

February 22 : Scriptures Deuteronomy 22-25

SUMMARY

As we cruise down the Bible Road, there are a lot of practical commands to point out. This chapter starts with what you would think are common courtesies. If you find something that doesn't belong to you, don't take it as your own. Look for the owner. Even if it puts you out, take care of other people's property and try to get it back to the owner. It's also God's way for us to show kindness and help others in need. The text talks about helping a person whose animal has "fallen" or "broken down" under a load, but that can easily apply to helping someone change a tire on the road, give them a lift, or wait for professional help to arrive. You don't have to look hard to see the Lord's mercy, kindness, love, and compassion reflected in His laws. No wonder King David sang such a beautiful Psalm about the glory of God's Torah (Psalm 119).

Verse 22:5 is simple, and it refers to gender-bending and implies a "Why would someone want to do this?" question. Counter to what a friend of mine argued, this is not a prohibition from dressing up for comedy purposes as Milton Berle, Flip Wilson, and the Monty Python troupe did. For Yehovah to forbid this practice indicates something serious, like cross-dressing, gender dysphoria, or homosexuality issues. As with many of the Lord's commands, it's essential to look to the heart and spirit of the command, not just the letter, although that is the place to start.

Each law in the next set of sundry commands (22:6-12) is interesting. The bird/egg prohibition has two components, per the rabbis. According to one explanation, God intends to prevent the mother the grief of seeing its offspring, the egg, taken from it. Therefore, the mother bird must be chased away before taking the egg. Another interpretation is about the preservation of the species. If the mother is taken along with the egg, the line of life is broken. If we take just the egg, the mother can produce more. Doing so is both commonsense and wise at the same time. Humanity was mandated to steward the Lord's creation. Following this command is an example of how we do it. We can apply this principle to many areas of agriculture, livestock, fishing, and the rest of our God-given world resources.

The law about building a wall around the edge of our roof seems ridiculous (22:8). I bet you're thinking about a wall with a sloped roof on your house, right? Well, you're thinking outside of the biblical cultural context. Roofs in the Middle East were flat. Flat roofs are sensible because it gives the family extra work, storage, and living space. During the day, family members lived inside their houses because it was cooler under the daytime sun. People cooled off by climbing onto their rooftops via stairs or a ladder at

night. However, a careless person might inadvertently walk off the roof. Having a small, raised ledge would be the homeowner's way of protecting the negligent person. And we come to the heart of the matter. I see this law as a general law about my responsibility to look after those who aren't looking after themselves, i.e., the careless and clueless. My responsibilities could include creating safety measures or removing hazards. Either way, it's a loving, merciful, and compassionate way to show God's character to others.

The mixture law is about preserving uniform things together; two different crops compete, unique fabrics wash and shrink differently, an ox and donkey pull with unequal strengths and strides, etc. These laws can also reinforce God's "purity" standards in a larger sense.

Finally, the tassels always remind the Israelite men of the terms of the covenant, that they live under those terms, and their obligation to obey them, no matter how insignificant they may seem (22:12).

Family purity is a *big thing* in Judaism today. For ancient Israelites, it was necessary to marry a virgin. One of the big reasons had to do with claims of a family inheritance. Marrying a virgin meant a clean distinction of ownership and estate. This law (22:13-21) addresses a husband's false accusation against his wife's marital virginity to get out of a marriage. A woman presenting herself as a virgin when she isn't is a grave accusation. If she is guilty of promiscuity, she's dead (22:20-21). Therefore, the cultural practice was to preserve the bloodstained section of sheet or cloth from the wedding night to prove the young lady was a virgin. The wife's parents keep this cloth as a testimony to prove their daughter's purity before marriage. If the husband accuses his wife, her parents present the wedding night cloth. The man is fined for slandering his wife (and her family) and prohibited from ever divorcing (22:19). Again, do you see how the Lord's laws protect the innocent and vulnerable?

The final part of this chapter deals with cases of adultery and rape. As you read through it, look for the wisdom in the commands. For example, a woman is guilty if she was raped in the city, and she could have called for help. However, she's guiltless if she's raped in the isolation of the countryside because even if she called out, no one would hear her. In that case, only the rapist would die.

Chapter 23 has some puzzling laws. Although this may seem like a rather odd or extreme set of prohibitions, there are reasons. Do you remember the Lord's commands about unblemished sacrifices (Leviticus 22:21)? The same goes for the priest who offers sacrifices. Blemishes constitute disqualifications based on physical form, legitimate birth

(to guarantee pedigree), nationality (the Ammonites and Moabites came from incestuous unions, Lot and his two daughters), and history of hostility. However, even though the Edomites and Egyptians had been hostile to Israel, they are to be received because of family relations (Edom) and previous early history (Egypt). Interestingly, the Egyptians had initially been welcoming to Israel and allowed them to settle in their land. But the Ammonites and Moabites were not welcoming (even hostile), prohibiting Israel from even passing through their lands. I see a lesson here about the value of hospitality.

Now, how about this? God even cares about personal and camp hygiene! He tells the Israelites how to address their bathroom practices when encamped for war against their enemies. They are to deal with ritual uncleanness (23:9-11) and physical uncleanness (23:12-13). What's the Lord's reason? He's holy and expects His people to live holy.

Did you know the Lord had His version of slave emancipation and sanctuary? It's right here in 23:15-16. What can we learn from this? Yehovah's ideal for people is freedom, not servitude or slavery. That's why there are so many laws that release debts, regulate indentured servitude, and protect enslaved people whether "legally" or have escaped to Israel. Yehovah is a God of freedom for all people!

Of the remaining laws of ch. 23, I want to point out the cult prostitution/prostitution wage issue. On a spiritual level, this connects the holy with the unholy, Yehovah with pagan gods. On an immoral level, this presents ungodly gain as a sacred gift. It would be like a drug dealer or a pimp giving a tithe of their income. Because it came from ungodly sources, God rejects such "blemished" or tainted offerings.

Chapter 24 addresses marriage and divorce, life issues, and laws for vulnerable and innocent people. The divorce law is a merciful one. In the ancient world, divorce was often carried out by the husband kicking the wife out of the house. Without the commanded divorce certificate, no man would want to marry the woman because they wouldn't be sure if she were free from her previous marriage. This situation is a potentially sticky one regarding family land inheritance concerns. As for a marriage's beginning, the Lord gives his blessing of a year-long honeymoon for a newly married couple (23:5). As you read about previously, the man is exempt from military service during that first year of marriage.

A pledge is a promise to pay back a loan. A person uses a millstone to grind grain for food. Taking a millstone is forbidden because it prevents the family from eating, endangering their lives. Kidnapping also threatens lives. Because kidnapping is life-threatening, the kidnapper forfeits their life as their punishment. Not treating skin

diseases properly can also be life-threatening. Do you see the connection between the three laws?

The final section of ch. 24 is about maintaining a person's dignity (24:10-13), respecting employees (Israelite or non-resident Gentile) by not taking advantage of them, and paying wages promptly. Notice the sunset clause. Sunset is the end of the day and the start of a new one in biblical reckoning. A paragraph on justice issues dealing with an individual's responsibility before the law follows. Although the Lord reserves His sovereign right to mete out justice along family lines (exodus 34:7), Israel's courts are to hold individuals responsible for their infractions. Justice must be applied equally to all, especially the vulnerable (24:17). And speaking of the vulnerable, the law of gleaning is here to help those who need food. The landowner is to leave some of his crops in the field for others. Gleaning is the ancient Israelite version of a foodbank (24:19-22).

Our final chapter of the day is about fairness and mercy in judgment, family lines, honesty, and God's judgment on the Amalekites who sneak-attacked Israel for no cause. For justice to be legitimate, the guilty person must be punished. However, there is a limit to punishment. The limitation is similar to the "eye for eye" limitation to prevent passions from going beyond what is judicially right, degrading a fellow person. This command speaks very much to our need for fair and uniform prison sentences today, where they are unequal or overly harsh. It's bad enough that a person is punished for their crimes, and the punishment doesn't need to degrade them. And likewise, as in the case of more severe crimes like rape and human trafficking, there should be stiff sentences to measure the crime's severity.

In case you're wondering, an ox was sometimes allowed to eat grain that it was threshing (25:4). What's the principle in this command? It's merciful for animals to share in the fruit of their labors. If so, then how much more should that apply to people? Profit-sharing is an example of this, and bonuses are another example. The Apostle Paul quotes this principle as a guide to paying those who serve others in the Christian community at the expense of a regular income.

Next, we have two seemingly unrelated sets of laws – the law of levirate marriage and improper fighting. First, levirate marriage was God's ordained way to preserve the family inheritance (25:5-10). If a man dies without a male heir, his brother is required to "marry" his sister-in-law until a male heir is born. This practice is so the estate will stay within the first man's family. If the brother refuses his brotherly duty, it's a big thing in the community. His label is shameful, declaring to all that he refused his duty to his family and his whole family will bear his shame. Talk about peer pressure!

So, what about the woman whose husband is fighting with another guy and she “takes matters into her own hands,” so to speak (25:11)? She’s harshly punished because she threatened the man’s ability to father offspring. Do you see the connection with the previous estate laws? Family lines and family land are critical to God’s covenant with His people. God will firmly deal with those who threaten land inheritance or the production of offspring to inherit that land.

