

March 1 : Scriptures Joshua 10-12

SUMMARY

Here's a quick recap of what's happened up to this point. Joshua and the Israelites have crossed the Jordan river and established their camp at Gilgal, about two miles away from Jericho. Joshua and the Israelites have destroyed Jericho and Ai. The Amorite kings in Canaan are banding together to attack Israel, while the Gibeonites have executed a successful deception to make a covenant with Israel to prevent their slaughter. Israel has established a successful forward operating base in the heartlands of Canaan. Now the southern campaign begins in chapter 10.

King Adoni-Zedek of Jerusalem (under Jebusite control), King Hoham of Hebron, King Piram of Jarmuth, King Japhia of Lachish, and King Debir of Eglon are the leading players in this campaign. They choose to attack the large city of Gibeon for allying themselves with Israel, the incoming enemy. According to covenant protocol, Gibeon sends an S.O.S. to their benefactors for help (10:6). Notice that Yehovah orchestrated all this to draw the Amorite kings into battle (10:8).

Two unexpected things happen that swing the battle to Israel; Joshua marches overnight to take the Amorite kings by surprise, and Yehovah adds shock to their awe by confusing the enemy and dropping hailstones on the fleeing Canaanite troops. You can tell the Lord is involved because more of the adversary is killed by hail than the Israelites. And just to make sure Israel has enough time to carry out Yehovah's will, Joshua pulls off a Moses-class miracle. He calls on the Lord to make the sun stand still, *and it happens!* The Amorites just can't win. Not only is the Lord fighting against them, but He's allowing Joshua to call forth a miracle to put more time on the game clock. Once night falls, an army can lose its advantage, and the enemy escapes. Not today, Canaanites!

As the panicked Canaanite warriors run away, Joshua hears the five Amorite kings have fled to a cave. So he traps them, destroys their forces (per the Canaanite protocol, although a few survive to make it back to their fortified cities), comes back, and executes the kings to complete the extermination. Again, the kings are hung on trees to demonstrate the Canaanites are cursed by the Lord and under His death sentence. So, the kings and armies of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon are finished. According to God's long-awaited judgment, these Amorites have been destroyed (Genesis 15:16).

Joshua now moves on to the Canaanite cities of Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish (along with King Hiram of Gezer) and Eglon (whose kings the Israelites had already killed), Hebron,

and Debir. Joshua does all the Lord commanded and returns to their camp at Gilgal (Joshua 10:40-43). This chapter has one of those sections where having a Bible atlas close by helps you visually understand Joshua's conquest area. You can find many free Bible map websites for your research or search for "Joshua Southern Campaign." Many websites with excellent maps display Joshua's route, the cities' locations, and other significant details.

Chapter 11 swings the camera 180 degrees to Joshua's northern campaign. It starts with King Jabin of Hazor summoning a great horde of Canaanite tribe into one northern coalition to fend off Joshua and the Israelites after their victories in the south part of Canaan (11:1-5). Hazor was a large and influential city in the northern region, as evidenced by the king calling together a coalition of armed forces, similar to the southern battle in chapter 10. This fighting force was a confederacy of people, horses, and camels. The Canaanite coalition also had horse-drawn chariots. This coalition was most likely the most extensive and best-equipped army that Israel had yet faced. Once again, do you see how the Lord guided the Israelites to increasing challenges to build their faith and confidence?

The Lord reassures Joshua not to fear (that "be strong and courageous" thing) because they will triumph again, and it'll only take one day. Once the enemy is defeated, they are to hamstring the Canaanite's horses and burn their chariots. Why? Doing so destroys the northern army's transportation and mechanical advantage. Hamstringing a horse is cutting the tendon above the hock or ankle so that the horse cannot walk ever again. Chariots were used to transport archers and armaments such as spears. To destroy them was to "hamstring" the northern coalition's military advantage and quick re-supply line.

And so, it happened. The Israelites defeated the Canaanite coalition, leaving no survivors. The only things that remained were hamstrung horses (I know, that sounds so cruel) and smoking piles of chariot ashes (11:8-9). Then Joshua proceeds to destroy the ringleader city, Hazor, and execute all the opposing kings. Done and done. However, the Israelites left the rest of the villages, towns, and cities undamaged so the Israelites could plunder them. Again, Joshua has done just what the Lord had commanded him through Moses (11:15)

Joshua's triumphs show how success is measured. Joshua was faithful to carry out everything the Lord commanded him to do. Although all the Land was Israel's, it wasn't Joshua's commission to conquer it all, just what the Lord told him to conquer. The rest was up to Israel to "subdue and rule." By following the Lord's orders, Joshua was able to

break the combined powers of Canaan so the tribes wouldn't have to face such overwhelming and established forces when taking their family land allotments.

Now, lest you think the southern, northern, and mop-up campaigns happened quickly, some battles did, but the war did not. Verse 18 says. "Joshua waged war with all these kings for a long time." The only city that made peace with Israel was Gibeon. As you recall, the Gibeonites used deception to save their skins. Joshua captured the Canaanite cities and destroyed the population. He took on the once-feared giants in Hebron, Debir, and Anab. You know, the ones of whom the Israelites fainted in fear (Numbers 13:28, 31-33)? With the Lord's help, the giants fell! Notice the text adds, "No Anakim (giants) were left in the land of the Israelites, except for some remaining in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod" (11:22). There is a famous giant called Goliath (1 Samuel 17), remember him? He came from the Philistine town of *Gath*, and Israel's future king, David, took him out. And Goliath had brothers which David's men also struck down (2 Samuel 21:15-22; 1 Chronicles 20:4-6), effectively ending the line of giants on earth.

We come to a synopsis of Joshua's triumphs in chapter 12. As you continue your read into the book of the Judges, many of these locations and cities are mentioned. The introductory chapter of Judges recounts past victories under Joshua and Israel's subsequent victories. However, the chapter turns sour by telling how some of the tribes (Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, Dan, et al.) failed to drive out the inhabitants, though they killed their kings.

