

THE DAILY QUIET TIME REFLECTIONS SERIES

CONQUEST, FAILURE, AND REDEMPTION

Reflections on the Books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth

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with Eunmi Kim

Conquest, Failure, and Redemption

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*For the Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas —
companions in the daily Word*

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How to Use This Book

Reading, Reflecting, Together

This book was not written to be read in a single sitting. It was written to be read one day at a time, the way it was first written — a chapter at a time, over the course of several weeks, alongside an open Bible rather than in place of one. The believers in Berea were commended not simply for their eagerness to hear the Word but for their habit of examining the Scriptures every day to see whether what they had been taught was true (Acts 17:11). That daily habit, sustained over years rather than compressed into a season, is the entire aim of this book and of the Quiet Time practice that produced it.

To help establish that rhythm, we have included, as an appendix at the back of this book, the same daily Bible reading plan we have used at dailyqt.org for well over a decade. It walks through the whole of Scripture in a year, a few chapters at a time, and it does not need to be started in January; you are free to begin on whatever date suits you and simply follow the sequence from there. Each of the sixteen chapters in this book lines up with exactly one day on that plan, from Joshua 1–4 to Ruth, so that this book and your own Bible can move through Joshua, Judges, and Ruth together, side by side, one day at a time.

This volume is arranged in three parts that follow its title — Conquest (Joshua), Failure (Judges), and Redemption (Ruth) — each opening with its own introduction and closing with its own conclusion. Read them as three movements of a single unbroken story rather than as separate books set side by side; the seven

chapters of Conquest, the eight chapters of Failure, and the one chapter of Redemption were written, and are best read, in that order.

Whether you are reading on your own or working through this book with a group like one of our own Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas, we would suggest the following simple rhythm for each day, or for each session if you are meeting weekly as a group:

- 1. Begin and end in prayer.** Ask God, before you open either Bible or book, to teach you something true about Himself that day, and thank Him, when you close both, for whatever He has shown you — even if it is smaller or slower than you expected.
- 2. Read the assigned Scripture.** Using the reading plan in the appendix, read the day's passage directly from your own Bible before turning to our reflections on it. There is no substitute for reading the text itself first, in whatever translation you trust, and letting it raise its own questions before we offer our own.
- 3. Read the corresponding chapter in this book.** Each chapter walks through that day's passage in the order Scripture presents it, drawing out its major movements and, where it seemed useful, the historical background behind them. Treat it as a conversation about the text you just read, not a replacement for it.
- 4. Answer the discussion questions.** Every chapter closes with several questions sized to fill a forty-five- to sixty-minute group discussion, though they work just as well as slower journaling prompts for a reader working through the book alone. Some ask you to notice something in the text; most ask you to notice something in yourself.

If you are part of a group, we would encourage you to read both the day's Scripture and the corresponding chapter individually during the week, and then use your time together for the fourth step: praying together and working through the discussion questions as a group. This was, after all, how the material in this book first took

shape — not in a study or a library, but in a room full of ordinary readers asking each other what a passage meant and why it mattered, week after week, for years. We hope it will do the same for you.

Part One

CONQUEST

Joshua

Introduction

Deuteronomy ends with a funeral. Moses, the man who spoke with God face to face, climbs Mount Nebo, looks out over a land he will never enter, and dies — buried by God Himself in a grave no one has ever found. Joshua begins on the other side of that grief, with a word that must have been both bracing and terrifying to the man who received it: “Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them” (Joshua 1:2). For those of us who have labored through the Books of the Law — from the Paradise of Eden to the Plains of Moab — this is the moment the entire Pentateuch has been straining toward. The Book of Joshua is the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises to Abraham: a numerous people, now standing two million strong on the riverbank, and a prosperous land, now finally within reach. Joshua himself would say it best at the close of his life: “You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed” (Joshua 23:14).

The name tells us what to expect, just as it did in Genesis and Exodus. Joshua was originally called Hoshea, “salvation,” until Moses changed his name to Joshua — “the LORD saves.” The Greek form of that Hebrew name is Jesus. The parallel is not accidental, and Scripture invites us to notice it: what Jesus is to God’s people in the fullest sense, Joshua was to Israel in a smaller one. Both men brought God’s people into the realization of God’s promises; both fulfilled the will of God completely. The great difference between them is the means: Joshua achieved God’s victory through military conquest, while Jesus achieved it through personal sacrifice. One shed the blood of God’s enemies; the other shed His own.

The book divides neatly into two halves. The first (chapters 1–12) records the conquest of Canaan — the crossing of the Jordan, the fall of Jericho, the disaster and recovery at Ai, and then three sweeping campaigns through the center, south, and north of the

land, a work of roughly seven years. The second half (chapters 13–24) records the division of the land among the twelve tribes, the setting apart of cities of refuge and Levitical towns, and Joshua’s final charges to the nation. It is worth knowing that in the Hebrew Bible, Joshua is not shelved with the history books at all: it is the first book of the Former Prophets. The Hebrews understood that this is history written by a prophet’s hand — not a mere record of events, but a selective, God-breathed account designed to teach His people who He is. It is the second generation’s story: everyone who left Egypt as an adult has died in the wilderness except two men, Joshua and Caleb, the only spies who urged Israel to trust God at Kadesh-barnea forty years earlier. Faithfulness, this book insists from its very casting of characters, is never wasted.

We cannot introduce Joshua honestly without facing its hardest question: how can a God of love command the annihilation of the Canaanites — men, women, and children? Some have called this the central problem of the book, and we will meet it repeatedly in the chapters ahead. But several things must be said at the outset. First, God had been extraordinarily patient. He told Abraham centuries earlier that his descendants would wait four hundred years because “the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Genesis 15:16) — generations of opportunity to repent under the witness of Melchizedek, Abraham, and others. Second, Canaanite religion was not innocent. Its own surviving records reveal a culture in which ritual prostitution, sexual perversion of every kind, and human sacrifice were regular acts of worship. In commanding its removal, God was performing surgery — cutting a cancer out of human society before it metastasized, as history shows such cultures do, into everything around it. Third, and most searching of all: God’s severity fell on Israel too. When one Israelite, Achan, took what was devoted to destruction, the whole nation tasted defeat, and Achan died under the same judgment as Jericho. God wages war against sin wherever He finds it — and He deals more severely with His own people than with anyone else, because privilege heightens

responsibility. Joshua reveals that it is precisely because God loves people that He hates sin; a father who will not fight what is destroying his children does not love them.

If Judges will show us the anatomy of failure, Joshua shows us the anatomy of faith — what one writer called “the victory of faith.” Faith here means accepting God’s standard of holiness, abandoning ourselves to God’s methods even when they look absurd (marching around a walled city for a week is not military strategy), and acknowledging that every victory is achieved in God’s might rather than our own. Israel learned all three lessons: at Jericho, where obedience brought walls down; at Ai, where hidden sin brought heroes down; at Gibeon, where failure to pray brought deception in. Through every campaign, the lesson repeats: spiritual preparedness matters more than military preparedness. One of them could put a thousand to flight for a single reason — “because the LORD your God fights for you, just as he promised” (Joshua 23:10).

Readers of the New Testament have long noticed that Joshua is to the Old Testament what Ephesians is to the New. Each describes a predestined inheritance for a chosen people; each inheritance is opened by a divinely appointed leader; each is a gift of grace received by faith; and each, perhaps surprisingly, is a scene of conflict. Canaan is not a picture of heaven — there are no battles in heaven — but of the believer’s present inheritance in Christ: blessings already granted that must still be possessed, ground already given that must still be walked. That charge, first spoken on the riverbank, still stands over every believer who opens this book: “Be strong and courageous... Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night” (Joshua 1:7–8).

And yet the book ends on a suspended note. Joshua dies at a hundred and ten, and Israel has served the LORD “throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him” (Joshua 24:31) — but pockets of Canaanites remain, tolerated rather than removed, and Joshua’s final speeches carry a prophecy of what those

compromises will cost. The land has been given; whether it will be kept is another question. That question is the Book of Judges.

Chapter One

Joshua 1–4

Around forty years have passed since God first commanded Israel to take the Promised Land. At that time they were just two years out from their bondage in Egypt and eleven days' journey from Mount Sinai, where they had received the Law of the LORD. Moses sent twelve men to spy out Canaan; ten gave a discouraging report, and two an encouraging charge. Forty years later, only those two — Joshua and Caleb — survived to lead the next generation of Israel into the land. Everyone who did not trust the LORD enough to obey Him perished in the wilderness, exactly as God had said. The book opens, then, with the conquest of the Promised Land, Act II — and with the death of Moses, who was himself barred from entering because he failed to honor the LORD at the waters of Meribah. God tells Joshua that He will be with him as He was with Moses, and He commands him, three times over, to “be strong and courageous,” to be careful to obey the whole Law, and He promises that faithfulness will make his way prosperous and successful.

It is worth pausing over how these opening commands are arranged, because the repetition is not casual. The expressions “I will be with you,” “Be strong and courageous,” and “Be careful to obey” are woven into a literary structure called a chiasm, in which the first and last lines pair up, the second and second-to-last pair up, and so on, until a central line stands alone carrying the main thought. Trace it through Joshua 1:5–9: *I will be with you* (v. 5) ... *Be strong and courageous* (vv. 6–7) ... *Be careful to obey, that you may be successful* (v. 7) ... and then the center: **“Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night”* (v. 8) ... then you will be successful (v. 8) ... *Be strong and courageous* (v. 9) ... the LORD your God will be with you* (v. 9). The center of the chiasm is the center of the book. For a book about military conquest, Joshua contains remarkably little about military preparation and strategy, and a great deal about consecration and obedience. Israel’s first great conquest will be won

not by siege engines but by trusting and obeying God's instructions; her one great failure will come directly from disobeying them. You would think that with great battles about to ensue, Joshua and the people would busy themselves with military preparations. But the only preparation God required of them was spiritual.

Nor is this a theme unique to Joshua; it is the one unwavering principle for believers of every age — for Old Testament saints and New Testament saints, for new believers and old. The command given to Joshua was the same command given to Israel's future kings, who were to write out a personal copy of the Law and read it every day of their lives, that they might learn to fear the LORD and not turn aside from His commands (Deuteronomy 17:18–20). It is how the entire Psalter opens: “Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night,” a person like a tree planted by streams of water, whose leaf does not wither (Psalm 1:1–3). And the New Testament affirms it at every point: faith comes by hearing the word (Romans 10:17); we are sanctified by the truth of the word (John 17:17); the Scriptures thoroughly equip the servant of God for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17); and Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet listening to His word, chose “what is better” over even the good work of serving (Luke 10:39–42). Jesus gathered the principle into a single command: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Each of us wakes to the same sixteen or so hours every day. We cannot recapture the time that has passed, and only God knows how much remains. What differentiates our lives is how we use those hours — and when God's Word is not defining our activities, our priorities, and our perspective, then no matter how “good” and socially acceptable our busyness may be, we are like a runner running aimlessly, a boxer beating the air.

But what does it actually mean to meditate on God's Word “day and night”? In Hebrew poetry, “day and night” is a merism — two ideas that serve as bookends to include everything between them,

the way “Alpha and Omega” does not merely name two Greek letters but claims everything from first to last (Revelation 22:13). “Day and night” means the whole day, all day long. And the Hebrew word for meditate, *hagah*, means to mutter, murmur, ponder. Unlike Eastern meditation, which seeks to empty the mind, biblical meditation actively fills the mind with God’s Word — repeating it, reflecting on it, quietly speaking it aloud. Ancient reading was done out loud; to meditate meant to mumble the text under your breath as you went about your day, until its truth shaped your thoughts, choices, and character. The nearest modern equivalent of ancient Hebrew meditation is Scripture memorization.

Here a word of testimony is in order. I have been memorizing Scripture for more than twenty years, and I know of nothing so spiritually enriching as repeating Scripture in my mind, under my breath, and out loud, again and again. Rather than a verse here and there, I prefer to memorize whole chapters and whole books, which keeps everything in context and guards against misinterpreting or misapplying an isolated verse. The method is simple: one to three new verses a day, verbal repetition until I can say them without looking, a brief daily review of what has come before. Reciting Scripture while waiting in traffic or standing in a long line transforms dead time into worship. I believe there is no spiritual discipline so life-transforming as daily hiding God’s Word in your heart through repetition and recitation — and this is precisely what God commanded Joshua, and precisely what He declared would be the key to Israel’s success in the land. It is the key for you and me as well. Start today; a chapter as beautiful as Psalm 139 is a worthy place to begin.

There is comfort as well as command in this opening chapter. “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). Fear is no respecter of competence. A person may hold a black belt and still fear — fear uncertainty, fear loud and unruly people, fear failure, fear too much

success, fear their own lack of self-control, fear a vain and wasted life. The armies of Canaan were what stood immediately before Joshua, but is God's presence and power limited to military conflict? "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) — isn't the whole universe in view? His Spirit lives within us (1 Corinthians 6:19); in Christ we have every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3); He withholds no good thing and works all things toward our ultimate good (Romans 8:28, 32). Therefore we can be strong and courageous against all our fears, whatever they are and wherever they come from.

Chapter 1 closes with Joshua confirming the arrangement Moses had made with the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh: they would inherit land east of the Jordan, provided their fighting men crossed over and fought alongside their brothers until every tribe possessed its inheritance. They agreed. Both Moses and Joshua permitted it — the promised land did, after all, stretch from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean, not merely from the Jordan. And yet one wonders whether it was a spiritually wise decision. It placed these tribes farther from the future central place of worship; it split them geographically from their brothers; and history records that they were among the first to embrace Canaanite idolatry and the first carried into exile by Assyria (1 Chronicles 5:25–26). Their choice bears an uncomfortable resemblance to Lot's, who saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered and pitched his tent toward Sodom (Genesis 13:10). The motivation in both cases was the same — not spiritual but material. The land looked good for livestock (Numbers 32:1). It seemed an economically sound choice, and it proved disastrous. We make all kinds of decisions in life — where to live, what work to take, what to pursue — and too often the spiritual criteria come last, an afterthought behind the material and the emotional. "Everything is permissible," Paul wrote, "but not everything is beneficial" (1 Corinthians 10:23). It may not be sinful to weigh material benefit, but we may be forgoing the blessing of God by not weighing the spiritual first.

I can testify to this from my own life. When I started my first job out of college, I had no savings, no retirement — just a red Toyota Corolla, a gift from my parents. In my first week I sat down and typed out my goals: five houses, a net worth of five million dollars, passive income that would make work optional. And then something stopped me. Not a voice, exactly — more like a conviction. I flipped the paper over and started again. This time I wrote: daily Bible reading. Regular prayer. Faithful ministry. It was those back-of-the-page goals that received most of my time, effort, and focus in the years that followed — and nearly three decades later, I can say that God has kept the promise of Matthew 6:33 in both directions. Seek first His kingdom, and the other things have a way of being added. That is my testimony.

Then comes Joshua 2, and one of the most surprising heroes in all of Scripture. Joshua secretly sends two spies ahead to Jericho — secretly, one suspects, because it did not go well the last time spying was done publicly, and he would not repeat that mistake with a fickle people. The spies lodge at the house of Rahab, a prostitute whose home was built into the city wall, perhaps reasoning that no one would notice visitors there. They were wrong; the king's men came for them. But God providentially protected them through this Canaanite woman, because she feared God. Rahab told the spies what her whole city knew: everyone had heard how the LORD dried up the Red Sea forty years earlier and how Israel had annihilated the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan. “Our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Joshua 2:11). On the strength of that confession she hid the spies, asked that her family be spared, and let them down by a rope through her window, with a scarlet cord tied there as the sign of the oath.

Notice what a contrast Scripture has quietly set before us. The spies departed from Shittim — the very place where Israel had embraced the Baal of Peor and twenty-four thousand died under God’s judgment (Numbers 25). At Shittim, Israelites embraced a

Canaanite god, and it led to a great judgment; at Jericho, a Canaanite embraced Israel's God, and it led to a great deliverance. And her faith is instructive precisely because of what it was made of. Rahab never saw the Red Sea part. She never tasted manna. She had only heard reports — the same reports every citizen of Jericho had heard. The difference between Rahab and the rest of her city was not access to information; it was that she acted on what she believed. Compare her to Thomas, who had walked with Jesus and still declared, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands... I will not believe” — and then hear the Lord's benediction: “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:25, 29). Rahab is among the first of those blessed ones. Jesus told the chief priests, “the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matthew 21:31) — and why them? Because of their humility. Not puffed up like the Pharisee praising the works of his own hands, but like the tax collector who could only pray, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

Rahab's faith was also costly and irreversible. The moment she hid those spies and misdirected the king's messengers, she had committed treason against Jericho. There was no going back; her faith burned the bridge behind her completely. From the vantage of her own people she was a traitor; from the vantage of Scripture she is one of the great heroes of faith. Genuine saving faith always involves some form of irreversible commitment — some point at which we identify with God's people in a way that forecloses the alternative. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). And her faith worked. James pairs her, of all people, with Abraham — the father of the covenant nation alongside a Canaanite prostitute — as his two proofs that faith without deeds is dead (James 2:25). The pairing is deliberate and as forceful as it could possibly be: saving faith is not a matter of heritage, status, or religious formation. It is a matter of acting on what you believe when it costs something. She was afraid — she said so; her whole city's hearts were melting, hers surely

among them — and she acted anyway. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is acting rightly in the presence of fear. Hebrews names her in the hall of faith (Hebrews 11:31); Matthew names her in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, one of only five women listed, each of them a story of grace operating outside every expected boundary (Matthew 1:5). God wove a Canaanite former prostitute into the direct human ancestry of the Messiah. No one is beyond the reach of God's grace, and no past disqualifies a person from full inclusion in the purposes of God.

Chapters 3 and 4 record the crossing itself. As the priests carrying the ark stepped into the flooded Jordan, the waters piled up in a heap far upstream, and the whole nation crossed on dry ground — God confirming Joshua's appointment by doing through him what He had done through Moses at the Red Sea. Then God commanded a curious thing: twelve stones taken from the riverbed and set up at Gilgal, "to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?'... tell them" (Joshua 4:6–7). God repeatedly commanded Israel to build memorials to His great acts, so that generations who had seen nothing would still hear everything, "so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God" (Joshua 4:24). God may not part rivers before our eyes today, but He works providentially in our lives no less really — bringing people to faith, giving us His Word in our own language, granting freedom to worship without persecution. "Every good and perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17). Parents, consider creating your own memorials — family traditions, kept stories, marked anniversaries of God's faithfulness — so that your children grow up surrounded by reminders of His goodness and power. Scripture does not command it, but it commends the pattern; indeed the Lord's Supper itself is the New Testament's own memorial, established so that His people would never forget the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The central command of the chiasm — and of the whole book — is to keep God’s Word always on your lips and meditate on it day and night. What would *bagab*-style meditation actually look like in the rhythm of your ordinary day? Is there a chapter or book of Scripture you could begin memorizing this week?
2. When you make major decisions — where to live, what job to take, how to spend — what criteria genuinely come first? What would it look like to give the spiritual criteria the first word rather than the last, in light of the trans-Jordan tribes and Lot?
3. Rahab and her neighbors heard exactly the same reports about the LORD, but only she acted. What is the relationship between what you say you believe and what you actually do when acting would cost something? Has your faith ever cost you something real?
4. Rahab acted in the very fear that paralyzed her city. What is the “Jericho culture” in your life — the environment whose pressure runs against faithfulness to God — and what would it cost you to act against it?
5. The twelve stones at Gilgal existed so that children would ask questions. What memorials — traditions, stories, kept objects, marked dates — could you establish so that the next generation asks, “What does this mean?”