In keeping with the Lord’s commands for judicial fairness, financial dealings are just as important (25:13-16). No cheating is allowed! Enough said.

And finally, the Lord reiterates His command to wipe out the Amalekites. All of them.

INSIGHT

Have you ever read the verse, “Therefore, whoever breaks one of **the least of these commands** and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven? But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). Did you know that in today’s chapters, you read “the least of the commandments?” You’ll find that command in Deuteronomy 22:6-7, the law to drive away a wild bird from her nest before you take her egg.

“Least” in the rabbinic parlance means “insignificant.” “Great” means the opposite, “significant,” or “most significant.” When the Jewish leadership challenged Jesus for His take on which commandment was the greatest or “most significant” commandment, Jesus took two great commands, love God and love others, and welded them together into one Great Command. This one command covers all the other commands because they all apply to either or both of the “love” categories, and they are by far the most significant command.

The chasing the bird away command is called “least” because it takes little effort, and most people would overlook such a simple task. But it guides us to show mercy to the mother. And because it teaches us to show mercy and compassion to all of God’s creation, what seems to be an insignificant command is actually a very significant one.

And it teaches us another lesson. All God’s commands are important regardless of whether they seem insignificant or odd, and God wouldn’t have given them if they weren’t important to us and His world.

February 23 : Scriptures Deuteronomy 26-28

SUMMARY

Chapter 26 holds commands for the firstfruits offering and the third-year tithe. As you can see by now, the Lord claims firstfruits and firstborns as His own. The “firsts” remind the Israelites who their King is and that He should take preeminence in their lives, both individual and national. The firstfruit presentation here concerns the firstfruit of the barley harvest (at Passover, spring), the wheat harvest (at Shavuot, early summer), and the end of the year harvest (at Tabernacles, fall). The worshiper recounts the basic story of how Yehovah began with Abraham (the wanderer from Aram), his family’s sojourn in Egypt during the great famine, Yehovah’s mighty deliverance, and how He fulfilled His promise to bring them to the land He promised Abraham. The firstfruits are evidence of the Lord’s faithfulness. After the ritual, everyone gets to sit down for a festive meal!

The third-year tenth is a beautiful way the Lord takes care of His servants, the Levites, and the needy in every community (26:12). The First Tithe supports the Levites (Numbers 18:21), and the Second Tithe is for going up to Jerusalem to participate in the Feasts of the Lord (Deuteronomy 12:5-7, 17-18; 14:22-26). The First and Second Tithe are collected every year. Did you catch that? It comes to 20% of what you produce. (And church people complain about giving 10%!)

The people collect their Third Tithe on the 3rd and 6th year of the seven-year Sabbath cycle. The people give this tithe to the local Levite, alien, orphan, and widow (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12) to declare that they have fulfilled the Lord’s commands and express their desire for His blessing.

The chapter ends with Moses summarizing the covenant. God has given His commands, and the people are to follow them. By this, the Lord affirms Israel as His possession and will “elevate you to praise, fame, and glory above all the nations he has made, and that you will be a holy people to the Lord your God as he promised” (26:19).

Moses has now shared the bulk of the commands. Chapter 27 opens with the Lord’s command to erect standing stones once the people have crossed into Canaan (27:2). The stones will be set up on Mount Ebal, one of the mountains where the Israelites will gather to pronounce God’s covenant blessings and curses publicly. The memorial stones will have the terms of the covenant inscribed on them and covered with plaster to protect the words from the elements (27:2). Should there be any doubt about the terms, the plaster can be removed along with all doubt. Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal are ground zero for Israel’s covenant renewal ceremony in the Promised Land. Some archeologists believe

they've found the altar on Mount Ebal described here in the verses. Make an internet search with "Mount Ebal Joshua Altar" and check it out!

On the day the Israelites set up the memorial stones, they are to split the community with half the people on Mount Gerizim and the other half on Mount Ebal with the Levites in the valley between them. As part of the covenant renewal ceremony, the Levites will yell the cursed behavior with the people shouting, "Amen!" The people are saying, in effect, that these are things we absolutely will not do as a nation.

Now that the relationship between Yehovah and Israel is rehearsed and the covenant terms are spelled out, it's time to put forth the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience. Chapter 28 is where you find those. These blessings and curses are similar to the Admonition of Leviticus 26. In Deuteronomy's case, based on the number of verses alone, there are nearly *four times* the amount of curses than blessings. Yes, Yehovah wants to bless His people. But He knows human nature and its desires. Sometimes the stick is more effective than the carrot for faithful obedience. Sadly, this is the case with ancient Israel's history. Make sure you read the curses carefully. The longer Israel strays, the more the afflictions increase with severity, with the most severe being exile from their land (28:64). Frankly, the end of the chapter is a downer.

INSIGHT

Isn't helping people out a pleasant feeling? Wouldn't it be great to be able to help someone in need? You can! I want to encourage you to tithe. While it's tough to follow the 20-30% giving pattern, 10% is not that hard. For most of us, it's a simple matter of discipline. Try this if you've never tithed before. Decide in your heart at what percentage to start. Grab an envelope or make a category in your financial software. Take your designated percentage off the top when you get paid or any form of income. No bargaining, no questions. It gets easier when you regard it as the Lord's money and not yours.

That tithe should support your local congregation and those who serve them. Then add a little more to your envelope or account, either a set amount or percentage. Use that to bless other ministries or the needy around you. While you do this in good faith and thanks to the Lord, ask Him to prosper you so you can give more, "And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). I want to be clear. Tithing is not about giving to get. Tithing is recognizing who your Provider is. And He has promised to care for your needs as you care for other people's needs, "The generous man [is a source of blessing and] shall be prosperous *and* enriched, And he who waters will

himself be watered [reaping the generosity he has sown]" (Proverbs 11:25 Amplified Bible).

February 24 : Scriptures Deuteronomy 29-31

SUMMARY

We start today's reading with the renewal of the Sinai covenant. Technically speaking, this is a second covenant, a continuation of the one the Lord made with Israel at Mount Sinai (Horeb), "in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb" (29:1). The first is the Sinai covenant, and the second is the Mosaic covenant, although many refer to them as one covenant while using each name interchangeably.

Moses again gives a brief history but tags it with, "Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand, eyes to see, or ears to hear" (29:4). In other words, "The Lord did this for you, but you just don't get it. You don't understand the magnitude of what the Lord has done for you." Moses tells them they've been living a miracle existence in the Wilderness, "Your clothes didn't wear out, your food and drink never ran out, and you wiped out your enemies. The Lord did this for you so that you'll know He alone is God" (29:5-7 paraphrased). What should Israel's response be according to Moses? "Therefore, observe the words of this covenant and follow them, so that you will succeed in everything you do (29:9).

Moses tells them they are going through this covenant renewal ceremony not only for their sake but also for generations to come, *many* generations (29:10-15). And what's the purpose of this ceremony? "... so that he may *establish you today as his people and he may be your God* as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (29:13).

Again, Moses warns them of the great danger of breaking Yehovah's covenant. The covenant is not something to take lightly. The idolatry the Israelites have already witnessed will be a temptation for them, and there will be those who think they can slide, "he may consider himself exempt, thinking, 'I will have peace even though I follow my own stubborn heart'" (29:19). Bad idea! Breaking the covenant "will lead to the destruction of the well-watered land as well as the dry land" (29:19).

Rain is crucial for the land of Israel to this day. How much more severe was it in ancient Israel without the irrigation modern Israel has today, and they depended on the Lord's grace to send rain. Without it, the land languishes, and the people die. Therefore, rainfall became God's leading indicator of Israel's faithfulness or apostasy. Disobedience stops the rain, and obedience opens the heavenly spigot. As I've already pointed out, the endpoint of God's judgments against a rebellious Israel would be exile. Therefore, an empty, desolate landscape is the prime sign of Israel's covenant rebellion.

So here's a little history lesson. The Israelites lived in their land from the time of Joshua (1440 B.C.) through the Babylonian Exile (586 B.C.). Many Jews (not all) returned from Babylone seventy years later and remained in the land through the Greek and early Roman empires. The Jews rebelled against Rome (A.D. 66-70). The rebellion ended when most of the Jews were exiled in A.D. 70. A third and final rebellion against Rome occurred in 132-135 A.D. (the Bar Kochba rebellion). That rebellion ended with the destruction of all 50 Jewish fortresses and 985 villages. Jerusalem was plowed under and rebuilt as *Aelia Capitolina* (a Roman city). Judea was renamed *Syria Palestina* (Latin for *Philistine*). The Jews were exiled from Jerusalem, sold into slavery, and dispersed throughout the Roman Empire.

Jesus predicted this would happen due to the Jewish leadership's rejection of Jesus, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See, your house is abandoned to you. I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Luke 13:34-35). Jesus also predicted Israel's rebirth before His return (Matthew 24:32-33) and the recapture of Jerusalem by the Jews (Luke 21:24). Jesus' words in Luke 21:24 seem to match perfectly with what happened to Israel in A.D. 135 and the Jews taking Jerusalem during the Six-Day War on June 7, 1967.

