abandoning you. Take heart in the knowledge that God knows what you feel. Even more, He feels what you feel. Even more still, He can heal what you feel; because “He Himself has said: I will never leave you; nor will I ever forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5,6). God NEVER abandons His children.

Judge Othniel: 3:9-11

“When the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the Lord gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died” (3:9-11).

We know that Caleb was a mighty man of God, with great faith to trust God for giant-sized tasks. Now we learn that Caleb’s nephew, Othniel, the son of his younger brother, was also a mighty man, the first of the “judges” of Israel. Othniel had earlier demonstrated faith and military efficiency, so that Caleb gave his daughter to him in marriage (Joshua 15:16,17). Now, he emerges

as Israel's first great judge/leader. We see here the great blessing that comes to a family line when faith is exemplified by one generation, and then emulated by a succeeding generation. We also see here the unpredictability of God. Why not one of Caleb's own sons as the next great Israelite warrior? We cannot control or predict the mystery of God's ways with each individual. We can only live passionately for God, as Caleb did, and then wait and watch to see where in the family line that 'spark of faith' becomes a flame in someone else.

Here we also see a pattern that will repeat with each judge: *the Spirit of the Lord* will come upon the divinely appointed leader and, as a result, they will be given *the power to rescue* Israel from the oppressor. This "leadership anointing" was a temporary bestowal of power upon judges and, later, kings for the purpose of leading God's people. The judges were *not necessarily ideal leaders*, like Moses, Joshua or Samuel. In fact, some of the judges, like Samson, were extremely weak in character. Yet, they *all* were used to rescue Israel from oppression and usher in *a period of rest*. This Spirit-anointing for leadership could also be withdrawn from the individual (see Psalm 51:11; or 1Samuel 6:14).

"But, when the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help, the Lord raised up a deliverer" (3:9). No matter whether we cry out to God from a place of disobedience and hard consequences, or from some other difficult life circumstance, God listens to our cry for help and comes near to us. He will always respond to a sincere heart. "Come near to God and He will come near to you" (James 4:8). Let the words of Psalm 40 sink into your heart and encourage you in your trials: "For evils beyond number have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to see; they are more numerous than the hairs of my head, and my heart has failed me" (Psalm 40:12). "I waited patiently for the Lord; He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me up out of the mud and mire. He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord" (Psalm 40:1-3).

Judge Ehud: 3:12-30

Just as God would, at times, strengthen a deliverer for Israel, so also He would, at other times, strengthen an oppressor against Israel as a discipline for their unfaithfulness to Him.

“So the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord” (3:12).

On the surface of the human situation, it appeared as if one nation was simply “gaining the upper hand.” Yet, viewing the human situation from God’s perspective, we see that it was God who was intentionally *giving one nation or another* the power to prevail.

Judge Ehud’s exploits are recounted in some detail. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, a tribe with many left-handed men known for their military prowess (see Judges 20:16). Judge Ehud used his “left-handed-ness” to bring down Eglon the king of Moab and lead Israel to freedom.

A left-handed judge? In Ehud’s day, to be left-handed was NOT regarded as a strength, rather, a weakness. Yet, when empowered by God, this man’s weakness became His strength. What unique traits has God given to you that might, if surrendered to Him, might be used for His purposes and glory? Do you have a trait, an experience, even a propensity that you have always considered a weakness or a liability? Have you offered this to God as something that He might use for His purposes? “My strength is made perfect in your weakness” (2Corinthians 12:9). Who knows – maybe God’s greatest exploits in your life will come through your weaknesses.

Judge Shamgar: 3:31

After him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.

Shamgar is given just a passing notice. His judgeship may have overlapped with that of Ehud. Or, the writer of Judges may have been facing the obvious space limitations that came with ancient manuscript writing. Nevertheless, Shamgar’s most powerful exploit should not be overlooked: he single-handedly defeated 600 Philistines with a stick used to prod goats! How many people do you know who have defeated 600 men . . . alone . . . with a stick?

Judge Deborah: 4:1-5:31

While Shamgar is given just one verse, Judge Deborah is given significant attention in the book of Judges (2 full chapters). This is likely because the Holy Spirit wished to shine the light on the power of women to be used for God’s purposes in history. Deborah is also described as a “prophetess” (4:4,5). This was unique among the judges, except for Samuel. This means that she

received direct revelation from God. Not only Deborah, but also Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite, will shine in this part of Israel's history. Two women were used by God to save a nation! The story falls into two parts: 1) the description of the war and 2) the song of victory.

The war against Sisera: 4:1-24

How interesting that God would use a female judge as the champion for Israel's freedom *during one of the scariest and most oppressive periods in their history*. The oppressor, in this case, was extremely cruel and unusually well armed.

“Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. The sons of Israel cried to the Lord; for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years” (4:1-3).

Jabin “*oppressed Israel severely for twenty years.*” Part of this was because of his formidable force of “*nine hundred iron chariots.*” Yet, God will use 2 women to bring this formidable opponent to a swift and inglorious end!

Deborah called for Barak to lead a military charge against the enemy army, led by Sisera. Barak, however, hesitated *unless Deborah would go with him*.

Then Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” She said, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman” (4:8,9).

The two armies met head-to-head at the River Kishon. Sisera had all 900 of his iron chariots with him! Yet . . .

“The Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot” (4:15).

We are not told here *how* Barak managed to thoroughly rout Sisera and his force of chariots. Yet, two references in the Song of Deborah (ch.5) provide us with the necessary clue:

“Lord, when You went out from Seir, when You marched from the field of Edom, the earth quaked, the heavens also dripped,

even the clouds dripped water” (5:4).

“The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent of Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon” (5:20,21).

There is one thing that would bring any army of chariots to its knees: a violent rainstorm resulting in the flooding of the River Kishon and a valley full of MUD! It seems likely that this is what happened, so that even Sisera the commander had to jump out of his chariot and flee for his life on foot (4:15). God (Lord of heaven *and* earth) humbled the proud army of Sisera by means of a thunderstorm and gave Israel the victory!

But that was not the end of the humiliation for the proud and cruel tyrant, Sisera. As the story unfolds, he fled on foot and turned into the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, thinking that he was finding refuge in the tent of a friend. Yet, Jael was *not* a sympathizer of Sisera, or of Jabin his king. Thus, while Sisera slept under a warm blanket, Jael took a hammer and a tent peg and dispensed with him via a single blow to the temple! As Deborah had prophesied to Barak . . . the honor for the defeat of Sisera fell upon a woman!

God can bring about victories in many different and even unexpected ways. This is why we must learn to keep our eyes on Him and not on the size of the challenges that lie before us. Pharaoh’s armies were drowned in the Red Sea. Jericho’s walls fell down. The sun stood still over Gibeon. Sisera’s chariots got bogged down in a rainstorm. Don’t limit God to your understanding of HOW things MIGHT work. God is able to do “above and beyond all that we can ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Ephesians 3:20)! Give Him your battles. Let Him figure out HOW to win them.

The Song of Deborah: 5:1-31

There are a number of significant songs tucked away in the Old Testament narrative, such as the Song of Moses (Exodus 15), or the Song of Hannah (1Samuel 2). These songs put into communal hymn form the record of the mighty deeds of God. Here we have the Song of Deborah, celebrating God’s mighty deliverance from severe oppression. Read the entire Song of Deborah through. It is quite powerful. Several lessons stand out in this Song.

1. The audience and the army.

Part of Deborah’s Song is a tribute to those tribes that came

valiantly to the battle, and a rebuke to those that did not come. Ephraim, Benjamin, Issachar, Zebulun and Naphtai were with Deborah in the fight, and she gives them high praise in her Song. Yet, several other tribes failed to show up for various reasons.

- Reuben deliberated; but failed to deliver.
- Gad (Gilead) chose safety in their land across the Jordan.
- Dan stayed busy with shipping and commercial interests.
- Asher chose peace by the seashore, rather than battle by the river.

2. The divine-human partnership.

“That the leaders led in Israel, that the people volunteered, bless the Lord! Hear, O kings; give ear, O rulers! I - to the Lord, I will sing, I will sing praise to the Lord, the God of Israel. Lord, when You went out from Seir, when You marched from the field of Edom, the earth quaked, the heavens also dripped, even the clouds dripped water” (5:2-4).

The leaders led . . . the people volunteered . . . the Lord went out. There is always a divine-human partnership in the way that God gets things done. When the apostle Paul described how the Church grows, he pictured it as a divine-human partnership:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1Corinthians 3:6-9).

God loves to partner with people to change the world. But He waits for us to make ourselves available for His purposes. Are you following in the footsteps of those brave tribes that led and/or volunteered for this great battle, and ended up partnering with God in one of the greatest victories of all time? Or, are you like those tribes that found reasons to stay at home, and missed the opportunity to experience firsthand the mighty work of God? Someone once said that there are 3 kinds of people in the world: Those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who say, “What happened?” How can YOU become more involved in God’s mighty activities today? Where can YOU serve? Where can YOU lead? Where can YOU help?

3. The power of one woman to seal the deal.

“Most blessed of women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; most blessed is she of women in the tent” (5:24).

What a moment for Jael! She did not wake up that morning expecting that God would lay the fearsome Sisera at her feet. When that happened, however, she was ready and she acted. She used what she had to deliver the knockout blow. She used her gift of hospitality: *“Turn aside, my master, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid.”* She used her resources: *“She opened a bottle of milk and gave him a drink; then she covered him.”* She used her strength: *“She took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand . . .”*

When a decisive moment presents itself, it is too late to prepare. We must be prepared in advance for such moments. Convictions must already be in place. The courage to trust God must already be the defining movement in our hearts. It appears that Jael was already prepared in her heart for such a moment as this. Had she not been ready, she would have been overcome by fear. She would have waffled in her decision. She would have backed down. She would have run away. She would have feared failure. She would have feared Sisera, rather than fearing God. Instead, Jael acted decisively because of what was already in her heart: courage and conviction. Thus, her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity turned out to be a turning point in biblical history. Sisera’s end, and Israel’s new beginning was sealed . . . at the feet of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. “Most blessed among women” is she!

4. The transforming influence of Deborah.

“In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were deserted, and travelers went by roundabout ways. The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel. New gods were chosen; then war was in the gates” (5:6-8).

The rise of Deborah completely changed the atmosphere in Israel. Before her arrival on the scene, Israel was walking around like a nation of scared children in the midst of monsters. They could not even freely and confidently walk the roads. They had to take the roundabout ways everywhere, for fear of Sisera and his army. Then, Deborah arose, and *“new gods were chosen.”* Israel returned to their devotion to Yahweh under her leadership! Further, *“there was war in the gates.”* She would no longer accept the oppression of the enemy. There was not a single shield or spear among 40,000 warriors in Israel (v.8); yet, **Deborah had the spiritual strength to trust that God could still give Israel the victory over 900 IRON chariots and she rallied a nation to believe with her!** And all of this strength grew out of her LOVE FOR GOD. ***“May those who LOVE YOU rise like the sun in all***

its power” (5:31). Such was Deborah – a strong sunrise to break the power of darkness in Israel, and lead them into a bright new day.

The story of Deborah is one of the most powerful stories in the Bible about the role of women in the work of God. There are 13 judges in the Book of judges. Deborah must be regarded as one of the greatest of the judges, if not THE greatest of them all. Not only is Deborah highlighted . . . but her strength is set against the backdrop of the weakness of men in her day. Men were waffling and cowering in fear. Deborah rose up with divine power and turned the tide of Israel’s history.

Women, never underestimate the power that God has put within YOU to do amazing things for His glory. In fact, there will be many times when it will take your bold initiative to turn the tide in some situation. Find courage in the story of Deborah, and follow her method: 1) She spent time with God sitting under the palm tree. 2) She was attentive to God’s instructions for her life. 3) She boldly proclaimed the divine orders to those who could help her fulfill them. 4) She went into the battle herself. 5) She celebrated loudly, giving the glory to God.

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 7 – Judge Gideon
Judges 6-8

Introduction

As Israel continued its repetitive downward spiral in the cycles of sin, we come to the story of judge Gideon. While this is a story of deliverance from yet another period of severe oppression, it is also the story of the struggle of one man – Gideon – to take God at His word. There are many lessons here for us about walking with God, and God’s ways of working with His children. At the outset of the story, Gideon appears very skeptical of God’s goodness. As the story progresses, Gideon has trouble believing God’s word. He repeatedly asks God for *signs* to verify His promises. Toward the end of the story, Gideon makes for himself a sacred ephod – a special garment to be worn *only* by the high priest. Thus, Gideon the “mighty warrior” is presented to us as the doubting judge who constantly needed help taking God at His word. Yet, God worked with His flawed child and used him in incredible ways to deliver Israel. If God can use a Gideon, then there IS hope for all of us!

The severe oppression of the Midianites: 6:1-6

The Midianites were completely subdued under Moses (see Numbers 31); but now, some 200 years later, they had grown strong and were able to completely overrun the Israelites. So severe was the oppression of Midian (along with the Amalekites and other eastern peoples) that Israel was reduced to hiding in caves in the mountains.