Chapter Two

Joshua 5–8

“Now when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the coast heard how the LORD had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites... their hearts melted in fear and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites” (Joshua 5:1). The Amorites were primarily warriors, holding the mountains and the southern country; the Canaanites were primarily tradesmen, occupying the lowlands and the coast. Militarily and economically, both were far superior to a nomadic people forty years out of the wilderness — and none of it provided the slightest advantage against the LORD God of Israel. “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6). “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God” (Psalm 20:7). “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

What follows is one of the strangest pieces of military preparation in history. With the enemy demoralized and the invasion begun, God’s first command is not to strike but to circumcise. The generation that left Egypt had been circumcised, but their children, born during the forty years in the wilderness, had not been — and there is no indication that God ever told Israel to suspend the practice. The suggestion is that the wilderness generation simply failed or refused to obey, one more evidence of the entrenched unbelief for which God swore, “They shall never enter my rest” (Hebrews 3:11). And this was no small omission. Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant — “My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:13) — the very covenant whose land-promise Israel was now standing inside. How could they receive the covenant promise without bearing the covenant sign in their bodies? Moses himself had nearly died for neglecting it with his own son (Exodus 4:24–26). No uncircumcised

male could even eat the Passover (Exodus 12:48), and Passover was days away.

But consider what obedience here required. A camp full of newly circumcised fighting men was a camp utterly unable to defend itself — this was exactly how Simeon and Levi had slaughtered the men of Shechem, attacking on the third day “while all of them were still in pain” (Genesis 34:25). From a human standpoint, no commander would ever order it with the enemy watching from walled cities. It speaks volumes about Joshua’s faith that he obeyed anyway, and volumes more about God’s faithfulness that no attack came: the LORD had already melted the courage of every king in the land. God made Israel vulnerable so that He might make them invincible. He would rather have a consecrated army than a defended one — and He took personal responsibility for the difference.

The places received memorial names, just as the stones of chapter 4 had. Gibeath Haaraloth, “the hill of foreskins,” marked the renewal of the covenant sign; Gilgal, “roll,” marked God’s declaration: “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you” (Joshua 5:9) — the sneering claim that God had brought Israel into the wilderness only to destroy them (Deuteronomy 9:28) now disproven forever. And then, quietly, an era ended: they celebrated Passover on the plains of Jericho, ate the produce of the land, “and the manna stopped the day after” (Joshua 5:12). The manna had been a temporary provision, perfectly timed to the wilderness years, and when its purpose was complete it ceased — not a day early, not a day late. There is no waste with the LORD. It is the same God who, after feeding the five thousand, had the leftover pieces gathered up so that nothing was lost. His provisions are never wasted and always abounding, and Gilgal is a pivotal point in Israel’s story precisely here: the rootless, rationed, wandering life was over, and the land flowing with milk and honey had begun. Praise be to God, who never forgets His promises.

Then comes an encounter that deserves more attention than it usually receives. Near Jericho, Joshua looks up to see a man standing before him with a drawn sword. Joshua challenges him: “Are you for us or for our enemies?” The answer is arresting: “Neither” — literally, simply, “No” — “but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come” (Joshua 5:13–14). It was the wrong question. Joshua needed to know whether to fight this warrior or recruit him, and the answer dismantled the entire frame: the issue was never whether this figure was on Joshua’s side, but whether Joshua and all Israel would be on *his*. Joshua understood immediately. He fell facedown in reverence, and his question changed from “Are you for us or against us?” to, in effect, “What is my Lord’s command for his servant?” Confrontation became submission. And who is this commander? He receives worship without protest, and he issues the very command God gave Moses at the burning bush: “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy” (Joshua 5:15; cf. Exodus 3:5). The last time Scripture showed us a divine figure with a drawn sword, it was the angel of the LORD standing against Balaam (Numbers 22:31); the next time, it will be the angel of the LORD standing over Jerusalem in judgment (1 Chronicles 21:16). These appearances are best understood as Christophanies — preincarnate appearances of the Lord Jesus Christ, who receives God-like worship and is spoken of interchangeably with the LORD Himself. Before the conquest begins, the true Commander presents Himself, and the lesson stands for every generation: God does not enlist in our campaigns. He does not conform to us; we must conform to Him. The question is never whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God’s.

Two of the shortest sentences in the book carry its whole theology. “And Joshua did so” (Joshua 5:15) — three words in Hebrew — and “so it was” when the word of the LORD went forth. The one encapsulates the whole duty of man: to obey, without discussion or argument, when it is clear that God has spoken. The other expresses God’s perfect sovereignty: what He declares, is. Karl

Barth, who wrote thousands of pages of dense theology, famously remarked that the most profound thing he knew was still “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so” — the sovereign promises of God, simply trusted. And the old hymn answers from the human side: “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” Between those two short sentences — *and it was so; and Joshua did so* — lies the entire life of faith.

Notice, too, the tense of God’s promise before Jericho: “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men” (Joshua 6:2). Past tense — before the first trumpet blast, before a single sword was drawn. Hebrew grammar can speak of a future event in the past tense to convey absolute certainty, and Scripture reserves this construction for the promises of God: they are so sure that, though still future, they may be spoken of as already accomplished. Paul does exactly the same thing in Romans 8:30 — “those he justified, he also *glorified*” — placing the believer’s future glory in the past tense. If you have been justified by God in Christ, your glorification is, grammatically and theologically, a done deal. You can bank on it.

The strategy for taking Jericho would never appear in any military manual. The city was shut up for a long siege (Joshua 6:1), its walls and high ground beyond Israel’s tools to overcome without terrible casualties. God’s instructions: armed men before and behind seven priests blowing trumpets and carrying the ark, marching around the city once a day for six days and seven times on the seventh, then a long trumpet blast and a shout. Their instruments of war were literally instruments. And the walls came tumbling down. It must be admitted that in later years others, including Christians, have tried to mimic the method, never with recorded success — because the power was never in the strategy but in the obedience. God defeated Midian’s hordes with Gideon’s three hundred (Judges 7); He told Jehoshaphat’s army simply to stand and watch (2

Chronicles 20); every method was different, but it was the same God, who gives victory to those who trust and obey Him.

Amid the rubble, one detail rewards a second look. Rahab's house was built into the wall (Joshua 2:15) — and after the wall collapsed, the spies went *into her house* to bring her family out (Joshua 6:22). One can only surmise that the section of wall bearing Rahab's house, marked by its scarlet cord, did not fall while everything around it did. Except for her household, Israel devoted the city to the LORD, destroying every living thing in it (Joshua 6:21). “Devoted to the LORD” — the ban, *herem* — refers to the irrevocable giving over of persons or things to God, and what was so devoted had to remain devoted: Joshua pronounced a curse on any man who would rebuild Jericho, a curse fulfilled to the letter five centuries later in the days of Ahab (Joshua 6:26; 1 Kings 16:34). God's judgments endure and do not fail; those who set themselves against His purposes are cursed indeed. But standing amid the ruin is Rahab — a harlot, a liar, and by Canaanite estimation a traitor — preserved alive as a perpetual monument of God's grace, taking her place alongside Noah's ark and the remnant that survived Babylon, and pointing forward to every Christian rescued from the wrath coming on the world. As those God curses are cursed, so those God blesses are blessed. Get on the right side of His blessing.

Chapter 7 shows the other edge of the sword, and we will feel its weight throughout the rest of the book: Achan took what was devoted, and Israel — the same Israel before whom Jericho fell flat — fled before the little town of Ai. Sin in the camp cost thirty-six men their lives and very nearly the whole campaign. Only after the sin was judged did God restore the victory, and at Ai Joshua gave us one of the book's quiet pictures of perseverance: he held out his javelin toward the city and “did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai” (Joshua 8:26). There is a prayer worth praying in that image: Lord, let me raise my spear and keep it raised until Your will is completely fulfilled in me — even when my arms are tired and every fiber of my body yearns

for relief. O LORD, command what You will, and do what You command in me.

And then, victory won, Israel did something no other nation would think to do as a celebration. On Mount Ebal, Joshua built an altar, wrote on stones a copy of the Law of Moses, and read every word of it — the blessings and the curses — to the whole assembly, women and children and foreigners included (Joshua 8:32–35). Who celebrates a military victory by copying out Scripture and reading it aloud for hours? A people who know exactly where the victory came from. We throw parties to celebrate one another's achievements; should we not celebrate the Lord this way when He gives us victories — acknowledging His faithfulness out loud, collectively, in praise of the One who gave them? Have you experienced victories for which you can praise the Lord? Then plan to celebrate Him — and do it.

What Jericho promises the believer is not a technique but a Person. What obstacles, enemies, troubles, fears, or anxieties are you facing today? Wouldn't it be wonderful to march around them seven times, shout, and watch them fall? Consider Paul — imprisoned in Rome, chained around the clock to a soldier, disparaged by rival preachers — writing: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4); "Do not be anxious about anything... and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6–7); "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). Joy, peace, and strength in the Lord: when we turn our affections toward Christ and trust His sufficiency, these can fell any wall.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God's first order of business in the land was covenant consecration, not military readiness — even at the cost of making Israel temporarily defenseless. Where in your life is God asking

for consecration before He grants conquest? What “vulnerability” does obedience require of you right now?

2. Joshua asked, “Are you for us or against us?” and was told, in effect, that it was the wrong question. In what areas of your life are you trying to enlist God in your plans rather than submitting to His? What would change if the question became “What is my Lord’s command?”
3. God spoke of Jericho’s fall in the past tense before it happened, just as Romans 8:30 speaks of believers’ glorification as already accomplished. What promise of God do you need to begin treating as certain rather than merely possible?
4. The manna stopped the very day it was no longer needed. Can you identify a provision in your life that God gave for a season and then ended? How does seeing His perfect timing in hindsight help you trust Him in the present?
5. Israel celebrated victory by publicly reading the Law and praising God. How do you celebrate your victories — and what would it look like, practically, to put the Lord at the center of the next one?

Chapter Three

Joshua 9–11

After Jericho and Ai, word of Israel spread through the whole land, and the kings of the hill country and the coast gathered to make war. But the people of Gibeon chose a different strategy: deception. They loaded worn-out sacks on their donkeys, patched their sandals, packed dry and moldy bread, and presented themselves to Joshua as ambassadors from a distant country seeking a treaty. The ruse was full of holes, and Israel even ran their hands over the evidence — “the Israelites sampled their provisions” — but the text adds one devastating clause: “but did not inquire of the LORD” (Joshua 9:14). They checked the obvious things and skipped the essential one. Joshua could not see through the Gibeonites’ deception, but God could; and the presumption of the narrative is that had Israel consulted Him, the lie would have been exposed. Three days later the truth came out: the “distant” travelers were near neighbors, from the very peoples Israel was commanded to destroy.

And here the story turns on something our age scarcely understands: Israel kept the treaty anyway. The leaders had sworn an oath by the LORD, the God of Israel, and though the whole assembly grumbled, the answer stood: “We have given them our oath by the LORD... and we cannot touch them now” (Joshua 9:19). An oath before the LORD is sacred and binding, even when deception is involved. We have seen this principle before. When Jacob dressed in Esau’s clothes, covered his skin with goatskins, and flat-out lied to his blind father, the stolen blessing nevertheless stood — “I blessed him, and indeed he will be blessed!” (Genesis 27:33). Once ratified before the LORD, it could not be recalled. And the Gibeonite oath cast a shadow four centuries long: in David’s day, God sent a three-year famine on Israel “because Saul put the Gibeonites to death,” violating the ancient treaty — and the famine did not lift until the breach was atoned for (2 Samuel 21:1–14). The LORD takes vows that seriously. It is because oaths are so serious

that both Jesus and James command believers not to swear them voluntarily at all: “All you need to say is a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” (Matthew 5:37; James 5:12).

The applications press uncomfortably close. If you are like most of us, you have signed documents and clicked agreement boxes without reading what you were agreeing to. Convenience does not dissolve responsibility: if you were even duped into an agreement, you may fairly criticize the tactic, but before the LORD you are bound to your word. If you have incurred debt, you are bound to pay it — and negotiating to pay only a fraction of what you owe is not shrewdness to celebrate but a shame to bear, for the creditor only agrees because he fears receiving nothing at all from someone whose word has failed. And husbands and wives: you spoke oaths to one another before the LORD. “Till death do us part” is the only release clause you included. The vows were not conditional — you did not promise faithfulness only if your spouse proved easy to love — and so while both of you live, both of you are bound. There is also a quieter lesson here about prayerful dependence. “Pray continually,” Paul writes, and in the same breath, “test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:17, 21–22). The one enables the other. We are so easily deceived — by others, and by our own sinful natures — that constant consultation with God is not piety’s decoration but survival’s necessity. Prayer does not remove our responsibility to test everything; it declares that our wellbeing is finally entrusted to God.

There is one more thing to see in Gibeon, and Scripture makes sure we do not miss it. God honored the oath too. When five Amorite kings besieged Gibeon to punish its defection, Israel marched all night to keep a treaty they had been tricked into — and God fought for them as He fought at Jericho, hurling hailstones from heaven and, at Joshua’s astonishing prayer, making the sun stand still over Gibeon until the victory was complete: “Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel” (Joshua 10:14). We are powerless to make even one hair white or black, as Jesus said — but God can

move mountains, and stop the sun, to keep His promises. He has the power to fulfill them; more than the power, He has the heart.

The rest of chapters 10 and 11 sweep through the southern and northern campaigns in summary form: “Joshua subdued the whole region... He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded” (Joshua 10:40). During Joshua’s lifetime, Israel was victorious in every battle — not because of superior might, but because they fully obeyed the LORD. The theology of the book could hardly be plainer. The Law’s foundation was: if you obey, I will bless you; if you disobey, I will curse you. In Joshua, this translates directly: if you obey, you will win; if you disobey, you will lose. Now, believers today are not under the Mosaic Law, and its material blessings and curses do not transfer to us; God has never promised the Christian that full obedience yields earthly prosperity. But we have something better. Because of God’s unconditional and eternal grace in Christ, we can never be cursed — and yet we are still commanded to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12–13). Working out what God works in: this is the New Testament’s translation of “be strong and courageous, being careful to obey.” To walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16), pursuing the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that are His fruit — this is our conquest, and the only thing that finally matters in any life is to trust and obey God, whatever our lot. There is a morning prayer worth adopting: “Father, let me just live to please You this day. Grant me wisdom and discernment not to fill my hours with vain things, but to think and plan and do just what pleases and glorifies You most.” Our days will still fall short of the mark; let it remain our constant ambition anyway.

But the summary chapters contain a hard sentence that we must not read past: “except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with Israel... For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he

might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Joshua 11:19–20). Every city in Canaan had heard what Rahab heard. Every heart had melted as hers melted. Yet with one exception, not one city sued for peace; all chose war against an army with an unbroken record of total victory. Why? Not stupidity. The LORD hardened their hearts, as He had hardened Pharaoh’s, because He was determined to destroy them completely — treating Canaanite wickedness like a cancer, of which every remnant must be removed lest the disease resurge. This is the neglected, all-important side of God’s nature. It is endlessly preached that God is love, and so He is; but Scripture’s own emphasis falls with overwhelming weight on another declaration: God is holy. The one explicit “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16) stands beside hundreds of ascriptions of His holiness — yet survey the landscape of modern preaching and the proportion is exactly reversed. We dare not give a distorted portrayal of the nature of God. He is holy — transcendent, unbound by the rules that govern His creation, of purer eyes than to look on evil — and it is only as we are joined to Him, trusting and obeying Him, that we too become holy.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Israel “sampled the provisions but did not inquire of the LORD.” What decisions are you currently examining carefully by every means except prayer? What would genuinely consulting God look like before your next commitment?
2. Israel kept a treaty they were deceived into making, and God enforced it centuries later. What obligations — contracts, debts, promises, vows — are you tempted to treat as negotiable because circumstances changed or because you were treated unfairly? What would honoring them cost?
3. Marriage vows, as given, are unconditional. If you are married, how does it change your daily choices to remember that your promise was not contingent on your spouse’s performance?

4. God stopped the sun to honor an oath Israel made foolishly. Where do you need to be reminded that God's commitment to His promises exceeds both His people's wisdom and their deserving?
5. "God is love" appears twice in Scripture; "God is holy" resounds through all of it. Has your picture of God drifted toward one attribute at the expense of the other? How would restoring the balance change the way you worship — and the way you regard sin?

Chapter Four

Joshua 12–15

Chapter 12 is a victory ledger: thirty-one defeated kings, name by name, on both sides of the Jordan. But chapter 13 opens with a sentence that reframes everything that follows: “When Joshua had grown old, the LORD said to him, ‘You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over’” (Joshua 13:1). The conquest, for all its sweep, was incomplete — and buried in the tribal allotments that follow is a quiet refrain that will become the loudest theme in Israel’s next era: “But the Israelites did not drive out the people of Geshur and Maacah, so they continue to live among the Israelites to this day” (Joshua 13:13). It is the first notice of a pattern. Judah “could not” dislodge the Jebusites from Jerusalem (Joshua 15:63); Manasseh “could not” occupy certain towns (Joshua 17:12); and many more such notices would follow (Judges 1:21, 27–33). What must be understood is that they could not because they would not. Disobedience led to inability. The key text stands at the beginning of Judges, where the angel of the LORD declares: “You were not to make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars. Yet you have disobeyed me... Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares to you” (Judges 2:1–3). When Israel would not obey, God changed His dealing: He would leave the Canaanites in the land to test Israel, “to see whether they would keep the way of the LORD” (Judges 2:22) — just as He had tested the previous generation forty years in the wilderness after Kadesh-barnea. And Israel failed this test as they failed that one: they lived among the Canaanites, intermarried with them, and served their gods (Judges 3:5–6).

We have seen this exact sequence before, at the far end of Genesis’s opening chapters. When the sons of God — best understood as the godly line of Seth — saw that the daughters of men, the ungodly line of Cain, were beautiful, they married

whomever they chose; and the result was the corruption of the godly line, until “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:2, 5), and the flood came. When the Canaanites were allowed to remain among the Israelites, the same thing happened to the Israelites. Did God not know it would happen? Surely He did. Why then allow it? Because it demonstrates human depravity at its deepest: even the chosen nation, planted in the promised land with every advantage of revelation and covenant, would fail and destroy itself apart from the promises and grace of God. And we who belong to the New Covenant in Christ have no different hope. God still allows Canaanites to live among us — the world’s temptations are not removed from the believer’s field — and apart from the same sovereign grace that saves and sanctifies, we too would fall into idolatry and be condemned with the world. Remember, today, to praise God for His grace.

Return now to that opening sentence: Joshua grew old with very much of the land remaining. Here is a man who spent his entire life faithfully fighting the battles of God — and he did not live to finish the work or fully enjoy the conquest. Moses spent the greater part of his life delivering Israel and leading them to the land, and died on the wrong side of the river. Before them, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob followed the LORD to the end of their days and never saw any of the great promises fulfilled — owning, among all that was pledged to them, little more than a burial cave. Do you see the pattern? None of those to whom God first gave His great promises lived to see them fulfilled. The writer of Hebrews supplies the explanation: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth... they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:13, 16). The promises that saints of every age suffered and died for were never merely the

earthly ones, most of which they would not personally see. They were contemplating heaven, and perfection.