INSIGHT

"Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God" (Psalm 20:7). In other words, we often trust in human means to achieve our goals. The Lord brings us through so many battles in life to increase our trust in Him. He is the One who goes ahead of us in every situation. When new battle lines form in front of us, we should first call out to our Commander-In-Chief for His comfort, encouragement, strength, and strategy! What if we don't? "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD" (Isaiah 31:1). Our Father invites us to stand with Him as He takes a stand for us.

March 2 : Scriptures Joshua 13-15

SUMMARY

Chapter 13 opens up toward the end of Joshua's life (13:1). Time has passed in the Israel-Canaanite wars. Joshua is between 90 and 100 years old, and Caleb is 85 (Joshua 14:10). Joshua is getting too old to command the ongoing war for the land. However, the Lord never grows old or tired. He promises to do the work that Joshua has been doing, i.e., the Commander is taking over for Joshua and will personally lead Israel to victory if the tribes follow Him faithfully.

Yes, Joshua defeated many kings and destroyed their armies and populations. But there are still enclaves yet to be subdued. Much (Heb. *exceedingly numerous*) land has yet to be conquered and controlled. These areas include all the Philistine districts (the location of the Gaza Strip today), the land around Hebron, southern Canaan, and some northern regions.

The Lord will continue to drive the Canaanites out, but the Israelites will have to take up arms without Joshua. The land is to be divided by Joshua "in faith" (13:6).

The text details the land allocations to Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. Again, good Bible maps of this allocation are beneficial.

Per Moses' instructions, the Levites receive no territory inheritance (13:14, 33), and they only receive certain designated towns spread throughout Israel. This arrangement helps maintain knowledge of the Lord and His Torah throughout the tribes, with the center of Yehovah's worship (Tabernacle/Temple) in one place. All Israelite men are required to visit the central worship site, if able, three times a year – Passover, Shavuot, Tabernacles.

Verse 13:22 notes Balaam's death. As you may recall, Balaam was the Gentile prophet the Moabite king, Balak, hired to curse Israel, which didn't work out. "How can I curse what the Lord has blessed?" (Balaam). Instead, Balaam came up with an alternative plan. HE instructed Balak to use Moabite women to entice the Israelites to sin against their God and let Him wipe them out. It almost worked except for High Priest Aaron's grandson, Phineas (Numbers 25). Israel dished out a little "payback" to Balaam.

Chapter 14 flips to the western side of the Jordan river. High Priest Elazar will facilitate the land allocations by lots, and the text outlines the parameters of who gets what assignment and who doesn't. Before the land allocations begin, Caleb (85 years old) steps forward with his family to ask for what the Lord promised him. Caleb recounts his

faithfulness as the basis for the grant (14:8-9). Joshua agrees. Verse 14 says Caleb took Hebron, implying that he defeated the king and the inhabitants. Hebron was originally called Kiriath-arba, meaning the City of Arba, named after the tallest/biggest/greatest man (a giant) among the Anakim giants. The “big guy” among Israel gets the city of the “biggest man” from among the “biggest people.”

Chapter 15 focuses on Judah’s inheritance, Caleb and Othniel’s allocation, and the cities within Judah’s tribal boundaries. Remember your Bible maps! The chapter zooms in on how the Calebite family takes control of their land (15:13-19). Caleb first eliminates three big problems – the giants Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi – descendants of Anak. Next, Caleb challenges, “Whoever attacks and captures Kiriath-sepher, I will give my daughter Achsah to him as a wife” (15:16). Why the challenge? Presumably to “sift the stock,” i.e., find a man who qualifies in faith, strength, bravery. It’s not a bad way to build a quality line in your family. Othniel conquers Kiriath-sepher and marries Achsah. Achsah’s request is for springs of water along with the land apportioned to her and her husband, Othniel. These springs still exist today.

Chapter 15 finishes with a list of Judah’s new cities. Most of the first 29 cities were assigned to Simeon (see 19:1-9). Notice “But the descendants of Judah could not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem. So the Jebusites still live in Jerusalem among the descendants of Judah today (15:63). Neither Judah nor Benjamin could drive out the Jebusites entirely or permanently, and it was up to King David to take the Jebusite fortress later on. From that time forward, the Jebusites lived free among Judah.

INSIGHT

Caleb (*calev* means dog). Caleb is “Dog, the Giant Hunter!”

The rabbis say that the boundaries are given in such great detail (15:1-12) because some Torah commands may only be performed within the limits of their land allocation. However, even if we live outside of the land of Israel and these commands are not specifically applicable, we can still learn from them.

March 3 : Scriptures Joshua 16-18

SUMMARY

Chapter 16 and the next deal with allotments to Joseph, i.e. Ephraim and Manasseh. This came up as one lot, which caused some bickering in 17:14-18.

Joseph's southern border ran from Jericho to the west past Bethel, then down toward Gezer and the Mediterranean Sea. The northern border began at the Jordan and went west, just south of Shiloh and just north of Shechem, then down to the Mediterranean Sea.

Regarding Ephraim's boundaries it says, "However, they did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer. So the Canaanites still live in Ephraim today, but they are forced laborers" (16:10). They didn't drive out the Canaanites from Gezer. This is but one in a string of statements that the Israelites failed to take the Land completely. The Gezerites lived with the Ephraimites as indentured servants. This was similar to the Gibeonites except no treaty is mentioned.

Regarding west Manasseh's boundaries, note that although Manasseh was firstborn, Ephraim was allotted land first. This reflects the blessing of Grandpa Jacob, where he crossed his arms and blessed Ephraim before Manasseh (Genesis 48:13-20). Perhaps this was also a reminder to Ephraim who really WAS the firstborn of Joseph? Going on, Zelophehad's daughters finally stake their claim to their father's inheritance (17:3-5).

Not everyone, though, is able to establish their claim. The people of Manasseh couldn't drive these Canaanites out, so they made them pay tribute (17:12-13). Are you beginning to see a trend here?

And now comes the bickering (17:14-18)! The two tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh complain they should get more than one allotment (as Joseph's two tribes double portion). And it's true the two tribes have great numbers when counted together under Joseph's name. So they go to Joshua to press their case. Remember that Joshua is one of Joseph's descendants as well so this is a family squabble. Maybe the Ephraimites and Manasseh-ites thought they'd get favored, although the land was issued by lot as Yehovah's choice via High Priest Eleazar.