“Because of Midian the sons of Israel made for themselves the dens which were in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds” (6:2).

Further, the Israelites were suffering starvation as the invaders swallowed up all of their crops and livestock, leaving them little to live off of (6:3,4). The summary statement shows just how desperate the situation was:

“So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried to the Lord” (6:6).

Like the prodigal son in Jesus’ story (Luke 15), sometimes God lets us be brought *very low* in our journey away from Him. Only then do we “come to our senses” (Luke 15:17) and turn our eyes back to the Father.

Israel cries out – the Lord responds: 6:7-10

The Lord sent an unnamed prophet to speak to Israel, in response to their cries for help. The message is very similar that of the angel of the Lord at the beginning of Judges (see 2:1-5). Israel is rebuked for failing to *obey* God’s word and remain faithful to Him.

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘It was I who brought you up from Egypt and brought you out from the house of slavery. I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the hands of all your oppressors, and dispossessed them before you and gave you their land, and I said to you, “I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But you have not listened to My voice”” (2:8-10).

I brought you up . . . I rescued you . . . I drove out your enemies . . . I said to you . . . BUT you have not listened to My voice. In spite of all God’s faithfulness to them, they failed to walk in humble obedience to His words.

Israel had “heard” God’s voice; but they had not “listened” to Him. It is one thing to hear . . . but another to heed. This is why James wrote: “But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must DO what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don’t obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don’t forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it” (James 1:22-25). Israel’s problem was that, after hearing God’s word, they never made any substantive changes in their way of life. How about you? You are “hearing” God’s words week after week. But . . . are you “listening” to (i.e., doing) His words rather than just hearing them?

The angel of the Lord appears to Gideon: 6:11-24

Gideon was threshing wheat in an unusual place: a hole designed to be a wine press. He was attempting to hide his produce from the

Midianite invaders. It was there that the angel of the Lord appeared to him with an unlikely address:

The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, “The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior” (6:12).

A valiant warrior in a wine press! The Lord sees us not so much for what we are; rather, for what we can become, with His help. Gideon, the fearful wheat thresher in a wine press, is seen as a “valiant warrior.” Peter, a hesitant, uneducated fisherman, is seen as “a rock” and “a productive fisher of men.” Moses, the reluctant shepherd, is seen as the deliverer of God’s chosen people. How do you see yourself? Do you tend to think of who you are, based on your past limitations, or your present circumstances? Or, do you dream with eyes of faith about who you might become, and what you might accomplish, with the power of God moving through your life unleashing your true, God-given potential? Begin to ask God what it is you are truly made for. His answer will very likely surprise you. Maybe there’s a valiant warrior inside of you?!?

Gideon was quick to question God’s character and faithfulness. Here we see a theme that will recur in the story: Gideon is prone to look for *proof* (signs) of God’s promises. It is difficult for him to simply take God at His word.

“O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian” (6:13).

Where are all the miracles that our fathers told us about?!? This was a classic ‘second chair’ question (see p.208). Gideon’s generation did not have *their own stories* to strengthen their faith. Gideon failed to consider, however, that it was Israel’s rebellion, not God’s abandonment, that was preventing the free-flow of divine power in the nation’s favor.

Like Gideon, we are prone to blame God for troubles that we have brought upon ourselves. Maybe Gideon didn’t get the memo from the unnamed prophet: Israel was suffering because they had turned away from God! Before shaking our fist at heaven, perhaps we should pray: Lord, is there anything in my life that you want to point out that might be the cause of my troubles? Then, allow the Holy Spirit to search your heart and bring to light what He sees. The remedy for many of our troubles lies in getting our own hearts in tune with God’s will.

In spite of Gideon's questions about God's faithfulness, the Lord assured him that He was now ready to deliver Israel from oppression, using Gideon as their leader. Gideon again protested, pointing out that he was the youngest son in a not-so-important family. How could he be of any use in such dire times? Yet, God assured him that he was, indeed, the chosen deliverer.

God delights in using the weakest, the least, the youngest, the "nobodies" to accomplish His glorious work. Paul wrote to the church of Corinth: "Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God" (1Cor.1:26-29).

Again, Gideon is not convinced merely on the basis of God's word. He asks for A SIGN that God is really speaking to him.

So Gideon said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who speak with me. Please do not depart from here, until I come back to You, and bring out my offering and lay it before You." And He said, "I will remain until you return" (6:17-18).

After preparing an offering for the Lord, the angel of the Lord gave Gideon the miraculous sign he needed.

"Then the angel of the Lord put out the end of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. Then the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight" (6:21).

Gideon was awestruck by the visible presence of the angel of the Lord. He was actually afraid that he might die from exposure to such glory (a rare privilege indeed – see Genesis 32:30). To consecrate this encounter, Gideon built an altar and named it Yahweh-shalom (The Lord is Peace).

"Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face." The Lord said to him, "Peace to you, do not fear;

you shall not die.” Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and named it The Lord is Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites” (6:22-24).

This encounter with the angel of the Lord became the turning point in Gideon’s life, propelling him into the role of being Israel’s next judge and deliverer.

Once Gideon’s trust in God was initially established, he was ready for his first act as Israel’s next deliverer. He had a major battle to fight *in his own father’s house and among his hometown kinsmen.*

Why was Gideon such a doubter? He had not personally seen God at work in his lifetime. He had heard stories of God doing things in past generations; but not in his own day. Our ability to trust God grows over time as we see Him show up in our lives. This is why it is so critical to bring every situation to the Lord, inviting Him to display His presence and power. And when God does show up, make a record of it. Commemorate God’s personal work in your life so that you can go back and recall His past faithfulness. What Job said needs to be true for all of us: “I had only heard about You before, but now I have seen You with my own eyes” (Job 42:5). As we see God with our own eyes, our knowledge of Him will grow and our ability to trust Him will strengthen.

Gideon destroys his father’s Baal altar: 6:25-32

The Lord’s first assignment for Gideon may have been the most scary: He was to tear down his father’s altar devoted to Baal, and build an altar for Yahweh on the high place of the city. Gideon took ten men with him and did this by night, because he was afraid of his father’s household and the men of the city (v.27). Sure enough, on the next morning, the men wanted to kill Gideon for destroying their sacred shrine to Baal.

Then the men of the city said to Joash, “Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has torn down the altar of Baal, and indeed, he has cut down the Asherah which was beside it” (6:30).

In support of his son, Joash responded that IF Baal was truly a god worth worshipping then he should be able to fight for himself. He not only stood with his son against the men of the town; he even re-named Gideon “*Jerubbaal*” – “*Let Baal defend himself.*”

Note the father-son dynamic in this story. Gideon had to choose God over his own father by taking a defining stand against his father's idol worship. Joash, Gideon's father, could have responded in many different ways to his son: anger, separation, disapproval, execution. Yet, Joash chose to believe the best about his son, and to follow him in placing the worship of Yahweh above the worship of Baal. Joash chose to redefine his own faith with his son. Very often, it will take the transformation of a child's faith in God to turn the tide in a family. But the child must be strong enough to declare his/her own faith in God, allowing God to deal with the response of the parent(s).

Gideon asks for more signs: 6:33-39

As the enemies approached for battle, the Spirit of the Lord came upon (literally, "clothed") Gideon (v.34). He blew the war trumpet and assembled an army of 32,000 for the battle. Yet, he was still in need of *proof* that God would come through for Israel. After all, he was facing a massive enemy force of some 135,000 warriors! Thus, he *twice* put *the fleece* before God, asking for confirming signs. God graciously responded in both instances, knowing that Gideon needed such reassurances in order to lead with courage.

People often ask: *Is it right to test God by "putting out a fleece" of some kind to determine His will? The answer really depends on the situation. In Gideon's case, he should not have needed to test God with the fleece, since God had already clearly declared His will and given Gideon a confirming sign. The fact that God responded (twice!) says more about the grace of God toward Gideon than it does about the correctness of Gideon's asking. In cases where God has already revealed His will to you (via His Word, godly counsel, circumstances, etc.), you should be seeking to OBEY God, not to TEST His sincerity and reliability. On the other hand, there are many situations where we are truly unsure which direction to go when making a decision. Several options seem acceptable. They all have the support of godly counselors. Our conscience is clear in all directions. In such cases, it is good to prayerfully make a wise decision while praying something like this: "Lord, I have placed this decision in Your hands and I continue to do so. You know what is best for me. I believe that I have Your permission to move in direction X. I ask You to confirm or correct this direction by opening or closing doors in front of me. I move forward by faith, wanting only what YOU want for me." God knows our hearts. If we truly desire to do His will, He will honor that desire and direct our steps. "The mind of man plans his ways; but the Lord directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9).*

God reduces Gideon's army: 7:1-8

After all the tests that Gideon put before the Lord, the Lord now responds by putting a HUGE test before Gideon. Will Gideon trust God even when his army is reduced from 32,000 to just 300 men?

The Lord said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me'" (7:2).

First, all who were afraid were allowed to go home. 22,000 took this opportunity to opt out of the war. Second, God reduced the remaining 10,000 to just 300 by means of a water-drinking test at the nearby spring. Those who lapped water like a dog (300) were allowed to remain, while all others were sent home. This must have been an awkward moment for Gideon as a leader. Here he has called together this large volunteer army. They have travelled long distances to come to the war. Now, they are sent home! He may have had some disgruntled volunteers on his hands.

God truly wants to partner with us in the battles of life. He also wants to do so in a way that glorifies HIS power, not our own. Thus, God will reduce Gideon's army so that HE will be Israel's boast in the end. The prophet Jeremiah declared: "Let him who boasts boast in this – that he understands and knows ME, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:24). Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote: "May it never be that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14). "God is opposed to the proud; but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). Therefore, we must remember to lean into GOD'S strength, not our own. "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1,2).

The Lord gives Gideon another sign: 7:9-18

The Lord assured Gideon of victory and told him to attack.

Now the same night it came about that the Lord said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hands" (7:9).

Yet, God must have seen that there was still FEAR in Gideon's heart, the sort of fear that needed to be overruled by *another sign*. This time, it is God who suggests that Gideon receive a confirming sign:

“But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, and you will hear what they say; and afterward your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp” (7:10,11).

Of course, Gideon *was* afraid, so he *did* go down with his servant to the edge of the enemy encampment. There, he overheard one man relating a dream to another man – a dream that clearly foreshadowed a victory for Gideon over them. When Gideon returned from this experience, he finally had the boldness to declare to his 300 men *the exact same words that God had already declared to him:*

He returned to the camp of Israel and said, “Arise, for the Lord has given the camp of Midian into your hands” (7:15).

How gracious of God to give Gideon yet another courage boosting sign. God gave Gideon what he needed, even on the eve of battle! God will work with us to build up our trust in His character. He will give us what we need, when we need it. Yet, over time, He wants our confidence in Him and knowledge of His character to grow, replacing an incessant need for proofs and signs with a steady trust in His goodness and love. God ultimately wants us to trust Him because we KNOW Him and LOVE Him, not because He keeps showing up with proofs and signs.

Victory for Gideon and his 300 men: 7:19-25

After overhearing the man who had the dream, Gideon knew that the enemy camp feared him. Thus, he took strategic advantage of their fear, making his army *appear* bigger than it really was, and doing so by night. He gave all 300 men trumpets and torches concealed in pitchers. At his signal, they all blew their trumpets and revealed their torches as they descended from the hillsides upon the enemy camp. Typically, one trumpet would be sounded to lead an entire division of warriors. Thus, the enemy probably thought there were 300 divisions of Israelites descending upon them in the darkness . . . not just 300 men. The sudden confusion among the enemy caused them to kill one another and flee for their lives. Gideon and his men stood on the hillside and watched in amazement as the entire enemy army destroyed itself and then disbanded in fear! (Recall how Moses told the people of Israel to stand back and watch as God destroyed Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea – Exodus 14:13. The Lord delights in us seeing Him in action!)

Gideon then called for men from several other tribes to cut off the enemy retreat. As a result, Gideon's army completely routed the opposing forces. (See 2Chronicles 20:22-24 for a similar instance where God caused confusion in the enemy armies, resulting in them turning upon one another. "Friendly fire" was common then, even as now.)

Ephraim's complaint and Gideon's response: 8:1-3

The tribe of Ephraim complained heatedly (v.1) that Gideon had not invited them to the battle. Gideon assured them, in a humble spirit, that they had contributed massively to the victory by capturing and killing the Midianite commanders, Oreb and Zeeb.

"God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that (8:3).

In the face of a serious team rupture, Gideon used a wise strategy: "A gentle answer turns away anger" (Proverbs 15:1). He found a reason to praise his accusers and to even subordinate his contributions to theirs. He helped these team members understand that they HAD achieved a huge WIN for the team. As a result, they felt validated and their anger immediately subsided. Try that strategy next time you have a rupture on your team.

The reproach of Succoth and Penuel: 8:4-21

Gideon and his weary band of 300 pursued the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunnah, across the Jordan River to the east. Significant attention is given to the reproach Gideon suffered on this difficult journey from the Jewish leaders of the eastern cities of Succoth and Penuel. Both cities refused to supply Gideon and his troops with provisions for their journey, and both chided him for his efforts and questioned his potential for further success.