Why bring this up? Because so many of us are too earthly-minded. Our concerns and ambitions are tied overwhelmingly to this life, which is a drop in the bucket beside the eternal dwellings that await us. We are consumed with what we eat and drink and wear, the house we live in, the car we drive, vacations, our children's activities, our careers. And — here is the searching part — our prayers largely follow our preoccupations. Survey the requests we bring to God: health and healing, business success, better jobs, travel mercies, a good outcome on a purchase. Nearly all of it concerns earthly matters with little direct bearing on righteousness, the kingdom, or eternity. We have justified this by a verse: “in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). But read the verse in its home. Paul has just commanded, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (4:4); he is teaching an attitude for everything, not a shopping list of everything — anxiety about nothing, faith in everything. And his teaching deliberately echoes his Lord's: “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:31–33). Jesus does not say, “Do not worry about these things — pray about them instead.” He says your Father already knows you need them; therefore seek something else first, and trust Him with the rest. Is it not worth asking whether our fervent praying over mundane matters is often just our worrying, addressed to God? When our petitions are dominated by the very things Jesus told us not to pursue, we reveal where our treasure lies. None of this is written so that we stop bringing our needs to our Father — He invites us to cast every care on Him — but so that the character of our prayers might change. The primary purpose of prayer is to align our will with God's will. Paul, who wrote these words in chains, had learned “the secret of

being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:12), because his focus was Christ and his goal was not in this life. Let us stop living and praying as if this life were the end of us. It is not even the beginning.

Against this backdrop, chapter 14 gives us the book’s great portrait of the opposite spirit: Caleb. Eighty-five years old, he comes to Joshua at Gilgal and reminds him of a forty-five-year-old promise: “I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions” (Joshua 14:7). While ten spies spread fear, Caleb had silenced the people: “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it” (Numbers 13:30) — and for following the LORD wholeheartedly, God promised him the very ground his feet had walked. Do the arithmetic Caleb invites: forty at Kadesh, thirty-eight more years wandering, and now eighty-five — which means the conquest itself has taken six or seven years. Through all of it, “the LORD has kept me alive... I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out” (Joshua 14:10–11). And what does he ask for, as the senior saint of the nation? Not a pension. He asks for the hill country of the Anakim — the giants’ territory, the very ground that terrified Israel into forty years of wandering — with the same creed on his lips at eighty-five as at forty: “the LORD helping me, I will drive them out just as he said” (Joshua 14:12). Joshua blessed him, and Hebron became Caleb’s, “because he followed the LORD, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly” (Joshua 14:14). God kept a forty-five-year promise to the letter, down to the plot of ground. Friends, the LORD is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). It does not matter whether you are forty or eighty-five; it is the LORD who gives the victory. Whatever mountain stands before you today — however hard, however long promised, however guarded by giants — understand this timeless truth: if the LORD is with you, you will overcome.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. “They could not because they would not.” Is there an area of your life where you have concluded you *cannot* obey — and might the honest word be *will* not? What would wholehearted obedience look like there?
2. God left the Canaanites in the land as a test, and He allows temptation to remain in the believer’s life. How does knowing that testing is purposeful — and that grace, not performance, is your security — change the way you face recurring temptation?
3. Take an honest inventory of your recent prayers. What proportion concerned earthly comfort, and what proportion concerned God’s kingdom, righteousness, and will? What is one way the character of your prayers could change this week?
4. Abraham, Moses, and Joshua all died without seeing the promises completed, “longing for a better country.” What are you laboring at that you may never see finished — and how does the heavenly city reframe that labor?
5. At eighty-five, Caleb asked for the giants’ mountain. What “hill country” has God put before you that you have been postponing because of the size of its inhabitants? What would it mean to say, with Caleb, “the LORD helping me, I will drive them out”?

Chapter Five

Joshua 16–18

These chapters continue the division of the land, turning to the tribes of Joseph — Ephraim and Manasseh — and to the survey of what remained for the tribes not yet settled. The boundary descriptions can be difficult to follow, a procession of unfamiliar towns and wadis; a good Bible atlas kept open beside these chapters will repay the effort, turning a list of names into a landscape. But the reader who perseveres finds that the allotment chapters are not filler. They contain, in their quiet administrative way, both the book's deepest warning and one of its richest veins of gospel geography.

The warning first. “When the Israelites grew stronger, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labor but did not drive them out completely” (Joshua 17:13). Mark the sequence: this was not weakness but policy. When Israel *could* finally have finished the task, they chose profit over obedience — Canaanite labor was worth more to them than Canaanite absence. The LORD had commanded complete removal precisely because of the moral and idolatrous influence these nations would exert; Israel's compromise looked economically shrewd and proved spiritually catastrophic, exactly as God predicted. Even the Joseph tribes, complaining that their allotment was too small for their numbers, reveal the same spirit: Joshua tells them the forested hill country is theirs for the clearing and the Canaanites of the plain theirs for the driving out, “though they have chariots fitted with iron and though they are strong” (Joshua 17:18) — but they preferred to negotiate for easier ground. And chapter 18 opens with Joshua's exasperated question to seven tribes still encamped: “How long will you wait before you begin to take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you?” (Joshua 18:3). The land was given; possession lagged. Grace grants; faith must still occupy.

What is the New Testament's translation of "drive them out completely"? Not conquest but flight: "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18); "flee from idolatry" (1 Corinthians 10:14). Israel's trouble was that they allowed the sources of corruption to persist in the land — domesticated, taxed, useful, and lethal. Do we do differently? Streaming services, the internet, social media, certain friendships and gatherings and habits — the eyes are a gateway to the heart, and we are not immune to the influence of what we continually watch and hear. Each of us must assess honestly: have we established clear lines of obedience, or have we merely put our Canaanites to forced labor — keeping them around because they entertain us, profit us, or flatter us? Some of us will conclude that a subscription must be cancelled, an app deleted, an association ended. It can be done; there are those who have done it and not missed what they feared to lose. This is part of what it means to flee. There is no single rule for every conscience, but there is a single principle: incomplete obedience is disobedience on a delay, and what we tolerate, our children may embrace.

Now the gospel geography. Tucked into Manasseh's border description is a name that carries more of Scripture's story than perhaps any other city: Shechem (Joshua 17:7). Trace its thread. Shechem was the first place Abram stopped in Canaan, where the LORD appeared and said, "To your offspring I will give this land," and where Abram built his first altar in the land of promise (Genesis 12:6–7). Jacob, returning from Paddan Aram, camped there, bought a plot of ground for a hundred pieces of silver, and raised his own altar, naming it El Elohe Israel — "God, the God of Israel" (Genesis 33:18–20). Dying in Egypt, Jacob deeded that very ridge of land to Joseph (Genesis 48:21–22), and Joseph in turn made Israel swear to carry his bones up from Egypt (Genesis 50:25). Centuries later the oath was kept: "Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought... This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants" (Joshua 24:32). Shechem lies in the valley between Mount Gerizim

and Mount Ebal, where Moses commanded the tribes to stand and pronounce the covenant blessings and curses (Deuteronomy 27:12–13) — which is exactly what Joshua did after Ai (Joshua 8:30–35), and where he will gather all Israel for the covenant’s final renewal in chapter 24. After the allotments, Shechem became a Levitical city and a city of refuge. Later, and less happily, it was at Shechem that the kingdom tore in two (1 Kings 12), and the region became the heartland of the Samaritans.

Which brings the thread, astonishingly, to a well. “Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well” (John 4:6) — in Sychar of Samaria, near the plot of ground Jacob had given Joseph, in the shadow of Gerizim. When the Samaritan woman perceived that Jesus was a prophet, she raised the thousand-year-old question of that very landscape: “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem” (John 4:20). And Jesus answered over the heads of both mountains: “a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23–24). At the place where Abraham built his first altar, where the blessings and curses once echoed between the mountains, the Lord of the covenant declared that no place — not Gerizim, not even Jerusalem — is the point of worship. However much historical or religious significance a location holds, it is not the *place* of worship that matters but the *heart* — and not sincerity alone, for zeal without truth does not save. We must worship in Spirit and in truth. The God who kept a land-promise across six centuries, down to the burial plot of one man’s bones, now seeks worshipers from every land; and the woman He sought that day at Jacob’s well was, like Rahab before her, precisely the kind of person no one else would have chosen.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Israel put the Canaanites to forced labor rather than driving them out — compromise dressed up as management. What influence in your life have you domesticated rather than removed, because it profits or entertains you? What would “driving it out completely” require?
2. “How long will you wait before you begin to take possession of the land the LORD has given you?” Is there something God has already granted — a calling, a ministry, a reconciliation, a discipline — that you have left unpossessed? What is the real reason for the delay?
3. The Joseph tribes wanted more land but not the iron chariots that came with it. Do you find yourself asking God for enlarged blessing while declining the battles attached to it?
4. Trace what Shechem witnessed: Abraham’s first altar, Jacob’s purchase, Joseph’s bones, the covenant blessings and curses, and finally Jesus at the well. What does this long geography of faithfulness teach you about the scale on which God keeps His word?
5. Jesus relocated the question of worship from mountains to hearts: “in the Spirit and in truth.” Which half of that phrase most needs attention in your own worship — the living engagement of the Spirit, or the grounding of truth?

Chapter Six

Joshua 19–21

The allotments conclude in these chapters: the final seven tribes receive their portions by lot at Shiloh, the cities of refuge are appointed, and the Levites receive their forty-eight towns scattered through every tribe. Two threads especially reward attention here — one a cautionary tale hidden in a boundary list, the other the theological summit of the entire book.

The cautionary tale belongs to Dan. The seventh and final lot fell to the Danites — no small clan, but the second-largest tribe in the census after Judah (Numbers 26:42–43) — assigning them a compact, valuable territory in the central lowlands between Judah and Ephraim, bordering the Philistine plain, “with the area facing Joppa” (Joshua 19:46). But embedded in the allotment is a grim postscript: “the Danites had difficulty taking possession of their territory” (Joshua 19:47) — Judges is blunter: “The Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country, not allowing them to come down into the plain” (Judges 1:34). And rather than trust the God who had stopped the sun for Gibeon, Dan gave up its inheritance. Judges 18 tells the sordid story: spies sent north found the people of Laish “living in safety... prosperous... with no one to molest them,” and six hundred armed Danites fell upon that quiet and unsuspecting people, burned their city, rebuilt it, and named it Dan. On the way they stole a shrine’s idols and hired away its freelance priest, “and the Danites set up for themselves the idol” — maintaining their private cult “all the time the house of God was in Shiloh” (Judges 18:30–31). The tribe that abandoned its allotted inheritance became, from its first day in its stolen one, a settled center of idolatry. Generations later Jeroboam, needing shrines to keep the northern tribes from Jerusalem, set up his two golden calves — one at Bethel, and the other at Dan (1 Kings 12:29–30). The city founded in unbelief became a national capital of false worship. Nor was the move even pragmatically sound: perched on Israel’s far northern

border, Dan lay first in the path of every invader — Assyria and Babylon both came down from the north — and so the tribe that fled its hard inheritance for an easy one placed itself first in line for destruction. Like Israel, we have an inheritance — “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:4). It cannot be lost as Dan’s was; but the enjoyment and occupancy of it in this life can be forfeited by the same combination of difficulty met with unbelief. Let us persevere in the faith to possess what God has given, for what God gives is good — and worth fighting for.

The cities of refuge (chapter 20) and the Levitical towns (chapter 21) show the land being ordered not merely for occupation but for mercy and for worship: six cities where the accused could flee from the avenger of blood until fair trial, and the ministers of God distributed through every tribe rather than concentrated in one — the nation salted throughout with those set apart to teach the Law. And then, when the last town has been named, the narrator lifts his eyes and delivers the verdict of the whole book:

“So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the LORD’s good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled” (Joshua 21:43–45).

This is the summit — the sentence toward which everything since Genesis 12 has been climbing. In Genesis 15, God promised Abraham descendants as innumerable as the stars, and it came to pass: a clan of seventy grew into a nation of two million. He promised them the land of Canaan, and it came to pass: Joshua 21:45 is the formal certificate of fulfillment. And recall how that covenant was made: God alone, in the form of a smoking firepot and blazing

torch, passed between the divided carcasses (Genesis 15:17), binding *Himself* — and only Himself — to keep it.

But an honest reader must ask the obvious question. If not one good promise failed, why does the same book keep telling us of land not taken, Canaanites not driven out, tribes still waiting? How can “every one was fulfilled” stand beside “very large areas of land remain”? The answer draws a line through the whole Bible: God promised to *give*; He did not promise that any particular generation would fully *take and keep*. The gift was complete on the Giver’s side — every enemy that Israel actually faced in obedience fell before them; nothing was withheld — but the promises were not matched by the faith to fully grasp them. The shortfall was never in God’s giving but always in man’s receiving. The same fault line would run through the covenant with David: God’s promise of a perpetual throne stood firm, while generation after generation of David’s sons failed to walk in it. One might even say it was the failure of human free will — the one component the old arrangement left in human hands, and the one component that never once held.

This is why the New Covenant became absolutely necessary, and why its terms are so striking. Hear them: “‘It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors... because they broke my covenant...’ declares the LORD. ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more’” (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Notice what is new. The essence of the New Covenant is not, as often taught, simply the death and resurrection of Christ — His blood ratified the covenant and made it effective, but atonement had been the hope of God’s people from the beginning. What is new is *who does the keeping*. Every clause is “I will”: God Himself writing the law on hearts, God Himself causing His people to know Him, God Himself forgiving and forgetting. The New Covenant overcomes the failure of human

free will by the gracious imposition of God's sovereign will. Under the old arrangement, God's perfect giving was forever being spilled by man's imperfect grasping; under the new, God supplies the grasp as well as the gift — faith itself His gift — and its final fulfillment awaits the day we are with the Lord, free at last even of the flesh's remaining pull. So when we come to the Lord's Table and hear "this cup is the new covenant in my blood," we celebrate not only what Jesus accomplished *for* us but what God has sovereignly accomplished *in* us. Joshua 21:45 tells us God's promises never fail. Jeremiah 31 tells us that in Christ, our laying hold of them will not fail either — because that, too, is now His work.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Dan found its God-given inheritance difficult and traded it for an easier, self-chosen one — and inherited idolatry and exposure instead. Where are you tempted to exchange a hard obedience for a comfortable substitute? What does Dan's story suggest about how that trade ages?
2. "Not one of all the LORD's good promises to Israel failed." Rehearse the promises God has kept in your own life — perhaps literally listing them, as Joshua 12 lists defeated kings. What does the exercise do to your confidence about the promises still outstanding?
3. God's giving was complete, but Israel's taking was not. Is there a gap in your life between what God has granted and what you have possessed? What does that gap consist of — and what would close it?
4. The New Covenant's clauses are all "I will." How does it change your assurance to know that under this covenant, God supplies not only the promise but the faith that grasps it?

5. The cities of refuge wove mercy into the very map of Israel. How visibly is mercy built into the structures of your life — your schedule, your finances, your home — rather than left to impulse?

Chapter Seven

Joshua 22–24

The book closes with three scenes of parting: the eastern tribes sent home, and two farewell addresses from an old man who has seen every promise kept.

First, the homecoming that nearly became a civil war. The men of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh had kept their word — the word given back in chapter 1 — fighting for years beside their brothers until every tribe had its inheritance. Joshua blesses them and sends them east with one final charge, and it is worth hearing in full, because it distills the whole book: “Be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Joshua 22:5). At the height of the conquest, at the end of his commission, Joshua’s concern is not leadership succession, not border management, not military logistics. His concern is that the people do their utmost to remain faithful to the LORD. It is the Old Testament’s anticipation of Matthew 6:33 — seek first the kingdom — for what finally matters is never our success, our jobs, or even our families in themselves, but our relationship to the LORD, out of which everything else must flow.

Then, at the Jordan, the eastern tribes built “an imposing altar” — and all Israel mobilized for war against them (Joshua 22:10–12). The reaction seems wild until we remember what this generation had lived through, and here is the irony: throughout their history Israel had to be commanded, again and again, to *remember* — and this time they did. They remembered Peor, where apostasy cost twenty-four thousand lives (Numbers 25); they remembered Achan, whose one man’s sin brought wrath on the whole community (Joshua 22:20); and they remembered the Law itself, which permitted sacrifice only at the one place the LORD would choose (Deuteronomy 12:13–14).

A rival altar meant rival worship, and rival worship meant national judgment. So they did the right thing in the right order: before the swords came out, a delegation went in, led by Phinehas. And the explanation dissolved everything. The altar was never for sacrifice at all, the eastern tribes explained, but a *witness* — a replica standing at the river to testify to future generations that the Jordan was a border, not a boundary of faith: “so that in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, ‘You have no share in the LORD’” (Joshua 22:27). The delegation was satisfied, the armies went home, and the altar was named: A Witness Between Us that the LORD is God.

The episode is a small masterclass in community life, and its lessons apply directly. First: do not jump to conclusions — the altar was not what it appeared, and things often are not. Second: consider how your liberties appear to others. The eastern tribes were innocent, but a less provocative memorial would have spared the nation a near-war; even legitimate freedoms can cause others to stumble, and love sometimes sacrifices what it is entitled to (1 Corinthians 8:9). Third: there are always two sides to every story. Anyone who has counseled quarreling friends — or married couples after an “argument” — knows how astonishingly one-sided a sincere account can be; when someone confides in us against another, wisdom holds judgment until the other side is heard. Fourth: seek resolution through direct, honest conversation rather than gossip or force — confront the person, clear the misunderstanding, speak the truth in love. And finally, the word that towers over the whole episode: remember. Remember the LORD, remember what He has done, remember His precepts — for this time, remembering is what saved the nation.

Where did Joshua’s own lifelong steadiness come from? A single verse from Exodus may hold the clue. “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent” (Exodus 33:11). We marvel at the first half of that verse and miss the second. When even Moses went back to the

business of the camp, Joshua stayed in the presence of God. Like Mary of Bethany choosing the better part at Jesus' feet, Joshua chose to linger — and considering the unfettered obedience of his whole recorded life, perhaps we are being given the secret of it. Obedience under fire is formed in unhurried presence beforehand. Could there be a message for us as well?

Joshua's farewell addresses (chapters 23–24) gather the nation's leaders and then all the tribes at Shechem — that place again, where Abraham built his first altar and the covenant blessings once rang between the mountains. His counsel to a people surrounded by remaining Canaanites is striking in its focus: "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses... Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them" (Joshua 23:6–7). Do not even *mention* their gods' names. There is wisdom here that reaches beyond ancient idolatry, into the whole question of where we direct our attention. In our quest for truth we sometimes feel we must know everything about everything — but who has the time, and "those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know" (1 Corinthians 8:2). All truth is God's truth, but not all truth is of equal value: the truth about how to throw a ball is not as significant as the truth about how to please God. What we need, as much as truth, is discernment — the focusing of our pursuit. When a treasure hunter has found where the treasure lies, he does not keep surveying other fields; he digs, down and all around, at that spot. For Israel, God had revealed Himself as the only God; there was therefore nothing to gain and everything to lose by inquiring after the gods of Canaan. For us: if you have come to know the LORD as God and Jesus as your only Savior, and the Bible as the sure revelation of His will, then consider honestly what you give your time, attention, and energy to every day — and dig where the treasure is.

Then the great final scene. Joshua rehearses, in the LORD's own voice, the whole story from Abraham to that day — "I took... I

gave... I sent... I brought... I delivered... I gave you a land on which you did not toil” (Joshua 24:3–13) — and then issues the demand the whole book has been building toward: “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness... But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:14–15). The people answer with a ringing pledge, and Joshua replies with the strangest evangelistic rejoinder in Scripture: “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God” (Joshua 24:19). He is not excusing them from obedience — he immediately renews the covenant and takes their vow — he is stripping them of self-confidence on the very day of their commitment. The people’s inability to obey perfectly did not nullify God’s requirement that they obey earnestly; but neither could their most earnest effort ever be the ground of their standing with God. What kind of effort, then, was expected? The kind Moses prescribed: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments... are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:5–9) — total immersion in the Word of God, until loving Him becomes the shape of the whole self. That command belongs to the New Covenant no less than the old, and we have not five books but sixty-six in which to immerse ourselves. Do you want to know how to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Surround yourself with His Word — always talking about it, thinking about it, being reminded of it. Yet in doing all this, do not imagine for a moment that the doing establishes your standing with God. That is accomplished only by grace, through the finished work of Christ on the cross. The best that can be lived in this life is exactly this: fully and only trusting Christ for salvation, while diligently studying and obeying His Word.