Joseph's descendants (JD): "Why'd we get such a small allotment. We're so numerous, we need more!"

Joshua (J): "Yeah, if you're so many, then start cutting trees in Perrizite and Rephaim (giant) hillside territory if your lowlands aren't enough."

JD: "But, but, but the hill country still isn't enough and if we try to take the valleys as well, we'll have to face enemies with iron chariots." (Iron chariots are formidable for excellent protection and offensive tactics.)

J: "Yes, you have a lot of people and you'll get more than one allotment because it includes the hills. So clear it out. And to get more, you'll have to clear your enemies from the valleys as well. Don't sweat it. You can take the Canaanites even though they're strong and have armored vehicles!"

Chapter 18 picks up the land distribution process for the seven remaining tribes at Shiloh (18:1). So far five tribes have their assignments. Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh have their portions east of the Jordan. Judah has their portion in the south and Joseph has their portion north of Judah. The established territories of Judah and Joseph (Ephraim) will serve as the anchor points. The remaining land will be sub-divided for conquering.

Seven tribes had not yet possessed their territory even though the land was conquered. Reason? The tribes were lax in taking the portions that had been allotted to them. It's up to the remaining tribes, minus the Levites who get no land, to divide up their inheritance. Joshua sends out a survey crew to scout the land and bring back a report to HQ at Shiloh where the Tabernacle is now set up after being moved from Gilgal in the Jordan Valley (18:8). After 7 years of conquest and 7 years of allocation, the Tabernacle was moved. The center of Israel has moved from the "place of consecration" to the "place of rest." The Tabernacle remained at Shiloh for 369 years as the central point of Israel's identity and worship.

Benjamin is the first to get their land and cities. The Benjamin-ites are sandwiched between Ephraim on the north, Judah on the south, and Dan on the west. Dan later migrates to the north of Israel. We'll see that when we get to the book of Judges.

INSIGHT

The Israelites may have conquered a central part of Canaan and wiped out the main opposition, but other parts of the land remained to be conquered, brought under control, and established under the Lord's rule. This is so similar to our spiritual lives when we come to the Lord. Yes, Satan's hold over us is broken and we're now under Jesus' rule (Colossians 1:13). However, as any honest follower of Christ will tell you, there are many

parts of our lives that need “mopping up” to establish Jesus as Lord. It’s one thing to break bad habits, but it’s another matter to create new ones. Conquering your “land” is good, but settling your “land” is the goal.

This also applies to whatever the Lord has called us to in life. While the Lord may give us a foothold in some areas of our lives, we often have to fight to expand into our calling such as furthering our education and developing personal disciplines and practices.

I get it. Sometimes it would be great if the Lord just suddenly transformed us. But this is a cooperative task. The Lord will do for you what only He can do for you. At other times, He will not do for you what only you need to do. Often, we need to just stop whining and get to it! “Chop down those trees” and take on those “iron chariots.” As Joshua said, “You can do it!” Why? Because you have the Lord with you!

March 4 : Scriptures Joshua 19-21

SUMMARY

We continue with the inheritance by lot in chapter 19. Below is the list in order with a few notes of interest.

2nd lot – Simeon, south. The tribe of Simeon was embedded within the borders of Judah. The *Tanak* (Hebrew scriptures) comment, “Whereas all the tribes received separate territories within the land, Simeon was not allocated any territory, but only scattered patches of land within the territory of Judah. Ramban explains that this was in fulfillment of Jacob’s word, “I will divide them [i.e., Simeon and Levi] in Jacob and scatter them in Israel (Genesis 49:7), implying that the tribes of Simeon and Levi would be given a series of cities, but not complete provinces.” (*Tanak*, Stone Edition, 562)

3rd lot – Zebulun, north. Cities of note – the vicinity of Nazareth.

4th lot – Issachar, north. Mount Tabor is located in Issachar, where Deborah and Barak gathered their forces (Judges 4), and Mount Moreh, where the Midianites gathered before Gideon attacked them (Judges 7). Cities of note – Jezreel, where the Elijah events of 1 Kings 17 occurred. Also, Shunem and Beth-Shemesh.

5th lot – Asher. Cities of note – Tyre. Mount Carmel in Asher is where Elijah’s famous battle with the prophets of Baal occurred (1 Kings 18).

6th lot – Naphtali. Cities of note – Hazor, Kedesh, Dan. As noted earlier, Hazor was the ringleader city Joshua razed to the ground.

7th lot – Dan. Cities of note – Aijalon, Timnah, Ekron, Jaffa. Samson comes from the tribe of Dan, and he traveled south into the Philistines’ territory to pick a bride and some fights. The struggle with the Amorites in this area kept the Danites confined to the higher elevations. Because they couldn’t overcome the residents, Dan later migrates north, conquers the city of Laish, and renames it Dan (Judges 18).

8th lot – Joshua. Joshua’s family receives Timnath-serah in Mount Ephraim by the word of the Lord. This land grant is in the southwest corner of Ephraim, facing the Mediterranean. Most kings take their allotment of land before anyone else. But Joshua, the servant of the Lord, receives his portion only AFTER all the tribes have received theirs.

Chapter 19 ends the land allotment process. The dignitaries involved in this venture were Eleazar, Joshua, tribal leaders, and the Lord. It was performed in the Lord's presence (the Tabernacle) at Shiloh (19:51).

Cities of refuge are the focus of ch. 20. Now that the nation with its tribal/state boundaries has been established, it is time to begin a basic system of government. Part of the government involved the Cities of Refuge court system, to which a person accused of manslaughter may flee, so they aren't struck down in the heat of emotion by a vengeful relative of the victim. The Avenger of Blood is a person designated as the protector of family rights. They also function as the Kinsman-Redeemer. This person is authorized to execute vengeance, *never* revenge. The Cities of Refuge allowed the case to be tried outside of the tribal/clan/family influences so often seen in "small town" situations. Doing so was a great safety measure against the eruption of blood feuds. The Lord selected the Cities of Refuge from among the Levite towns where His Law would be known and respected. All trials were to take place at the entrance to the city, i.e., the city gate, where the elders sat daily. The accused would state his case before the elders, allowing (or preventing) entry into the city (20:4). The trial would take place at a later date before the elders for fairness and oversight. Once the trial concluded and the decision was rendered, the accused would be dealt with appropriately.