"The leaders of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army" (8:6)?

Gideon promised that upon his return, there would ensue severe discipline for the leaders of both cities. Later, the leaders of Succoth were whipped with thorns. Those of Penuel died when the tower they were hiding in was destroyed. Scholars are divided over whether Gideon was exercising justice, or exacting vengeance from his opponents. The deaths of the leaders of Penuel seems to point more in the direction of a personal vendetta by Gideon.

We all have our Succoths and Penuels – people who disagree with our direction, mission, or strategies. The issue is: How do you deal with those who oppose you (or simply fail to show support)? Clearly, vengeance is the wrong approach. Exercising vengeance is the Lord's work, not ours (see Romans 12:17-21). At the same time, there are appropriate disciplinary measures that should be used when people who are supposed to support you fail to do so, or even hinder the mission of the team. The best approach is to allow your emotions over the situation to settle before doing anything. Then, involve other 'objective' people in the process of deciding the WHAT, HOW and WHEN of any corrective steps. This kind of approach can keep you from whipping your Succoths and killing your Penuels! It will also help your wider team understand and have confidence in your approach to handling team ruptures.

As the story concludes, we see that Gideon defeated the remaining 15,000 warriors who were with Zebah and Zalmunnah. He also executed these 2 enemy kings after pointing out to them that *they had executed his own brothers (8:18-21)!*

This victory over Zebah and Zalmunnah, the two Midianite kings, along with their generals Oreb and Zeeb, became a major inspiration to later generations of Israelites who were facing formidable enemies. In Psalm 83, the writer was crying out to God for help against a tyrannical enemy. He refers back to two of the major battles in the book of Judges, including Gideon's victories:

Deal with them as with Midian, as with Sisera and Jabin at the torrent of Kishon, who were destroyed at En-dor, who became as dung for the ground. Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb and all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, who said, "Let us possess for ourselves the pastures of God" (Psalm 83:9-12).

Again, the Lord spoke through Isaiah the prophet about the overthrow of the Assyrians, who were severely oppressing Israel. He likens their deliverance to the overthrow of Midian by Gideon:

"The Lord of hosts will arouse a scourge against him (Assyria's king) like the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb; and His staff will be over the sea and He will lift it up the way He did in Egypt. So it will be in that day, that his burden will be removed from your shoulders and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be broken because of fatness" (Isaiah 10:26,27).

What great battles are you involved in today, that might become the legends that future generations recall? I think that the churches involvement with the restoration of Detroit will be a story that will be retold for years to come. This is a major “battle” that God has privileged the One Church of metro-Detroit to be a part of. To date, the Church has risen up, rolled up her sleeves, and gotten involved in very significant ways, with God-honoring results. Let us continue to fight this battle with such passion and dependence upon God that it will someday become a major inspiration for others to trust God for big victories in the midst of big challenges! Gideon shouted: “For the Lord and for Gideon!” Maybe our shout should be: “For the LORD . . . and for Detroit!”

Gideon refuses the request that he become king: 8:22-23

One of the high points of Gideon’s story comes in the moment when he was asked to become Israel’s first king:

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son’s son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.” But Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you” (8:22,23).

Gideon wisely refused to be made king, and to have his sons continue in a dynastic kingship model (which was common among all the surrounding nations). Israel was unique among the nations in that *Yahweh was her only King*. Gideon preserved the theocracy with these words: *The Lord shall rule over you*. (Later, under Samuel, Israel will ask for a king “like all the other nations,” and God will comply with their request.)

Opportunity does not grant permission. There will be many times in life when big opportunities are placed before you: a position, a promotion, a scholarship, a business offer, a prize, an honor. But opportunity, in and of itself, does not grant you permission to seize that opportunity. Every opportunity must be viewed as an opportunity to seek God and ask for His will. When you do this, you will find that God calls you to pass on some great opportunities, while accepting others. When GOD sets before you an open door, you must walk through it. When the world sets before you an open door, you must pause, and ask if it is just a good door, or a God door. “Behold, I have put before you and open door which no one can shut” (Revelation 3:8). Gideon stood before a seemingly good door (dynastic kingship), but he wisely passed, seeing that it was not a God-door.

Gideon makes an ephod: 8:24-27

Gideon's high moment (acknowledging that God was Israel's one and only king) was immediately followed by his low moment. He asked the people to honor him by giving him gold jewelry, which he then transformed into a sacred ephod. It appears that although Gideon theoretically acknowledged God as King (i.e. "in charge") he had a weak view of how God's kingship actually played out in his own life and the life of the nation. He overruled God here.

Yet Gideon said to them, "I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil." (For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) They said, "We will surely give them." So they spread out a garment, and every one of them threw an earring there from his spoil. The weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the neck bands that were on their camels' necks. Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household" (8:24-27).

Recall that the sacred ephod was part of the high priestly attire as directed by God (see Exodus 28:6-14). This breastplate was highly ornamented with special stones. It was often used as a means to discern God's will in special situations. The ephod was to be worn *only* by the designated high priest in any given generation (Exodus 29:29). Further, it was to be used *only* in the sacred Tabernacle of God, which in Gideon's day was located at Shiloh.

By making this ephod and placing it in his own hometown, Gideon seemed to be pulling the religious system of Israel *toward himself*. It is not clear whether he was pretending to be some kind of priest of God; whether he was intentionally opposing the sacred system of worship at Shiloh; or whether he was saying that he was the only one who truly could discern the will of God for the nation. In any case, his action was in clear violation of God's commands and ended up becoming a huge idolatry-snare for Gideon's own family, as well as for the whole nation of Israel. The people ended up worshipping this ephod in the shrine that Gideon set up for it! He did not intend to introduce idolatry into Israel; yet, he did so by taking too much personal liberty in religious matters.

One man's slight religious deviations can become the undoing of the generation that follows. Gideon probably did not think that he was doing any harm in deviating from God's instructions as to the religious life of Israel. In fact, he probably thought he was doing everyone a big favor. After all, they had just offered to make him their king. Why should he not take steps of his own choosing to secure the spiritual future of the nation? Yet, it was catastrophic for Israel and for Gideon's own family in the long run. God had already declared what was proper and improper in terms of His sacred worship system. Be very careful about the spiritual legacy that you leave for your descendants. Your slight deviations will become their major errors. Stay close to God's Word. Do not deviate to the right or to the left. Be careful to obey all that is written, so that it may go well with you, and with your children after you (Joshua 1:7,8).

The epilogue to Gideon's life: 8:28-35

The immediate fruit of Gideon's life was 40 years of rest for Israel. Free from the terrible Midianite oppression, they could emerge from their caves and rebuild their way of life without fear.

Yet, the bulk of this epilogue gives ominous signs for the future. Gideon sinned by multiplying wives and having 70 sons (v.30). He had a concubine in a nearby city and a son by this woman (v.31). That illegitimate son – Abimelech – will end up killing 69 of Gideon's 70 legitimate sons, and wreaking havoc on Gideon's entire clan (ch.9)! But worst of all is the note about the entire nation sinking once again into the cycle of sin:

“Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god. Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel” (8:33-35).

Israel quickly forgot the God who had “delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side” . . . and they forgot their national hero, Gideon, the man whom God used to usher in 40 years of rest. What a sad epilogue to the life of Gideon. His own life was riddled with doubt. And the nation he so valiantly led was plagued by an incessant and increasing desire to abandon their God in favor of the gods of the world around them. Thus, the cycle of sin goes on, getting ever deeper with each new turn.

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 8 – Judge Jephthah
Judges 9-12

Introduction

The cycle of Israel's sin continues, spiraling ever downward. Yet, the mercy of God continues to outpace the sin of His wayward people, as He comes to their rescue time and time again. In the story of Jephthah, we see how God took an underdog and used him to be the deliverer. We all love these "Cinderella stories" where some loser becomes the winner in the end. Such is the story of Jephthah – the outcast who became the champion. Everyone can gain much hope from the story of Judge Jephthah, because God can use any of us for His glory. The key is that we must choose, as Jephthah did, to allow God to overcome the shame of our past and write a new story that brings Him much honor and glory.

The chaos among Gideon's descendants: 9:1-57

Chapter 9 of Judges records the sad aftermath of Gideon's legacy. Gideon's son Abimelech, from his concubine in Shechem, rose up and had himself proclaimed king over Israel (9:1-6). To solidify his position, he ruthlessly killed the legitimate sons of Gideon - 69 of 70 sons executed in one day - with only Jotham the youngest surviving the brutal attack by hiding himself.

Quite often, people who are heroes in battle are not heroes in daily life. Gideon did great things for the kingdom of God; but sin in his personal life resulted in disastrous consequences for the generation that followed after him. Paul wrote to young Timothy: "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you" (1Timothy 4:16). Are you paying sufficient attention to your own personal walk with God? Are you engaging in the spiritual disciplines that strengthen your walk with God?

Jotham, the lone surviving son of Gideon, reproved the men of Shechem for turning their backs on his father and supporting

Abimelech. He pronounced a curse on the relationship between the men of Shechem and Abimelech. Ironically, he pronounced this curse from the top of Mt. Gerizim, which was the place where *the blessings were to be read* in the renewal of the Mosaic Covenant (see Deuteronomy 11:29)! The remainder of the story tells how this curse was actually fulfilled in the 3 years that Abimelech ruled over Israel (9:22). God sent an “evil spirit” to disrupt relations between Abimelech and the men of Shechem (9:23-25). From that point forward, there was nothing but ill will and murderous intent between these two parties. (Similarly, God sent an evil spirit to end the rule of king Saul [1Samuel 16:14]).

Why did God allow Abimelech to rule over Israel for 3 years? There was to be no “king” in Israel, but God Himself. Yet, God allowed this ruthless tyrant to rule Israel with an iron fist for 3 years. It is really impossible to comprehend the mind, will and timing of God. Yet, He is always in control and always allowing human affairs to play out according to His sovereign justice. When a difficult and trying situation lasts “too long” (in our eyes) we must have faith to believe that God is in perfect control of the people, circumstances and timing in ALL of it. He makes no mistakes.

A man named Gaal rose up against Abimelech, asking the men of Shechem to make him their ruler (9:26-29), which they did. Abimelech responded by attacking Gaal *and the inhabitants of Shechem*. He drove Gaal and his relatives out, and destroyed all the leaders of Shechem, burning the city to the ground (9:30-49). Finally, Abimelech himself was killed at Thebez when a woman threw a millstone from the top of a tower and crushed his skull. Thus, the evil spirit of animosity did its work and the curse of Jotham (the lone remaining son of Gideon) against Abimelech and the men of Shechem, was fulfilled.

Abimelech is a classic study in what you DON'T WANT in a leader. He began with selfish desires to rule. He then moved forward with ruthless, controlling strategies to get what he wanted. He murdered any and every opponent. He took upon himself a role reserved only for God. He exacted his own revenge against any who violated him. Finally, this proud man died in the most humiliating way. Instead of falling to a warrior's sword, he was crushed by a woman's grinding stone. “When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when a wicked man rules, people groan” (Proverbs 29:2). Be very careful who you appoint to rule over you. As goes the leader, so go the followers.

The Oppression of the Philistines & Ammonites: 10:1-10

For the next 45 years after Abimelech, two judges led Israel: Tola and Jair. Very little is said about either one, except that Jair's 30 sons rode on 30 donkeys and had 30 cities of their own. Apparently, Jair's personal glory, and the glory of his sons, was all that could be recited in memory of him.

Then, the Israelites turned away from God *again*. Another cycle of sin! But this time, their spiritual adultery was complete:

“Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook the Lord and did not serve Him” (10:6).

In the past cycles of sin, Israel would tend to blend their worship of Yahweh with the worship of other deities (syncretism). This time, they abandoned Yahweh entirely and served an array of other “gods;” seemingly *every god but Yahweh!*

“The anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the sons of Ammon” (10:7).

Under these oppressors, Israel was ***“shattered, crushed and greatly distressed” (10:8,9).***

Then the sons of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, “We have sinned against You, for indeed, we have forsaken our God and served the Baals” (10:10).

How far does God have to go to get your attention? Israel had to be shattered, crushed and greatly distressed for 18 more years. Even then, they kept calling on all their other “gods” for help, to no avail. So much unnecessary suffering comes into our lives because we don't call upon God until we have exhausted every other option. As God sadly said through the prophet Hosea: “These people turn; but not upward” (Hosea 7:16). Who, or what do you keep turning to in your times of distress? Are you quick to turn to the Lord? “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth” (Palm 121:1,2).

God's dispute with Israel: 10:11-16

In this dispute with His people, God sounds very much like a lover who has been betrayed too many times, and is reluctant to move forward with yet another round of forgiveness and healing.

The Lord said to the sons of Israel, "Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the sons of Ammon, and the Philistines? Also when the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, you cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their hands. Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will no longer deliver you. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress." The sons of Israel said to the Lord, "We have sinned, do to us whatever seems good to You; only please deliver us this day." So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord; and He could bear the misery of Israel no longer (10:11-16).