So the book ends with three graves — Joshua at a hundred and ten in his own inheritance, Joseph’s bones at long last in Jacob’s plot at Shechem, and Eleazar the priest in the hill country of Ephraim (Joshua 24:29–33) — each grave a promise kept, each a quiet amen to “not one of all the LORD’s good promises failed.” And one sentence hangs over the ending like a hinge: “Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel” (Joshua 24:31). Throughout that lifetime — and then? The book does not say; the next one will.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Joshua’s parting charge concerned faithfulness, not logistics. If you were giving your own household a single farewell charge, what would it actually be — and does the way you spend your days match it?
2. The altar crisis was averted because Israel confronted directly instead of attacking on assumption. When you last believed the worst about someone, did you go and ask? What relationship in your life right now needs a Phinehas-style delegation rather than a verdict?
3. Joshua “did not leave the tent.” What does lingering in God’s presence — beyond the necessary business of prayer requests and reading plans — look like for you? What would it cost to build it in?
4. “Do not even invoke the names of their gods.” Attention is formative. Where does your daily attention actually go, and what is it forming you into? What would it mean to dig only where the treasure is?
5. “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” — followed immediately by “You are not able to serve the LORD.” How do

these two sentences fit together in your understanding of commitment and grace? Where does your confidence finally rest?

Conclusion

The Book of Joshua opens with a river at flood stage and closes with three graves in a land of rest — and between them, every promise kept. “Not one of all the LORD’s good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled” (Joshua 21:45). That is the verdict of the book, and it was earned the hard way: through a river that parted only after the priests’ feet got wet, walls that fell only after seven days of apparently pointless marching, a defeat at Ai that taught the cost of hidden sin, a deception at Gibeon that taught the weight of a sworn word, and a slow, uneven settling of the land that exposed how much easier it is to receive a gift than to possess it.

If the book has taught us anything, it is that the decisive battles were never really military. The central command of the whole conquest was not “sharpen your swords” but “keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night” (Joshua 1:8). Israel won when they trusted and obeyed, whatever the odds; they lost, or stalled, or compromised whenever they leaned on their own assessment — sampling the provisions but not inquiring of the LORD, sparing the Canaanites who seemed more useful alive. And standing at the head of the book, sword drawn, is the Commander of the LORD’s army, correcting the question we still instinctively ask. Not: is God for us or against us? But: are we for Him? He does not enlist in our campaigns; we surrender to His.

And grace ran through the conquest like a scarlet cord. A Canaanite prostitute believed a report and was grafted into the ancestry of the Messiah. An oath obtained by fraud was honored by God with hailstones and a halted sun. A land was given to a people whose own subsequent history would prove, beyond argument, that they had not earned it. Even the book’s fulfillment formula carries a forward lean: God’s giving was perfect, but Israel’s grasping was not, and the gap between them is the space into which the New Covenant would one day be spoken — “I will put my law in their minds and

write it on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). What the old covenant demanded, the new one supplies.

But that is to run ahead. The book ends on a knife’s edge that its first readers would have felt keenly: “Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him” (Joshua 24:31). Faithfulness, one lifetime deep. The stones of witness were standing at Shechem; the Law was written and read; the people had answered, “We will serve the LORD.” Joshua, who knew them, had answered back: “You are not able.” Both statements were about to be tested in the generations that had not seen Jericho fall and had not stood at the covenant renewals — the generations for whom the memorials would be mute stones unless someone told them the story. Whether anyone did, and what happened when the telling stopped, is the burden of the Book of Judges. Joshua has shown us the victory of faith. Judges will show us, with equal honesty, the anatomy of forgetting.

Part Two

FAILURE

Judges

Introduction

If a single word could summarize Joshua, it would be *conquest*. The single word for Judges is *failure*. The two books are like two sides of one coin: Joshua demonstrates that victory, success, and progress follow when God's people trust and obey Him; Judges demonstrates, six times over and with mounting horror, what follows when they do not. One is the positive lesson, the other the negative — and Scripture, knowing us, gives the negative lesson three hundred years of space.

In a real sense, Judges is Genesis 3 replayed at the scale of a nation. In Eden, God gave Adam one command, and obedience would have meant peace and prosperity in Paradise for him and every generation after him. In Canaan, God gave Israel His Law and one urgent charge — to completely remove the Canaanites and their gods from the land — and obedience would have meant peace and prosperity in a land flowing with milk and honey, forever. Adam sinned, was judged, was shown mercy, and his children sinned again, spiraling downward until only grace interrupted the descent. Judges tells the same story with Israel's name in it. What Genesis 3 revealed about the natural character of man — sinful — Judges reveals about the natural character of even the chosen people of God. Election, this book insists, does not exempt anyone from the diagnosis.

A word about the title, because it misleads modern readers. The judges of this book were not courtroom officials in robes. The Hebrew word describes a “bringer of justice” — something closer to a deliverer, a divinely raised champion who was part general, part governor, part prophet. When Joshua died, God appointed no single successor; each tribe was to finish possessing its own territory. Instead, as crisis followed crisis, God raised up individual deliverers — in various regions, at various times, some of whose tenures overlapped — to rescue segments of His people from the oppressors their own sin had invited. They were a strikingly mixed company: a left-handed assassin, a woman of iron courage, a fearful farmer

threshing wheat in a winepress, a bandit chief who knew how to strike a bargain, a strongman who could not master himself. None led a united Israel. And behind them all stands the true Judge of the book — “may the LORD, the Judge, decide” (Judges 11:27) — working deliverance through instruments no recruiter would have chosen.

The structure of the book is a descending spiral, and its rhythm becomes familiar quickly: Israel sins, forsaking the LORD for the gods of the peoples they failed to drive out; God disciplines them, handing them over to those very peoples; Israel cries out; God mercifully raises up a judge and delivers them; the land has rest — and then the judge dies, and the people sin again, sinking each time lower than before. Sin, servitude, supplication, salvation, and back to sin. The root of it all was incomplete obedience. Israel did not destroy the Canaanite altars; she tolerated them. Toleration became admiration, and admiration became embrace, exactly as God had warned. The nations Israel allowed to live became the thorns in her sides and the snares at her feet — and the instruments of her chastening. There is a sobering personal principle here that we will meet again and again in these chapters: the sin we spare becomes the master we serve.

The trajectory of the book is from theocracy to anarchy. It opens with the tribes at least asking the LORD who should fight first; it closes with an idol-making mother, a freelance priest for hire, a tribe stealing another man’s gods, an atrocity in Gibeah that deliberately echoes Sodom — except now the men of Sodom are Israelites — and a civil war that nearly erases the tribe of Benjamin. Four times in those closing chapters the narrator sounds the book’s refrain: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25). Spiritual apostasy led to political disintegration, and political disintegration to social chaos: lawlessness, blindness, immorality. The order matters, and it still does. Social and civil collapse grow from spiritual roots, in nations and in individual lives, and no amount of reorganizing the branches heals a poisoned root.

Yet for all its darkness, Judges is finally a book about the grace of God. Every deliverance in it is undeserved. God did not rescue Israel because her repentance was impressive — often it was little more than a desperate cry — but because He is merciful, and because His discipline was always remedial, designed to bring His people back rather than to destroy them. It is no accident that the New Testament's honor roll of faith names Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah (Hebrews 11:32) — flawed men, weak men, whose faith was sometimes barely a flicker, through whom God nevertheless changed the course of history. In nearly every cycle, God used a single individual. He still does.

And the refrain about the missing king is not despair; it is longing. Judges looks forward — past its own horizon — to a righteous king who could unite and shepherd the whole nation. Within the story, that hope will land on David. Beyond the story, it lands on David's greater Son, the King of kings, in whom the long cycle of sin, judgment, and relapse is finally broken. But before the king comes, God gives us something unexpected: a quiet love story from these very same dark days, proof that even in the worst of times, He was never without His faithful. That story is the Book of Ruth.

Chapter One

Judges 1–2

Joshua was a book of victorious conquest. Judges is a book of defeat and failure. Israel holds the Promised Land — a large portion of it — but the opening chapter is a ledger of unfinished obedience: tribe after tribe “did not drive out” the inhabitants of the land as God had commanded. Judah could not dislodge the people of the plains with their iron chariots; Benjamin left the Jebusites in Jerusalem; Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali all settled down among Canaanites they preferred to tax rather than remove; and Dan was pushed back into the hill country altogether (Judges 1:19–34). Then the angel of the LORD comes up from Gilgal — from the place of covenant memory — to Bokim, the place of weeping, and announces the consequence we saw coming in Joshua: “You have disobeyed me... Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares to you” (Judges 2:2–3).

But the hinge of the whole book — the verse that explains everything that follows — comes quietly in the middle of chapter 2: “After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). One generation. That is all it took. Just after one generation, the people of Israel forgot the LORD and turned to idols — and with every successive generation they grew only worse, and stubbornly worse. Whenever we read Judges, we should think of the opening movement of Genesis: the swift slide from Adam to Cain to Lamech; the corruption of even the godly line of Seth through intermarriage, until “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5); and then, when God began again with righteous Noah, a world rushing within generations to build a tower to its own rebellion. In every case God intervened to stem the tide; and in every case, the next generation spawned a new cycle of degeneration. Judges is that

same story with Israel's name on it, and by the end of the book the people will no longer even know right from wrong.

Verses 10 through 19 of chapter 2 summarize the entire book in advance, and the pattern is worth fixing in mind, for we will watch it turn six times. First, disobedience: Israel forsakes the LORD who brought them out of Egypt and worships the gods of the peoples around them (2:12). Second, disciplinary judgment: in His anger the LORD gives them into the hands of raiders and sells them to their enemies, “whom they were no longer able to resist” (2:14). Third, distress and crying out: groaning under oppression, they cry to the LORD. Fourth, deliverance: “Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders” (2:16). And fifth, disobedience again — but deeper: “when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors... They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways” (2:19). It is not a circle but a descending spiral. And though God raised up mighty judges through these centuries, not one of them could break the cycle. Each deliverance lasted a lifetime at most; each relapse sank lower. If the cycle was ever to be broken, it would take a Deliverer of another order entirely — “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob” (Romans 11:26). We know that Deliverer. Jesus Christ breaks the cycle not by delivering us from our enemies but by delivering us from ourselves.

Now, how did this catastrophe of forgetting come to be? Judges 2:10 does not merely indict the generation that “did not know the LORD”; it quietly implicates the generation before them — the generation that had seen everything, and failed to pass it on. From the beginning, God had built the telling of His acts into His acts. He hardened Pharaoh's heart and multiplied His signs in Egypt expressly “that you may tell your children and grandchildren... and that you may know that I am the LORD” (Exodus 10:2). He designed the Passover as an annual question from a child's mouth: “When your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them” (Exodus 12:26–27). Moses commanded:

“Watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen... Teach them to your children and to their children after them” (Deuteronomy 4:9). And he did not generalize; he described the method in detail, twice over: these words on your hearts, impressed on your children, talked about sitting at home and walking on the road, at lying down and rising up, bound on hands and foreheads, written on doorframes and gates (Deuteronomy 6:6–9; 11:18–21). The Levites were to assemble the whole nation regularly — men, women, children, foreigners — precisely so that “their children, who do not know this law, must hear it” (Deuteronomy 31:12–13). And in nearly his last recorded words, Moses pressed the point once more: “They are not just idle words for you — they are your life” (Deuteronomy 32:47). Yet a generation arose that did not know the LORD or what He had done. Somewhere between the memorial stones and the dinner table, the telling stopped.

The application could hardly be more direct. The New Testament gives parents essentially one command concerning their children: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). One command — and it is precisely the command Joshua’s generation neglected. How many of us have made the spiritual instruction of our children the actual chief priority of our parenting, rather than one activity among the sports and the schooling? This is written by parents who also fall woefully short of such focused, biblical parenting; let us then encourage, challenge, and support one another to do better — because Judges is the documentary of what happens one generation after the telling stops.

There is a deeper current running under all of this, and it is worth naming at the outset of the book, because Judges will press it on us relentlessly: the utter bankruptcy of unaided human effort. The Old Testament is one long demonstration of it — and not only effort at obedience, but effort at faith. Israel was judged at Kadesh-barnea not merely for breaking rules but for unbelief: they did not trust that

God would give them the land. Israel saw the plagues, the sea, the manna, the Jordan, Jericho — and still, within a generation of Joshua's death, bowed to Baal. If ever a people had the advantages that should produce faith, it was this people; and their history proves, beyond argument, that human depravity runs deeper than evidence can cure. This is why the New Covenant's promises are worded the way they are: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts... they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jeremiah 31:33–34). Notice — not "they will be taught," but "they will know," because God Himself will have written it within. The new birth precedes and produces faith (John 3:3); we believe because God has enabled us to know and believe Him; we have chosen Him because He first chose us and drew us; we love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). We were "dead in transgressions and sins... by nature deserving of wrath" (Ephesians 2:1–3), unable even to accept the things of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14) — until grace came, and faith was given. Judges will show us, in the darkest colors, what humanity does when left to itself. Let the reader see it clearly, and then praise God for His marvelous grace, by which He grants us to know Him, to believe Him, and to receive the unmerited righteousness of Christ.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. "Another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done." What, concretely, are you doing to tell the next generation — your children, grandchildren, or spiritual children — what God has done? Where has the telling thinned out?
2. Moses prescribed a total environment of the Word: at home, on the road, lying down, rising up. Which of those four settings is emptiest of Scripture in your household, and what would fill it?
3. Israel's compromise began as economics — Canaanite labor was more useful than Canaanite absence. Where do you tolerate what

God has told you to remove, because removal would cost something?

4. The judges could deliver but never transform; only Christ delivers us from ourselves. What recurring cycle in your own life have you tried to break by resolve alone? What would it mean to bring it under the New Covenant promise — God writing His law on the heart?
5. Israel saw more miracles than any nation in history and still fell within a generation. What does that suggest about the relationship between evidence and faith — and about where saving faith must finally come from?

Chapter Two

Judges 3–5

The cycle begins to turn. Israel intermarries with the peoples they failed to drive out, serves their gods, and falls under Cushan-Rishathaim of Aram for eight years; they cry out, and God raises up Othniel, Caleb's younger brother — the first judge, from the best of families, and the only one about whom nothing negative is recorded. Then Moab, and Ehud the left-handed Benjamite with his hidden sword; then the Philistines, and a single verse about a man named Shamgar; then Jabin of Hazor with his nine hundred iron chariots, and the extraordinary partnership of Deborah and Barak. Rather than retell every story, let us draw out four threads.

First, Shamgar — and the dignity of ordinary means. “After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. He too saved Israel” (Judges 3:31). That is nearly all Scripture tells us of him; his only other appearance is a line in Deborah's song: “In the days of Shamgar son of Anath... the highways were abandoned; travelers took to winding paths” (Judges 5:6). Read the two verses together and a picture emerges. Why would highways be deserted unless enemies had made them death traps, ambushing Israelite travelers along the main roads? It is always assumed Shamgar killed his six hundred at one time and in one place, but the text does not say so. He may well have cleared the roads group by group, ambush by ambush, over time — six hundred in total, with planning, patience, and strategy, armed with a farmer's tool. That would take nothing away from God's deliverance through him; it would simply locate the deliverance where God usually locates it: in faithful, thoughtful, persistent work. It is sometimes preached that believers should attempt only what requires a miracle — that anything less is not “living supernaturally.” This is rhetorical flourish, not Scripture. In biblical practice it was normal to think, plan, prepare, strategize, and diligently execute; and God appears most pleased not with those who demand displays of power but with

those who trust and obey without them: “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

That principle deserves pressing, because sign-seeking is alive and well among us. It was “a wicked and adulterous generation” that kept demanding signs from Jesus (Matthew 12:39), and He warned that those unwilling to hear Moses and the Prophets “will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). God has already made Himself known — in creation, and definitively in the Scriptures. Yet many believers today chase experiences: traveling great distances to pray for hours in emotionally charged assemblies, hoping to receive a personal prophecy from strangers, as if a word from an excited stranger carried more of God than the Book they leave unread. Jesus addressed the underlying instinct directly: “when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words” (Matthew 6:7). And He told us how to evaluate those who traffic in spiritual experiences: “Watch out for false prophets... By their fruit you will recognize them” — fruit meaning obedience to the Father’s will, not prophecies, exorcisms, and wonders performed in His name (Matthew 7:15–23). Transformation begins with “the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2), not the unfettering of feelings. And rather than casually announcing what God “told” us — claims for which we will answer, “for by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:37) — is it not better to quote the relevant Scripture, and know for certain that it is from the Lord?

Second, the pattern of relapse — and the problem of succession. “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, now that Ehud was dead” (Judges 4:1). Mark the timing: *now that Ehud was dead*. It is the book’s constant refrain — the people were faithful only as long as the God-appointed leader lived, and when that leadership was gone, they went astray. May we suggest that one reason for the endlessly recurring cycle was precisely this lack of continuity in godly leadership? No judge, it seems, prepared the next; each deliverance

died with its deliverer. How different is the pattern Scripture commends! Jesus spent His ministry finding and equipping twelve to carry on His work, and His final charge was “make disciples” (Matthew 28:19). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church they planted and circled back to strengthen them (Acts 14:23; 15:36). Paul’s succession plan for Timothy ran four generations deep in a single sentence: “the things you have heard me say... entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2). We have seen this in our own ministry experience: a teaching ministry that set out from the very first day to find and train leaders was, within a few years, granted dozens of them — enough not only to sustain the work but to send a leader out to begin another, which soon raised up its own leaders in turn. Without that intentionality from the start, the work could not have survived its founders’ limits, let alone multiplied. So in our families, our ministries, and our work: let us always be finding and equipping godly leaders to replace us. Don’t wait until it is too late — and it is never too early to be making disciples.

Third, Deborah — and the geography of courage. Jabin of Hazor, far in the north, had oppressed Israel twenty years behind his iron chariots, and his commander was Sisera. Deborah, a prophetess judging Israel in the hill country of Ephraim, summons Barak of Naphtali and delivers the LORD’s command: take ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun to Mount Tabor, “and I will lead Sisera... to the Kishon River and give him into your hands” (Judges 4:6–7). The oppressed northern tribes had to fight — the crisis was theirs. But Deborah’s song in chapter 5 preserves a more searching roll call: Ephraim, Benjamin, Makir, and Issachar came to help a battle that was not at their borders — and are honored by name for it; while Reuben sat among the campfires “searching their hearts,” and Gilead, Dan, and Asher stayed home — and are named for that too (Judges 5:13–17). Then comes the most chilling verse in the song: “‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the LORD. ‘Curse its people bitterly, because they did not come to help the LORD, to help the

LORD against the mighty” (Judges 5:23). Meroz appears nowhere else in Scripture; its only memorial is this curse — a town, evidently near enough to the battle to help, that did not lift a finger, perhaps even benefiting from a victory it refused to join. Whether we act or fail to act in the face of oppression — whether the injustice is at our door like Naphtali’s, one border away like Ephraim’s, or distant like Issachar’s — it appears that God takes note. As we watch our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, the roll call of Deborah’s song asks us plainly: when the LORD went out against the mighty, where were you?