The Cities of Refuge on the west side of the Jordan river are Kedesh in the hill country of Naphtali in Galilee, Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah.

The Cities of Refuge on the east side of the Jordan river are Bezer on the wilderness plateau from Reuben's tribe, Ramoth in Gilead from Gad's tribe, and Golan in Bashan from Manasseh's tribe.

Note the two sets of cities are distributed in the north, central, and southern sections of the land. Cities of Refuge were required to be where it would be most easy to locate and travel.

In ch. 21, we address the Levites' cities, specifically the cities for Aaron's family, the Kohathites, Gershonites, Merarites.

The heads of the various Levitical families approach Eleazar, the High Priest, Joshua, the leader, and the heads of the other Israelite tribes requesting their promised living spaces (21:1).

This scattering of Levi's descendants fulfilled a long-ago prophecy by Jacob, "Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel" (Genesis 49:7). Both Simeon and Levi were scattered throughout the land because they attacked Shechem and slaughtered its people. Simeon is scattered throughout Judah, and Levi is scattered throughout the land.

Unlike the other tribes, the Levites were given no set region. They were allowed cities and agricultural/grazing land surrounding the towns so they could raise their families. They were required to be ready to devote themselves to Divine service by assisting at the Tabernacle at Shiloh and later at the Temple in Jerusalem. Until then, they were allowed to live scattered among their fellow Israelites.

The end of the chapter declares the Lord's promises are fulfilled (21:43-45). The Lord gave them the entire land – they inherited it and lived in it. The national campaign was completed, and no force in Canaan was left that could dislodge the new nation. The Lord gave them rest from their surrounding enemies. Those that did attack fell before Israel, and the Lord "delivered them into their hands." The verse notes, "Nothing of all the good things of which the Lord had spoken to the House of Israel was lacking; everything came to pass" (21:43). Therefore, the Lord has proved Himself faithful to His Word, and for those who are faithful to Him, he provides His blessing.

INSIGHT

Cities of Refuge functioned as a "decompression zone" so that the facts of a matter may be determined and calmly weighed. Justice was carried out fairly and with the proper timing, thus easing passions. Timely justice. An independent (not family) court to sit in judgment.

As the Lord's disciples, we should often "count to ten" before speaking or acting rashly. Using the book of Joshua as an example, we see how various areas of our lives need to be conquered and put under the control of the Lord's Word – both Written and Living – through Jesus' leadership. The most challenging part is often controlling our tongues.

Instead of rash words, take time to think. Perhaps a cooling-off period is needed before addressing issues?

Instead of hurtful words, we reconsider less painful language. As the book of Proverbs says, "The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Proverbs 12:18). What if the person you're verbally slicing and dicing isn't innocent? Is it right to verbally "kill" them even if they're not innocent?

Gracious words have great value, "Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances" (Proverbs 25:11).

And words carry great power. As James writes, "Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:5-8).

March 5 : Scriptures Joshua 22-24

SUMMARY

And now we come to the end of the Book of Joshua. Chapter 22 begins with Reuben's, Gad's, and Manasseh's release from duty after helping their compatriots gain their land. They were faithful to Moses and Joshua's commands (24:2) as they promised they would be. Joshua's charge to the departing tribes is to stay focused and committed to the Lord. They were to "Love the Lord, walk in His ways, do His commands, cling to Him, and serve Him with everything you have."

National unity is the theme of this chapter and the "2nd altar" event. Even though the eastern tribes (2 ½ tribes) live in a different region, they're still part of the nation. National disunity and division were the main concerns at the end of Numbers, through Deuteronomy, and into Joshua. The question is how to ensure that unity.

The eastern tribes depart from the Israelites' camp at Shiloh and return to their allotted territories across the Jordan. At the Jordan, they build an elaborate altar. The Hebrew literally translates as "altar large in sight." So, not only did the altar stand out, but it was quite a sight to behold. Were the 2 ½ tribes just ambitious and rebelling, or was there an innocent reason for this large altar? Was it intended to be a sacrificial altar to God or a Canaanite god?

When the western tribes heard what the eastern tribes had built, they concluded that the tribes had erected the altar as a rival to the Lord's altar at the Tabernacle at Shiloh (23:12). Their assumption was undoubtedly was a frightening possibility. Previously, the Lord Himself had commanded, "Say to them: 'Any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance to the tent of meeting to sacrifice it to the LORD must be cut off from the people of Israel'" (Leviticus 17:8, 9). Why? Because making sacrifices without Levite supervision could lead to turning away from Yehovah (Deuteronomy 13:12-15). So, in obedience to Moses and to prepare to "cut off" the apparently wayward tribes, the western tribes assembled an army at Shiloh to exercise a bit of disciplinary action.

The event is handled quite well by Israel's leadership. First, the leaders hold a hearing with the eastern tribes to share their suspicion and concern (22:15-20). I appreciate how the leadership seeks to fix the situation positively, "If there's a problem, let us help you make it right."

Next, the eastern tribes affirm their allegiance to Yehovah and give their reason for building the altar. “Hey, guys. This altar isn’t what it looks like! It isn’t an altar for sacrifice but an altar of remembrance – a standing stone memorial. It wasn’t built for us (Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh) to separate from the western tribes but to prevent the western tribes from separating from us, causing our descendants to drift from the Lord. “We actually did this from a specific concern that in the future *your descendants might say to our descendants, ‘What relationship do you have with the Lord, the God of Israel? For the Lord has made the Jordan a border between us and you descendants of Reuben and Gad. You have no share in the Lord!’ So your descendants may cause our descendants to stop fearing the Lord”* (22:24-25). That makes good sense. Natural boundaries make borders that could cause separation, estrangement, and apostasy in the future. So, the Jordan altar symbolizes wholehearted commitment rather than a symbol of rebellion! The altar isn’t for sacrifice but a covenant witness and memorial that “we’re still in this with you.” It’s also a claim to the eastern tribe’s right to worship the Lord in *Eretz Yisrael* (22:26-27), thus reinforcing tribal ties.