Yet, even here, we see God being moved to have compassion on His suffering people, after they called out to him in genuine repentance. Note that they didn't just "cry out" to God; but they also "put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord." They were not just paying lip service to repentance. This was true brokenness, and it moved God's heart.

God has emotions, and our love (or lack thereof) impacts His emotions. In the New Testament, we read that the Holy Spirit can be "grieved" within us when we fail to walk in God's ways (Ephesians 4:30). Here in Judges, God is a forsaken lover, ready to hand Israel over to her other lovers. Finally, after Israel repents deeply, God can bear her misery no longer. He moves to rescue His unfaithful bride. Do you ever stop to ponder how your actions are impacting God's heart? And do you ever stop to consider the incredible mercy and forbearance of God – how He just keeps coming back to you with His unending love and grace over and over and over again? His mercies are, indeed, "new EVERY morning" (Lamentations 3:23).

Jephthah called to deliver Israel: 10:17-11:11

As the oppressors gathered to further suppress Israel in Gilead, east of the Jordan River, the people began to ask:

"Who is the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He shall become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead" (10:18).

Jephthah was the son of a prostitute and a man named Gilead. Because he was an illegitimate child, and not an heir, his brothers drove him away from their homeland.

“So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him” (11:3).

When the Ammonites attacked Gilead, the elders quickly turned to Jephthah and asked him to come be their deliverer and head.

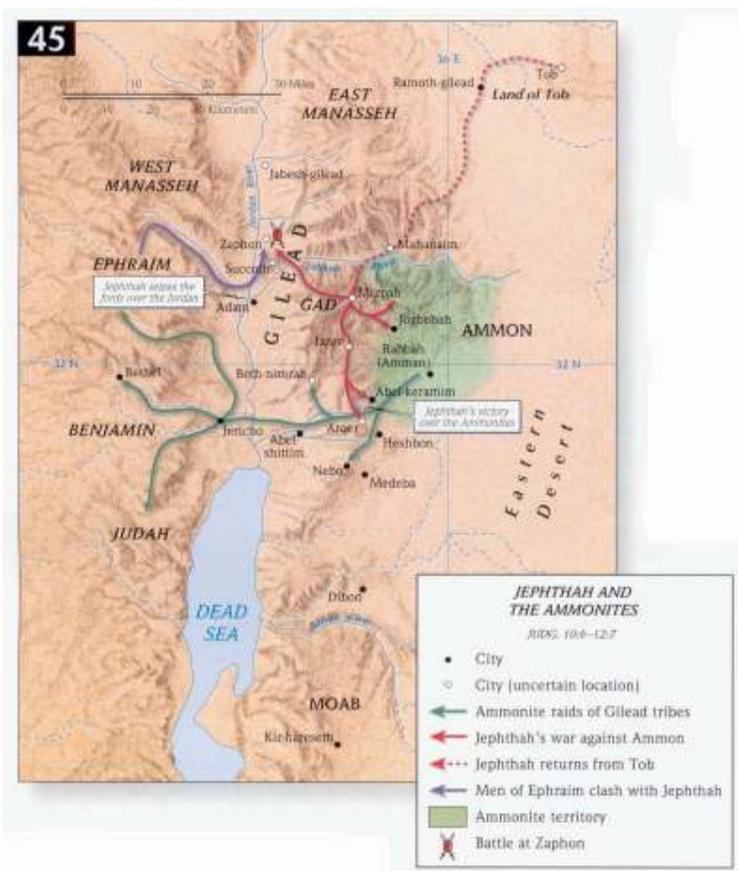
Then Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “Did you not hate me and drive me from my father’s house? So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble” (11:7)?

Jephthah had to exercise forgiveness toward the very people who had rejected him. He had suffered much loss because of them; but now, he was willing to return and help them. Jesus said: “I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:44,45). Is there a past enemy who you need to forgive? Do they need your help now? Are you willing to return their hurt with your help?

He asked for reassurances that he would, in fact, become their head IF he delivered them in battle. They made a covenant with him before the Lord:

“Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah” (11:11).

God continues to pick unlikely people to occupy center stage in His story: Tamar, Judah, Rahab, Gideon, Ruth, Bathsheba . . . Jephthah was the son of a prostitute, and he suffered much in life because of other people’s sins. Yet, God saw that he was a useful servant at this hour in Israel’s history. Perhaps your life has been marked by a series of unjust circumstances that have left you feeling unworthy and somewhat useless. Take heart from the story of Jephthah: God took a castaway (with a band of “worthless fellows” - 11:3) and turned him into the deliverer and leader of a nation, even giving him a mention in the great Hall of Fame of Faith (Hebrews 11:32). Give your life to God and let Him show you what you were REALLY made for. It’s definitely a bigger story than you could ever write for yourself!



Jephthah's attempt at a diplomatic solution: 11:12-28

Jephthah gave immediate evidence that he was more than just a hothead looking for a fight. He entered into skilled diplomatic efforts with the enemy with the hope of avoiding war. This is, in fact, the premier example in the Old Testament of a leader composing a diplomatic letter in the attempt to avoid war.

Jephthah embodied an important principle: Try to walk the peace-path, before you resort to the war-path. "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Romans 12:18). "Pursue peace with all men" (Hebrews 12:4). Perhaps you are embroiled in some dispute. Have you exhausted every possible peace-path, before resorting to war? Ask God if there is something that you can still do to resolve the situation in a peaceful manner. Maybe His Spirit will whisper a tactful strategy that you have not thought of to this point.

In his diplomatic letter, Jephthah recounted Israel's movement in the trans-Jordan area, under Moses, prior to entering the Promised Land. He indicated that Israel was forced into war against the Amorites (who formerly occupied the territory now in question) when Sihon their king attacked Moses/Israel. Most importantly, Jephthah argued that it was THE LORD who gave Sihon, and his land, into Israel's hands. He further argued that the Ammonites *never* had any legitimate claim to this territory (now Gilead, part of Israel). Jephthah concluded by asking the Ammonites to be content with the land that *their god*, Chemosh, had given to them; while permitting Israel to remain in the land that *their God*, Yahweh, had given to them.

“Since now the Lord, the God of Israel, drove out the Amorites from before His people Israel, are you then to possess it? Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the Lord our God has driven out before us, we will possess it” (11:23,24).

I will never forget the day that I sat with a developer who was demanding that we sell them the Gloria Deus Field on which Oak Pointe Church now sits. The developer owned ALL the land surrounding us, and wanted our 27 acres to finish their mile-square development. I told the developer the entire story of how God had given us a field named “Gloria Deus” (God’s glory), and that we were destined to be on this very spot, decades before our church was even conceived. After years of wrangling, threatening and maneuvering, the developer finally gave up the fight, saying: “It’s over. Build your church.” To God be all the glory for selecting this very piece of land long ago, and preserving it as a spot from which His glory continues to shine out to the region!

In spite of his efforts, the leaders of Ammon rejected Jephthah's letter and moved forward in their preparations to attack Gilead and take this territory into their own hands.

Jephthah's vow before battle: 11:29-33

As with every judge, Jephthah's work as deliverer began when the Spirit of the Lord fell upon him:

“Now the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, so that he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon” (11:29).

Very little attention is given to the details of Jephthah's many battles. He overpowered 20 Ammonite cities and completely subdued the enemy. Instead, significant attention is given to the *vow that Jephthah made prior to his battles*:

Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and (or) I will offer it up as a burnt offering" (11:30,31).

It is unclear whether or not Jephthah took time to ponder *what* or *who* might come out of the door of his house upon his victorious return. He seems to have been more concerned about gaining the victory, rather than carefully considering the possible implications of his vow. This would turn out to be a very costly and tragic mistake for Jephthah and for his very unfortunate only child.

Scripture warns against making hasty vows. "Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:2). Jesus echoed this in His teaching: "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.' But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil" (Matthew 5:33-37). We should be people who are so trustworthy that our simple word – Yes or no – is enough for others to believe us. And we should NEVER make rash, poorly thought out vows, as Jephthah did.

The cost of Jephthah's vow: 11:34-40

"When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had no son or daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot take it back." So she said to him, "My

father, you have given your word to the Lord; do to me as you have said, since the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon.” She said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go to the mountains and weep because of my virginity, I and my companions.” Then he said, “Go.” So he sent her away for two months; and she left with her companions, and wept on the mountains because of her virginity. At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man. Thus it became a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year” (11:34-40).

There has been a long debate over whether Jephthah actually offered his daughter as a *burnt offering* (11:31), or if he offered her to the Lord as a *perpetual servant* in the Lord’s sanctuary (resulting in her never getting married, and being a perpetual virgin). It is very unlikely that the Lord, who was so opposed to child sacrifice, would have looked kindly upon Jephthah offering his daughter as a burnt offering. It is much more likely that, as a result of her father’s rash vow, she was forced to become a perpetual virgin in the service of the Lord in His sanctuary. This explains why she asked for permission to go to the mountains for 2 months to mourn *her virginity*. (Note: The Hebrew connective particle in v.31 can be translated “and” or “or.”)

It could easily be argued that Jephthah’s daughter is the real hero in this whole story. When her father came back from the war, she joyfully ran out to greet him and welcome him home. In return, she was wrongly blamed by her father for “brining him low” and “troubling him.” Still, she honored God and her father by encouraging him to fulfill his vow (at her great expense). She remained respectful to her father by asking his permission to go to the mountains with her friends for a period of mourning. Finally, she submitted to his vow and entered into a life of perpetual virginity and service to the Lord, forsaking the right to marry and raise a family. In the end, it was Jephthah’s daughter who was memorialized annually with a 4-day religious observance by all the women in Israel.

So often, our lives are seriously impacted by the actions of other people. Like Jephthah's daughter, we may suffer great loss due to the rash actions of another. Or, we may simply inherit a liability, as Jephthah himself did (being born to a prostitute and driven away by his brothers). Yet, the most important thing is for us to cling to God and look for His direction as we seek to respond to these life-altering hurts, however they come to us. In the end, we really only have two options: We can become bitter toward people, toward life and, ultimately toward God for what has happened to us. We can spend the rest of our days living as victims with an "if only" mindset. Or, we can turn to God and say, as Joseph did: "God meant this (evil) for good, to bring about this present result" (Genesis 50:20). The legacy of Jephthah's daughter was powerful, causing women in Israel to retune their hearts toward God 4 days each year . . . all because she responded to life's great hurts with faith in her God, rather than with anger toward the flawed father whose rash vow permanently changed the course of her life.

Jephthah's war with the tribe of Ephraim: 12:1-6

The tribe of Ephraim had previously complained to Gideon about being left out of a war. Now, they accuse Jephthah, similarly, of dishonoring them by not including them in the action. This time, however, their words are more threatening:

Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you" (12:1).

Once again, Jephthah engaged in diplomacy, stating that he *had* asked for their help in the battle (12:2,3). The two sides could not reconcile their differences. War erupted between the tribe of Ephraim and the men of Gilead. As a result, 42,000 men of Ephraim were killed . . . by their own Israelite brothers!

Jephthah's death and successors: 12:7-15

"Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead" (12:7).

Israel enjoyed 31 years of peace under Jephthah (6yrs) and his three successors: Ibzan (7yrs) Elon (10yrs) and Abdon (8yrs). While other judges are noted for how many children they had, Jephthah the great warrior is remembered for having but one daughter, whom he sacrificed to the Lord!

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 9 – Judge Samson
Judges 13-16

Introduction

The tragic cycle of sin in the book of Judges grinds toward a conclusion with the story of Samson. Sadly, it seems that the character and life of Samson provides a parallel to the character and life of Israel as a nation. Samson was a strong man made weak by his own uncontrolled lusts. Israel was a strong nation made weak by her own out-of-control idolatries. Samson was under a special covenant (Nazirite vow) to serve God with his God-given strength. Israel was under a special covenant (Mosaic law) to serve God with her God-given resources. Samson became weak by violating the terms of his covenant. Israel became weak and oppressed by violating the terms of her covenant. Samson's life never reached its full potential. Israel, under the weight of her sin, never represented God well to the surrounding world. Samson died in the rubble of a pagan temple. Israel was overrun by the pagan ways of the Canaanites. Samson's own life pictures the wasted strength, the 'what might have been' of Israel as a whole.

The announcement of Samson's birth: 13:1-7

The angel of the Lord appeared to the wife of Manoah, announcing the birth of a special son (much like the angelic announcement of the birth of Jesus to Mary):

Then the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold now, you are barren and have borne no children, but you shall conceive and give birth to a son. Now therefore, be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (13:3-5).

The news of Samson's birth was accompanied by special instructions placing him under a lifetime Nazirite vow (see

Numbers 6 for the laws governing Nazirite vows). This vow meant that he was dedicated for special work for God. Most Nazirite vows were undertaken for a temporary period of time; but Samson's vow was a lifetime commitment. He had to remain separate from defilement and wholly consecrated to the mission given to him by God. Allowing one's hair to grow uncut was part of the Nazirite vow.