And fourth, the strange arithmetic of glory. Barak would go only if Deborah went with him, and the prophetess consented with a prophecy: “because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman” (Judges 4:9). So it happened — but not the woman anyone expected. Sisera, fleeing on foot from a battle in which the LORD had routed his chariots (the song suggests the Kishon flooded and swept them away, 5:21), took refuge in the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, who gave him milk, covered him, and drove a tent peg through his temple while he slept. “Most blessed of women be Jael,” sings Deborah (5:24). It is a violent blessing from a violent age; but the theological point stands gleaming amid the wreckage: the LORD is not constrained to deliver by expected instruments. A prophetess commands the general; a housewife fells the commander; and forty years of peace follow. “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty (Zechariah 4:6) — and, He might have added, not by the persons you would have shortlisted, either.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Shamgar cleared the roads with an oxgoad — ordinary means, extraordinary faithfulness. Do you undervalue planning, preparation, and persistence as somehow “unspiritual”? What work in front of you needs an oxgoad rather than a miracle?

2. Jesus called sign-seeking the mark of an unbelieving generation. Where do you look for guidance beyond the Word — experiences, feelings, other people’s “words” for you — and what would it mean to test all of it by Scripture?
3. “Now that Ehud was dead...” Who are you training to carry on the good work God has given you — in your family, ministry, or workplace? If you were removed tomorrow, what would survive you?
4. Deborah’s song names both those who came and those who stayed home. In the injustices and persecutions of our own day, which name would the song give you? What is one concrete way to “come to the help of the LORD” this month?
5. God delivered Israel through a prophetess and a tent peg. Has God ever worked through you, or around you, by means you would never have chosen? What does Jael’s story do to your assumptions about who is usable?

Chapter Three

Judges 6–7

The fourth apostasy brings the severest discipline yet: seven years of Midian. Each harvest, the eastern hordes swarmed in “like locusts,” devouring crops and livestock until Israel hid in mountain clefts and caves (Judges 6:2–5). The people cried out — and God first sent not a deliverer but a prophet, to remind them why they were suffering (6:7–10). Only then does the angel of the LORD come and sit under an oak in Ophrah, watching a young man thresh wheat at the bottom of a winepress — grain beaten furtively in a sunken vat, out of sight of Midianite raiders — and address him with what must have sounded like irony: “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior” (6:12).

Gideon’s reply is worth hearing, because it carries an unexpected confirmation of something we saw in chapter 2: “Pardon me, my lord... if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’” (6:13). So some fathers *did* tell their children — Gideon had heard the stories. Yet the LORD’s indictment stands over that whole generation: whether they knew of His mighty acts or not, “you have not listened to me” (6:10). Information had survived in places; obedience had not. And this teaches us something important about how God preserves His work in dark times: in every generation, He reserves for Himself a faithful few — and He does it by grace. When Elijah despaired that he alone was left, God answered, “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” Paul draws the conclusion for every age: “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works” (Romans 11:4–6). Even in the days of the judges — as we will see gloriously in the Book of Ruth, set in these very years — there were those like Boaz, quietly faithful while the nation rotted. The remnant is never as large as we might hope. “Small is the gate

and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:14). The honest question for each of us is not whether a remnant exists, but whether we are in it — and those who cannot find even a little time daily in God’s eternal Word might well ask what their neglect suggests. We are not saved by Bible reading, nor by any work; but those who believe show the fruit of it, and it is no legalism to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), making our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10).

Before Gideon could deliver Israel from Midian, he had to deliver his own backyard from Baal. “That same night the LORD said to him, ‘Take the second bull from your father’s herd... Tear down your father’s altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it’” (Judges 6:25). Notice the order of operations: the first battlefield was his father’s property; the first enemy stronghold, the idolatry of his own household. Before God sends us to fight armies outside the house, He requires the altars inside it to come down. If we are unwilling to demolish the shrines under our own roof — the household gods of our screens, our spending, our secret habits — what army do we propose to fight beyond it? Let us offer up our homes properly to the LORD, that He may use us mightily outside them. Gideon obeyed — at night, because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople (6:27) — and the morning brought a lynch mob, talked down only by his father’s unexpected wit: if Baal is a god, let Baal contend for himself (6:31).

Fear, in fact, is the recurring note in Gideon’s portrait, and we should be honest about it, because the honest portrait corrects a popular misuse. This “mighty warrior” asks for a sign that it is really the LORD speaking (6:17); protests that his clan is the weakest in Manasseh and he the least in his family (6:15); demolishes the altar by night out of fear (6:27); and then, with Israel’s army already mustered, twice more tests God with the fleece — wet on dry ground, then dry on wet ground — apologizing even as he asks: “Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request” (6:36–

40). Even after all this, God, knowing His man, volunteers a final reassurance unasked: “If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying” (7:10–11). It is only when the Spirit of the LORD comes upon him (6:34) that this timid, sign-seeking man rises to become what God named him at the first; and with each obedience his confidence visibly grows, as we will trace into chapter 8. Now here is the correction: many remember Gideon chiefly for the fleece, and — because we identify with the faults of Bible characters more readily than their virtues — “putting out a fleece” has become, astonishingly, a commended method of discerning God’s will. But Gideon’s fleece was not faith; it was unbelief begging for indulgence. God’s patience with it was forbearance, not approval — the same God, incarnate, answered the suggestion that He test His Father with, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Matthew 4:7; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:9). So let us not devise fleeces of our own — “Lord, if she answers the phone, I’ll know she’s the one” — trying to force God’s hand where He has chosen not to speak. Where God has spoken, obey; where He has not, use the wisdom His Word supplies; and do not mistake His forbearance with Gideon for a devotional technique.

Then comes the arithmetic of chapter 7, among the most deliberate object lessons in Scripture. Gideon’s thirty-two thousand face a Midianite host “thick as locusts,” their camels beyond counting (7:12) — and God’s first word is not that Israel’s army is too small but too large: “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, ‘My own strength has saved me’” (7:2). The fearful are sent home — twenty-two thousand leave — and still too many; the drinking test sifts the ten thousand down to three hundred. Against perhaps a hundred and thirty-five thousand (cf. 8:10), that is one Israelite for every four hundred and fifty enemies. Then the tactics match the arithmetic: no swords in hand at all, but trumpets, empty jars, and torches; a midnight encirclement; a shattering of pottery and a shout — “A

sword for the LORD and for Gideon!” — and the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords (7:20–22). It is Jericho’s lesson taught again in a minor key: the victory was never in the strategy, for no manual would print it; it was in the God who was obeyed. And what is the purpose of this famous account? It is to show that God’s grace is greater than human weakness — that even though the people had disobeyed, even though the parents had failed to teach their children, God’s grace still prevailed, through a remnant, through a frightened farmer, through three hundred men with torches. He still works so — reserving a remnant, choosing the weak things to shame the strong, arranging His victories so that no flesh may boast in His presence (1 Corinthians 1:27–29). If God has stripped your resources down to a fraction of what you thought the task required, consider Gideon’s three hundred before you despair: it may be that God is not weakening you but positioning you, so that when the wall falls or the camp scatters, everyone — including you — will know exactly whose strength did it.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God addressed a man hiding in a winepress as “mighty warrior” — naming what grace would make of him, not what fear had made of him. What might God be calling you that your present circumstances contradict? What would it look like to answer to that name?
2. Gideon’s first assignment was his father’s altar, at home, before any battle abroad. What “altar” in your own household needs tearing down before God enlarges your assignment? What makes you hesitate — and whose disapproval do you fear most?
3. The fleece was forbearance, not a formula. How do you currently discern God’s will? Where might you be testing God — demanding signs — instead of obeying what He has already said in His Word?

4. God reduced thirty-two thousand to three hundred so that no one could boast. Has God ever pared back your resources before using you? How does the story reframe what you presently consider “not enough”?
5. In every generation God preserves a remnant by grace — and the road is narrow. Without morbid introspection, what fruit in your life gives evidence that you belong to it? What daily neglect might you need to repent of?

Chapter Four

Judges 8–9

Chapter 8 completes Gideon’s campaign — and complicates his portrait. The frightened farmer is gone; in his place marches a commander of growing confidence and hardening edges. He answers Ephraim’s wounded pride with a diplomat’s soft word (8:1–3), executes the towns of Sukkoth and Peniel for refusing his exhausted men bread (8:5–17), avenges his brothers on the kings Zebah and Zalmunna with his own hand (8:18–21), and brings forty years of peace. Then comes the moment the whole period has been waiting for. The men of Israel say to Gideon: “Rule over us — you, your son and your grandson — because you have saved us from the hand of Midian” (8:22). A dynasty, offered on a platter. And Gideon’s answer is one of the high-water marks of the era: “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you” (8:23). Spiritual maturity, wisdom, and humility in a single sentence — the theocracy defended by the very man positioned to end it.

And then, in the next breath: “However, I do have one request — that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder” (8:24). *However*. It was like an afterthought — and Scripture’s afterthoughts deserve our full attention, because they have a track record. Achan had an afterthought: after Jericho fell in perfect obedience, he saw a beautiful robe, two hundred shekels of silver, a wedge of gold — surely no one would miss so small a treasure — and his afterthought brought defeat on the nation and death on his household (Joshua 7). Lot’s wife had an afterthought: delivered by angels from a burning city, she turned for one look back, and became a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26). King Saul had an afterthought: commanded to devote Amalek entirely, he spared the best of the sheep and cattle — for sacrifice, of course — and God took the kingdom from him (1 Samuel 15). Gehazi had an afterthought: his master Elisha had refused Naaman’s treasure

outright, but a talent of silver and two sets of clothing seemed a shame to waste, and Gehazi's afterthought clothed his descendants in Naaman's leprosy (2 Kings 5). Gideon's afterthought weighed about forty-three pounds of gold, and he fashioned it into an ephod and placed it in his town, "and all Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family" (Judges 8:27). The man who tore down his father's idol built his own; the deliverer from Baal became the occasion of the next apostasy — for no sooner had Gideon died than Israel "set up Baal-Berith as their god" and forgot both the LORD and Gideon's family (8:33–35).

Friends, when we obey the LORD, when we commit ourselves to Him, let us have no afterthoughts — no backward glance at the former life, no quiet plan to serve both God and ourselves. "Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God's will... we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved" (Hebrews 10:36, 39). The afterthought is where shrinking back begins. Paul presses the same urgency to its startling conclusion: "the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not... those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep... For this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:29–31) — not a dissolving of our duties but a loosening of our grip, the same loosening John commands: "Do not love the world or anything in the world... The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:15, 17). Seek first His kingdom (Matthew 6:33); take up the cross daily (Luke 9:23). And let none of us imagine ourselves beyond the danger. Meeting recently with friends over the Scriptures, we were freshly reminded that each of us is as susceptible as anyone — if not more so — to fall by an afterthought. "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1 Corinthians 10:12–

13). It is not a foregone conclusion that the afterthought must win. We are called to be alert, to battle our sinful natures, to persevere in holiness — entrusting ourselves to the grace that will one day free us from the fight altogether.

Chapter 9 shows what Israel was spared when Gideon refused the crown — by showing what happened when his son seized it. Abimelek, Gideon's son by a Shechemite concubine, hires “reckless scoundrels” with seventy shekels from the temple of Baal-Berith, murders his seventy brothers “on one stone,” and is crowned king at Shechem (9:1–6). One brother escapes: Jotham, the youngest, who climbs Mount Gerizim — the mountain of blessing, of all places — and shouts down at the coronation the Bible's first parable, the parable of the trees.

The trees, Jotham says, went out to anoint a king. They asked the olive tree, and it answered: should I give up my oil, by which gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees? They asked the fig tree: should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to wave over the trees? They asked the vine: should I give up my wine, which cheers gods and men, to sway over the trees? Finally all the trees asked the thornbush — and the thornbush said: if you really mean it, come take refuge in my shade; and if not, let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon! (9:7–15). The parable rewards a slow reading. The olive, the fig, and the vine each produce a fruit with its own God-given purpose, and each understands its role: they serve “both gods and humans” where they are planted, and they will not abandon fruitful service for the empty honor of “holding sway.” They are pictures of everyone who knows the role God has assigned and bears fruit in it — Gideon himself, at his best, was such a tree: “I will not rule over you... the LORD will rule over you.” The thornbush is another matter. It bears no fruit at all, only thorns; and its grand invitation is absurd on its face — a thornbush casts no shade; to shelter under one, you must sink to the ground and be scratched for your trouble. The only mighty thing a thornbush can do is burn — dry brush is where wildfires start, fires

that can consume even the cedars of Lebanon. Abimelek is the thornbush: fruitless, grasping, offering a protection he cannot give, and destined to destroy the very people who sheltered in him. And the parable proved prophetic with terrible precision: when Shechem later turned on Abimelek, he cut down tree branches, piled them against the stronghold tower, and burned about a thousand men and women alive (9:46–49) — fire out of the thornbush, consuming those who took refuge in his shade — until God repaid him in kind, a millstone from a woman’s hand crushing his skull at Thebez (9:53–57).

The parable asks each of us a double question. First, which are you? Every believer has been given a fruit to bear — abilities, gifts, a station of service — and the tempter’s oldest whisper is that fruit-bearing is beneath us, that “holding sway” is the real prize. Our King settled the matter by example and by command: “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant... For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43–45). The King of kings identified Himself with the fruit-bearers, not the sway-holders. And second: what do the people around you actually receive from your life? Let us each examine the impact of our lives — are those near us enjoying the fruit of our labor, or being burned by the fires we cause?

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Gideon’s ruin arrived in the word “however.” What is the afterthought currently attached to your obedience — the small exception, the modest reward, the one look back? What did the ephod become, and what might your exception become?
2. Achan, Lot’s wife, Saul, Gehazi, Gideon: in each case the afterthought concerned something legitimate-looking — treasure, home, livestock, a gift, an ornament. Why do you think the gravest spiritual dangers so often wear such reasonable disguises?

3. “The time is short... this world in its present form is passing away.” How would you live differently this month if you held your possessions, plans, and even relationships with the loosened grip Paul describes?
4. In Jotham’s parable, the fruitful trees declined the throne and the fruitless thornbush demanded it. Where are you tempted to trade a fruitful, unglamorous service for a position of “holding sway”? What fruit would be lost in the trade?
5. A thornbush offers shade it cannot give, and burns what shelters in it. Have you ever taken refuge in a thornbush — a leader, an institution, an ambition that promised protection and delivered fire? How do you now discern the difference between an olive tree and a thornbush?

Chapter Five

Judges 10–12

After Abimelek's fire, two quiet judgeships — Tola and Jair, forty-five years between them (10:1–5) — and then the fifth apostasy, the worst catalogue yet: Israel serves the Baals, the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia — everyone's gods but their own — and God sells them to the Philistines and Ammonites for eighteen years (10:6–8). When they cry out, the LORD's first answer is startling: "You have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!" (10:13–14). Only when Israel puts away the foreign gods and serves Him does the text give us one of the Old Testament's tenderest sentences about God: "he could bear Israel's misery no longer" (10:16).

The deliverer He raises is the era's most unlikely yet: Jephthah the Gileadite, "a mighty warrior" and the son of a prostitute, driven from his father's house by his half-brothers, gathering a band of adventurers in the land of Tob — a bandit chief with a lawyer's mind, as his long, careful diplomatic argument to the Ammonite king shows (11:12–27). The elders who exiled him come begging him to command them; Jephthah negotiates his terms; and "the Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah" (11:29) as he advances to war.

Then, on the eve of battle, he opens his mouth. "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering" (11:30–31). The LORD gives the victory — twenty towns devastated, Ammon subdued — and what comes out of the door of his house, dancing to the sound of timbrels, is his daughter. His only child.

Have you ever made a vow to the LORD? Jephthah's story should discourage you from ever doing it again. There is no benefit

in vows; no Scripture teaches that God is moved by them — God is moved by faith and obedience. The Law itself, while enforcing vows strictly, pointedly adds that making them was never required: “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it... But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty” (Deuteronomy 23:21–22). Jesus took up exactly that provision and pressed it to its conclusion: “Do not swear an oath at all... All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:34, 37). And James: “Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear — not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” (James 5:12). *Above all* — as though of all his warnings, this one were the most neglected. Yet believers still make vows: bargains struck in crisis, promises volunteered in enthusiasm, conditions laid on God. Understand what Scripture actually teaches: a vow made is binding — better not to vow than to vow and not fulfill (Ecclesiastes 5:5) — and a vow broken has consequences, as surely as a touched iron burns. If you have made a foolish vow, do your utmost to keep it where keeping it involves no sin; where it cannot rightly be kept, confess the foolishness to God, seek His forgiveness, and accept whatever consequences He sees fit. In Jephthah’s case, the nobler course would surely have been to confess the rashness of his vow and plead with God to take the consequences on himself rather than on his daughter. One of us knows this territory personally: a foolish vow made to the Lord early in the Christian life — a promise that if a certain struggle were not overcome within a set time, full-time ministry would be forever renounced — a vow kept now across decades, its foolishness long since confessed, its binding force a lifelong reminder. That testimony is shared for one purpose: so that you will never make such a vow at all.

What exactly Jephthah did to his daughter, interpreters have long debated — whether he offered her literally as a burnt offering, in pagan-soaked ignorance of the Law he elsewhere knew, or consigned her to lifelong virginity, her annual commemoration by

Israel's daughters (11:39–40) marking the extinction of his line either way. The text draws a veil, and the era's motto — everyone doing what was right in his own eyes — makes the darkest reading tragically credible. But before our sentiments settle wholly on this one girl, chapter 12 poses an uncomfortable test of our moral perception. The Ephraimites — the same tribe whose wounded pride Gideon had soothed with flattery (8:1–3) — confront Jephthah with the same complaint, now escalated to a death threat: “Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us? We’re going to burn down your house over your head” (12:1). Jephthah, no Gideon, answers that he did call and they did not come; and the quarrel about credit becomes civil war. Gilead seizes the fords of the Jordan, and every fugitive is given a one-word test: say “Shibboleth.” The Ephraimite dialect betrayed its speakers — “Sibboleth” — and forty-two thousand of them were slaughtered at the river (12:5–6).

Forty-two thousand. Sit with the number. Ephraim and Gilead were brothers, sons of Jacob; even the Ammonites Jephthah crushed were kin, descendants of Lot. Yet notice where our attention instinctively goes in these chapters: to one daughter, dancing out of one doorway. Much is written on Jephthah's vow; almost nothing on the forty-two thousand. Why? Because we are moved by what most vividly captures our imagination, not by the actual weight of things. We are transfixed by a single tragic story and give a lesser reaction to genocide in a distant land — and both are forgotten the moment some celebrity trivia goes viral. We say we value life; more honestly, we value what captivates us. Scripture will not let us keep that habit. Life is fragile — we are dust, a handbreadth, a vapor — and every one of those forty-two thousand mattered to God as much as the girl with the timbrels. That God assigns such value to creatures so fleeting is the amazement of the psalmist (Psalm 8:4; 144:3–4), and it relativizes all our petty and worldly concerns. We are not the masters of our destiny; fate and fortune, providence and grace set the boundaries of our brief lives. As for the eternal question, let each of us choose, without rancor toward the billions who choose

otherwise, to run our course echoing the confession of the man who brought God's people into this land: "But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

Ephraim's arc across this book is itself a sermon. In Deborah's day they crossed no borders of self-interest to fight Jabin, and the song honors them (5:14). In Gideon's day they fought — but their aftermath grievance shows the motive curdling: not deliverance but credit, pride talked down by flattery (8:1–3). In Jephthah's day the same speech reappears armed with arson threats, from a tribe that had ignored the actual cry for help and arrived only to claim a share of a victory already won (12:1–3). Three generations: from sacrificial helpers, to prideful helpers, to belligerent non-helpers — and forty-two thousand graves. The moral character of a tribe, like a family, like a soul, declines by degrees, each generation's vice the next one's starting point. It is the book's descending spiral in miniature, and it ends where the spiral always ends: with the people of God killing each other. Left to ourselves, this is the trajectory of every human line — "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart... only evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5); indeed Scripture's verdict is not that we are declining but that we start "dead in transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). Which makes the gospel's next word the only hope in the chapter: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4–5). Let us be truly thankful: we were once dead, and have been made alive in Christ.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God is moved by faith and obedience, never by bargains. Have you ever tried to negotiate with God — "if You will do this, I promise that"? What does the instinct to bargain reveal about how we view Him?