Everyone finally realizes that the western tribes are threatening to discipline the eastern tribes for the sake of unity, and the eastern tribes built the altar for the sake of unity. Both sides are working for the same goal, but they think they’re at odds through a misunderstanding. The reality is the altar is a *copy*, and the Hebrew word is specific. This altar is a replica, not a replacement, of the Lord’s altar at Shiloh to remind both sides that we’re all children of Israel.

With the conflict resolved, the delegation is content. “Now we know! Cool. See ya later!” (22:30). The leaders spread the word to the western tribes to clear the eastern tribes’ reputation and for the army to “stand down.” The memorial stone altar was named “Witness” because that was how it was built to function.

I’m impressed with Joshua’s farewell address that follows in ch. 23. The elderly Joshua calls Israel to a meeting after the Lord has given them rest from their enemies. The first thing Joshua does is give credit to the Lord (23:3). Then he acknowledges the task he’s completed (23:4). Finally, Joshua encourages the Israelites that the Lord will continue to push back the remaining enemies through the Israelites so the nation can possess their promised land.

Joshua tells them the key to Israel’s future success is continued covenant faithfulness to the Lord. He reminds them to stay close to His word, so they don’t drift apart from Him and embrace the remaining Canaanites’ gods (23:6-8). They are to have a firm grasp on their commitment to Yehovah. He reminds them that the only reason they were

successful in the first place was that the Lord was with them (23:10). If they switch loyalties, intermarry with the Canaanites, and “go native,” the Israelites will put themselves under the same ban as their enemies. And Yehovah will deal with the Israelites the same way He has dealt with the Canaanites – He will drive them from the land. Any alliance with the Canaanites will become a deadly trap for the Israelites.

Finally, Joshua reminds the people that he has fulfilled his part, and the Lord has fulfilled His promises up to this point. As Yehovah has kept His promises to Israel, so He'll keep His curses if they stray from the covenant (23:16).

Now it's time for Joshua's final official act as Israel's leader, a covenant renewal ceremony, just like his mentor, Moses, did at the end of his life. The ceremony takes place at Shechem, and once again, it follows the traditional Hittite covenant format:

The Preamble: identifying the initiator of the covenant (24:2).

The Historical Prologue: spelling out the previous relationship between the covenant parties (24:2-13).

The Stipulations: the general and specific obligations involved (24:14-15, 23).

The Oath of obedience and ratifying ceremony: verbal and physical agreement (24:15-22, 23-24).

The Curses and Blessings: based on faithfulness or treachery (covenant unfaithfulness) (19-20).

The Arrangements: to place a copy of the treaty in the sanctuary of each party's gods and regular reading of the treaty (25-26a).

The Witnesses – invoked to witness the treaty (22, 26b-28).

Joshua recites Yehovah's history with the Israelites similar to Exodus 19:4 and Deuteronomy 1-3. Over and over, the Lord recounts it was Him and not Israel that scored the successes. “I took your father Abraham from... led him... multiplied his descendants... Isaac... Jacob and Esau. I sent Moses and Aaron... I defeated Egypt... I brought you out... (I) put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and brought the sea over them, engulfing them... I brought you to the land of the Amorites... I handed them over to you... I annihilated them... I would not listen to Balaam... I rescued you from

him... I handed (Jericho's citizens) over to you... I sent hornets ahead of you (against the Amorites) ... I gave you a land...cities... vineyards... and olive groves you did not plant. Therefore..." (24:3-13).

The "Therefore" is "there for" a reason. Because the Lord did all this for the Israelites, Joshua calls Israel to recommit themselves to Yehovah and renew their covenant with Him. Sure, they can serve either the Lord or idols, and that's their choice. But they must decide right now. As for Joshua and his family, they're all in (24:15). The people affirm they will follow the Lord and worship Him. But Joshua reminds them of their inability to live up to their commitment and the consequences if they don't. Despite Joshua's warning, the people say they will remain faithful to the Lord, giving their fully informed consent. So, Joshua says they are witnesses to what they just swore, and the people agree.

Joshua records their agreement in the book of the Law. He sets up a standing stone as a long-lasting memorial as an additional witness to the Israelites' pledge of allegiance to Yehovah with all the rights and responsibilities, blessings, and curses that come with it.

The book of Joshua closes with the burial of three significant leaders – Joshua (age 110), Joseph (whose bones are finally buried at Shechem, on his family's land), and Eleazar, Israel's 2nd High Priest.

INSIGHT

Like the Israelites, our Heavenly Father delivered us out of our idolatry and continues to fashion us into men and women of God. This involved saving us from our "Egypt," making a covenant with us (the New Covenant in Jesus), and then working with us to conquer the land (aspects of our lives such as thoughts, ungodly attitudes, habits, and practices) He has graciously given us. He has defeated the enemy's main force, but He continues to work with us to bring all areas of our lives under His covenant terms.

There are times when we need to "refresh" our covenant commitment to the Lord. When we reach important life events such as marriage, starting a family, changing locations, or jobs, that can happen. It can also be appropriate when we find that we've drifted away from the Lord and need to return to Him. Reaffirming the New Covenant is essentially what Communion is all about. When we take the wine and the bread, we're commemorating what Jesus has done for us and recommitting to follow Him, our covenant partner, as we agreed to at the moment of our salvation. Even now, you can stop to thank Him and reaffirm your pledge to Him.

March 6 : Scriptures Judges 1-3

SUMMARY

The book of Judges is hugely relevant for our day. The verse, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25) captures the overall theme of God's covenant people in the Book of Judges and clearly describes many people's attitudes today, sadly even Jesus' followers.