Specifically, Samson's God-given mission was ***"to begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines"*** (13:5). The Philistine domination of Israel lasted 40 years. Samson served as judge for only 20 years. He never mustered an army to completely overthrow the Philistines, as David finally did (2Samuel 5:17-25). Yet, by his personal acts of power against the Philistines, Samson kept the oppressors off balance and "began" the work that David would later complete.

Manoah seeks an audience with the angel: 13:8-25

Manoah *entreated* the Lord to send the angel again, so that he could personally hear the instructions concerning the raising of the boy. The angel appeared again *to his wife*. When Manoah asked for further instructions, the angel referred back to what he had already told his wife:

So the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, "Let the woman pay attention to all that I said. She should not eat anything that comes from the vine nor drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing; let her observe all that I commanded" (13:13,14).

In many ways, Samson's birth parallels that of John the Baptist (Luke 1:13-16). Angels announced both births. Both were dedicated to God's work prior to their births. Both lived under Nazirite vows. Samson was to begin the deliverance that David would complete. John was to begin a deliverance that Jesus would complete. Both fathers had questions and, at times, doubts. Both mothers believed. Both sons, once born, grew in the strength of God's Spirit as they waited for their mission to begin.

Samson: ***"And the Lord blessed him as he grew up. And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him while he lived in Mahaneh-dan" (13:24,25).***

John: ***"And the child continued to grow, and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts . . . (Luke 1:80).***

Samson's demand for a Philistine wife: 14:1-4

At the very outset of the Samson narrative we are introduced to his fundamental weakness. He falls for women the moment he sees them. He has no ability to evaluate the worth of the relationship based upon higher principles. He is controlled by what his eyes see, not by what his conscience knows to be right.

Then Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. So he came back and told his father and mother, "I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife." Then his father and his mother said to him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me" (14:1-3).

Moses forbade Israel from taking wives from the inhabitants of Canaan. Nevertheless, Samson demanded what "looked good" to him, even against the protests of his father and mother. He more or less ordered his parents to give him what he wanted.

It is always wise to have an objective set of eyes helping you to make big decisions. Our own appetites and desires can mislead us, causing us to overlook important details about the long-term viability of a decision (what to purchase, what job to take, who to date/marry, who to partner with in business). The key is to invite input from wise counselors, and then to seriously consider their point of view. Samson was unwilling to heed the wisdom of his own parents, deciding instead only by what his own eyes desired in the moment. As a result, his path was repeatedly filled with the pain of disappointment, defeat and heartache.

Yet, in spite of his sins and flaws, the Lord used Samson for His sovereign purpose – to begin delivering Israel from the hand of the Philistines. There is always the God-side of every situation:

"However, his father and mother did not know that it was of the Lord, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. Now at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel" (14:4).

Samson goes to marry the Philistine woman: 14:5-9

The story of Samson's trip to Timnah, to marry the Philistine woman, has a parenthetical story about him killing a lion with his bare hands. While this incident clearly demonstrates his God-

given strength, it also shows Samson's propensity to jeopardize the terms of his Nazirite vow and, thus, risk his God-given strength. Coming into contact with dead bodies was forbidden in the law (Leviticus 11:27).

“When he returned later to take her, he turned aside to look at the carcass of the lion; and behold, a swarm of bees and honey were in the body of the lion. So he scraped the honey into his hands and went on, eating as he went” (14:8,9).

He did not tell his parents that he got the honey out of the body of a dead lion because he did not want them to know that he had compromised his Nazirite vow.

Samson's wedding debacle: 14:10-20

We've all heard stories about wedding ceremonies going awry. Samson's weeklong wedding ceremony was a disaster because 1) he decided to play games that would shame the men, and 2) the woman he had chosen to marry was not loyal to him.

Since Samson brought no groomsmen with him to Timnah, 30 Philistine men were chosen to be part of his bridal party. In turn, Samson was to give gifts to these men. To avoid giving them gifts, he proposed a riddle involving the dead lion and the honey (which only he knew about). IF the 30 men could solve the riddle within the 7-days of the wedding week, then Samson would provide them with 30 linen wraps and 30 changes of clothes. IF they could *not* solve his riddle, then they would pay him the same amount. (Since when do the attendants to the bridegroom ever pay the groom for their participation?) His riddle was as follows:

“Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet.” But they could not tell the riddle in three days (14:14).

Frustrated that they could not solve the riddle, the 30 Philistine men began to threaten Samson's wife with harm if she did not entice him to divulge the answer to the riddle.

Then it came about on the fourth day that they said to Samson's wife, “Entice your husband, so that he will tell us the riddle, or we will burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us to impoverish us? Is this not so?” (14:15).

Samson's wife then began to use *all* her powers of female persuasion to get him to tell her the answer to the riddle.

Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer" (14:16).

"She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people" (14:17).

Samson paid up on his bet by going to Ashkelon, a key Philistine city, killing 30 men, stripping them of their garments and giving them to the 30 groomsmen! Meanwhile, his wife ***"was given to one of his companions who had attended him at the feast" (14:20).***

Women have a God-given power to use the gift of persuasion for good or for destructive ends. Though Samson was physically strong, he was weak in the face of female manipulation and persuasion. His first wife sobbed and complained that he did not really love her. He finally caved in to her, and it cost him his marriage (and much more). His second wife, Delilah, also pressed and pressed, finally playing the 'you-don't-love-me' to get Samson to reveal the secret of his great strength (16:15). "With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death" (16:16). That fall cost Samson his God-given strength, and ultimately, his very life. The book of Proverbs says much about the dangerous power of the tongue of a temptress (Prov. 7:7-22). "For the lips of the adulteress drip honey and her speech is smoother than oil" (Prov. 5:3). On the other hand, the woman of wisdom is highly praised for her ability to use her tongue to impact people positively. "She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (Prov. 31:26). Women, how are you using your God-given power of persuasion?

Samson's revenge on the Philistines: 15:1-8

Samson returned to Timnah, hoping to reconcile with "his wife." He did not know that her father had already given her in marriage to another man. Enraged, Samson took revenge on the Philistines. First, he destroyed their grain fields with the help of 300 foxes.

"Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took torches, and turned the foxes tail to tail and put one torch in the middle between two tails. When he had set fire to the torches, he released the foxes into the standing grain of the Philistines, thus burning

up both the shocks and the standing grain, along with the vineyards and groves” (15:4,5).

The Philistines retaliated by killing Samson’s former wife and her father. He, in turn, avenged their deaths by using his God-given strength to slaughter them ruthlessly.

“He struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam” (15:8).

Again, in return, the Philistines amassed an army and prepared to attack the tribe of Judah (15:9). This was a classic case of tit-for-tat, with the carnage escalating at each new level. And it all started with Samson saying, *“I merely did to them what they did to me” (15:11)*. “Revenge is an uncontrollable monster. Each act of retaliation brings another. It is a boomerang that cannot be thrown without cost to the thrower. The revenge cycle can be halted only by forgiveness.” (Life Application Study Bible, p.408).

It is fascinating to see how God’s sovereign purposes are fulfilled even through human sin and error. Samson was making mistake after mistake in his personal life; yet, God was using him to “begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines.” God’s plans never fail. The ultimate example of God using human sin to bring about His purposes was the death of Jesus. Jesus taught His disciples that “the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again” (Luke 24:7). On the day of Pentecost, Peter put it like this: “This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23). The hands of God and the hands of godless men combined to put Jesus on a cross to die for our sins. The sovereign plan of God and the free-willed actions of human beings are like two sides of the same coin. You can’t see both sides clearly at the same time; but they are both true simultaneously.

The men of Judah oppose Samson: 15:10-20

When the tribe of Judah saw that they were about to be attacked by the Philistine army, because of Samson, they came to his hideout at the cave of Etam intending to bind him and hand him over to the enemy in order to avert war. How ironic that Israel had come to the point where they were ready to hand their God-given deliverer over to the enemy in order to keep the peace!

The men of Judah bound Samson with cords and led him to the Philistines. When he came near, however, the Spirit of God gave him the power to prevail over the enemy once again.

And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily so that the ropes that were on his arms were as flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds dropped from his hands. He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, so he reached out and took it and killed a thousand men with it. Then Samson said, "With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey I have killed a thousand men" (15:14-16).

"The Lord's strength came upon Samson, but he was proud and boasted only of his own strength. 'With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men,' he said, and later asked (demanded) God to refresh him because of his accomplishments (15:16-18). Pride can cause us to take credit for work we've done only because of God's strength." (Life Application Study Bible, p.409).

This section concludes by noting that Samson "*judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines*" (15:20). Yet, there is one final defining sequence of events for judge Samson.

Samson and Delilah: 16:1-22

A brief story of Samson spending the night with a prostitute in Gaza (a Philistine city!) precedes the final story of Samson and Delilah. The minor point of the Gaza-prostitute story is that Samson kept falling into traps brought about by his own uncontrolled lusts. The larger point seems to be the tale of his great strength in ripping the Gaza city gates from their foundation and carrying them to the top of the mountain opposite Hebron, a distance of 9 miles! Truly, his strength was supernatural.

The final story concerning Samson has become the most famous, and it highlights not his great strength, but his great weakness.

"After this it came about that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah" (16:4).

There really is no story about Samson that does not involve, at the outset, the love of some woman. The *entire* focus of the Delilah narrative is on how the Philistine lords used her to entice Samson in order to learn the secret of his God-given strength and rob him of it. By now, they *knew* his Achilles heel was *women*. Thus, they

wisely used a woman to defeat him. Delilah, for her part, was motivated by sheer greed, in that each of the Philistine lords promised to give her 1,100 pieces of silver (v.5), a massive amount of money! Delilah three times tried to coax out of Samson the secret of his strength; but he three times deceived her with false answers. Finally, she pulled the “love card” on Samson:

Then she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me? You have deceived me these three times and have not told me where your great strength is.” It came about when she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, that his soul was annoyed to death. So he told her all that was in his heart and said to her, “A razor has never come on my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will leave me and I will become weak and be like any other man” (16:15-17).

Samson revealed his secret, thinking it would be safe with his lover. Instead, she betrayed him, and he was suddenly left hairless and powerless. His Nazirite vow had been broken, and with it went the Spirit-power that had marked his career.

Then she began to afflict him, and his strength left him. She said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep and said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him (16:19,20).

It was a sad day when the Lord “departed” from Samson (i.e., removed His special Spirit-anointing given to Judges). Yet, more revealing is the fact that Samson did not even know that God’s special anointing power was gone. He thought he could get up and overpower enemies “as at other times.” Here are a few diagnostic questions to assess your own dependence upon God: IF the Lord removed His presence and power from your life right now, would you notice? Are you living in such close dependence upon Him that you simply could not continue to move forward without His strength? Or, are you living so much in your own strength that you would go about your day “as at other times?” (Note: I am glad these are just diagnostic questions. The New Testament assures us that once the child of God is indwelt by His Spirit, He will NEVER depart from us!)

“Then the Philistines seized him and put out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison” (16:21).

What sad irony in the fact that it was Samson’s eyes that kept taking him into sin . . . and his eyes he lost in the end.

Samson’s enemies knew his weaknesses better than he did. They knew he was an easy prey for a beautiful woman. When you know that you are prone to fall in a certain area, it is wise to “make no provision for the flesh, in regard to its lusts” (Romans 13:14). As J.B. Phillips translated it: “Give no chances to the flesh to have its fling!” What practical steps can you take today to guard yourself against your major weaknesses? What can you do to rob your sinful nature of the chances it needs to take you down?

Samson’s final victory over the Philistines: 16:23-31

The Philistines held a feast to worship their god, Dagon, for giving Samson into their hands. Some 3,000 people were gathered on the roof of the building, looking down at Samson, who was tied between two pillars. He was the “entertainment” for the crowd of spectators.

Then Samson called to the Lord and said, “O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.”

It is telling that Samson asked for strength to avenge the Philistines for his two eyes, rather than for God’s glory and the honor of Israel. In spite of his self-serving motive, God answered his prayer, and gave him supernatural strength for one final victory over the Philistines.

“Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and braced himself against them, the one with his right hand and the other with his left. And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines!” And he bent with all his might so that the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life” (16:28-30).

There were terrible consequences for Samson’s sins. He lost his freedom, his strength, his family, his wife, his eyesight, his dignity and, ultimately, his life. Yet, God still did not abandon His servant. He answered his prayer of repentance and filled him with

power for one final mighty victory over the Philistines . . . in fact, his greatest victory of them all! If there is one last lesson here, it is that *it is never too late to turn back to God, asking Him to make something of your life . . . or your death.*

Samson's feats of strength were many:

- He killed a lion barehanded (14:5,6).
- He killed 30 Philistines and took their garments (14:9).
- He caught 300 foxes and tied torches to their tails (15:3-5).
- He repeatedly broke ropes apart (15:14; 16:9,12,14).
- He killed 1,000 men with the jawbone of a donkey (15:15).
- He carried off the city gate of Gaza (16:3).
- He toppled a Philistine building (16:30).