Why do I bring this up? Because when the Jews are out of their land for disobedience, the land languishes as Moses describes. The famous American writer Mark Twain visited Europe and the Middle East and later wrote *The Innocents Abroad*, documenting his observations. Here is how he described the land of Israel in the late 1800s. "Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince... Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land? "Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies" (*Mark Twain's unwittingly prophetic vision for the State of Israel* by Tuly Weisz, The Jerusalem Post, jpost.com, SEPTEMBER 23, 2017).

The famous Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides (1194-1270), visited Jerusalem in 1267. He noted that "he couldn't find even nine other Jews to pray with (10 Jews making an official quorum for prayer). He wrote to his son, 'Many are Israel's forsaken places, and great is the desecration. The more sacred the place, the greater the devastation it has suffered. Jerusalem is the most desolate place of all.' But Nachmanides also wrote that the devastation 'constitutes a good tiding, proclaiming that our land will not accept our enemies... Since the time that we left it, [the land] has not accepted any nation or people, and they all try to settle it... This is a great proof and assurance to us.'

The 13th-century scholar wrote that Israel will remain desolate until the Jewish People assume control. But when the people of Israel finally return to the land of Israel, the region will once again flourish thanks to Divine providence." (*Ibid.*)

However, since the Jews began returning to their covenant land in the late 1800s, Israel's rebirth in May 1948, and the retaking of Jerusalem in June 1967, it becomes evident that Yehovah is still working with His people. Israel is exceedingly fruitful, and Tel Aviv has become the world's startup capital. Israel's strides in high tech, medicine, and many other areas prove the Lord's hand is still on them.

Over time, Israel has been unfaithful, as Moses predicted, but Yehovah has remained faithful. He's been working with His people to fulfill all His promises. Why? *Because His name and reputation are at stake!*

Chapter 30 is a continuation of ch. 29 and is God's promise of national restoration that I noted above. Even if Israel's exile is extreme, the people *will* come to their senses, repent, and return to the Lord, and He will restore them, "he will restore your fortunes, have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. Even if your exiles are at the farthest horizon, he will gather you and bring you back from there." Yehovah will prosper them even more than their ancestors. (That is so true today!) He will change their hearts and go after their enemies. Obedience is the key (30:10).

What, therefore, should the Israelites do? Since covenant faithfulness is a matter of life and death, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, love the Lord your God, obey him, and remain faithful to him. For he is your life, and he will prolong your days as you live in the land the Lord swore to give to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (30:19-20). Moses reassures his people this is not too difficult nor beyond their grasp. Yehovah has placed His word in their hands.

Furthermore, they have witnesses, heaven and earth, that will bear testimony to their pledge of allegiance to Yehovah (30:9). Why did the Lord choose those two as witnesses? Because heaven and earth last longer than human witnesses do. Plus, as Israel follows the covenant, so testifies heaven (rain) and earth (productivity).

Finally, in ch. 31, Moses reminds the Israelites that he won't lead them much longer. The Lord is their leader who will go before them into Canaan with Joshua in command (31:3). Two times Moses speaks the words, "Be strong and courageous," once to the people and once to Joshua (31:6-7). Besides their new leader, they will also have Yehovah's Word to

guide them; Moses writes down the Torah and gives it to the priests. Notice the words, "Moses *wrote down this law* and gave it to the priests" (the Law, 31:9). And "When Moses had finished writing down on a scroll *every single word* of this law" (31:24), which means the entirety of God's Torah is a written record of His commands, statutes, and guidelines to teach His people the proper way to live. The Lord commands the entire covenant Law be read to the people every Sabbath year (the 7th year of the 7-year cycle) during the Feast of Tabernacles (31:10) as a reminder of the covenant terms. The mass recitation of the Torah is logical since all the Israelite men are to attend Tabernacles as one of the three pilgrim feasts. Everyone is to listen to the priests read through the commands. What's the purpose? "So that they may listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and be careful to follow all the words of this law" (31:12).

Despite having a written record of God's commands and hearing them all read every 7th year, the Lord knows His people will turn their backs on Him after Moses dies (31:16). Yehovah will then have to discipline and punish them (31:17-18). To paraphrase the Lord in verse 31:19-21, "I warned them, you (Moses) warned them, but they're going to do it anyway. Their prosperity will make them turn to other gods and despise Me. They're prone to rebellion. So here's a song I want you to teach them so that they'll know why they've ended up in a terrible situation and that I alone will vindicate them."

I'm not going to lie. The chapter ends on a sour note. Imagine being a Christian father, and the Lord tells you that after you die, all your kids will rebel and turn their backs on Jesus. That's a pretty depressing prophecy, isn't it? And yet, this is *precisely* what the Lord tells Moses. Moses doesn't mince words with the Israelites. "You've rebelled before. How much more will you rebel once I'm not around to stop you or interceded for you? So let me teach you a song about your inevitable rebellion and idolatry." Sheesh. Nice pep talk, Moses! The Song of Moses follows in chapter 32, which should be read together with chapters 29-31 to understand Moses' final address fully.

INSIGHT

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today" (30:19). Why did Yehovah choose heaven and earth as the covenant witnesses? Because the covenant and its terms will last as long as they do, apparently "forever." But that's not the case. Heaven and earth won't last forever.

2 Peter 3:7,10 reveals our current heaven and earth will pass away, which will happen at the End. The generally accepted order of events is as follows:

- Our current age.
- The Great Tribulation (Revelation 7:14).

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- Jesus' return, His enemies are defeated, and Jesus starts His 1000-year Messianic Reign from Israel over the whole earth (Revelation 19:11-20:6).
 - Satan's final rebellion and defeat (Revelation 20:7-10).
 - The Great White Throne Judgement when God judges the remaining unresurrected dead. Revelation 20:11 says, "Then I saw a great white throne and one seated on it. Earth and heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them."

Notice the timing. The end of the current heaven and earth comes when God makes His final judgment between those who have pledged allegiance to Him (via the New Covenant) and those who haven't.

Think of it this way. A judge only needs witnesses in his courtroom until they've given their testimony, then they're dismissed. Heaven and earth are God's covenant witnesses to testify whether any single person has accepted God's covenant or not or whether they've been faithful to it by keeping His terms. Once Jehovah's judgment is rendered, the covenant witnesses, heaven and earth, are dismissed *because the covenant is no longer in effect*. Why? Because the remaining people are those who the Holy Spirit's power has transformed under the New Covenant. The terms of God's Torah are now "written on their hearts," that is, instinctive, by nature (Jeremiah 31:33). When there's no possibility of betraying a relationship, there's no need for a covenant with terms to protect that relationship against betrayal. No covenant = no need for witnesses.

God's people will be righteous and will remain so forever. But since God's design included heaven and earth "in the beginning," Jehovah will follow His design and make a new one for His forever- righteous people, "But based on his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, *where righteousness dwells*" (2 Peter 3:13). For now, we work on being faithful to our promise to our Heavenly Father under the New Covenant.

February 25 : Scriptures Deuteronomy 32-34

SUMMARY

We ended yesterday's reading on a rather down note. Well, things pick up a little with the Song of Moses. The big question is, "What's the Song's purpose?" According to the rabbis, Moses is calling heaven and earth to bear witness to the disasters that will happen to Israel if it sins and the absolute joy that will come with Israel's final restoration.

The setup states the theme, God's greatness, perfection, faithfulness, righteousness, and truth (32:1-4).

Next, Moses rebukes Israel for its bent towards waywardness (32:5-6), and Moses continues to their origin story (32:7-9). The Lord may have divided the nations up at the Tower of Babel (32:8), but Israel is His special creation, brought forth miraculously through Abraham, a nation created from one man. According to rabbinic teaching and expanded on by Dr. Michael Heiser (*Unseen Realm*), when the Lord set the boundaries for the nations per their language groups, He set spiritual beings as His "caretakers" over the nations because they refused to follow Him. When Yehovah created Israel, he didn't give them a caretaker. The Lord would be their steward. Therefore, Israel would stand out among the nations as God's people (32:9).

32:10-14 chronicles Israel's growth into a prosperous adulthood. As I pointed out before, Moses warned the Israelites that prosperity is dangerous because it causes people to take their prosperity for granted rather than keeping their focus on God. Prosperity easily wrecks God's people, and persecution strengthens God's people.

Israel's fall into idolatry will be their natural outcome (32:15-18). This section of Moses' song predicts a lot of what we'll see from the settlement of the tribes at the end of Joshua through Kings and Chronicles. They'll get fat, rebel, scorn God, and run after idols. Breaking the covenant with their King will result in the King exercising covenant discipline. As Hebrews 10:31 says, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

And that's what Moses says will happen to Israel in the future when (not if) they turn from the God who loved them, saved them, and blessed them (32:19-25).

The Lord's justice will demand that He utterly wipe Israel off the face of the earth, but something stops His hand from annihilating His people in covenant judgment. Such an action could be used to speak against Him. So, for His name's sake (His reputation), He

will spare Israel yet again. Israel's enemies might think *they* were the ones that brought down Israel, but it will be the One in whose hands they were just tools to do His will (32:26-27). Those nations whom God will use to discipline Israel will be so stupid, foolish, and lacking discernment that they'll think their own strength got them the victory. If only they were discerning enough to realize that the only way they could route Israel would be if God gave them into their hands. Think of this picture. God will drop His protective arms and allow the enemy to "poke Him in the eye" (Israel is the pupil of His eye, 32:10). It will follow that it's His turn to poke back! If God judges Israel for its sin, what do you think will happen to the nation God uses?