The book of Judges introduces a new phase in Israel's national life – for the first time since the Exodus, there was no single leader. For the previous sixty-five years, Israel had two dynamic and successful men of God leading them. Moses delivered Israel from Egypt, and Joshua led Israel in conquering Canaan and establishing the new nation.

After Joshua's death, the Israelites were to continue conquering their allotted tribal territories within the formerly Canaanite-controlled land. There were still pockets of enemies to be dislodged, wild animals driven out, and homesteads to build. The Lord had clearly promised the Israelites that He would never leave them nor forsake them as long as they kept faith with Him (see Joshua 23, 24). He also promised them defeat, destruction, and even exile from the Promised Land, *Eretz Yisrael*, if they turned to other gods, the god of the nations they were supposed to wipe out. The book of Joshua ends peacefully with Israel walking with their God, and the book of Judges opens with Israel's walk turning into a stumble.

As the Israelites associated with the remaining Canaanite peoples, they began to buy into the neighbors' idolatrous worship system. The Canaanite worship practices were abominable and seductive, playing off humanity's base desires. It wasn't long until an Israelite generation arose that "knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals" (Judges 2:10-11).

As a result, the Lord allowed Israel's enemies to oppress them, but not all at once. Israel was forced repeatedly to marshal their troops under a Spirit-filled leader, a Judge, who would lead the campaign to drive out the invading enemy force, but not without Israel first repenting of their sin and returning to the Lord with all their hearts. Only then would they be victorious over their cruel enemies. After that, a period of peace would descend for a time – until Israel wandered off again.

Israel was fine as long as the people focused on the Lord and their commitment to His divine task – conquering their land entirely. But there came moments when Israel faltered in their mission. Many of the remaining Canaanite tribes were no pushovers. Starting

with Judges 1:27, there is a list of Israelite tribes who failed to drive out their pesky neighbors and chose instead to subject the inhabitants to tribute and servitude, similar to Joshua's treatment of the Gibeonites (Joshua 9). While this seemed a satisfactory solution, it was disobedience to the Lord. It also set the stage for Israel to begin observing, then adopting the ways of the Canaanite people instead of leading the Canaanite to embrace the One True God. Israel's capitulation was their *sin* which led to *rebellion*.

The Lord sent a hostile nation to oppress Israel when the situation became so bad that it violated their covenant terms. That oppression usually took the form of *slavery*, a physical *rebuke* from the Lord. When the pressure and pain became too great to bear, Israel cried to the Lord for relief. With great *supplication* (meaning "to ask humbly and earnestly, usually by prayer"), Israel would *repent* of their sins and beg the Lord for deliverance.

In response, the Lord raised a judge to lead the afflicted tribes against their oppressors and drive them out. Yehovah's judge would bring the Lord's *salvation* by *redeeming* them out of the enemy's control and back under the King's dominion. What followed this great deliverance was a period of rest and peace.

So, here's the recurring cycle: *Sin – Slavery – Supplication – Salvation*. You can also say *Rebel – Rebuke – Repent – Restore*. Look for it as you read through the book.

Chapter 1 begins with a synopsis of Israel's attempts to finish the task of eliminating the Canaanite people:

Judah and Simeon conquered Bezek and Jerusalem, the Canaanites in the hill country, the south desert (Negev), and the Judean lowlands to the west. They also defeated Debir. Caleb's nephew, Othniel, conquers Kiriath-sepher and earns Caleb's daughter, as we've already seen in (Joshua 15:17). In the process, Caleb smites the three giants! Moses' kin, the Kenites (of Moses' father-in-law, Jethro), migrate to the area of Arad, SW corner of the Dead Sea (FYI). Later, Judah takes out the Canaanites from the Judean lowlands westward into today's Gaza Strip. But "they could not drive out the people who were living in the plain because those people had iron chariots" (1:19). Those darned armored vehicles again!

The Benjaminites fail and choose to live alongside the Jebusites.

The people of Joseph take the town of Luz, but Joseph's sub-tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim, fail to eliminate the Canaanites, and they decide to put them to forced labor instead.

The tribes of Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali all fail the Lord's "search and destroy" objectives and choose to settle down alongside their enemies. It's just getting worse and worse, isn't it?

Finally, Dan is unsuccessful in driving out the Amorites. The Amorites kept them confined to the hills. While the tribe of Joseph was able to make some headway with the Amorites, putting them to forced labor, the people of Dan will eventually give up and move north, as we'll see at the end of the book of Judges.

The Lord promised to help the Israelites drive out *all* the Canaanites, which they began to do under Joshua's leadership, but the Israelites failed to follow through. And because they stopped short, they did exactly what they weren't supposed to do. They chose to make treaties (covenants) with the Canaanites. The Lord's rebuke through an unknown prophet was swift and brutal, "You are not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land. You are to tear down their altars. But you have not obeyed me. What have you done? Therefore, I now say: I will not drive out these people before you. They will be thorns in your sides, and their gods will be a trap for you" (2:3). It happened just like Joshua said it would in Joshua 23:13. Israel's disobedience was not destroying every person of the remnant native Canaanite tribes.

The writer gives us a little background on why the Israelites failed. Judges 2:6-9 notes the transition from the book of Joshua to the time of the Judges. It's a recap of Joshua's death, leading to the next generation of elders who had known Joshua and the Lord's mighty works in Canaan. After that generation who had first-hand knowledge and experience with Yehovah, there arose a "clueless" generation "who did not know the Lord or the works he had done for Israel" (2:10). Because they didn't know the Lord personally, many of that 3rd generation Israelites turned from Yehovah to worship the enticing gods of the Canaanites. So Israel begins its *Rebel* stage of the cycle. And yes, this torqued Yehovah off! So He sent "marauders who raided them. He sold them to the enemies around them, and they could no longer resist their enemies" (2:14), and they "suffered greatly" (2:15). This is Israel's *Rebuke* stage. Yehovah would then raise leaders to deliver the Israelites for their *Repent* and *Restore* stage. But when Yehovah saved them from their enemies, the Israelites would just drift back to their idolatry (2:16-17). Seriously, with all this rebellion, why would the Lord bother to save His rebellious people in the first place? Because He's a compassionate, promise-keeping God who gives multiple chances for His people to repent (2:18). But despite the Lord's mercies, they would soon forget and return to their sin (2:19).