Yet, he could not rule his own spirit! The ancient words of Ambrose are a fitting commentary on Samson's life: "Samson, when strong and brave, strangled a lion; but he could not strangle his own love. He burst the fetters of his foes, but not the cords of his own lusts. He burned up the crops of others, and lost the fruit of his own virtue when burning with the flame enkindled by a single woman." The words of Proverbs are fitting also: "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls" (Proverbs 25:28).

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 10 – A Chaotic Epilogue
Judges 17-21

Introduction

The book of Judges has given us a bleak picture of the nation of Israel during the 350-400 years after Joshua. The cycles of sin have been repetitive, with each cycle taking Israel to a new low. The ending of the book contains two stories that can only be described as pure spiritual and moral chaos. It is sort of like walking into a house of mirrors where *everything* is distorted. There is no aspect of these stories that come anywhere close to what God originally intended for His chosen nation. Truly, *“everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* (17:6; 21:25). The most surprising fact about these two stories is *that they took place chronologically at the beginning of the book of Judges*. This gives us a sense for the author’s real message: The ENTIRE period of the Judges was woven through and through with spiritual defection, moral degradation and inter-tribal conflict. And, the sad irony is that both of these epilogue stories center on the actions of priests from the tribe of Levi – the very people who were assigned to lead the nation *toward* God and His blessings.

Micah’s personal religion: 17:1-13

If the theme of this entire section is, *“everyone did what was right in his own eyes,”* then the opening story is a perfect example of free-for-all religion. A man named Micah, encouraged by his mother, decided to create his own household religion. Micah *did what was right in his own eyes*. At least 7 of the 10 commandments were violated in the process of setting up this homemade worship:

- Micah steals his mother’s 1,100 pieces of silver.
- The mother pronounces a curse on the thief.
- Micah, fearing the curse, confesses that he is the thief.
- He returns the silver to his mother and she blesses him.
- She then gives him the silver to make a household idol.
- Micah makes an idol and sets up a shrine in their house.

- He appoints one of his own sons to be his household ‘priest.’
- A Levite wanders into town, so Micah hires him to be his priest.

The closing line contains sad irony:

Then Micah said, “Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest” (17:13).

Micah was so deceived that he thought God would bless him for setting up this personal, household religious system . . . even though every aspect of it was contrary to God’s revealed will. The tribe of Levi supplied all the priests for Israel, and they were to conduct worship according to strict guidelines given by God through Moses (book of Leviticus). Further, *all* worship rituals were to be conducted at the sacred Tabernacle, which was in Shiloh at that time. Such was the religious drift in Israel, that Micah and his mother thought they were honoring God when, in fact, they were breaking all of His laws.

We may ask: What was a Levite doing wandering around looking for a job? The Levites were to live in designated cities in Israel, and their sustenance was to be derived from the tithes and offerings given by worshippers at the Tabernacle of the Lord. It seems that the Levites were not being adequately supported by the offerings of the people; thus, we find a priest wandering the country looking for work.

It appears that both Micah and his mother were sincere; but sincerity alone does not make something right. They were sincerely wrong in their attempt to create their own in-house worship system. The apostle Paul wrote about religious zealots in his day: “I know what enthusiasm they have for God, but it is misdirected zeal” (Romans 10:2). This is why it is so important to be firmly grounded in the truth of God’s Word. Otherwise, religious zeal can actually do more harm than good (which is so evident in many religious circles in our world today). Zeal, if not guided by truth, is like a train without tracks – dangerous!

Yet, the self-styled religion of Micah’s house was taken to a whole new level in the second part of this story, as it became the religion for an entire tribe in Israel.

The tribe of Dan steals Micah's priest and idol: 18:1-31

The tribe of Dan had been assigned their own territory (Joshua 19:40-48); but they never fully occupied it, so they wanted more. And they wanted *easy-to-conquer* territory. They sent out an army of 600 men to capture the quiet, secluded town of Laish in the far north. This town was “unsuspecting” of any trouble (18:7).

Dan wanted an easy way to get more territory. This was because they had failed to do the hard work of trusting God to drive out the Canaanites in the territory God allotted to them. “The Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the valley” (Judges 1:34). God wanted them to learn to trust Him for this territory (Judges 3:4); but they were unwilling to cooperate with God to gain the victory. So, they went looking for easy prey and found the quiet, peaceful city of Laish in the far north, a city that God had NOT designated for destruction. All too often we look for the easy way forward, instead of trusting God with the more difficult path that He asks us to walk. The easy way is to quit, to give in, to compromise, to write a check, to sign the papers, to conquer an easy prey. Resist the temptation to take the easy way out. Instead, as God how He might want you to take the more difficult path of faith, trusting Him for the victory. The tribe of Dan paid a heavy price for going the easy way. When the tribes of Israel are listed in 1Chronicles, Dan is not mentioned. Again, when the tribes of Israel are listed in Revelation 7, Dan is nowhere to be found. It appears that Dan lost their place in God's story because they chose to write their own story. The “easy way” turned out to be a very costly way for the tribe of Dan.

As the warriors of Dan moved north toward Laish, they came to the house of Micah. They stole both his household idols *and* his Levitical priest, believing that these would help them gain the victory in battle. In fact, the priest helped them with the theft!

When these went into Micah's house and took the graven image, the ephod and household idols and the molten image, the priest said to them, “What are you doing?” They said to him, “Be silent, put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?” The priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod and household idols and the graven image and went among the people” (18:18-20).

The priest was *glad* that he was being offered a more prestigious

position as priest over an entire tribe, rather than just one family. So, he stole *all* of the religious hardware from Micah's house and took off with his new employers. This priest has drifted far, far away from God's commands concerning the sacred priesthood.

When Micah found out he been robbed of his entire religious system, he took some neighbors and caught up with the 600 men from Dan, protesting the theft of his idols and his priest. But Micah and his friends were no match for the 600 armed warriors, so they returned home empty-handed.

The sons of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, or else fierce men will fall upon you and you will lose your life, with the lives of your household." So the sons of Dan went on their way; and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his house (18:25,26).

After the tribe of Dan captured the city of Laish, they set up the idols they had stolen from Micah's house, and made the priest *their* priest in their new city. Now, the entire tribe of Dan has formed its own new religion. And they renamed the city "Dan" in honor of their tribe.

"The sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh" (18:30,31).

An entire tribe had defected from true Yahweh worship. Yet, there is more sad irony tucked away in these verses. The name of the priest behind all of this defection is finally given: He is Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of **Moses!** The wayward Levite leading this entire religious defection was Moses' grandson. Oh how far and fast Israel had fallen from her spiritual roots. And when spiritual roots are lost, moral and civil decay soon follows ...

A Levitical Priest and his concubine: 19:1-30

The final story in Judges also involves a priest from Levi. This must rank as one of the saddest, most degrading stories in all of Scripture. Again, we must recall that these events took place *at the beginning* of the period of the Judges, indicating the moral degradation that ran through the entire 350-400 years. In summary, here is what happened:

- A Levite married a concubine (a wife with reduced legal rights).
- The concubine was unfaithful to her husband and ran away.
- The Levite went to reconcile with her after 4 months.
- The Levite partied with her father for 4 straight days.
- On the 5th evening, the Levite departed with his concubine.
- They passed a Canaanite city, thinking it unsafe to stop there.
- They came to Gibeah, thinking it safe, being an Israelite town.
- The men of Gibeah demanded to have sex with the Levite.
- The host first tried to give his virgin daughter to the mob.
- The Levite pushed his concubine out the door to satisfy the mob.
- The mob sexually abused her all night, while the Levite slept.
- The next morning, he found his concubine dead on the doorstep.
- The Levite took her body home and cut her up in 12 pieces.
- He mailed 12 body parts to the 12 tribes of Israel.
- His gory mailbags achieved his desired purpose:

All who saw it said, “Nothing like this has ever happened or been seen from the day when the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt to this day. Consider it, take counsel and speak up!” (19:30).

Judges 19 is one of the saddest chapters in the Bible. The moral and civil fabric of Israel had disintegrated. But the reason the author has placed two epilogue stories side by side conveys the deeper message: When our spiritual lives drift (chs.17,18), every other aspect of our lives suffer (chs.19-21). God Himself must be the center. When He is not, chaos is the result. What can WE learn from these side-by-side stories in Judges? We need to wake up and be warned. Our society is daily brimming with stories that easily rival the depravity of Judges 19, both in real life and in the imaginary world created on screen. We need to take a step back and ask some hard questions about the spiritual drift that is fueling our moral/ethical drift. We need to find our true ‘center’ again . . . and that center is God. “The Lord says, ‘I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control’” (Psalm 32:8,9). When we lose our center, we lose it all.

War against the tribe of Benjamin: 20:1-48

The only positive detail in this entire story is that all the other tribes *were* outraged at the crime of the men of Gibeah, and they came together to seek the Lord (20:18,23,27). All Israel gathered to make war against the tribe of Benjamin (the men who

committed the crime were from Gibeah, a Benjamite city). When Benjamin refused to hand over the men who had abused and killed the woman, war ensued. Surprisingly, Israel was defeated by Benjamin on the first 2 days of battle. This seems to indicate, indirectly, that God's judgment was on the *entire nation*, not just the tribe of Benjamin. Finally, on the 3rd day, the Lord allowed Israel to prevail and the tribe of Benjamin was entirely decimated, except for 600 men.

“So all of Benjamin who fell that day were 25,000 men who draw the sword; all these were valiant warriors. But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they remained at the rock of Rimmon four months. The men of Israel then turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, both the entire city with the cattle and all that they found; they also set on fire all the cities which they found” (20:46-48).

Mourning the loss of the tribe of Benjamin: 21:1-6

A solemn ceremony of national mourning took place, as Israel lamented the loss of one of their tribes.

So the people came to Bethel and sat there before God until evening, and lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. They said, “Why, O Lord, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel, so that one tribe should be missing today in Israel?” It came about the next day that the people arose early and built an altar there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings (21:2-4).

Given what we have seen thus far, we might anticipate that this whole story has a strange ending . . . and it does!

Finding wives for the remaining 600 Benjamite men: 21:7-23

The only way to secure a future for the tribe of Benjamin was to allow the 600 surviving warriors to take wives from among the other tribes. Yet, the other tribes had vowed that they would not give their daughters to Benjamin. So, they came up with two ways to secure wives for Benjamite men. The first 400 wives were taken from the city of Jabesh-Gilead. This city had failed to come to the mandatory ceremony of mourning/repentance at Mizpah. Thus, Israel attacked that city, killing everyone, except for 400 virgin women. These women were then given to 400 of the remaining Benjamite men. The final 200 wives were secured in a most bizarre manner. (Yet, the entire ending of Judges is bizarre, so, why not!)

The 200 remaining Benjamite men were told to go to the annual religious festival at Shiloh and to kidnap wives for themselves! This was likely the annual 7-day Passover festival, which involved women dancing and singing the song of Miriam and the Exodus.

And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, “Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, and watch; and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to take part in the dances, then you shall come out of the vineyards and each of you shall catch his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. It shall come about, when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, that we shall say to them, ‘Give them to us voluntarily, because we did not take for each man of Benjamin a wife in battle, nor did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.’” The sons of Benjamin did so, and took wives according to their number from those who danced, whom they carried away. And they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the cities and lived in them” (21:19-23).

What had Israel come to? This final section of Judges started with a man stealing silver from his mother and ends with men kidnapping dancing girls at a Passover festival! The spiritual life of Israel had broken loose from its anchor, and the nation was drifting in ever-deepening waters of chaos and confusion.

The postscript: 21:24

“The sons of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and each one of them went out from there to his inheritance. In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (21:24,25).

Israel had no king (17:6; 18:1; 19:1 and 21:25) because Yahweh was supposed to be their KING, ruling in their hearts and lives. The theocracy (“rule of God”) was in shambles because human hearts refused to enthrone Him. In the next major section of God’s story, Samuel the priest and prophet will rise up and give Israel what it wants: a human king. The theocratic period in Israel will give way to the monarchical period. The people will find out very quickly, however, that having a flawed human king can be worse than having no king at all. Be careful what you wish for. If God is *not* on His throne in your heart, you are headed for trouble.

Afterword: The cause of the chaos in Judges?

Israel's history during the period of the Judges was chaotic, to say the least. They went through repetitive cycles of departure from Yahweh and His laws, leading to painful periods of bondage and oppression. They would cry out in repentance and be led, by God-given leaders (Judges), into periods of rest . . . only to repeat the cycle over and over again. As the two epilogue stories show, the entire period was replete with spiritual, moral and civil chaos.

Why? Because Israel had strayed far from Sinai. It was at Mt. Sinai that Yahweh their God gave to Israel a very detailed and specific roadmap for life - laws governing every aspect of their lives: worship, work, marriage, family, business, crime and punishment, etc. God warned Israel at that time to *"take to heart"* all of His words and to *"observe them carefully."*

"Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life. And by this word you will prolong your days in the land, which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess" (Deuteronomy 32:46,47).