The truth that God controls all the events on the world's stage is the biblical worldview. The Lord directs the affairs of humanity at will (Daniel 4:32, 35).

In 32:28-30, you can see Moses shaking his aged head as he writes, "Israel is a nation lacking sense and no understanding. If only they were wise, they would comprehend this; they would understand their fate. How could one pursue a thousand, or two put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock had sold them, unless the Lord had given them up?" In other words, "They don't get it! With Yehovah as their God, no nation can take them down unless the Lord allows it."

Not all "rocks" are the same. The gods of the nations ("their rock") cannot compare with Israel's God (THE Rock, 32:31)!

And then Yehovah will strike the nations (32:32-35)! The Rabbis interpret this section as referring to Israel. Israel suffers because of its twisted nature (Sodom, Gomorrah, the wine they drink is poison, etc.). I see this as describing the nations that attack Israel based on the word "their" in verse 31.

Israel will, at last, be vindicated, and Yehovah, their God, will be exalted among the nations (32:36-43)! The Lord swears by Himself that He can bring retribution if He so desires and no one can withstand Him. God calls the nations attacking Israel "MY enemies" because those who attack Israel attack Him (32:40-41). The Lord will bring Israel to the point of complete helplessness, and they will realize that the only One they can turn to is Yehovah. Israel will realize that idols and anything else they could depend on other than Yehovah is utterly worthless. And throughout this whole process, the Lord is growing a strong and complete dependence on Him within His nation. I like Yehovah's warning to the Gentile nations in 32:43, "You Gentile nations better throw your lot in with Israel cause 'this is the way it's going down!'" (paraphrased).

Moses wraps up the song and commands the Israelites to memorize it because they will need it in years to come. But what they need more is to “follow all the words of this law carefully. For *they are not meaningless words to you but they are your life*, and by them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess” (32:46-47).

The chapter ends with the Lord’s final command to Moses to be prepared to die on Mount Nebo within sight of the Promised Land. Moses will now bless the people and go to see Yehovah more clearly than he has ever seen Him before, and yet, not as clearly as you and I will see Him upon our deaths!

Chapter 33 is fascinating to read and compare with Genesis 49. Israel stands on the threshold of a leadership change in both cases, Jacob to Joseph and Moses to Joshua. In Jacob’s case, he gave each son God’s blessing, died, and the family leadership passed to Joseph (as the firstborn). In Moses’ case, he will now give each family tribe God’s blessing, die, and the national leadership will pass to Joshua. I won’t go into great depth with each blessing, and I’ll just point out some points of interest as we cruise through the text together.

33:1-5 is a poetic recap of Israel’s encounter with Yehovah at Mount Sinai, where He became their King and Israel His people. Note the words, “All your holy ones are in your hand, and *they assemble at your feet. Each receives your words. Moses gave us instruction, a possession for the assembly of Jacob.*” This event is the giving of the Torah during Israel’s time at Sinai.

Reuben – “though his people become few.” The rabbis saw this fulfillment when the Assyrian empire stormed down along the east side of the Jordan through Reuben and Gad’s territory. These were the first tribes to be exiled from the land under God’s judgment for idolatry around 724-722 B.C.

Judah – “He fights for his cause with his own hands, but may you be a help against his foes.” The Davidic royal line would descend from Judah, and Judah would play a central role in the nation’s leadership. This princely tribe would lead the nation in the wars for *Eretz Yisrael*.

Did you notice Simeon is not included in the list? As usual, only 12 tribes are in the family list. We have twelve since Ephraim and Manasseh are mentioned under Joseph, Zebulun and Issachar are mentioned together, and Levi is included. Interestingly, after the conquest, the tribe of Simeon was encircled by Judah in Israel’s southern desert and seems to be absorbed later on.

Levi – The tribe of Levi is commended because, in the incident of the Golden Calf, they set themselves apart, even against their own families (33:9). This attitude was necessary for the priesthood because they would have to function without regard to family ties.

Benjamin – This one is somewhat cryptic, isn't it? The Adin Steinsaltz Humash Commentary gives us some insight that this refers prophetically to the building of the Temple on Benjamin's land. Yes, Jerusalem was regarded as part of Benjamin for more time than being a part of Judah. Also, since the Temple Mount is shorter than the surrounding mountains, it's referred to as "between the shoulders."

Joseph (Ephraim, Manasseh) – This blessing incorporates those of Ephraim and Manasseh and, in many ways, parallels Jacob's blessing of the tribes (Genesis 49:22-26). Lots and lots of blessings for Jacob's reassigned firstborn son. Verse 16 has a Hebrew parallelism: "May these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince of his brothers." Head = brow, Joseph = the prince of his brothers. Judah will have the kingship later on, but Joseph is still the firstborn of the family. The two horns of the ox (Joseph) are Ephraim and Manasseh (33:17). Though Manasseh is first, Ephraim will grow larger and more numerous, i.e., 10,000s vs. thousands of people. An ox is a powerful animal. Joseph is Joshua's tribe and will lead the people of Israel in their drive (like an ox) to push out the nations in front of them.

Zebulun and Issachar – Here's another cryptic prophecy. The rabbis explain that the people of Zebulun go on journeys to trade, and the people of Issachar (which produced the most Torah scholars per tradition) stay in their tents to study.

Gad – Gad's territory was east of the Jordan and extended eastward. Moses blesses God as the one who extends Gad's territory. The tribe of Gad was reputed to be fierce warriors, and as the easternmost tribe, they would encounter incoming enemies first. So, Moses blesses their military prowess. Gad received the commander's portion, the first pick, which they did when they claimed king Sihon's and king Og's land.

Dan – Wow! Short and sweet. Dan's original territory was west-central Canaan, bordering on the Mediterranean. They were unable to defeat the Amorites, who kept them confined to the hill country of Ephraim. The tribe later migrated to the northernmost part of Israel, conquering Laish (meaning lion) and renaming it Dan. Samson, the tribe's most celebrated person, tore a lion apart. The strength of a lion vs. a real lion.

Naphtali – Naphtali's portion was a very rich territory of central Israel near the Sea of Galilee and the Jezreel Valley.

Asher – The most extensive olive orchards in Israel are in Asher's region, also in the Galilee region.

The list of blessings closes with praise to Yehovah, who will drive out the Canaanites and protect His people. There is no doubt Israel is unique! In the end, God will raise his sword and shield over them, their enemies will come fawning to them, and Israel will take part in destroying their idolatry.

Chapter 34 records Moses' death and the passing of the torch to Joshua. When you identify all the named sites Yehovah showed Moses from the top of Mount Nebo, you realize God gave him a supernatural sight to see the entire land the Israelites would conquer.

No one knows where Moses is buried (34:6), and according to the text, the Lord Himself buried Israel's great prophet. Moses' unknown grave was to prevent people from turning it into a shrine of pilgrimage for those who deify national heroes.

Joshua now takes over (34:9), filled with the spirit of wisdom, and yet Joshua is not on par with Moses. He *does* carry Moses' full authority, and the Lord is with him. But he is not like Moses, for Joshua has his own task to fulfill. Moses is unique (unparalleled) because he saw God more clearly than any Old Covenant person. He worked powerful signs and wonders in Egypt and before Pharaoh, and he performed awesome and "terrifying things" before Israel.

INSIGHT

Parallelisms identify Hebrew poetry. Parallelisms are "the repetition of a syntactic structure for rhetorical effect" (Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary). In layman's terms, it's when a writer repeats part of what they wrote with different wording to create a balanced sense. It's like an artist using two complementary or contrasting colors side by side to add a dynamic effect to a painting. Here's how they are used (from crivoice.org):

- The second line has different words but the same meaning (*synonymous*, compliments, Psalm 19:1-2).
- The second line adds to the first (*synthetic*, continues, Psalm 24:3-4).
- The second line contrasts with the first (*antithetic*, contrasts, Psalm 73:26).
- Each successive line builds to a final line (*climactic*, builds, Habakkuk 3:17-18).
- Each line shares parts with the other (*eclectic*, interweaves, Habakkuk 1:2).

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- Similar words are used for emphasis within the verse (*emphatic*, punches up, Deuteronomy 6:5).

Yeah, I know this is probably more than most everyone wants to know, but I did it for the few that want to hone their Bible appreciation skills. Bible translators print Hebrew poetry differently than Hebrew prose to distinguish the two forms. I'll quote the examples from today's reading as they appear in the Bible.

Example #1:

"Pay attention, heavens, and I will speak;
listen, earth, to the words from my mouth."

This example is *synonymous* parallelism. "Pay attention" parallels "listen," "heavens" parallel "earth," and "speak" parallels "my mouth. Both sentences say the same thing two ways to reinforce what Moses is doing. He's calling on the covenant witnesses, heaven and earth, to hear what he will sing about Israel and their rocky relationship with the Lord. Heaven and earth will stand as witnesses to how the Lord treated Israel, how Israel treated the Lord in return, how the Lord will discipline His people and restore them afterward.