2. Jesus said anything beyond “yes” and “no” comes from the evil one. Why do you think we reach for oaths, promises, and dramatic commitments instead of simple, kept words? Where does your simple “yes” need to replace a grand vow?
3. One daughter captures our imagination; forty-two thousand brothers barely register. Where do you notice “selective compassion” in yourself — moved by the vivid story, unmoved by the greater but less vivid suffering? What would it mean to grieve by God’s scales rather than the imagination’s?
4. Ephraim declined from helpers to credit-seekers to armed grievance in three generations. What virtue in your family or church is quietly curdling into its counterfeit — service into recognition-seeking, conviction into contentiousness? How is such a slide arrested?
5. “He could bear Israel’s misery no longer.” After eighteen years of discipline and a stinging rebuke, God’s compassion broke through. What does this verse tell you about the heart behind even God’s severest dealings with His people?

Chapter Six

Judges 13–15

The sixth apostasy receives no recorded cry for help. Israel does evil; God delivers them to the Philistines for forty years — the longest oppression in the book — and this time the people seem to have made their peace with servitude; it is the men of Judah, later, who will complain to Samson, “Don’t you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us?” (15:11). Into this settled captivity God speaks, unbidden, to a barren woman in Zorah: “You are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son... No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines” (13:3, 5).

Pause on the shape of that announcement, because it frames everything we must understand about Samson. He was chosen before birth — not for foreseen goodness, for his life would be a catalogue of immoral decisions, but purely to accomplish God’s purposes. This is God’s sovereign will: unconditioned, unearned, announced to his mother before the boy could do anything good or bad. And yet within that sovereign election, Samson made his own choices — nearly all of them bad — for which he alone bore responsibility. This is what we may call God’s permissive will: He allows the choices of free creatures, without sanctioning them as good, and then bends even those choices to serve purposes that cannot be thwarted. Scripture shows us this interplay again and again. Joseph’s brothers acted freely and wickedly in selling him — “You intended to harm me” — yet “God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20). Supremely, the cross: God’s sovereign purpose that His Servant suffer for sin was fixed before Jesus was born (Isaiah 53), and God accomplished it precisely through the free wickedness of men who remain fully accountable for it. No purpose of His can be thwarted (Job 42:2); and His sovereignty never makes Him the

author of our sin — it is the sin nature in us that sins — while our freedom never makes us the authors of His plan.

The narrator states the principle over Samson's first outrage in words that startle every careful reader. Samson demands a Philistine wife — intermarriage with the peoples of the land was precisely what God had forbidden — and his grieving parents did not know “that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines” (14:4). From the LORD! God used even Samson's forbidden appetite — for which Samson remains responsible — as the lever of Israel's deliverance, exactly as He used the brothers' jealousy, Pharaoh's hardness, and Judas's treachery. Whether His agency in any event is direct or indirect, God is in control of everything under heaven, bad as well as good — and yet He is never stained by it. If that seems impossible, consider carefully what sin actually is. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23): sin is falling short of God's glory — and God's glory is nothing other than His own person, will, and works. There was no abstract standard of “good” floating above God before Him, to which He must answer; He is the First Cause, and He Himself defines the good — “the nearness of God is my good” (Psalm 73:28). This is why what God commands can never be sin even when the same act, humanly initiated, would be: Abraham's knife over Isaac was obedience, not murder, because God commanded it. The reason God cannot sin has nothing to do with what is done and everything to do with Who is doing it (cf. James 4:12). These are deep waters — the joint truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility — but they matter, lest we misjudge the character and work of God when we read a sentence like Judges 14:4. “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Proverbs 16:33).

Now to the man himself. Four times the text says “the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him” (13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14), and the results are legendary: a lion torn barehanded, thirty Philistines struck down at Ashkelon, ropes snapping like charred flax, a

thousand men felled with the fresh jawbone of a donkey. And here is the riddle greater than any Samson posed at his wedding: the man on whom the Spirit repeatedly and mightily came was repeatedly and mightily powerless before the enticements of women. Nor is he alone in this. Set beside the strongest man who ever lived the wisest: Solomon, granted wisdom beyond all men, whose Canaanite wives turned his heart, and who would himself write of the immoral woman, “Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng” (Proverbs 7:26). The Spirit gave Samson strength and Solomon wisdom; the Spirit did not give either of them holiness against their will. Both were allowed to fall.

Friends, this corrects a dangerous assumption. Do we imagine that the Spirit will keep us from morally wrong decisions — that He will make the right choices for us? That is promised nowhere in Scripture. Yes, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23), but fruit grows on a tree that abides; it is not imposed on a stump that resists. Could God enforce righteousness in us? Certainly — He did precisely that when He saved us, giving us faith in a gospel we would never have embraced on our own. But He is not obligated to override our wills at every juncture thereafter, and He does not. Instead He has permitted a battleground within us: “the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want” (Galatians 5:17). While there is no effort in our salvation — it is the gift of God — there is very real effort in following the Spirit. How much? “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Hebrews 12:4). That much. It is the wedding-vow standard — till death — and it is our Lord’s own recruitment language: “deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Yet before we leave Samson’s early exploits, one more note must be sounded, and Samson himself, at his best moment, sounds it. Parched after the slaughter at Lehi, he prays — the first prayer

recorded of him — “You have given your servant this great victory” (15:18). For once, exactly right. Samson was not special; strip away the gift and he was a crude, impulsive man with a weakness for women and a taste for riddles — an average man, apart from what God gave. The strength was never his; his unshorn hair conferred nothing magical but marked a consecration whose power was God’s alone. Were Samson alive today he would be a celebrity, envied and imitated; but the question Paul asks of every gifted person would still stand: “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Corinthians 4:7). John the Baptist, watching his own congregation drain away to Jesus, spoke the settled truth: “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven” (John 3:27) — and rejoiced. James calls envy and selfish ambition “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” wisdom (James 3:14–15), while heavenly wisdom traces every good gift to the Father of lights (James 1:17), leaving no room for boasting over what we were given or envying what we were not. We are called to be found faithful stewards of what God has entrusted (1 Corinthians 4:2) — nothing more, nothing less. Let the one-talent servant not envy the ten; let the ten-talent servant not lord it over the one. Whatever your lot, may you be found neither envious nor boasting — simply faithful.

And what, finally, is God’s will for your life — the question Samson never asked? It has already been answered, and not privately: “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is” (Romans 12:1–2). Samson had the Spirit’s power without the renewed mind, and his story is the wreckage of that combination. Let us conform to the will of God by transforming our minds through the continual reading of His Word.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God chose Samson before birth, not for foreseen goodness but for His own purposes — and still held Samson responsible for every choice. How do you hold together God’s sovereignty and your responsibility? Where are you tempted to collapse one into the other?
2. “This was from the LORD” — spoken over a forbidden marriage. Looking back, can you identify wrong turns in your own story that God nevertheless bent toward good? How does that history shape your trust in what He is doing with the present?
3. The Spirit empowered Samson’s arms but did not commandeer his appetites. Where have you been passively waiting for God to remove a temptation that He is calling you to actively resist — perhaps “to the point of shedding blood”?
4. Strength ruined Samson and wisdom ruined Solomon — each undone at the point of his gift. What is your strongest gift, and how might that very strength become your unguarded gate?
5. “What do you have that you did not receive?” Make the inventory honestly: abilities, opportunities, intelligence, upbringing. How does receiving everything as gift dissolve both boasting and envy — and what would “simply faithful” look like with your particular talents this year?

Chapter Seven

Judges 16–18

Samson's end comes at the point of his lifelong weakness. Gaza first — a prostitute, an ambush evaded by tearing the city gates from their sockets and carrying them uphill toward Hebron (16:1–3) — and then the Valley of Sorek, and Delilah. Three times she asks the secret of his strength; three times he toys with her — fresh bowstrings, new ropes, hair woven into a loom — while Philistine lords wait in the next room with their silver. A wiser man would have fled at the first “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But Samson had never yet met a consequence, and “she nagged him day after day until he was sick to death of it,” and he told her everything (16:16–17). The Nazirite's hair fell; and the saddest sentence in the book follows: “he did not know that the LORD had left him” (16:20). The Philistines gouged out his eyes and set the deliverer of Israel to grinding grain in a Gaza prison — the strong man made a blind beast of burden, entertainment for a temple full of worshipers of Dagon. Yet grace gets the final word even here: “the hair on his head began to grow again” (16:22) — quiet Scripture shorthand for a consecration renewed — and Samson's last prayer, “Sovereign LORD, remember me... strengthen me just once more” (16:28), brought the house of Dagon down on its lords and worshipers, “so he killed many more when he died than while he lived” (16:30). It is a grim salvation, and a fitting emblem of his whole career: God's purposes accomplished through, and in spite of, and finally at the cost of, His flawed servant — who is nevertheless named, to the astonishment of every reader, in faith's hall of fame (Hebrews 11:32). God writes no one off whom He has claimed; but oh, what Samson might have been.

With chapter 17 the book changes register. The great deliverance stories are over; what remain are two appendices — anatomies of ordinary life in the era of the judges — and the narrator now steps back and lets the horror speak for itself, punctuated only

by the book's refrain, here given in full: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (17:6). And let this be said plainly at the threshold: if you can read Judges 17–18 without nearly every verse troubling you, then you do not yet know the Scriptures as you ought — and you stand in some danger of the very condition these chapters describe. For the text supplies no moral commentary; it is as if God designed the account to indict not only the characters in it but any reader who fails to see what is wrong. Like the people of Isaiah's commission — "be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving" (Isaiah 6:9) — Israel had lost the faculty of moral recognition. Only a few generations after Joshua, the compass was not merely ignored; it was broken.

Watch how much is wrong, verse by verse. A man of Ephraim named Micah has stolen eleven hundred shekels of silver — no petty theft; at the wages this very chapter records (ten shekels a year for a priest, 17:10), it approaches a lifetime's income — from his own mother. Two commandments down: honor your father and mother; you shall not steal. He returns it only because he hears her pronounce a curse on the thief — fear of a curse, not fear of God or grief over sin; the curses of God's own covenant (Deuteronomy 28) apparently held no such terror. And the mother? "The LORD bless you, my son!" (17:2). Not a word of rebuke — small wonder the son stole. She then dedicates the silver "to the LORD... to make an image overlaid with silver" — a sentence at war with itself, consecrating to the LORD a violation of the first two commandments — and even so, of eleven hundred shekels dedicated, only two hundred reach the silversmith (17:3–4): she shortchanges God in the very act of idolatry. Micah installs the idol in his household shrine, alongside an ephod and other household gods, and ordains one of his own sons as priest (17:5) — private worship, private priesthood, private gods, every element in defiance of the Law's one altar and one priesthood (Deuteronomy 12:13–14). Then opportunity knocks: a young Levite, drifting homeless from Bethlehem — evidently unemployed, in a nation with little work for

real priests — and Micah hires him: room, board, clothes, ten shekels a year. Here was a man whose calling was to know and teach the Law; he could have brought reform to that house. Instead he blessed its idolatry for a salary. And Micah beams with the punch line of the whole sad comedy: “Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest” (17:13).

Now I know the LORD will bless me. Micah is perfectly sincere — and sincerely, catastrophically wrong at every point. Here is the terrible lesson of the appendix: sincerity does not sanctify. God struck down Uzzah for the well-intentioned steadying of a falling ark, because His Word about how the ark must be carried had been ignored (2 Samuel 6:6–7). He renders the same verdict over an entire zealous nation: “they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Romans 10:2–3). Zealously wrong is still wrong; religiously packaged disobedience is still disobedience; and a hired holy man pronouncing blessing over it changes nothing but the depth of the deception. When there is no functional Word of God, this chapter shows us, people do not become irreligious — they become *wrongly* religious: they call evil good and good evil; the ministers of worship bend to money and security while announcing “thus says the LORD”; and through it all, everyone believes they are honoring God. We flatter ourselves if we think the condition ancient. Wherever congregations know Scripture only as a smattering of stories filtered through a weekly message; wherever teachers preach platitudes without context and spiritualize details without warrant; wherever people gather teachers “to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3) and evaluate every claim by experience and feeling rather than the Book — there Micah’s shrine is open for business, and the counterfeiter who “masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14) is glad to staff it. The devil’s oldest strategy is not to empty the shrine but to relabel it. In Jesus’ day the genuine works of God were attributed to the devil; do

not be surprised when, in ours, works far from God are attributed to the Holy Spirit. The test has not changed: not sincerity, not zeal, not sensation, but the Word — “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). And how shall we recognize whether even our leaders are rooted in that Word, if we do not know it ourselves?

Chapter 18 scales Micah’s private apostasy up to a tribe. The Danites — who, as we saw in Part One, had abandoned their difficult God-given allotment — send five spies north, who lodge at Micah’s house, recognize the Levite’s voice, and obtain from him a conveniently agreeable oracle (18:5–6). They find Laish: a quiet, unsuspecting, prosperous people, isolated from every ally. Six hundred armed Danites return; on the way they loot Micah’s shrine — idol, ephod, household gods — and make the Levite an offer sized to his ambition: “Isn’t it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priest rather than just one man’s household?” (18:19). “The priest was very pleased” (18:20). Micah chases the column, is asked with breathtaking irony “What’s the matter with you?”, and turns home before the swords come out — his gods, in which he trusted, carried off as cargo (18:22–26). What can a man say who must plead, “You took the gods I made”? Gods that can be made can be stolen. The Danites burn Laish, slaughter its people, rename the city Dan, and set up the idol — installing as its priesthood none other than the descendants of Moses (18:30, a genealogy so shocking the scribes long softened it), a counterfeit sanctuary operating “all the time the house of God was in Shiloh” (18:31), and destined, as we saw, to host Jeroboam’s golden calf. Thus the era’s whole religious economy: stolen silver, homemade gods, purchasable clergy, oracles on demand, violence baptized with borrowed liturgy — and everyone, from Micah’s mother to the Danite spies, invoking the name of the LORD throughout.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. “He did not know that the LORD had left him.” Samson’s consecration eroded so gradually that its loss was undetectable until tested. What consecrations in your life — convictions, disciplines, boundaries — have eroded by inches? How would you know?
2. If nothing in Judges 17–18 troubled you on first reading, what does that suggest? More broadly: what is your working method for judging right and wrong — instinct, culture, sincerity — and how much of it is actually calibrated by Scripture?
3. Micah was completely sincere and completely wrong; Uzzah meant well and died. Where might you be substituting sincerity for obedience — confident that God will bless an arrangement His Word never authorized?
4. The Levite blessed idolatry for room, board, and ten shekels, then upgraded for a better offer. What pressures — financial, social, institutional — bear on those who teach God’s Word today, and on you when you are called to speak truth? How is a “purchasable” voice prevented?
5. Micah’s gods could be made, and therefore stolen. What in your life functions as a made god — a security that could be carried off by six hundred armed circumstances? How does the living God differ, and how would your life look if you trusted Him accordingly?

Chapter Eight

Judges 19–21

The final appendix is the darkest passage in the Old Testament, and the narrator marks its register in the opening words: “In those days Israel had no king” (19:1). Read it we must — Scripture includes it on purpose — but let the reader be warned: this is what “everyone did as they saw fit” looks like when it reaches the bottom of its descent.

Another Levite — the second unnamed Levite of the appendices — takes a concubine from Bethlehem. Already the arrangement is telling: there is no mention of a wife; he simply declines to give this woman the status and protections of one. The traditional reading of 19:2 says she “was unfaithful to him,” but there is good textual support for the alternative, “she became angry with him,” which the context better fits: in her anger she leaves him and returns to her father’s house. Four long months pass before he bestirs himself to go “and speak tenderly to her” and persuade her to return (19:3) — but arriving, he spends day after day eating and drinking with her father, and when he finally departs, the narrator’s inventory is quietly devastating: “the man left and went toward Jebus... with his two saddled donkeys and his concubine” (19:10). She is listed with the animals. The reader is being shown, before Gibeah ever appears, how this man values this woman.

Nightfall forces a choice of lodging. His servant suggests Jebus — Jerusalem, still a foreign city, itself a standing witness to Israel’s incomplete obedience — but the Levite refuses: “We won’t go into any city whose people are not Israelites” (19:12). Safer among our own. The irony of that sentence will bleed for three chapters. In Gibeah of Benjamin, an Israelite town, no one takes them in — a violation of hospitality so basic that the Law commanded it even toward foreigners, and these travelers carried their own provisions and needed nothing but a roof (19:18–19). Only an old man, himself

an out-of-towner, gathers them in, with a warning that tells us everything about Gibeah: “Only don’t spend the night in the square” (19:20). What happens next was, in other words, no aberration; the townspeople knew their town.

Then the pounding on the door — and the reader realizes, with a chill, that we have stood at this door before. “Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him”; the host goes out, “No, my friends, don’t be so vile”; he offers his own virgin daughter and the concubine, “do to them whatever you wish” (19:22–24). Set it beside Genesis 19 — Lot in his doorway at Sodom, the men of the city young and old, the same demand, the same appalling counteroffer of daughters — and the parallel is nearly word for word. That is not literary accident. The writer intends us to conclude the unthinkable: Israel has become Sodom. The people God formed by covenant to be a light to the nations now reenact, in their own hill country, the very scene that brought fire from heaven in Abraham’s day — except that in Sodom, angels intervened, and in Gibeah, no one does. When wickedness becomes the atmosphere, even the “moral” responses are twisted: a host defends his male guest by offering women to a mob.

And the Levite — surely now the Levite acts? He does: “the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them” (19:25). The woman he would not marry, whose anger he provoked, whom he came to speak tenderly to, he thrusts out the door to save himself, and closes it. They abuse her through the night. At dawn she falls at the threshold, hands on the doorstep — one of the most pitiful images in all Scripture — and when her master (the text’s word) opens the door to leave, his greeting to the woman on the ground is: “Get up; let’s go” (19:28). No embrace, no grief; the tone is of a man ashamed of an inconvenience. There is no answer. Whether she was dead already or died on the donkey, he never checked while checking was worth anything. At home he dismembers her body into twelve parts and couriers the pieces through Israel — a summons to outrage from the man who put her out the door. And notice, when the tribes

assemble, how he edits the story (20:4–7): the mob becomes “the citizens of Gibeah” (they were a gang of scoundrels); their intent becomes “they intended to kill me” (the text says otherwise); and the sentence “I took my concubine and sent her outside to them” appears nowhere in his testimony. The victim’s chief witness is her chief betrayer, laundering his cowardice into a national *casus belli*.

Israel musters four hundred thousand men — unity at last, achieved by atrocity, the tribes that never once combined against Canaanites now combining against Benjamin — and Benjamin, in the era’s final madness, closes ranks around the rapists of Gibeah rather than surrender them (20:12–14). Then a detail that puzzles many readers: Israel inquires of God, and loses; inquires again, and loses again — forty thousand dead in two days — before the third inquiry brings victory (20:18–28). Why would God allow His people such losses in a just cause? Look closely at the inquiries. The first does not ask *whether* to go to war, nor is there any weeping, fasting, or repentance; it asks only “Who shall go first?” — a request for tactical scheduling. They did not humble themselves; they did not grieve Gibeah’s sin as their own nation’s shame; they were, frankly, out for blood. Only after the second defeat do we find “the whole army... weeping... they fasted... and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings” (20:26) — and then God gives Benjamin over. The lesson cuts deep: God was judging Israel even as Israel judged Benjamin. A right cause does not sanctify a self-righteous army; the surgeon’s hands must themselves be clean, and Israel’s were not. When the ambush finally springs and the smoke rises over Gibeah, Benjamin is all but annihilated — twenty-five thousand fall in a day; six hundred men survive at the rock of Rimmon; the tribe’s towns, women, and children are put to the sword by their brothers (20:35–48). Israel has done to Benjamin what it never managed to do to the Canaanites.