And so Yehovah decided not to drive all the Canaanites out immediately under Joshua's leadership (2:23), nor did He help the Israelites drive out the remaining Canaanites after Joshua died (2:21).

In ch. 3, the Lord reveals two reasons for leaving the remaining Canaanite people in the land; to test and train the Israelites for battle (3:2-3) and to see if His people would remain faithful to Him (3:4). But faithfulness doesn't seem to be this generation of Israelites' strong suit. With the Israelites intermingling with the Canaanites, intermarrying began, leading to idolatry.

Thus begins the 2nd and central section of Judges (3:7-16:31), and the cycle of *Sin – Slavery – Supplication – Salvation* starts.

Othniel is Israel's first judge. As you may recall, he's Caleb's nephew. Othniel had already demonstrated his character and obedience at Kiriath-sepher. Yehovah's Spirit comes upon Othniel, and he takes down Cushan-Rishathaim, a king of Aram (modern-day Syria), and brings Israel 40 years of peace, roughly a generation. So, what happens when a generation that knew oppression and God's deliverance passes away?

Then comes Ehud (3:15). Ehud's "weakness" is that he's left-handed. In the ancient and modern Middle East, the left hand is the weak hand, and to put it delicately, the "potty" hand. This left-handed man is from the tribe of Benjamin, which is ironic because of the name Benjamin, "the son of my right hand." The right hand indicates strength, and the left hand suggests weakness. The right hand is the "power" hand. So here's a little insight. If the ancient Israelites eat with the right hand and do toilet business with the left, does the phrase, "they are a people who don't know their right hand from their left?" take on meaning? Yup, it means the referred to people are stupid.

So, what is the strategic importance that Ehud is left-handed? First, Ehud is already a trusted person, thus lowering the guards' alertness. But even if they were alert, the guards would typically look for a weapon on the left side, drawn with the right hand. It makes me smile to know God empowers Ehud's weakness to bring down Israel's Moabite oppressor! Israel is delivered and enjoys eighty years of peace (at least in this area).

Shamgar is the next judge and does the remarkable with something impossible. Shamgar uses an ox goad (a sharpened stick used to poke the rear end of an ox to get it moving) to kill *six hundred Philistines*. *Six hundred! Holy mackerel!* After being delivered from the Philistine's oppression, this should have been a lesson to the Israelites. If Yehovah could

use such “weak” vessels to do His work, surely the Israelites could have thoroughly cleansed Canaan of the Canaanites and Amorites. So why didn't they?

Disobedience. It's just as God said. Israel's disobedience would become the sin that brings defeat, “But if you do not obey me and observe all these commands— if you reject my statutes and despise my ordinances, and do not observe all my commands—and break my covenant, then I will do this to you... You will sow your seed in vain because your enemies will eat it. *I will turn against you, so that you will be defeated by your enemies. Those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even though no one is pursuing you*” (Leviticus 26:14-17, italics author).

INSIGHT

Israel's biggest struggle in the book of Judges was their ability to remain faithful to the Lord. Throughout the book, Israel demonstrated a very familiar cycle to most, if not all, Christians. The book of Joshua can be understood as a picture of Christians conquering ungodly areas of their lives (ungodly personality traits, habits, practices, and desires) despite our weaknesses. The book of Judges is also a bold warning of what happens to Christians when they ignore the Holy Spirit's power and guidance for maturity but fall into spiritual compromise.

March 7 : Scriptures Judges 4-6

SUMMARY

“The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after... (the judge) died” (4:1). Yes, this is going to get repetitive. Many of these judges’ times of service overlap as Israel struggles to keep the faith and not fall into idolatry. The next judge in chapter 4 is Deborah. This account is fascinating because it focuses on two women – the prophetess and judge Deborah and a lowly maiden named Jael. Who was Deborah? She was called a “Mother in Israel” (5:7), meaning a woman who was mature in years and had sound wisdom. “Mother in Israel” is a title of honor, respect, and prominence, and Deborah ranks among the top leaders in Israel’s history.

The man of the story, Barak, is a genuine warrior but doesn’t take the lead as he should. He relies on Deborah’s presence to give him the confidence to act on God’s call to defeat King Jabin of Hazor. Yes, it’s the same city of Hazor that Joshua destroyed in the northern campaign (Joshua 11). The book of Joshua says Joshua struck down King Jabin of Hazor and burned the ringleader city (Joshua 11:1, 10). Another King, Jabin, has ascended to the throne and rebuilt the city during the elapsed time. That’s no surprise since Hazor sat on a vital trade route between Israel and points east.

Because of the Israelites’ sin (again), the Lord allowed King Jabin to oppress Israel for twenty years. He had iron chariots (a “modern” army), making it nearly impossible for Israel to defeat him. But when the Israelites’ were repentant enough to be delivered, God sent a prophetic word through Deborah to Commander Barak. He was to “go forth and conquer” when the Lord lured Sisera and his army into the battleground (4:7). The strategy is to take 10,000 warriors from Naphtali and Zebulun and station them on Mount Tabor, an elevated terrain that is tough for iron chariots to navigate. The Lord is using the warriors as bait for Sisera by collecting them in a highly prominent place and keeping them out of reach of the chariots.

But Barak balks. He says he’s not going to do it unless Deborah comes with him. I don’t know. Maybe she was his spiritual “security blanket” or something. Apparently, Barak trusted Deborah’s presence more than the Lord’s presence and prophetic word. Deborah declares that Barak will route the enemy as the Lord said, but *a woman* would get the credit. Do you get that? *A woman!* Barak will be bested by a woman, again proving Yehovah can use what’s thought of as “weak” and seemingly “useless” vessels in mighty ways.