Example #2

"Let my teaching fall like rain
and my word settle like dew,
like gentle rain on new grass
and showers on tender plants."

This example is two *synonymous* parallelisms that are *synthetic*. In other words, "teaching" = "word" and "rain" = "dew." But then the second line adds to the first by using the "water" references. "Rain" = "showers" and "new grass" = "tender plants." Do you see how that's joined together?

So here is my recommendation. When you come to the Hebrew poetry format in your Bible, read slower and look for parallelisms. If you're confused about what part of the verse says, see how the other part compliments, continues, contrasts, builds, interweaves, or punches up the first. It'll give you fresh insights into the Lord's Word!

February 26 : Scriptures Joshua 1-2

SUMMARY

The time has finally arrived! After four hundred years of wanderings, blessings, slavery in Egypt, earth-shaking judgments, a miraculous deliverance, a mind-blowing encounter with the Living God at Mount Sinai, repeated rebellions, disciplines, and pardons, a faithless attempt to take Canaan, a forty-year training camp in the Wilderness complete with God's presence, power, protection, and provision, and the death of their beloved Moses, the children of Israel stood with a new leader on the edge of Eretz Israel, the Promised Land.

In the Wilderness, the Lord had provided all their needs. Now the children of Israel would be required to establish their new nation, under God and their God-given Torah, in a Land filled with idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed.

This task would not be an easy one. The Lord was on their side as He promised, but He would not do it all for them. It would have to be a team effort with Yehovah taking the lead. Israel was not only working to win their Promised Land, but they were also executing the Lord's wrath on the wicked and corrupt nations occupying Canaan. Would Israel succeed in conquering their Promised Land? There was a single deciding factor – they would only succeed and become secure only if they followed their Lord God into battle and stayed obedient to His Word.

A proverb says, "The seeds of an organization's destruction are planted in its foundation." This proverb means that an organization rises or falls based on the strengths and weaknesses built into the group's guidelines and practices from the very beginning. It is easier to correct a wayward branch of a tree than a trunk that's bent from its sapling stage. Israel was going to lay a foundation for their future. Would their future be one of complete obedience or one fraught with compromise? The former would ensure peace and security, and history has shown that Israel fell into the latter resulting in discipline, hardship, even eventual expulsion.

And yet the story is not all bad. Like many of the people the Lord has used throughout history, the children of Israel struggled with both positive and negative character traits. There are many lessons to be learned within the pages of Joshua's book. Such lessons revolve around faithfulness and unfaithfulness, triumph and tragedy. The book's central character is not Joshua, although he is a key figure. Instead, the Commander of the Host of the Lord, God Himself, takes the spotlight. Many have claimed, "God is with us!" That cry stands in direct opposition to the Book of Joshua. The question is not, "Is God with

us?" the real question is, "Are we with God?" As long as Israel stayed aligned with Him, success was guaranteed.

Joshua's time was one when nations believed that gods led their people to become nations. When one nation conquered another, it was evident to surrounding nations that that nation's god was more powerful. The fact that the children of Israel advanced like an unstoppable army was a testimony to the worldview of Joshua's day that Yehovah was the Almighty God. This understanding was especially true when Israel's advance was viewed in the light of the Lord's triumph over the Egyptian gods.

Joshua was the son of Nun, of the tribe of Ephraim, and he was the servant and successor to Moses. His original name was Hoshea, meaning "salvation," which Moses later changed to Jehoshua, "The Lord Saves" (Numbers 13:8, 16). At first, Joshua appears as the leader of Israel's hand-picked soldiers against the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-14). Afterward, he is seen frequently as Moses' aide and leader-in-training (Exodus 24:13; 33:11). Moses selected Joshua as one of the initial twelve Spies of Canaan, ten of whom returned with a mixed report of Canaan that caused the Israelites to draw back in fear. Only Joshua and Caleb stood firm in faith that Yehovah would trounce the Canaanites as He said He would. Following a 39-year training camp in the Wilderness during which Israel learned to trust the Lord more fully, Joshua stood before the nation of Israel on the east side of the Jordan in Moab as Moses laid hands on him and transferred the task of Israel's leadership. Joshua was about 85 years old when he assumed command and died at the end of the book at 110 years old, ending a 25-year campaign and term of service.

As a leader, Joshua reflected Moses, as all good disciples do. Both Moses and Joshua demonstrated that leaders must not only be capable of leading others but, more than anything else, they must rely on God, not neglecting their spiritual or moral responsibilities. This servant leadership served as the example to influence and inspire all the Israelites as they fought to establish their new lives under God's watchful eye. God's people must live their lives carefully and responsibly, caring for themselves and one another, never forsaking their spiritual and moral responsibilities. The Israelites were required to unite as separate individuals, families, and tribes into one cohesive and unified nation. Directing this task fell to their leader, Joshua. Even though there were tribal differences that would always remain to some extent, national unity was of the utmost importance, and a robust and uniting leader was a crucial component.

The Wilderness was a place of ongoing miracles. God-given food and water were a daily occurrence. The Israelites just took a stroll each morning and collected the day's bread. But not so when they entered the Promised Land. *Eretz Yisrael* would be a place for a

God/people cooperation. The Lord's blessings would still flow, but now the people of Israel would have to work alongside their King. What the nation practiced in the Wilderness would soon become an everyday necessity in Canaan. The continual process was defeating spiritual and physical enemies while establishing God's Torah as the "law" of the land. They were to spiritually plant and cultivate a Torah-observant nation just as they were to physically plant and cultivate the land. The goal? To subdue and rule *Eretz Yisrael* completely.

By doing so, Israel would stand as a beacon to the rest of the world, a world that was just as idolatrous, immoral, and bloodthirsty as the Canaanites the Lord was driving out. Israel was to be a "light unto the nations" and "a city on a hill." All it would take is a complete success.

The sad fact of history is that Israel could not completely drive out the Canaanite tribes from the land leading to Israel falling into idolatry. Therefore, the Book of Joshua is not only an example of what happens when God's people are faithful but what happens when God's people balk at their divine assignment. The book of Joshua serves as a bridge between Israel's Exodus deliverance and Wilderness discipleship and the struggle to hold the Land through covenant faithfulness in the Book of Judges.

Chapter 1 opens with the blunt announcement, "Moses my servant is dead." Moses was the last generation who died in the wilderness for disobedience. He had his own sinful moment, which brought on him the same punishment as the rest. The only two Israelites of the early generation to enter the land were Joshua and Caleb, and it is their trust in Yehovah that opened the door to the Promised Land to them.

The Lord prepares Joshua with a command, "go," and a promise, "I have given you every place where the sole of your foot treads, just as I promised Moses" (1:3). All Joshua needs to do is keep walking forward with the Lord at his side.

Have you noticed the phrase "Be strong and courageous" keeps coming up? Moses said it three times to the people and Joshua (Deuteronomy 31:6-7, 23), the Lord says it to Joshua four times (Joshua 1:6-9), and Joshua says it to the people twice (1:18, 10:25). Gee, maybe everyone should be strong and courageous? Well, they're going to need it! Just because the Lord is with them and helping them fight their battles, the Israelites will still have to fight. And they *will* lose people in battle. *Eretz Yisrael* is not going to be handed to them on a platter. They're going to have to *take it* from the Canaanites.

While “strong and courageous” is crucial, they won’t be the key to Joshua’s and the Israelites’ success. Their success will depend on remaining faithful to Yehovah’s word through obedience, “Above all, be strong and very courageous to observe carefully the whole instruction my servant Moses commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right or the left, so that you will have success wherever you go” (1:7). Joshua needs to be constantly aware of God’s Word, always leading and guiding him on how to live as a person and how Israel is to exist as a nation. And notice the comparison in verse 9, “Strong and courageous” vs. “fearful and discouraged.” How can this be? Because Yehovah is with them. King David echoes David in Psalm 56, “God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” and “in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mere humans do to me?” (Psalm 56:4, 11).

Next, Joshua prepares the people. He tells them they’re going to break camp in three days, and he reminds the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh to remember your obligation. Their answer? “We will obey you as we obeyed Moses upon pain of death!”

Joshua’s attack on Canaan will begin at Jericho. The city is a good starting point because it’s close to where Israel will cross the Jordan and their new base camp in Canaan. Jericho was a fortified city with an excellent water source, and the city is one of the oldest known continuous settlements since about 7,000 B.C.

Joshua’s entry into the land is similar to Israel’s attempt 39 years earlier. Yes, another spy mission! Only this one turns out better. The fact that Joshua personally dispatched the two spies seems to indicate that he wanted men whom he could trust to bring back an unclouded report. Do you think the events of 39 years earlier were still fresh in Joshua’s mind? Do you think Joshua pulled the spies aside and warned them about what happened on the first attempt?

The two men secretly enter the land and wind up in the house of Rahab, the prostitute. Although Rahab was a prostitute and ran a brothel, she’s honored as a convert to the God of Israel and His people. She’s honored in the New Covenant for her faith (Hebrews 11:31) and her works (James 2:25). She is also the great-great-great-grandmother of King David and ancestress of Jesus.