Chapter 21 is the era’s ethics performing its final contortion. Two rash oaths now collide: the tribes had sworn at Mizpah not to give their daughters to Benjamin, and sworn death to any town that

failed to muster — and waking from their fury, they weep over the tribe they have nearly erased (21:2–3). Their solution to the first oath is the second: Jabesh Gilead had sent no soldiers, so Jabesh Gilead is destroyed, and its four hundred virgins handed to the survivors of Benjamin (21:8–12) — massacre as a marriage bureau. Still two hundred men short, the elders devise the vintage-festival scheme at Shiloh: let the Benjamites hide in the vineyards and *seize* wives from the dancing girls; then, when fathers complain, we will explain that since the women were taken and not given, no oath was technically broken (21:19–22). Hear the reasoning: we may keep the letter of our vow while orchestrating its violation — indeed, they did not manage even the letter, having encouraged the taking and soothed the givers. It is Jephthah’s folly compounded: a foolish oath, and then evasion by word-play rather than confession. And are we so different? Our generation has become masterful at parsing and relabeling, redefining terms until sinful acts appear justified, and appealing to circumstance and upbringing to dissolve guilt that ought to drive us to repentance. Like Micah with his idols, like the Danites with their stolen shrine, like the Levite with his edited testimony, like these oath-juggling elders, every one in turn maintained a twisted morality with a straight face — and thought God satisfied by the technicality. The crisis beneath every episode is the same one announced in 2:10: a people who no longer knew the Word, improvising righteousness out of their own eyes’ seeing. Unless we develop a lifestyle of learning the Bible for ourselves — not outsourcing it to pastors and teachers, however sound — and diligently give it to our children, we stand, every culture and every congregation, exactly one generation from a Judges-like descent. That is not rhetoric; it is the documented arithmetic of this book.

So the era closes with its epitaph, the fourth and final sounding of the refrain: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (21:25). And we must read that sentence at its full depth. It is not merely observing that the monarchy had not yet arrived — as though a Saul were the missing piece. Israel *had* a King: the LORD

Himself, who had reigned from Sinai, whose Law was the nation's charter, whose kingship the people were rejecting every time they did what was right in their own eyes. The vacancy on Israel's throne was not constitutional but spiritual. What happens when a people dethrone God? Romans 1 gives the clinical progression — "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts... God gave them over to shameful lusts... God gave them over to a depraved mind" (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) — and Judges 19–21 is that progression narrated: the abandonment, the perversion, the mind that can no longer perceive what it is doing. This is not ancient history; it is anthropology. Apart from God's lordship and the light of His Word, we would be no better than these self-directing Israelites — no better than Sodom, no better than the generation of the flood; the raw material is in every one of us. Which is why the book's despair is really an advent announcement. Israel needs a king — yes; Samuel is coming, and David after him. But the deliverer who finally breaks the cycle must deliver people not from Philistines but from themselves, and only one King does that. "But God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions" (Ephesians 2:4–5). Let us then acknowledge who our King is — and be His faithful and obedient servants, the willing subjects of the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus Christ our Savior. And choose, deliberately and daily, to be the faithful remnant: they have existed in every depraved generation from the beginning, always few, always by grace — people of real faith, who diligently study God's Word and humbly submit every corner of their lives to it. "Come near to God and he will come near to you... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:8, 10).

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The Levite valued his concubine somewhere between his donkeys and his reputation, and every horror in the chapter flows downstream from that valuation. Whom are you tempted to value

for their usefulness to you? What would this chapter say about where such valuation ends?

2. “We won’t go into any city whose people are not Israelites” — and Gibeah proved worse than Jebus. Where do you assume safety because of a religious label? How does this story recalibrate the difference between belonging to God’s people in name and in truth?
3. Israel inquired of God for tactics before ever weeping over sin — and lost forty thousand men. When you pray about a conflict, are you seeking God’s perspective on your own heart, or only His help for your side? What would genuine humbling look like before your next confrontation?
4. The elders kept their oath’s letter while engineering its violation. Where do you parse words, redefine terms, or plead circumstances to keep a technical innocence? What would plain confession — instead of clever compliance — require of you?
5. “Israel had no king” — yet the LORD was their King all along. In what practical areas of your life (money, calendar, relationships, opinions) is Christ’s kingship acknowledged in principle but vacant in practice? What would coronation look like there this week?

Conclusion

Judges is the hardest book in Scripture to love, and among the most necessary to know. It began with a question of unfinished business — who will go up first against the Canaanites? — and ended with tribes weeping over a brother-tribe they had nearly exterminated, everyone doing what was right in their own eyes. Between those bookends the spiral turned six times: sin, servitude, supplication, salvation, and back to sin, each revolution lower than the last, until the nation that entered the land singing Joshua’s covenant renewals closed the era reenacting Sodom.

The diagnosis was delivered in advance, in a single quiet verse: “another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). Everything else in the book is that verse working itself out. When the telling stopped, the knowing stopped; when the knowing stopped, the compass broke; and a people without the Word did not become irreligious — they became wrongly religious, blessing idols in the LORD’s name, hiring priests to sanctify what God had forbidden, keeping the letter of oaths while strangling their spirit. The book’s refrain — no king in Israel — was never merely a note about the missing monarchy. Israel had rejected her true King, and the vacancy on that throne explains every horror in these pages.

And yet grace ran through even this book, stubborn as a spring in drought. God raised deliverers from the least likely places — a left-handed assassin, a farmer’s oxgoad, a prophetess under a palm tree, a housewife with a tent peg, a frightened man in a winepress, an outlaw’s exiled son, a Nazirite who squandered everything and was heard one last time. He reduced armies to three hundred so that no one could boast; He could bear His people’s misery no longer even when they deserved every hour of it; and in every generation He reserved a remnant chosen by grace. The judges could rescue but never transform; the cycle they interrupted always resumed, because the disease was never finally the Philistines or the Midianites. It was

the human heart — which is why the book's longing for a king reaches past Saul, past even David, to the Deliverer who comes from Zion to turn godlessness away from Jacob, the King who saves His people not from their oppressors but from themselves.

Still, we should not leave the era only by the main road of its horrors. In these very days when the judges ruled — under this same broken sky, during one of these same covenant famines — there lived in Bethlehem and Moab a handful of people whom the spiral did not claim: a bitter widow who still came home to her God, a foreign girl who bound herself to Him with an oath she kept, a landowner who practiced the Law of Moses gladly when no one was enforcing it. Scripture now sets their small story beside the era's large one, like a candle carried into the cave of Judges — and by its light we will see what the whole dark book has made us long to see: that God was never absent, that faithfulness was never impossible, and that in the quietest corner of the age, He was already preparing the king. That story is the Book of Ruth.

Part Three

REDEMPTION

Ruth

Introduction

The Book of Ruth opens with a time stamp that changes everything about how we read it: “In the days when the judges ruled...” (Ruth 1:1). This is not a story from some gentler era. It unfolds inside the very period we have just left — the era of apostasy, invasion, and everyone doing as they saw fit — and even its opening famine bears the marks of that age, since famine in the land was among the covenant judgments God had promised for national sin. And yet what follows is not another cycle of rebellion but a story of loyal love, quiet integrity, and providence working through barley fields and threshing floors. Ruth is a literary foil to Judges: as a foil character’s virtues expose another’s flaws by contrast, so Ruth and Boaz, in their faithfulness, stand against the faithlessness of an entire nation. Judges showed us Israel’s sinful character; Ruth reveals God’s sovereign grace — and reminds us that in the darkest chapters of history, God has never left Himself without a witness.

As literature, the book is nearly perfect; Goethe called it the loveliest short work of its kind ever written, and critics ever since have agreed. But its beauty serves its theology. Only two books of the Bible bear women’s names, and they mirror each other: Esther, a Hebrew woman living among Gentiles who marries a Gentile king; and Ruth, a Gentile woman living among Hebrews who marries into the royal line of Israel. Both books teach the providence of God — His directing of ordinary circumstances so that His purposes come to pass. But where Esther famously never mentions God at all, Ruth’s characters speak of Him constantly: He fills their greetings, their blessings, their vows and laments. Almost every mention of God in this book comes from the mouths of its characters rather than the narrator, and this is its distinctive lesson in providence. No sea parts in Ruth. No walls fall. God works invisibly here — through a famine, a foreigner’s loyalty, the timing of a harvest, the seating of

a city gate — and the people inside the story name Him at every turn as the unseen mover behind it all.

The story itself can be told in a breath. Naomi, emptied by famine, exile, and three graves in Moab, returns to Bethlehem so bitter she asks to be renamed Mara. Her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth refuses to leave her, binding herself to Naomi in one of Scripture's great confessions of faith: "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Gleaning scraps in the field of a relative named Boaz, Ruth encounters a man whose generosity to the poor, the widow, and the foreigner shows the Law of Moses being kept gladly, from the heart — a jarring sight after the greed and violence of Judges. Naomi stirs; a plan forms around Israel's provisions of levirate marriage and the kinsman-redeemer, the near relative with the right to buy back a family's lost land and raise up heirs for its dead. Boaz, scrupulously honest even in his eagerness, first defers to a nearer kinsman — who declines — and then redeems both the land and the widow. The book that opened with famine and funerals closes with a wedding, a harvest, and a baby on Naomi's lap. Emptiness has become fullness; bitterness has been renamed blessing. Bethlehem — the "house of bread" — that had no bread is once again worthy of its name.

Then comes the ending that reframes everything. The son born to Ruth and Boaz is Obed, "the father of Jesse, the father of David" (Ruth 4:17). This quiet domestic story turns out to be royal history: the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king was a Moabite widow who chose the God of Israel over every familiarity of her homeland. Here is the answer to the ache of Judges — the king Israel lacked was already being prepared, in secret, in Bethlehem, before anyone thought to ask for him. And the line does not stop at David. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus Christ pauses, against every convention, to name the women in the royal line — among them Rahab the Canaanite, whom we met in Joshua, and Ruth the Moabitess. The scope of God's grace was never limited to Israel; the Gentile nations were always in view, woven into the very ancestry of

the Messiah. And the kinsman-redeemer himself points forward: as Boaz paid the price to redeem a helpless widow who could contribute nothing but her trust, so Christ, our nearest Kinsman by His incarnation, paid the ultimate price to redeem a people who could bring Him nothing but their need.

For readers standing where Naomi once stood — emptied, embittered, unable to trace any good design in their circumstances — Ruth is a book of extraordinary comfort. It teaches that circumstances do not make or break the believer; faith does. Boaz kept his integrity as a wealthy man in a corrupt age; Ruth kept hers as a destitute foreigner with every excuse to despair. Neither of them lived to see David's throne, much less the birth of David's greater Son in their own town of Bethlehem. They simply trusted, obeyed, and loved — and God made them foothold for things of which they could not dream. So He still does. The story that begins “in the days when the judges ruled” ends with the name of a king; and with that name, Israel's long era of chieftains and chaos begins to close. A prophet is about to be born who will anoint that king — but that is the story of Samuel, and it must wait for another book.

Chapter One

Ruth 1–4

“In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land” (Ruth 1:1). With those words, Scripture sets this small story inside the large one we have just left — and the famine itself is the first clue that we have not changed eras, only lenses. Famine in the covenant land was no random misfortune; it was among the judgments God had attached to national disobedience (Deuteronomy 11:16–17; 28:22–24). So when Elimelek of Bethlehem — Bethlehem, “house of bread,” now breadless — takes his wife Naomi and two sons to the country of Moab, we may fairly say the family is, from one angle, fleeing the discipline of God rather than repenting under it. In Moab the compromises compound: Elimelek dies; the sons marry Moabite women, unions the Law forbade (Deuteronomy 23:3; cf. Nehemiah 13:1–3); and within ten years both sons are dead too, leaving three widows and no heir. Every human calculation behind the move to Moab — survival, prosperity, posterity — lies in ruins. And it is precisely here, in the wreckage of disobedience and grief, that grace begins its quiet work: for somewhere in those ten dark years, God had stirred faith in a Moabite girl named Ruth.

In literature, the Book of Ruth is what is called a foil — a character or story whose virtues throw another’s flaws into sharp relief. That is exactly its function beside Judges. Israel was repeatedly unfaithful; Ruth is faithfulness itself. Israel abandoned the true God for false gods; Ruth abandons her native gods for the true God. Israel ignored the Law; Boaz keeps its smallest provisions gladly. Israel’s motto was “everyone did as they saw fit”; Boaz and Ruth do what is right in the LORD’s eyes at cost to themselves. After eight chapters of Judges, the reader aches for one ordinary righteous person; God now gives us three.

Naomi first — and she is drawn with unsparing honesty. Hearing “that the LORD had come to the aid of his people” by giving them food, she rises to return (1:6): note that even her bitterness travels *toward* God’s land and God’s people, not away. She could have stayed in Moab and been spared the humiliation of coming home empty; she came home. But listen to her counsel to her daughters-in-law on the road: “Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her” (1:15). Her gods! Is it possible that grief had so flattened Naomi’s faith that Yahweh seemed to her, in that hour, merely Israel’s regional deity — one god among the nations’ many, hers by geography rather than by glory? And in Bethlehem she renames herself: “Don’t call me Naomi [‘pleasant’]. Call me Mara [‘bitter’], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty” (1:20–21). Yet mark carefully what Naomi does *not* do. She attributes her affliction to God — and she does not curse Him. She is Job’s true kin, not Job’s wife’s: “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:10). Her theology is bruised but intact — the Almighty is still the Almighty, still the only address for her complaint — and her feet carry her home to Him even while her mouth accuses Him. There is a whole pastoral education in that portrait. God receives the bitter honesty of the broken; what He asks is that we bring it to Him, in His land, among His people — not that we pretend to a pleasantness we cannot feel.

Then Ruth’s confession, one of the most beautiful in all Scripture — and we must feel its weight. Orpah has kissed Naomi and turned back, reasonably, tearfully, to people, prospects, and gods she knows. Ruth clings: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me” (1:16–17). Consider what she is renouncing: homeland, family, remarriage, security, religion — everything, for an impoverished, embittered mother-in-law and that mother-in-law’s God. Consider,

too, where her knowledge of that God must have come from: ten years in Naomi's household, hearing of Yahweh — which means Naomi *did* tell her, as Israel's parents so conspicuously failed to tell their children — and yet Ruth embraces the God of Israel almost in spite of Naomi, choosing the LORD at the very moment Naomi is commending Chemosh. Her vow is sealed in the LORD's own name; like Rahab's scarlet cord, it is faith that burns every bridge behind it. And notice the shape of the relationship the vow creates: Naomi urging Ruth toward Ruth's best interests, Ruth binding herself to Naomi's — each seeking the other's good without calculation of her own. In an era of Levites who valued women with their donkeys, here is a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law outdoing one another in selfless love. It remains one of Scripture's loveliest pictures of what such a relationship can be.

They arrive at Bethlehem “as the barley harvest was beginning” (1:22) — the narrator's quiet hinge from emptiness toward fullness — and chapter 2 introduces the story's third foil, “a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz” (2:1). Everything about Boaz rebukes his era. He greets his harvesters with “The LORD be with you!” and they answer in kind (2:4) — grace flowing through the small courtesies of a working farm. He keeps the gleaning laws (Leviticus 19:9–10; 23:22) not grudgingly but lavishly: when Ruth asks to glean, he grants her protection, water, lunch at his own table, and secret instructions to his men to pull out stalks from the bundles on purpose for her (2:8–16). He knows her story — her kindness to Naomi has traveled — and his blessing over her gathers the whole book's theology into a single image: “May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (2:12). Set that sentence against Naomi's “go back to her gods”: where grief saw one god among many, faith sees the only refuge there is. Ruth, for her part, works “steadily from morning till now” (2:7) and carries home an ephah of barley — perhaps thirty pounds, many days' gleaning in one — and at the sight of it, and of the name Boaz, something long dead in

Naomi stirs: “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead... That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers” (2:20). The woman who came home empty has begun to count her fullnesses.

Chapter 3 belongs to Naomi’s revived faith and Ruth’s costly obedience, and chapter 4 to Boaz’s scrupulous integrity — and to understand them we need the two legal provisions on which the plot turns. First, redemption of land: “If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold” (Leviticus 25:25) — the *go’el*, the kinsman-redeemer, kept a family’s inheritance from vanishing into another’s hands. Second, levirate marriage: when a man died without a son, his brother was to marry the widow, “so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel” (Deuteronomy 25:5–6). Naomi, “seeking rest” for Ruth (3:1), sends her by night to the threshing floor to lay this double claim before Boaz: “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family” (3:9) — take under your wing, that is, the woman you blessed for taking refuge under the LORD’s wings; be the answer to your own prayer. It is a scene a lesser man could have exploited and a lesser storyteller ruined; instead Boaz’s first words are blessing and honor: “The LORD bless you, my daughter. This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: you have not run after the younger men... All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character” (3:10–11). He credits *her* with kindness in choosing *him* — taking no credit for the rescue he is about to perform — and then, rather than seize what he plainly desires, he discloses the inconvenient truth she does not know: “there is another who is more closely related than I” (3:12). His integrity extends even to his rival’s rights.

The gate scene of chapter 4 resolves it with wonderful shrewdness. Before ten elders, Boaz presents the nearer kinsman with the land alone — “I will redeem it,” the man says readily enough; land is an asset (4:4) — and then attaches the levirate

condition: “you also acquire Ruth the Moabite... in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property” (4:5). The kinsman withdraws — “I might endanger my own estate” (4:6); a son born to Ruth would carry Mahlon’s name and claim, not his — and the sandal changes hands. Note, in passing, that Boaz’s marriage to Ruth violates no command: the Law’s exclusion of Moabites addressed Moab’s gods and Moab’s hostility, and Ruth had renounced both; the woman Boaz marries is no longer a Moabitess in the covenantal sense but a convert who had bound herself to the LORD — exactly the foreigner Isaiah would later promise a place on God’s holy mountain, in “a house of prayer for all nations” (Isaiah 56:6–7). So the marriage is made; “the LORD enabled her to conceive” (4:13) — the book’s only other direct act of God besides the ending of the famine, providence bracketing the story with bread and a baby — and the women of Bethlehem, who once heard Naomi rename herself Bitter, now lay a grandson on her lap and rename her life: “Naomi has a son!” (4:17). The child fulfills every strand at once: he is Mahlon’s heir by levirate law, Naomi’s restoration, Elimelek’s land secured, Ruth’s reward, Boaz’s line — grace paying compound interest on one Moabite girl’s faithfulness. Emptiness has become fullness, famine harvest, bitterness blessing; and Ruth, whom the town blesses in the names of Rachel, Leah, and Tamar (4:11–12), is pronounced by the women “better to you than seven sons” (4:15) — from a Moabite widow to the highest praise Israel’s idiom could bestow.