Israel *did not* take to heart all of God's words. They did not cultivate their personal relationship with Him. They did not love Him "with all their heart, all their soul, and all their strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

In any age, when people stop loving God and heeding His words, self-styled religion will inevitably flourish. *"Every man will do what is right in his own eyes."* And when the anchor of God gives way, society will inevitably drift toward shores of destruction.

Why not rather give God our sincere attention?

"Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live" (Isaiah 55:3).

"Those who listen to instruction will prosper; those who trust the Lord will be joyful" (Proverbs 16:20).

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 11 – Ruth: A Story of Hope
Ruth 1-2

Introduction

The book of Ruth is the story of one family that lived during the period of the Judges. This story serves several important purposes in the biblical narrative. First, it bridges the period of the Judges into the period of the Kings by introducing us to the lineage of King David, through Ruth and Boaz (4:18-22). This seems to be the major purpose of the book, given the way the narrative ends with David's genealogy. Second, the events of Ruth show us that there were at least *some* faithful, God-loving, covenant-keeping Jews during the dark period of the Judges. Boaz was a righteous man who, in many ways, reflected the character of God to his world, even while Israel was repeatedly tumbling deeper and deeper into sin and degradation. Ruth was a Moabite woman who turned in faith to Yahweh, the God of Israel (the true mission of God's nation was to point all people to Him for redemption). Third, and most importantly, the story of Ruth shows that the scarlet thread of God's promise was still very much alive, being woven even through the dark period of the Judges. Though Israel as a nation was being unfaithful to the covenant with Yahweh, He still was determined to bring a great blessing to the entire world, as He had promised (Genesis 12:3). That blessing would ultimately come through Messiah, who would be God in person. The thread of the Messianic promise is carried on through the descendants of Ruth and Boaz, ancestors of the great King David (see Matt.1:5).

Naomi's losses in the land of Moab: 1:1-5

The narrative opens with a story of tremendous loss for Naomi.

“In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there” (1:1,2).

God's hand of discipline was on Israel, repeatedly, during the period of the Judges. This famine indicates that the nation was in one of those periods of discipline. Elimelek chose to run from the situation, rather than to remain under the hand of God in repentance and faith. He packed up his family and moved to Moab, a nation that had constantly been a snare to Israel.

Instead of finding life and security in Moab, Elimelek met only disaster. First, Elimelek died. Then Naomi continued the pattern of making choices contrary to God's will, as she remained in Moab for ten years, allowing her sons to marry Moabite women. But then, both sons also died, leaving 3 widows in a destitute situation.

“Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband” (1:3-5).

The Moabites (and particularly Moabite women) had been a constant snare to Israel since the time they came out of Egypt (Numbers 25). God specifically forbade Israel to take wives from among the surrounding nations, including Moab (Deut. 7:3). Moabites were forbidden to worship at the Tabernacle because they had not allowed Moses and the Israelites to pass through their land on the way to Canaan. Further, it was the Moabites who hired the false prophet Balaam to try to curse Israel (Deut. 23:3-6). Now, Naomi has not only settled in Moab; but she is mingling her family line with Moab, seeking blessing in the shelter of Moab.

Elimelek's name means, "God is King." Yet, Elimelek did not live as if God was King in his life. He made choices that were based on expediency and self-protection, rather than on God's rule in his life. He took his family to Moab to avoid the famine in Israel. The result was great chaos and loss for his family. Naomi could have returned to Israel after the death of Elimelek. Instead, she put down roots in Moab and allowed her sons to intermarry with Moabite women. We often act "ruler" over our own lives, making choices that seem "right in our own eyes." When we act in these self-directed ways, we end up in places that God never intended as part of our journey. "There is a way that seems right to a man; but its end is the way is death" (Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25).

Naomi's return to the land of Israel: 1:6-13

After the death of her sons, Naomi determined to return to Israel, having heard that God had lifted the famine and given Israel food.

“Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the Lord had visited His people in giving them food” (1:6).

Orpah and Ruth both declared that they would leave their homeland and go with Naomi to Israel. Yet, Naomi insisted that they remain in Moab, because she could offer them no hope for a future with her.

But Naomi said, “Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me” (1:11-13).

In Naomi's eyes, the two women would be foolish to wait for her to raise up two more sons whom they could marry. Moreover, she declared, *“the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me.”* Why stay with a person whom God was *“against?”*

Naomi's life had fallen apart in Moab. She had lost hope for the future, believing that the hand of God was against her. When everything in life falls apart, it can seem as if life is no longer worth living; that God will never again fight for us. It can feel like there is no future, no good that can come out of so much hardship and heartache. Yet, there is light on the other side of darkness, IF we keep our hope fixed on God. Naomi could not see that she had hope and a bright future because of the grace and mercy of God. He delights in taking prodigal sons and daughters and giving them a great blessing. Naomi's story begins with mourning; but it ends with rejoicing . . . because with God there is always hope.

Ruth's vow to go with Naomi: 1:14-18

The turning point in this story comes with Ruth's vow to remain with Naomi *until death*.

And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Then she said,

“Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.” When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her (1:14-18).

Ruth made a commitment not only to Naomi, but also to Naomi’s God, her people and her land. She vowed to live *and* die with Naomi, and to allow her body to be buried in Israel. Ruth “*clung to*” Naomi. This same verb was used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the bond between husband and wife. Truly, Ruth committed her life to Naomi, “*until death do us part.*” Finally, she sealed her words by invoking a curse upon herself if she ever did anything to break her vow of allegiance.

Naomi’s silence after such a passionate vow is revealing. She was consumed by her own losses and self-pity. Sadly, she was blind to God’s beautiful provision of love and comfort, in Ruth.

It is difficult to perceive how Ruth saw anything compelling enough to move her to commit her entire life to be with Naomi. Ruth had seen and experienced the heavy losses of husbands and hope. She had seen Naomi’s despair that God was “against her.” She had heard Naomi’s words pleading for her to return to the land of Moab to seek a better future there. Yet, in spite of Naomi’s less than compelling witness, Ruth was moved to go with her, seeking a share in Naomi’s future in Israel, rather than in Moab. We can only conclude that somewhere, somehow Ruth had come to a personal faith in Yahweh as her own God. Ruth’s hope for a future was not tied to Naomi, rather, to Yahweh, whom she called by His personal name, “Lord,” in her vow. As the story will continue to unfold, we will find the faith of Ruth shining brighter and brighter with each new day, as she trusts the Lord to guide her life and shape her future. Let us remember NOT to place our trust in another person for our future; rather, to keep our eyes and our hope fixed on the Lord. He alone is worthy of our utmost trust.

The arrival in Bethlehem: 1:19-22

So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Do not

call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?” (1:19-21).

The entire city of Bethlehem was in shock at the sight Naomi. She had departed a decade earlier with a husband and two sons. Now, she was returning a devastated and lonely woman, with only a Moabite daughter-in-law for a companion. *“Is this Naomi,”* they asked in disbelief? In turn, Naomi asked that they change her name to *“Mara,”* which means *“bitterness,”* stating that the Lord had dealt very bitterly with her.

Mara – “bitterness.” Naomi blamed the Almighty for making her life very bitter. She failed to consider that her journey was a reflection of choices that she made to walk away from God. Her decade of death in Moab was not in God’s original script for her life. It was a path that she and Elimelek had chosen, and these were the sad consequences of their self-directed decisions.

Yet, even in our rebellion and wandering, the grace of God is still at work. As the prodigal Naomi entered back into Israel, renaming herself “Mara” (bitterness), her tear-filled eyes could not see that the goodness of God was standing right next to her in the person of Ruth. This young Moabite woman was a gift of God to Naomi in her time of need. In fact, Naomi’s entire future blessing would spring from the womb of this Moabite outsider. The odd couple – Naomi and Ruth – returning to Israel in complete disgrace, would quickly rise, by the grace of God, to the place of highest honor in the biblical narrative: conveyors of the Messianic hope! Yes, our bad choices have consequences; but our gracious God is able to bring life out of death: “He will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair” (Isaiah 61:3).

Ruth gleanes in Boaz’s field: 2:1-7

One day Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go out into the harvest fields to pick up the stalks of grain left behind by anyone who is kind enough to let me do it.” Naomi replied, “All right, my daughter, go ahead.” So Ruth went out to gather grain behind the harvesters (2:2,3).

Naomi and Ruth had no means to support themselves. Ruth took the initiative to go out gleaning to find food for their sustenance.

The gleaning laws in Israel were like a welfare program for the poor (Leviticus 19:9; 23:22; Deut.24:19). God always has compassion for the poor, the outcast and the needy, and makes a way to provide for them.

“So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelek” (2:3).

Ruth just “happened” to land in Boaz’s field (literally, “her chance chanced upon the field of Boaz). Actually, there are no “coincidences” with God. It was the Lord who was looking after His precious daughters, Naomi and Ruth, and carefully overseeing their ways.

When we desire to walk with God, He is pleased to direct our steps. “The mind of man plans his ways; but the Lord directs his steps” (Proverbs 16:9). The key is that we must desire the Lord’s direction. Living in the will of God is not so much a matter of “finding” His will, as it is maintaining a yielded heart to God and asking for his guidance. Don’t sit idly waiting for some special sign from God to point the way. As Ruth did, use your mind, your initiative, your hard work . . . all the while maintaining a heart that desires HIS best plan for your life. When we are surrendered to His lordship over our lives, He will lead us in steps that He desires us to take. Our “chance WILL chance upon the field” God has for us at that particular point in our journey.

Boaz was a righteous man, as can be seen from his greeting to his reapers:

Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, “May the Lord be with you.” And they said to him, “May the Lord bless you” (2:4).

Boaz noticed Ruth gleaning in his field and asked his reapers who she was. He was informed that she was the Moabite woman who had returned to Bethlehem with Naomi, his relative.

Boaz blesses Ruth: 2:8-16

Boaz came to Ruth, telling her to continue gleaning in his field throughout the remainder of the harvest season. He promised her protection and provision under his care. When she asked why she was being so favorably treated, he commented on her faithfulness to Naomi and her commitment to become part of Israel:

Boaz replied to her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge” (2:11-12).

Ruth’s reputation had spread all over the town (2:11 and 3:11). She was a woman of excellent character who had taken a big risk in leaving her familiar country to come to a people she did not know. Boaz rightly pointed out that although Ruth had come under *his* protection, it was “*the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings*” Ruth had actually found refuge.

God uses people to bless other people. Ruth found refuge in Boaz. Yet, it was the Lord, ultimately, Who was using Boaz to provide this place of refuge for Ruth. Perhaps God wants to use YOU as His means of blessing someone else in some unique way. Ask God IF He wants to use you as His “wings of refuge” for someone else. Then, keep your eyes open for that person who “just happens” to be gleaning in your field. You are most like God when you are exercising grace and compassion toward those in need.

Boaz further blessed Ruth by serving her the midday meal along with his reapers. Typically, gleaners would not be seated with reapers at such a meal, since reapers were actually working for the landowner. Yet, Ruth ate with the reapers and was served *by Boaz!*

At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar.” So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left. When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. Also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her” (2:14-16).

Ruth reports to Naomi: 2:17-23

At the end of this very eventful day, Ruth returned home and told Naomi what had happened. Naomi was delighted to learn that Ruth had spent the day in Boaz’s field, since he was “*one of their closest relatives*” (2:20). Naomi recognized the *kindness of God* in the events of that day. This was the first time in this story that Naomi suspected that God *might* be working in her favor.

There is much emphasis on KINDNESS in the book of Ruth. Naomi asked God to deal kindly with her daughters-in-law (1:8). Boaz spoke kindly to Ruth the gleaner (2:13). Naomi acknowledged God's kindness in leading Ruth to Boaz (2:20). Boaz praised Ruth for her dual acts of kindness, first toward Naomi, then toward him (3:10). Kindness is a fruit that God's Spirit wants to produce in you (Galatians 5:22). Ultimately, kindness is an attribute of God, demonstrated to us supremely in the coming of Jesus into our world as our Savior (Titus 3:4,5). Ask God to release more of His Spirit's kindness through you (to increase your K.Q. – your Kindness Quotient). It will make a huge difference in your interactions with other people. Who knows . . . God may even use your kindness to further His story in someone else's life.

Ruth went on to explain how Boaz had invited her to continue gleaning in his field until the end of harvest season. Naomi encouraged her to do this, since she would be safe under his care.

“So she stayed close by the maids of Boaz in order to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she lived with her mother-in-law” (2:23).

The stage has been set for the blossoming of a love-relationship between Boaz and Ruth, the subject of the remaining two chapters.

***Addendum: “Between the lines” insight on Boaz . . .**

Why was Boaz moved to show such favor to an outsider like Ruth, a Moabite woman who, technically, had an unfavorable status in Israel? Why did he spontaneously show her *kindness and respect*?