Despite the spies’ best effort, it’s a big secrecy fail! The king of Jericho finds out about the spies and launches a “seek and destroy” mission. He even knows what house the spies are hiding in. Rahab tells the truth and not the truth. “Yes, they were here, but they went that-a-way! Go git ‘em, boys!” Once the king is convinced the spies aren’t in Jericho, he

shuts the gates against any other intrusion from the 1.5 million Israelites encamped across the Jordan in Moab, about 9 miles away.

As a side note, why is there flax on the house's flat roof? It's an ancient practice of drying grain. And since people use flax to make linen, perhaps Rahab's family also worked in textiles or supplied the local weavers.

When all the king's men have left, Rahab gives the all-clear. According to the Hebrew text, Rahab uses God's name, Yehovah, indicating she knows about Israel's God and suggests some personal faith in Him (2:9). She also identifies Yehovah as God above and below, having superiority over all gods. Even at this early stage, we can see that faith in God is not limited to the Jewish people alone, but all who become Abraham's descendants through their faith/trust in God.

The best intelligence from Rahab is that the Canaanites are petrified of the Israelites and their God. Word of Israel's prison break from Egypt via Yehovah's nation-crippling plagues has already reached Canaan. But that's to be expected. The trade route east from Egypt follows the Mediterranean coast and then north through Canaan. What's remarkable is that 40 years after Egypt's cataclysm, fear of Yehovah's strength still reverberates in the region. Add that to what the people of Jericho just heard about how Israel wiped out Kings Sihon and King Og's domains east of the Jordan, and the Canaanites' fear is building. But now Israel is camped on Canaan's doorstep! Israel's reputation precedes them, and everyone in the area is afraid of what's coming.

Rahab asks the spies to spare her and her family's lives (2:13). The spies make a covenant with her, and here are the elements to prove it:

- There's a relationship to protect (Rahab/family and Israel).
- There are terms (Rahab's secrecy and remaining indoors).
- There are oaths ("We die if you do," and we'll treat you with covenant kindness).
- There is a covenant sign (the scarlet cord).

Rahab's house is built into Jericho's wall (2:15). It was common for fortified cities to have a double wall with supporting cross walls. Rooms could be made in the subdivided spaces with windows looking into and out of the city. It wasn't the best housing, but it worked.

As requested, the spies give Joshua an accurate, unbiased report (2:23). The Canaanites are already at a disadvantage since their fear is causing them to be demoralized and faint-hearted, literally meaning "melting away."

INSIGHT

Joshua is a picture of Jesus. Joshua (Yehoshua) is a vivid picture of Jesus (Yeshua, a shortened form of Yehoshua). Both names mean essentially the same thing – “salvation.” Moses was only allowed to point the people toward the Promised Land, even bringing them to the very border. In the process, Moses gave the people the way to walk with God, the Torah. But Joshua was the one who would lead them across the Jordan and establish both the people and God’s way of life in the Land.

In truth, the Torah points us to the Promised Land, it gives us the way to walk with God, but that’s as far as it goes. Only Jesus can take us across the Jordan (salvation) into God’s new life for us. From there, He leads us in His ways, the ways of faithfulness and obedience. From this point on, there are striking parallels between Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land and each disciple’s fight to conquer the old nature under the leadership of Jesus’ Spirit. As Joshua fought to drive out God’s enemies and create a place of rest for Abraham’s descendants, so Jesus goes before us to drive out our enemies (sin habits) to create a place of rest (righteous lives) for those who have been adopted into Abraham’s family by faith in God.

February 27 : Scriptures Joshua 3-4

SUMMARY

Chapter 3 mentions the Ark of the Covenant over ten times. Even though the events are about Israel crossing the Jordan, who really gets the credit?

The time is now. The officers command the people to follow the Ark forward, but not too close. The Ark, with the tablets, is the symbol of the covenant. Just as the covenant-keeping God led them through the desert, the same covenant-keeping God goes ahead of Israel to bring them into the Land. Why follow the Ark? It represents Yehovah's presence and, according to 3:4, "so that you know the way to go for you haven't traveled this way before." Following the Ark is the key to taking the Land – let the Lord lead and direct the nation. *They* have work to do, but the Israelites must always follow the Leader. And while they have a personal relationship with the Lord, they must maintain a respectful distance as the Lord requests.

The significance of this event is critical! The Israelites are finally experiencing the family covenant promise 400 years after it was given to their forefather Abraham. It's a transition point of great magnitude, so the people must prepare themselves through consecration (3:5). Consecration is often called for when the Lord is about to meet with you in a special way or do something unique. And speaking of unique, the Lord tells Joshua He's going to exalt Joshua as Israel's new leader so that the people will follow him (3:7). The people need faith in their invisible God and need a physical representation, a leader. Now that Moses is gone, the Lord establishes Joshua's credentials, so the people will follow (taking the Land will be a daunting task) and so the people won't pull back or rebel as they had in the Wilderness. If God's authority were in effect for Moses, it most certainly would be in effect for Joshua.

Stopping the Jordan river will be a mind-blowing event for the Israelites (3:13)! It will confirm to Israel that the Lord is in their midst. More importantly, it will be a touchpoint of faith – if the Lord can part the waters of the Jordan and keep Israel unharmed, He can most certainly "part" the armies of the Canaanites with the same result.

Here's an interesting question. Why wouldn't the Lord part the river first, instead of having the priests enter first? Israel must obey the commands of the Lord in faith, i.e., trusting Him in the face of overwhelming circumstances, just as they had been living out in the wilderness. Sending the priests, bearing God's throne, ahead of the rest of Israel shows the Lord setting the example. "If the priests can move forward in trust, we can!"

What made the crossing even more intimidating to Israel was that the Jordan was at the spring flood stage. When the priests' feet entered the river, the water piled up far upstream (3:16). The water didn't stop and then flowed to the side. It backed up, stood still, and "rose in one column." The water downstream was utterly cut off. Like the Red Seas crossing decades earlier, the people had to pass by a wall of water towering in the distance. The priests had to stand in the middle of the now-empty river bed and watch as Israel passed by downstream. Wouldn't you *love* to know what the priests carrying the Ark said as one flood stopped (the Jordan) to let another flood (Israel) pass by?

Dry ground is mentioned a few times in both chapters, vividly reminiscent of the Red Sea crossing (Exodus 14:22). The Lord can not only deal with the water, but He can secure the path! The path was wide enough for over a million people, plus animals and wagons, to pass over in one day. The Lord (represented by the Ark) remains in the place of danger until ALL His people have passed. All the people and their goods make it across. No one was lost. When the Lord does something, He does it completely! Consider this: Jericho's people can see all this happening in the distance. What would your response be if you were a Jericho-ite?

It's now chapter 4, and Israel moves into the land! After the Israelites have finally crossed the Jordan, the Lord commands Joshua to select 12 men to take stones from the dry riverbed, carry them to the western side, and set them down at Israel's first campsite (14:1-3). Likewise, Joshua selects 12 stones and sets them up on the soon-to-be reflooded river bed (14:9). What is the significance of *two* piles of stones, one past Jordan's west shore at Gilgal and one in the river near the spot where the Ark and priests stood? One pile reminds them of the miracle (4:8), the other pile marks the spot (4:9).

Imagine the spectacle! A mass of humanity flows over the Jordan, with a tiny group of priests holding the Ark under wraps, while 12 men are selecting stones for a memorial, and Joshua is assembling stones at the feet of the priests standing in the river bed. In the far distance, the waters of the flooding Jordan are piling up in a heap. Jericho's king is watching all this happen from about 7 miles away and probably panicking!

Once Israel's miraculous crossing was completed, the priests walked up out of the riverbed, and the water immediately resumed its flow just as the Red Seas had done with Israel's crossing forty years earlier.

What's the purpose of the memorial stones? Stone is a lasting marker. 1) To mark the crossing site, 2) to serve as a physical reminder of Yehovah's power to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into their Promised land in case later generations doubt what happened,

and 3) "This is so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord's hand is strong, and so that you may always fear the Lord your God" (14:24).

The miraculous crossing had another powerful effect – letting the Canaanites know that the Nation of Israel and their God, who had just wiped out King Sihon, the dreaded giant, King Og, and the feared Gentile Prophet Balaam, *were coming for them next*. This realization would add to the fear that the Jericho-ites were already swimming in.

Finally, verse 19 says Israel entered Canaan on the 10th day of the 1st month, and this date is only five days before Passover, the 15th day of the 1st month. On the 15th, the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread begins, and something is about to happen that hasn't happened in forty years.

INSIGHT

Crossing the Jordan validated that the Lord was with Joshua as leader and Israel as His people. The crossing also proved that the Lord is the One Almighty God. Baal, the storm god, was the god whom the Canaanites served so that Baal would provide rain for their crops. The massive amount of water during the Jordan river's flood stage came from the early spring rains and melting snow from Mount Hermon, far to the north in the land of Israel. Stopping the Jordan river's water is the initial sign that Yehovah was stronger than Baal. Stopping the flood was also a visible sign that Yehovah controlled water (like the Red Sea) and other natural elements (like the sun and moon). What was Yehovah's message to Baal and his Canaanite servants? The King is approaching and laying claim to His Land! Baal and his followers *must* give way to Israel's King and his subjects.