The battle begins, and Sisera's army is beaten (4:15). Sisera flees the battlefield and winds up in Jael's nearby camp. With the enemy behind him, he relaxes for a moment since Jael's family and King Jabin are at peace (4:17). But Jael's family is also at peace with Israel since the Kenites, and the Israelites are a family from way back (Jethro the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, 4:11), remember? After a glass of warm milk, Sisera drifts off to dreamland, never to wake again. Jael takes a tent peg and drives it through Sisera's head, nailing him to the ground where Commander Barak finds him when he arrives (4:22). Yes, Barak, the Lord's word came true. Jael gets the glory, not Barak. Jael seized the opportunity like the judges Ehud and Shamgar did before her. She likely knew Sisera was a wanted man because she probably heard the word spreading about an impending battle in the area and its preparations. Also, what would be your conclusion if you saw a commander without his army or bodyguards? She probably figured it had been a rout.

We would be tempted to have fun because a "mere woman" killed Sisera with a tent peg. Dying at the hands of a woman was humiliating for a man in ancient Israel. But understand that Bedouin-type women were strong and hardy, and they had to be able to pitch a tent or any number of chores that required strength.

And now for the rest of the story. King Jabin's military is destroyed along with his commander. Israel can now fight against the king and eliminate the Canaanites in the area. Why? Israel has come back under their King, and he's fulfilling His promise to them by destroying their enemies. The hero of the story is God. In our eyes, He used unlikely people – two women and a reluctant man – to do His work.

We often read of songs in the Bible written in response to a victory in battle, and a song is an excellent way to remember what God has done. Deborah's song is composed this way: An introduction (5:1-3), the Lord leads His people via a historical review (5:4-5), another historical review explaining the terrible conditions leading up to the battle (5:6-9), the main event (5:10-23), the women in waiting – Jael lying in wait and Sisera's mom waiting for her son's return (5:24-30), and the finale (5:31).

Chapter 6 begins the story of a new judge, a somewhat insecure and unassuming man named Gideon. It's impressive to watch as Yehovah builds Gideon's confidence in the Lord and himself. Because of Israel's covenant violations (sin and idolatry, as we'll see with the pagan altar event), the Lord did what He said He would do. He allowed the Midianites to attack the Israelites and oppress them for seven years. This was brutal because the Midianites used food as physical and economic warfare. After the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites would ride like a scourge of grasshoppers and destroy everything – the crops and the livestock (6:3-5). Israel was impoverished and facing

annihilation. The Israelites cried to the Lord, but the Lord just said through another unknown prophet, "Hey, I told you so. Why are you surprised?" God's response reinforces that every generation needs to know the Lord personally. God has no grandchildren. Gideon's generation is having their "Come-to-Yehovah-moment."

But Yehovah is not heartless, and neither is He a covenant-breaker. He remains faithful, even though Israel is faithless. The "angel" of the Lord that appears to Gideon is likely the same God in human form/Commander of the Hosts of Yehovah that Joshua met on the plains of Jericho (Joshua 5:13-6:5).

The story picks up with Gideon harvesting wheat in a winepress (6:11). Gideon's plan was an excellent way to hide the grain from the enemy. In Israel, wheat is harvested in June, and grapes are harvested in the Fall. Who would think to look in a winepress that would otherwise be unused at that time of year? Notice that the Lord's angel calls Gideon a "valiant warrior" (6:12). Why would the Lord call this insecure man a valiant warrior? Because the Lord looks on the heart and knows His call on Gideon's life. The Creator knows all the attributes of His created person. What the Lord proclaims, the person becomes.

But it's a process. The first step is getting Gideon to recognize the Lord is with him and has a task for him to do. Gideon's response to the angel is funny, "Puh-lease! If the Lord was with us, we wouldn't be in this situation!" But the Lord forges ahead with his reluctant Gideon. "Don't worry about your strength, Gideon. Go with what you have. After all, I'm sending you." Isn't that interesting for the angel to say, "*I am sending you,*" just like Yehovah's words to Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 3)? What is Gideon's excuse to counter what the Lord said? "But I'm of the weakest clan, and I'm the weakest person in that clan" (6:15). Is this true? Yes. Does it make any difference to the Lord? No. Just ask Moses. For both Moses and Gideon, the Lord calls two reluctant men, unconvinced of their usefulness to the Lord. It's amazing what the weak can do with the Lord's presence and power. So, the Lord is unimpressed with Gideon's objection. He tells him to go because Gideon *will* take the Midianites down as if he were felling one man. Gideon just needs a little convincing. So, the Lord does a miracle for him (6:21).

After the sacrifice's spontaneous combustion, Gideon is convinced the Lord is with him and has assigned him the anti-Midianite campaign. The Lord continues to build up the valiant man's confidence. Yehovah has acknowledged Gideon, and now he asks Gideon to believe Him for who He is. The Lord tells him to tear down Baal's altar, erect a new one to Yehovah, and make a sacrifice, which Gideon does. *Except he does it at night for fear of how his fellow townspeople might react!* So much for being a "valiant warrior." But no fear.

Gideon goes in his strength (plus the strength of ten extra guys) and does the deed. When the townspeople learn of Gideon's deed, they want to punish him, but Gideon's dad steps up. "Hey, you boneheads! You got a problem? Anyone who steps up to defend Baal will die by morning. If Baal is so strong, let him defend himself." (Okay, I have a fanciful imagination.) So Gideon is off the hook and on his way to his next "learn faith in God" training session.

Sure enough, the enemy (Midianites, Amalekites, and people of the east) come storming into the land as usual (6:33). Of course, they camp in the Jezreel Valley because that's some of the best cropland in Canaan. God's Spirit comes upon Gideon, and he summons his clan, and the Israelites from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali rally to him. These are all tribes who lived in and around the Jezreel Valley. But Gideon is still unsure of himself. He humbly asks God to prove that He's behind Gideon with the famous "put out the fleece test." After the two nights with different results, Gideon has greater faith and is ready to go!

INSIGHT

When we insist on living in sin, Satan comes to oppress us. We often wind up living in a spiritual cave, hiding from God. Every time we begin to bring up something good in our lives, Satan snatches it away (God's Word on the hard-packed path), and it seems the fiercest attack comes just before our harvest time, the time when we could display "spiritual fruit," i.e., godly character. The best thing we can do is not let ourselves drift into sin but stay tight *with* the Lord.