Perhaps, because the story of *Boaz's mother* paralleled the story of Ruth. Boaz's mother was Rahab, the former prostitute from Jericho, who had become a believer in Yahweh, left her familiar people, and entered into the community of Israel when Jericho fell (Joshua chs.2&6). Rahab, had shown *kindness* to the spies, and asked for *kindness* in return (Joshua 2:12). Boaz's father, Salmon, returned her *kindness*, choosing to love and respect Rahab, in spite of her past and people's opinions of her. Boaz learned from *both* of his parents about the love of God for outsiders, and particularly about *kindness*. It was, therefore, most natural for Boaz to see Ruth through grace-filled lenses. Boaz was adding another chapter to a unique family story of grace and *kindness* toward outsiders.

**Thanks to my study-buddy and research assistant, Shirley, for the MANY profound insights you weekly add to this journey through the Word. Love doing this with you! You are truly a “woman of excellence” (Ruth 3:11)!*

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 12 – Ruth: The Promise Continues
Ruth 3-4

Introduction

On one level, Ruth is the story of a single family struggling to find a way forward in a difficult world. Ruth chapters 1-2 detail the plight of Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, as they resettle in Bethlehem, with little hope for a promising future. Ruth chapters 3-4 tell the story of Naomi and Ruth’s amazing turn of fortune. Guided by the sovereign hand of God, they find their “redeemer” in the man Boaz. His love and kindness, his mercy and grace, become the much-needed refuge for a family with little hope. On a higher level, the book of Ruth is the story of God’s great love for the entire human family, for it contains the scarlet thread of **God’s promise** to bring THE Redeemer and Savior to the world through the family line of David. How fitting, then, that the story of Naomi and Ruth finding their redeemer should occur in Bethlehem, the very city that became the birthplace of the Lord 1,000 years later.

Naomi’s plan for Ruth: 3:1-5

Naomi was encouraged by the entrance of Boaz into the picture. She knew that he was a relative of her deceased husband, Elimelek, and that he potentially could serve as the “kinsman redeemer” for her and Ruth. According to the laws that God gave to Israel through Moses, if a woman’s husband died and she had to sell family property to survive, the “kinsman redeemer” would step in and buy the property. If it had already been sold to someone else, then he would redeem the property from that person. In this way, the widow would have funds in order to live, while at the same time, the property would remain “in the family.” At a later date, when a suitable heir was raised up in the original family line, the property would be returned to that family. This was God’s way of preserving, through times of hardship, the land inheritance for each family in Israel.

A separate, but related custom in Israel was the law of levirate marriage. This law stated that the brother (or nearest male relative) of a deceased man would marry his widow and raise up offspring for his brother so that the family line would not disappear. These two laws (kinsman redeemer & levirate marriage) were sometimes combined so that the nearest relative (redeemer) was called upon to save both the *land* and the *line* for the deceased man.

Boaz was a close relative of Elimelek, Naomi's deceased husband. Thus, he had the *potential* to serve as the kinsman redeemer and levirate husband for Naomi or Ruth. Yet, he was not the "nearest of kin." There was one who was a closer relative than him.

Naomi, knowing that Boaz was a righteous man who would be good for Ruth and for her, came up with a plan whereby Ruth would *invite* Boaz to consider the possibility of taking her under his wing in marriage, serving as their kinsman redeemer *and* levirate husband.

Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? Now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do." She said to her, "All that you say I will do" (3:1-5).

This entire scheme was risky for *any* woman; but perhaps more so for Ruth given her Moabite background. Nevertheless, Ruth moved on this plan *with faith, courage and character*.

What exactly was Ruth asking Boaz to do? "*Ruth wanted Boaz to marry her and thus to provide a refuge for her and Naomi, just as a kinsman redeemer would . . . She appealed to him to be the family member who, at his own cost, would act to rescue those whose future had been blighted, even though he didn't have to do so*" (Iain Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, p.172).

The qualifications for the kinsman redeemer were fourfold:

- He must be related to the family.
- He must be able to redeem the land.
- He must be willing to redeem the land.
- He must pay the price and make the transaction.

Boaz accepts Ruth's invitation: 3:6-13

That night, at the threshing floor, after Boaz had gone to lie down by his heap of grain, Ruth moved on Naomi's plan.

"When Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came secretly, and uncovered his feet and lay down" (3:7).

In Ruth's day, when a man covered a woman with the corner of his robe it was a symbolic gesture roughly similar to our modern practice of giving an engagement ring (Duguid, 172). This is what happened when Boaz woke up in the middle of the night and found Ruth lying at his feet. Ruth was inviting a betrothal from the kinsman redeemer.

It happened in the middle of the night that the man was startled and bent forward; and behold, a woman was lying at his feet. He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth your servant. So spread your covering over your servant, for you are a close relative" (3:8,9).

Ruth invited Boaz to spread his covering over her (to marry her). When God drew Israel out of Egypt, and entered into a covenant relationship with her, He was covering her with His garment: "Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My garment over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine," declares the Lord God" (Ezekiel 16:8). Yahweh became Israel's redeemer and husband, just as Boaz did for Ruth. In the same way, Jesus has become the bridegroom for the Church, His redeemed bride. He has spread the covering of His love over us, removing our sin, our shame and

Boaz once again commended Ruth for her character (3:11, also 2:11,12). She was a "woman of excellence" (noble character).

" . . . for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence" (3:11).

He commended Ruth for “*not going after younger men, whether poor or rich*” (v.10). In other words, Ruth was not following the passions of a young woman’s heart; rather, she was pursuing the principles of her godly heart. She was unselfishly seeking refuge both for herself and for Naomi, her mother-in-law by offering to become Boaz’s wife. She was continuing to fulfill her vows of commitment to Naomi, even in her pursuit of Boaz.

That night, Boaz promised to become the kinsman redeemer for Naomi, *and* the husband for Ruth IF the one relative who was more closely related to Elimelek passed on the same offer. He promised to settle the matter by the next day.

In Hebrew, Boaz said to Ruth: “All my people in the gate know you are a woman of excellence.” The city gate was where people gathered to share daily news and discuss events. It was the ancient version of a social media site. Proverbs 31 describes the virtuous woman. The last line goes like this: “Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates” (Prov.31:31). Truly, Ruth’s works were already the ‘talk of the town’ at the city gates. She was a woman of noble character (Prov.31:10) and her reputation had spread like wildfire via the social media site of her day! How about you? What do your social media sites say about your reputation?

Ruth returns to report to Naomi: 3:14-18

At Boaz’ instructions, Ruth remained all night at the threshing floor, for her own safety. Boaz sent her back to Naomi early in the morning, while it was still dark, so that she would not be seen departing the threshing floor and be accused of anything immoral. Ruth reported to Naomi that her plan had succeeded, and that Boaz would seek to become their kinsman redeemer *and* her husband.

Boaz was rightly concerned about the ‘appearance of evil’ IF people saw Ruth leaving his threshing floor in the early morning. People would have (wrongly) assumed that Boaz and Ruth were engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul says this to the early church: “Hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil” (1Thessalonians 5:22). We need to pay attention to our lifestyles, making sure that we do not give people the ‘impression’ that we are engaging in unethical or immoral behavior. Abstaining from evil is one thing. Abstaining from the appearance of evil requires an even higher level of diligence and concern for one’s testimony as a follower of Christ. Is there any area of your life where you might be giving the appearance of evil?

Boaz discusses redemption with the other relative: 4:1-6

The next day, Boaz fulfilled his promise, going to the city gate to discuss the redemption of Naomi's land with the other relative. Boaz first presented the LAND aspect of the kinsman redeemer to this other relative. He would have to purchase the land that belonged to Elimelek, and give the proceeds to Naomi. This seemed like a good deal to the man.

Then he said to the closest relative, "Naomi, who has come back from the land of Moab, has to sell the piece of land which belonged to our brother Elimelek. So I thought to inform you, saying, 'Buy it before those who are sitting here, and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if not, tell me that I may know; for there is no one but you to redeem it, and I am after you.'" And he said, "I will redeem it."

Then Boaz presented to the man the *other half* of the deal, the levirate marriage issue. This he did not see coming!

Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance" (4:5).

Because Naomi (and Ruth) were without children, there would still be no descendant in Elimelek's line to someday receive back the property from the kinsman redeemer. Thus, the obligation (Levirate marriage law) to marry Ruth and raise up that future heir for the house of Elimelek.

The closest relative said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, because I would jeopardize my own inheritance. Redeem it for yourself; you may have my right of redemption, for I cannot redeem it" (4:6).

This other potential kinsman redeemer now realized that he would have to return the redeemed property, someday, to a child born of the marriage to Ruth. He was not wealthy enough to purchase the property, give Naomi the money *and* then have the property someday revert back to Naomi's family as an "inheritance." This complex transaction would jeopardize his financial situation and the inheritance he intended to give his own children. Therefore, he forfeited the right to be the kinsman redeemer to Naomi and Ruth, and that right fell to Boaz as their next closest relative.

Boaz publicly commits to be the kinsman redeemer: 4:7-12

Boaz' commitment to become the kinsman redeemer and husband to Ruth was formalized with a shoe covenant. Exchanging shoes was one way, in the ancient world, that land deals were finalized. The shoe (or sandal) was what stepped upon the land; thus it was a fitting symbol for the transfer of land. In this case, it appears that the two men did not exchange sandals; rather, the man passing on the land/marriage deal gave his sandal to Boaz, indicating that he was "handing over" the kinsman redeemer right to the land.

(There was a different situation under which the sandal would be used in a more humiliating fashion. If the kinsman redeemer was *able* but *unwilling* to marry one such as Ruth, then his contempt for God's law was symbolized as the rejected woman removed his sandal and spit in his face [Deuteronomy 25:9]!)

Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses today that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelek and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. Moreover, I have acquired Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, to be my wife in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance, so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his birth place; you are witnesses today" (4:9-10).

The formalities concluded with the elders of the city pronouncing a blessing over Boaz, Ruth and the descendants that would result from their union.

Naomi holds the redeemer: 4:13-17

As this story comes to a close, it is important to notice details in the wording. Thus far, Boaz has been called "the redeemer." Yet, in this closing scene, someone else is called Naomi's "redeemer."

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and

became his nurse. The neighbor women gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi!" So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David (4:13-17).

Though Boaz was, technically, the kinsman redeemer, it would be THE CHILD who would, symbolically, redeem life for Naomi as he would "restore life to her" and "sustain her in her old age." Thus, the story ends with the child taking center stage in the grand story of redemption. How fitting, as this child would carry on the Messianic promise of God, through David down to Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Savior! This child would bring about redemption not only for Naomi and Ruth, but for all of humanity!

The story of Naomi began with great pain and loss. She lost her husband and two sons, and had only Ruth, the Moabite daughter-in-law left by her side. Yet, God used Ruth to bless Naomi beyond what she could ever have imagined. The women of Bethlehem, who formerly called Naomi "Mara" (bitter), now pronounce a blessing over her, noting especially that "your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." Ruth LOVED Naomi. She was "better than seven sons!" God uses faithful, loving people to accomplish His beautiful plan in the lives of others. How might God want to use your love and faithfulness to bless someone else?

The genealogy of King David: 4:18-22

The book ends giving the lineage of King David. This indicates two things: 1) The book of Ruth was composed sometime during the reign of David. 2) The purpose of the book was to shed light on the unique circumstances and character of David's forefathers.

"Now these are the generations of Perez: to Perez was born Hezron, and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed, and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David" (4:18-22).

One of the *glaring* facts in the genealogy is the presence of the kinds of people that you would not normally associate with the blessing of God and the "right" to be in the sacred line leading to the Christ. Perez was born of the incestuous relationship between Judah and his more righteous daughter-in-law, Tamar (Genesis 38:1-30). Boaz was born to Salmon and Rahab, the former

prostitute from Jericho, turned convert to Israel (Matthew 1:5). Obed was born to a Moabite woman, Ruth.

Clearly, God's grace and mercy move Him to redeem the most unlikely people, using their lives to bring His promise to the entire world.

Perhaps this story was composed *after* David's adultery with Bathsheba. Recall that God promised that the child springing from David and Bathsheba, Solomon, would be the one through whom the sacred lineage would continue (1Kings 1:17). How could that be? How could God choose a child born *from this union* to carry on the sacred promise? The little story of Ruth gives an implied response: God moves in *very* mysterious ways!

Boaz presents a beautiful picture of Jesus, our kinsman redeemer. Boaz was a "family member." Jesus left heaven's glory in order to become a member of the human family. "Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers" (Hebrews 2:11). Boaz had the wealth to redeem Ruth and Naomi. Jesus had within Himself the wealth and power to pay the redemption price for all of humanity. "He redeemed us with His precious blood" (1Peter 1:18,19). Ruth came to Boaz with little to offer, other than poverty and brokenness. We come to Jesus as needy people with spiritual poverty and brokenness. Boaz saw value in Ruth and Naomi. He was willing to redeem them. Jesus values every human being enough to pay for the sins of the world. Boaz took Ruth to be his wife. Jesus calls the church His "bride." Naomi and Ruth shared in the riches of Boaz. We share in the eternal riches of Christ.

*God moves in a mysterious way; His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea; and rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines, of never failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds ye so much dread,
Are big with mercy, and shall break, in blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.*

*His purpose will ripen fast, unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain:
God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.*

William Cowper - 1773