Here's another tidbit! It only took Joshua and the people of Israel one day to return to Canaan, hundreds of years after they were forced out of the land by famine and into Egypt. It only took one day after hundreds of years for Joshua and the nation to repossess its inheritance. Likewise, on one day, May 14, 1948, Israel was reborn as a nation and reconsecrated its heritage after nearly 2,000 years of exile.

Isaiah prophesied Israel's long-awaited 1948 return almost 2,600 years before it happened, "Before she goes into labor, she gives birth; before the pains come upon her, she delivers a son. Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has ever seen such things? Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment? Yet no sooner is Zion in labor than she gives birth to her children. Do I bring to the moment of birth and not give delivery?" says the LORD. "Do I close up the womb when I bring to delivery?" says your God" (Isaiah 66:7-9).

February 28 : Scriptures Joshua 5-7

SUMMARY

The Israelite's miraculous crossing of the Jordan by Yehovah's power had its intended effect. When the Amorite and Canaanite kings heard of it, "they lost heart and their courage failed because of the Israelites" (5:1).

Now that the Israelites were encamped in Canaan, not far from Jericho, they had to attend to some unfinished business. The males all had to be circumcised. Why the circumcision ceremony? Circumcision was required as part of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:10-12). Circumcision's importance for every Hebrew man and boy was driven home in the episode of Moses not having his son circumcised when he should have (Exodus 4:24-26). The Hebrew men were circumcised according to the Abrahamic covenant before leaving Egypt. But none were circumcised in the desert because of the desert conditions. So now, all the men who were not circumcised once they crossed the Jordan had to go through the painful process (5:7) to affirm their covenant relationship with their King.

The verse "The Lord then said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away the disgrace ("reproach" in some versions) of Egypt from you'" (5:9) is a bit confusing. What's this "reproach" thing? Reproach means "to blame, bring up against." Perhaps it's not the "stain" of Egypt upon Israel, but likely the blame Egypt would bring against God if He could not bring them into the Land. After all the judgment the Lord dumped on Egypt and the miracles He wrought to get Israel out of Egypt, would the Lord be able to fulfill His promise? After all, Israel left *40 years ago*, and they *still* hadn't made it to Canaan.

Their survival was entirely in the Lord's hands. In fact, some of Israel had even perished in the wilderness! Was Egypt laughing in reproach or derision, "The Almighty Lord can bring them out, but He can't find the way? In the process, His people are dying! What a joke!" With the finality of the circumcision ritual, that reproach is "rolled back" with Israel now camped in the Land!

Two covenant practices are now resumed, circumcision and Passover (5:9-10). Why are they essential to the beginning of the Conquest of the Land? Because they are a reconsecration of Israel to both the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants. The NIV Study Bible points out, "Circumcision marked every male as a son of Abraham bound to the service of the Lord, and it was a prerequisite of Passover." Each generation *must* be circumcised. No one can assume the faith of the previous generation will help them. Faith is a "now" and individual thing.

The celebration of Passover in the Promised Land is a *huge* turning point for Israel (5:10). Much of what was promised is realized, and something that was promised is now ended. The morning after the Passover celebration, the manna miracle stops, and the Israelites ate unleavened bread from the Canaanite crops in the land (5:10-12). The new order and way of life have begun for the Israelites. Now that the children of Israel have renewed and recommitted themselves to the Covenants (Abraham and Sinai) and have celebrated their deliverance from Egypt and entered Canaan, the special provisions of the Wilderness change as the Torah commands for living in Canaan fully begin.

Joshua meets the Man with the Drawn Sword, God's Commander (5:13-6:5)! Joshua is on a nighttime reconnaissance mission near Jericho (5:13) and sees a man with a drawn sword facing him. Joshua asks the reasonable question, "Whose side are you on?" The man's answer is, "Neither. I have now come as commander of the Lord's army." What does that mean? God isn't on Israel's side. Israel is to be on the Lord's side. And the answer is to let Joshua know he isn't in charge of the attack. The Lord alone is. Knowing this is crucial to conquering the Land and must be settled before the first engagement begins. The chain of command is Joshua takes orders from the Lord, not the other way around. What's reassuring about this encounter is that Joshua knows that as Israel goes into battle, they follow the Lord's spiritual army, cutting a path for them through spiritual and physical enemies. The Commander's reply is reassurance that the Lord's army is committed to this conquest. Joshua may have left camp to spy out the Land, but the Lord is already ahead of him!

Jericho is in siege mode (6:1). People are not coming in, and no one is leaving. Jericho is prepared to resist this new enemy camped on their doorstep. And yet the Lord says that He has already given them to Joshua, a present impossibility declared as a past tense victory. Walls, locked gates, kings, and mighty men of war mean nothing to the Lord's Commander.

Joshua receives his marching orders, literally (6:3)! All the fighting men and Levites are to march around the city with no shouting for six days. The NKJV Study Bible states that Jericho was only about a half-mile circumference, about 7 acres. Therefore, the circuit around the city would have been relatively quick. The Levites are to carry the Ark and blow shofarim (a ram's horn trumpet; *shofar*, singular). On the 7th day, the army is to circle seven times, blowing the shofarim followed by a shout. The Lord declares that at that moment, the wall will fall.

Israel's first campaign in Canaan was a purely spiritual attack (6:8-27). The Ark is at the center of the procession, again highlighting that the Commander of the Lord's Hosts, the

Man with the Drawn Sword, is in Israel's midst directing their attack. Since the Ark is God's throne on earth, imagine Israel's King being borne around Jericho upon the shoulders of His servants. Now imagine how this "parade" affected the minds of the Jericho-ites as they watched it pass by.

On the 7th day, victory comes! Israel makes seven circuits of Jericho. After the 7th circuit, the soldiers are to shout as seven shofarim sound. But before that happens, Joshua relays specific instructions. The city and everything within its walls belong to the Lord. Jericho is under a *ban*, meaning that everything was devoted to destruction with only a few exceptions (silver, gold, vessels, Rahab, and family). The Israelites must be faithful about what is devoted to the Lord, dedicated for destruction, saved for Tabernacle use, or just saved (Rahab and her family, protected by the scarlet cord). Those who take anything from Jericho will take on the ban and bring death upon themselves and the whole nation, "But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise, you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble (*akar*) on it" (6:18). Taking what belongs to the Lord carries personal and corporate consequences. *Remember this.*

Since everything – the city, people, animals, and treasures – are devoted to the Lord, Jericho fits the picture of a firstfruit offering. A firstfruit is a thanksgiving offering to God for the initial "harvest" and a faith declaration of future "harvests." Israel's first victory promises future victories.

What does it indicate that the text says, "Every man went straight in..."? "Straight in" means there were no "breaches" in the wall but a wholesale take-down of the defenses. Everyone had access straight in. The Israelites follow through obediently, destroying the men and women, young and old, and the livestock (6:21).

Per the spies' covenant with Rahab, she and her family are spared (6:25). Because of their trust and faithfulness, these Gentiles, Rahab, and her family are saved. They join Israel and remain "even today." Their "conversion" becomes quite significant when we get to the book of Ruth.

Joshua levels Jericho by fire, leaving only rubble and ash (6:24), and curses the next person who rebuilds Jericho (6:26). The man who does so will lose his firstborn son when he starts (foundation) and his youngest son when he finishes (gates). Joshua's curse works, "In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the LORD spoken by Joshua son of Nun" (1 Kings 16:34).

Jericho fell in 1406 B.C., and Ahab became king of Israel in 874 B.C. (530 years later). That's some curse!

Chapter 7 opens with a terrible mistake. It says, "The Israelites, however, were unfaithful regarding the things set apart for destruction. Achan son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of what was set apart, and the Lord's anger burned against the Israelites" (7:1). Unfaithful means "committed a treacherous (willful betrayal of fidelity, confidence, or trust) violation." The man's name, Achan (*akan* – 'ah-kan') is similar to the root of the word for "trouble" (*akar* – ah'kar'). Rahab and Achan are an interesting comparison. Rahab abandons her Canaanite gods, people, and belongings to join with Israel. Achan "abandons" Yahweh, Israel, and embraces the goods of Canaan. This disobedience is a sign that there's trouble coming if this continues.

The march from Jericho to Ai is uphill for about 15 miles. The path is through a ravine and onto the ridge in the heartland of Israel. Taking this route is strategically smart because Israel will begin to conquer and control the high ground from the start.

Spies are again sent out (7:2-3). Their report is encouraging: It's a small city, and they only need relatively few soldiers. According to the Bible, the number of people in battle doesn't matter only faithfulness to the Lord. Therefore, only 3,000 warriors go out. Then catastrophe strikes! The Israelite warriors are defeated. Thirty-six die, and 2,964 return bloody, beaten, and bruised. As a result, the people lose heart, the very thing that's happened to the Canaanites because the Lord was against them (their courage drains away).

Joshua and the elders have the proper response. They humble themselves to hear clearly, even if it means they're at fault. They fell prostrate before the Ark, humbling themselves before the Lord *all day!* Tearing one's clothes and throwing dirt on one's head is an act of profound grief. A defeat shouldn't have happened! Israel should be thankful that it was only a small spanking, but Joshua got the point. With the Lord, they are undefeatable, and there should be few to no losses. Israel has turned its back before its enemies. They retreated and showed weakness. What does Joshua fear will happen? It will encourage the Canaanites, and they'll crush Israel.

But Joshua gets a "heads-up" from the Lord (7:10). The Lord's response is for the leadership to get up and deal with the sin (7:11). The Lord points to the problem – Israel sinned, violated the Covenant, took banned property, stole from God, and secreted it away. The Lord lays out *all* the charges. Notice that Yehovah is holding Israel guilty, not

just one person, although that one person is guilty. Israel will not succeed until this is made right (7:12).

Long story short, the Lord identifies Achan as the culprit (7:18), and he confesses (7:20). Joshua sends messengers to Achan's tent to corroborate his confession (7:22-23) and spreads the coveted items out before Yehovah. Since Achan is the federal head of his family, the sin he committed affects even his innocent family members (7:24). Achan lied, and soldiers died, so Achan's punishment was "measure for measure." Sin caused death, then by death shall the offense be paid. The entire community was affected, so the community as a whole executes justice (7:25). The bodies are burned to purge the land of sin, and stones are piled over the corpses (7:26). The rocks will serve as a memorial to remind Israel what happens to those who break the Covenant and sin. Deviating from the Torah's positive and negative commands will not be tolerated. Not only that, but they rename the place The Valley of Achor, the Valley of Troubling, as a memorial and a warning. Do you think this made an impression on Israel? Do you think anyone else would consider taking what belongs to the Lord and believe they could hide their sin from Him?

Afterward, the Lord extends forgiveness to Israel with the punishment delivered, and His "flaring wrath" is pushed aside. Now Israel must continue the work at hand. It's sad to leave the story here. (Darn those chapter headings!)

INSIGHT

When Christians fight, many assume "God is on our side." And when fighting amongst themselves, some ask God, "Whose side are you on?" God says the same thing to His people today as He said to Joshua, "Neither! I'm the Commander. Be quiet and fall in line!" We also sometimes think that we can win the battle in various areas of our personal lives. God says the same thing to us as He did to Joshua. "It's my battle, my conquest of the "land" called your body. Follow my lead." And our answer should be the same as Joshua's, "What would you have me do, Lord?"

February 29 : Scriptures Joshua 8-9

SUMMARY

Joshua and the Israelites resume their assault with the Achan debacle behind them. On a positive note, the initial failure to take Ai works in Israel's favor by giving Ai's soldiers false confidence. In 8:3-8, Joshua selects 30,000 mighty men of valor (no small force). From that group, Joshua commands a smaller force of 5,000 to use a deceptive tactic. They are only to stay as far away from the city as needed, so they're not seen but close enough to take it quickly before the surprise attack is discovered. Joshua and the remaining 25,000 men will draw the people away, leading the Ai-ites to think a similar band of weak warriors was trying again.

And the Ai army falls for it! The king and people of Ai attack (8:14-17). Israel's warriors break camp and "flee" east to start the deception. They fake that they are beaten back and run toward the wilderness. The melting opposition plus the enticement of plunder causes Ai's militia to muster all their fighting men for the pursuit. This tactic also draws in the fighters from the nearby city of Bethel (8:17). Once Ai is wholly exposed and stripped of its defenses, a relatively small force can whack 'em.

Joshua stretches forth his spear at the Lord's direction, similar to Moses stretching out his staff at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:16). This action is not just a signal to the Israelite force waiting to ambush Ai. The "raising of the Lord's staff" signifies that the Lord was exercising His authority over the situation, whether it was against Egypt or Ai. Joshua and his warriors turn on the pursuing army (8:20-29). When Ai's warriors look to retreat, they see their city burning and realize that they're trapped too late. Per the Lord's word, the Israelites kill all the people of Ai, except the king who was brought to Joshua alive. Joshua kills the king and hangs him on a tree (8:29). Why? To show that the Lord has cursed the Canaanites and death on a tree is evidence of a cursed state (Deuteronomy 21:23). The act is one to invoke shame, humiliation, and horror. Still, the Lord's mercy sets a limit to Israel's vengeance. The king gets the same fate as Achan. He's thrown at the city's demolished gate with a pile of stones heaped on him.

Now that Israel has reached the region of Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim in Canaan's heartland, it's time for the commanded covenant renewal ceremony (Deuteronomy 27:1-8). Joshua builds an altar to the Lord on Mount Ebal as instructed, and the Israelites raise two standing stones upon which to write the Torah. Inscribing covenant laws on a stone is a common practice as part of a covenant ritual to "enshrine" the terms of the covenant for future generations. The words are covered with a type of plaster to prevent

weathering. If one of the parties proves to have violated the covenant, the covenant witnesses are called, and the plaster is removed to reveal the terms for judicial review.

Joshua reaffirms the words of the Torah to Israel (8:34). He reminds them of the terms that will bring the blessing or cursing of God they just pronounced on Ebal and Gerizim. In chapter 9, the word of Ai's destruction has traveled fast! Previously, individual Canaanite kings were afraid. They now unite to attack the Israelites (9:2), except for the Gibeonites (9:3-4). Gibeon was evidently a part of the Canaanite federation. The city was about five miles northwest of Jerusalem and positioned near an excellent water supply. That made Gibeon a very strategic city to conquer and hold. The Gibeonites apparently didn't suffer from their partner cities' "Rambo" complex. The Canaanite kings relied on force to save themselves, and the Gibeonites relied on deception.

The Gibeonite delegation disguised themselves as representatives from a far-off country. They chose well-worn articles to carry, i.e., threadbare sacks, worn and cracked wineskins, patched shoes, ragged garments, and stale bread. Dressing up was a shrewd strategy because it was acceptable for Israel to make covenants with distant nations outside of the borders of the Canaanite ban.

They approached the Israelites with the words, "We're from a distant land, and we want to seal a covenant with you" (9:6). Please keep in mind covenants are binding once they're made. Covenants can only be broken if one side or the other wants to pay the penalty. The Gibeonites are offering a suzerain-vassal covenant with Israel. That's a covenant where one partner is stronger and often uses "servant" or "son" language. Notice the Gibeonites call themselves "your servants" (9:9). They are offering subservience to Israel rather than being killed. If they are indeed from a distant land, they are safe because Israel has no intention of killing their neighbors. Israel would be willing to make such an alliance. But if the party making the request were Canaanite, the proposal would be ignored.

The men of Israel are initially hesitant (9:7). Why? Because if the delegation represents the "locals," Israel would be in trouble by allowing a Canaanite to live, thereby breaking the Lord's command to wipe out all inhabitants of the Land. Seeing that the men of Israel aren't receptive, the delegation turns to Joshua (9:8). The Gibeonites present to him a humble and non-threatening face. They falsely claim to be from a distant land and profess a false admiration for the Lord. In verses 9-13, they mix truth with falsehood. Truthfully, they heard about all the Lord did to Egypt and the Amorites east of the Jordan, and it *is* true what the Lord did. This statement reinforces what the Gibeonites knew in verse 3 about Ai and Bethel's destruction. They claim the elders and community of their "far-off"

country sent them to make a covenant with mighty Israel. But now comes the lying evidence to build their credibility; hot fresh bread is stale, new wineskins are old, and worn-out shoes and clothing.

Israel makes a big mistake – they didn't consult Yehovah (7:14). The Lord could have immediately revealed the Gibeonite deception, but the elders relied on the Gibeonite's words and false evidence. Even Joshua bought the lie. So Israel's leaders sealed a covenant not to harm them.

The truth finally comes out, and when it does, Israel marches to confront the Gibeonites (9:16-23). Gibeon isn't destroyed because Israel could not harm them for the sake of the covenant they signed. The best the Israelites could do under the agreement's constraints was voice their complaint against the careless actions of their leaders. This debacle was probably an intense moment for Israel. It wasn't long ago that Israel was punished for not following the letter of their King's commands. Would they now be penalized for the leaders' lack of due diligence?

Joshua confronts them and calls them cursed. The fraud doesn't remove God's curse upon the Canaanite Gibeonites, but it transfers them from a death sentence to a perpetual servant sentence. The Israelite leaders allow the Gibeonites to live, even though the covenant was fraudulent. For their part, the Gibeonites agree to draw water and carry wood for the Tabernacle's operation. The Tabernacle service required a lot of wood and water for servicing the worship of over a million people. Joshua allows them to live in line with the leaders' decisions.

INSIGHT

Do hasty promises sometimes come back to bite us? How would you handle it if you were in a situation similar to Israel, making an ill-informed decision apart from the Lord's input? Would you fulfill your word, break it, or modify it? What if it was as serious as a promise or covenant with the Lord Himself? As we've seen, the Lord takes our commitments to Him seriously, and He commands us to keep our word to others without looking for ways out of our obligations. Psalm 15 asks, "Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain?" One of the character traits of such a person is "*who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind...* Whoever does these things will never be shaken" (Psalm 15:1, 4-5). How well do you keep your word?