And then the climax — for the climax of this book is not the wedding, nor even the child on Naomi’s lap, but five quiet verses of genealogy: “Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David” (4:21–22). David! The story we have just read is the prehistory of Israel’s greatest king — the answer, already germinating in Bethlehem’s fields, to the ache of “in those days Israel had no king.” And the genealogy does not stop at David. Matthew opens his Gospel by tracing the line onward from David to “Jesus who is called the Messiah,” and pauses — against every convention

of ancient genealogies — to name the women: Tamar; Rahab, whom we met at Jericho; “Ruth”; Bathsheba; Mary (Matthew 1:1–16; cf. Luke 3). The union of Boaz and Ruth leads not merely to a king but to the King of kings and Lord of lords. A story that might have remained a quaint domestic tale is elevated to world-hinging prominence by its place in the canon and its place in that lineage — a foreshadowing of the grace that would come through Christ to all of us who, like Ruth, “were foreigners to the covenants of the promise”: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ... you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household” (Ephesians 2:12–13, 19). And Boaz, the guardian-redeemer who paid the price to redeem a helpless widow who could bring him nothing but her trust and her need — who did for Ruth what she could never do for herself, gladly, at his own cost — is as clear a portrait of our Kinsman-Redeemer as the Old Testament affords. Christ became our near kinsman by taking our flesh, and redeemed us not with silver at a city gate but with His own blood (1 Peter 1:18–19).

What, finally, shall we take from this book? A child once summarized it in one word during family Bible study: “Ruth is about faithfulness” — Ruth faithful to Naomi, Boaz faithful to the Law, both faithful to the LORD. A five-year-old’s answer, and it is correct. But press one layer deeper and the book is about the God to whom they were faithful — about His providence, working through famines and harvests, meal times and lot-fallings (“as it turned out,” the narrator winks, “she was working in a field belonging to Boaz,” 2:3), without a single splitting sea; and about His sovereignty, “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:11). For consider: Ruth and Boaz almost certainly died without seeing the fruit of their union — never knew David, much less David’s greater Son born in their own Bethlehem. Their faithfulness was not rewarded with sight; it was woven, unseen, into a purpose beyond their imagining. So it will be

with us. “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion” (Philippians 1:6); “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28) — promises demonstrated, not merely asserted, by this story. Our competence and our worth come from God (2 Corinthians 3:5); apart from Him we can do nothing of enduring value (John 15:5). Therefore let us not be consumed with making our mark, nor let the anxiety of achievement cloud the enjoyment of God’s gift of the present moment. Whether our lives prove a forgotten blip on the eternal timeline or a hinge for one of God’s great works — Ruth had no idea she was the latter — is not ours to determine, and no ambition of ours can effect it. Let us instead believe fervently, love deeply, and hold our circumstances loosely: living, like Ruth in the barley rows, in the wonder of God’s grace for this day, trusting His providence with all the days we cannot see.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Elimelek’s move to Moab made economic sense and compounded spiritual loss — yet God brought Ruth out of it. How does this account hold together human folly and divine providence? Where in your own history has God grown grace out of a decision you now regret?
2. Naomi accused God bitterly — to His face, on the way back to His land and His people. What does her example (beside Job’s) teach about the difference between faithful complaint and faithless departure? What honest bitterness might you need to carry home to God rather than away from Him?
3. Ruth’s vow renounced every visible security for an invisible God, and Boaz kept the Law gladly when no one was watching. Which tests you more — the great irreversible commitment, or the small unenforced obedience? Give a concrete example of each from your life now.

4. Boaz blessed Ruth for taking refuge under the LORD's wings, then spread his own garment over her — becoming the answer to his own prayer. Whose need have you been praying about that God may intend you to answer? What would “spreading your garment” cost?
5. Ruth and Boaz never saw David, let alone Christ; their faithfulness bore its greatest fruit generations after their deaths. What are you being called to do faithfully now whose results you will likely never see? How does the genealogy of Ruth 4 change the way you measure a “significant” life?

Conclusion

The Book of Ruth ends with a name — David — and with that name, the long ache of the era of the judges finds its answer already in motion. While the nation spiraled through apostasy and atrocity, while Levites sold blessings and tribes devoured each other, God was quietly assembling a royal line in a barley field: a bitter widow brought home, a Moabite convert gleaning behind the harvesters, a righteous landowner keeping laws no one enforced. No walls fell in this book. No sun stood still. The only two acts Scripture directly attributes to God are bread given and a conception granted — and yet every “as it turned out” in the story turns out to be His hand. Providence, this little book insists, is not God’s absence but His ordinary presence: the same sovereignty that stopped the Jordan also arranges which field a foreign girl happens to choose on her first morning of work.

And so this volume closes where it began, with the faithfulness of God. Joshua showed us His promises kept in conquest — not one word failing. Judges showed us His grace persisting through collapse — a remnant reserved, deliverers raised, discipline that was always remedial. Ruth shows us His purposes advancing through obscurity — redemption enacted at a village gate, the Messiah’s line threaded through a Canaanite innkeeper of Jericho and a widow of Moab, grace gathering in the foreigner and the broken and making them ancestors of the King. Three books, one lesson learned three ways: the decisive question in every generation is never the strength of the enemy, the darkness of the age, or the smallness of the faithful. It is whether the LORD’s people will trust and obey Him — and behind even that, whether His grace will hold them. It will. “Not one of all the LORD’s good promises... failed; every one was fulfilled.”

The child on Naomi’s lap grew, and his grandson tended sheep in these same Bethlehem fields until a prophet came looking for him with a horn of oil. But the story of that prophet — the last judge, who would anoint Israel’s first kings — belongs to another book.

For now, let the women of Bethlehem have the final word of this one, spoken over Naomi and true over every reader whom the Redeemer has claimed: “Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer” (Ruth 4:14).

Appendix

Daily Bible Reading Plan

This is the same daily Bible reading plan we use at dailyqt.org, covering the entire Bible—Old and New Testaments alike—in three hundred sixty-five daily readings. It does not begin on January 1st, and neither must you; begin on whatever date suits you and simply follow the sequence from there. The sixteen readings that correspond to the chapters of this book—Joshua 1–4 through Ruth—fall a little under three months into the full sequence, but the complete year-long plan is reprinted here, as it is in every volume of this series, so that wherever you are in your reading you always have the whole plan close at hand. Check off each day's passage as you complete it, and feel no need to catch up if you fall behind by a day or a week. The goal was never a perfect record. It was a daily habit of opening God's Word, kept up faithfully enough, and long enough, that it becomes less a task to complete than simply the shape of an ordinary day.

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
January			
1/10	☐ Gen 1-3	1/11	☐ Gen 4-7
1/12	☐ Gen 8-11	1/13	☐ Gen 12-15
1/14	☐ Gen 16-18	1/15	☐ Gen 19-21
1/16	☐ Gen 22-24	1/17	☐ Gen 25-26
1/18	☐ Gen 27-29	1/19	☐ Gen 30-31
1/20	☐ Gen 32-34	1/21	☐ Gen 35-37
1/22	☐ Gen 38-40	1/23	☐ Gen 41-42
1/24	☐ Gen 43-45	1/25	☐ Gen 46-47
1/26	☐ Gen 48-50	1/27	☐ Ex 1-3
1/28	☐ Ex 4-6	1/29	☐ Ex 7-9
1/30	☐ Ex 10-12	1/31	☐ Ex 13-15
February			
2/1	☐ Ex 16-18	2/2	☐ Ex 19-21
2/3	☐ Ex 22-24	2/4	☐ Ex 25-27
2/5	☐ Ex 28-29	2/6	☐ Ex 30-32

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
2/7	☐ Ex 33-35	2/8	☐ Ex 36-38
2/9	☐ Ex 39-40	2/10	☐ Lev 1-4
2/11	☐ Lev 5-7	2/12	☐ Lev 8-10
2/13	☐ Lev 11-13	2/14	☐ Lev 14-15
2/15	☐ Lev 16-18	2/16	☐ Lev 19-21
2/17	☐ Lev 22-23	2/18	☐ Lev 24-25
2/19	☐ Lev 26-27	2/20	☐ Nu 1-2
2/21	☐ Nu 3-4	2/22	☐ Nu 5-6
2/23	☐ Nu 7	2/24	☐ Nu 8-10
2/25	☐ Nu 11-13	2/26	☐ Nu 14-15
2/27	☐ Nu 16-17	2/28	☐ Nu 18-20
March			
3/1	☐ Nu 21-22	3/2	☐ Nu 23-25
3/3	☐ Nu 26-27	3/4	☐ Nu 28-30
3/5	☐ Nu 31-32	3/6	☐ Nu 33-34
3/7	☐ Nu 35-36	3/8	☐ Dt 1-2
3/9	☐ Dt 3-4	3/10	☐ Dt 5-7
3/11	☐ Dt 8-10	3/12	☐ Dt 11-13
3/13	☐ Dt 14-16	3/14	☐ Dt 17-20
3/15	☐ Dt 21-23	3/16	☐ Dt 24-27
3/17	☐ Dt 28-29	3/18	☐ Dt 30-31
3/19	☐ Dt 32-34	3/20	☐ Jos 1-4
3/21	☐ Jos 5-8	3/22	☐ Jos 9-11
3/23	☐ Jos 12-15	3/24	☐ Jos 16-18
3/25	☐ Jos 19-21	3/26	☐ Jos 22-24
3/27	☐ Jdg 1-2	3/28	☐ Jdg 3-5
3/29	☐ Jdg 6-7	3/30	☐ Jdg 8-9
3/31	☐ Jdg 10-12		
April			
4/1	☐ Jdg 13-15	4/2	☐ Jdg 16-18
4/3	☐ Jdg 19-21	4/4	☐ Ruth
4/5	☐ 1 Sa 1-3	4/6	☐ 1 Sa 4-8
4/7	☐ 1 Sa 9-12	4/8	☐ 1 Sa 13-14
4/9	☐ 1 Sa 15-17	4/10	☐ 1 Sa 18-20
4/11	☐ 1 Sa 21-24	4/12	☐ 1 Sa 25-27
4/13	☐ 1 Sa 28-31	4/14	☐ 2 Sa 1-3
4/15	☐ 2 Sa 4-7	4/16	☐ 2 Sa 8-12
4/17	☐ 2 Sa 13-15	4/18	☐ 2 Sa 16-18
4/19	☐ 2 Sa 19-21	4/20	☐ 2 Sa 22-24
4/21	☐ 1 Ki 1-2	4/22	☐ 1 Ki 3-5
4/23	☐ 1 Ki 6-7	4/24	☐ 1 Ki 8-9
4/25	☐ 1 Ki 10-11	4/26	☐ 1 Ki 12-14

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
4/27	☐ 1 Ki 15-17	4/28	☐ 1 Ki 18-20
4/29	☐ 1 Ki 21-22	4/30	☐ 2 Ki 1-3
May			
5/1	☐ 2 Ki 4-5	5/2	☐ 2 Ki 6-8
5/3	☐ 2 Ki 9-11	5/4	☐ 2 Ki 12-14
5/5	☐ 2 Ki 15-17	5/6	☐ 2 Ki 18-19
5/7	☐ 2 Ki 20-22	5/8	☐ 2 Ki 23-25
5/9	☐ 1 Ch 1-2	5/10	☐ 1 Ch 3-5
5/11	☐ 1 Ch 6	5/12	☐ 1 Ch 7-8
5/13	☐ 1 Ch 9-11	5/14	☐ 1 Ch 12-14
5/15	☐ 1 Ch 15-17	5/16	☐ 1 Ch 18-21
5/17	☐ 1 Ch 22-24	5/18	☐ 1 Ch 25-27
5/19	☐ 1 Ch 28-2 Ch 1	5/20	☐ 2 Ch 2-5
5/21	☐ 2 Ch 6-8	5/22	☐ 2 Ch 9-12
5/23	☐ 2 Ch 13-17	5/24	☐ 2 Ch 18-20
5/25	☐ 2 Ch 21-24	5/26	☐ 2 Ch 25-27
5/27	☐ 2 Ch 28-31	5/28	☐ 2 Ch 32-34
5/29	☐ 2 Ch 35-36	5/30	☐ Ezr 1-3
5/31	☐ Ezr 4-7		
June			
6/1	☐ Ezr 8-10	6/2	☐ Neh 1-3
6/3	☐ Neh 4-6	6/4	☐ Neh 7
6/5	☐ Neh 8-9	6/6	☐ Neh 10-11
6/7	☐ Neh 12-13	6/8	☐ Esth 1-5
6/9	☐ Esth 6-10	6/10	☐ Job 1-4
6/11	☐ Job 5-7	6/12	☐ Job 8-10
6/13	☐ Job 11-13	6/14	☐ Job 14-16
6/15	☐ Job 17-20	6/16	☐ Job 21-23
6/17	☐ Job 24-28	6/18	☐ Job 29-31
6/19	☐ Job 32-34	6/20	☐ Job 35-37
6/21	☐ Job 38-39	6/22	☐ Job 40-42
6/23	☐ Ps 1-8	6/24	☐ Ps 9-16
6/25	☐ Ps 17-20	6/26	☐ Ps 21-25
6/27	☐ Ps 26-31	6/28	☐ Ps 32-35
6/29	☐ Ps 36-39	6/30	☐ Ps 40-45
July			
7/1	☐ Ps 46-50	7/2	☐ Ps 51-57
7/3	☐ Ps 58-65	7/4	☐ Ps 66-69
7/5	☐ Ps 70-73	7/6	☐ Ps 74-77
7/7	☐ Ps 78-79	7/8	☐ Ps 80-85
7/9	☐ Ps 86-89	7/10	☐ Ps 90-95
7/11	☐ Ps 96-102	7/12	☐ Ps 103-105

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
7/13	☐ Ps 106-107	7/14	☐ Ps 108-114
7/15	☐ Ps 115-118	7/16	☐ Ps 119:1-88
7/17	☐ Ps 119:89-176	7/18	☐ Ps 120-132
7/19	☐ Ps 133-139	7/20	☐ Ps 140-145
7/21	☐ Ps 146-150	7/22	☐ Prov 1-3
7/23	☐ Prov 4-6	7/24	☐ Prov 7-9
7/25	☐ Prov 10-12	7/26	☐ Prov 13-15
7/27	☐ Prov 16-18	7/28	☐ Prov 19-21
7/29	☐ Prov 22-23	7/30	☐ Prov 24-26
7/31	☐ Prov 27-29		
August			
8/1	☐ Prov 30-31	8/2	☐ Ecc 1-4
8/3	☐ Ecc 5-8	8/4	☐ Ecc 9-12
8/5	☐ Ss 1-8	8/6	☐ Isa 1-4
8/7	☐ Isa 5-8	8/8	☐ Isa 9-12
8/9	☐ Isa 13-17	8/10	☐ Isa 18-22
8/11	☐ Isa 23-27	8/12	☐ Isa 28-30
8/13	☐ Isa 31-35	8/14	☐ Isa 36-41
8/15	☐ Isa 42-44	8/16	☐ Isa 45-48
8/17	☐ Isa 49-53	8/18	☐ Isa 54-58
8/19	☐ Isa 59-63	8/20	☐ Isa 64-66
8/21	☐ Jer 1-3	8/22	☐ Jer 4-6
8/23	☐ Jer 7-9	8/24	☐ Jer 10-13
8/25	☐ Jer 14-17	8/26	☐ Jer 18-22
8/27	☐ Jer 23-25	8/28	☐ Jer 26-29
8/29	☐ Jer 30-31	8/30	☐ Jer 32-34
8/31	☐ Jer 35-37		
September			
9/1	☐ Jer 38-41	9/2	☐ Jer 42-45
9/3	☐ Jer 46-48	9/4	☐ Jer 49-50
9/5	☐ Jer 51-52	9/6	☐ Lam 1:1-3:36
9/7	☐ Lam 3:37-5:22	9/8	☐ Eze 1-4
9/9	☐ Eze 5-8	9/10	☐ Eze 9-12
9/11	☐ Eze 13-15	9/12	☐ Eze 16-17
9/13	☐ Eze 18-20	9/14	☐ Eze 21-22
9/15	☐ Eze 23-24	9/16	☐ Eze 25-27
9/17	☐ Eze 28-30	9/18	☐ Eze 31-33
9/19	☐ Eze 34-36	9/20	☐ Eze 37-39
9/21	☐ Eze 40-42	9/22	☐ Eze 43-45
9/23	☐ Eze 46-48	9/24	☐ Dan 1-3
9/25	☐ Dan 4-6	9/26	☐ Dan 7-9

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
9/27	☐ Dan 10-12	9/28	☐ Hos 1-7
9/29	☐ Hos 8-14	9/30	☐ Joel
October			
10/1	☐ Amos 1-5	10/2	☐ Amos 6-9
10/3	☐ Ob-Jonah	10/4	☐ Micah
10/5	☐ Nahum	10/6	☐ Hab-Zeph
10/7	☐ Haggai 1-2	10/8	☐ Zech 1-7
10/9	☐ Zech 8-14	10/10	☐ Mal 1-4
10/11	☐ Mat 1-4	10/12	☐ Mat 5-6
10/13	☐ Mat 7-8	10/14	☐ Mat 9-10
10/15	☐ Mat 11-12	10/16	☐ Mat 13-14
10/17	☐ Mat 15-17	10/18	☐ Mat 18-19
10/19	☐ Mat 20-21	10/20	☐ Mat 22-23
10/21	☐ Mat 24-25	10/22	☐ Mat 26
10/23	☐ Mat 27-28	10/24	☐ Mark 1-3
10/25	☐ Mark 4-5	10/26	☐ Mark 6-7
10/27	☐ Mark 8-9	10/28	☐ Mark 10-11
10/29	☐ Mark 12-13	10/30	☐ Mark 14
10/31	☐ Mark 15-16		
November			
11/1	☐ Luke 1	11/2	☐ Luke 2-3
11/3	☐ Luke 4-5	11/4	☐ Luke 6-7
11/5	☐ Luke 8-9	11/6	☐ Luke 10-11
11/7	☐ Luke 12-13	11/8	☐ Luke 14-16
11/9	☐ Luke 17-18	11/10	☐ Luke 19-20
11/11	☐ Luke 21-22	11/12	☐ Luke 23-24
11/13	☐ John 1-2	11/14	☐ John 3-4
11/15	☐ John 5-6	11/16	☐ John 7-8
11/17	☐ John 9-10	11/18	☐ John 11-12
11/19	☐ John 13-15	11/20	☐ John 16-18
11/21	☐ John 19-21	11/22	☐ Acts 1-3
11/23	☐ Acts 4-6	11/24	☐ Acts 7-8
11/25	☐ Acts 9-10	11/26	☐ Acts 11-13
11/27	☐ Acts 14-15	11/28	☐ Acts 16-17
11/29	☐ Acts 18-20	11/30	☐ Acts 21-23
December			
12/1	☐ Acts 24-26	12/2	☐ Acts 27-28
12/3	☐ Rom 1-3	12/4	☐ Rom 4-7
12/5	☐ Rom 8-10	12/6	☐ Rom 11-13
12/7	☐ Rom 14-16	12/8	☐ 1 Cor 1-4
12/9	☐ 1 Cor 5-8	12/10	☐ 1 Cor 9-11
12/11	☐ 1 Cor 12-14	12/12	☐ 1 Cor 15-16

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
12/13	☐ 2 Cor 1-4	12/14	☐ 2 Cor 5-9
12/15	☐ 2 Cor 10-13	12/16	☐ Gal 1-3
12/17	☐ Gal 4-6	12/18	☐ Eph 1-3
12/19	☐ Eph 4-6	12/20	☐ Phi 1-4
12/21	☐ Col 1-4	12/22	☐ 1 Thess 1-5
12/23	☐ 2 Thess 1-3	12/24	☐ 1 Tim 1-6
12/25	☐ 2 Tim 1-4	12/26	☐ Titus-Phm
12/27	☐ Heb 1-6	12/28	☐ Heb 7-10
12/29	☐ Heb 11-13	12/30	☐ James
12/31	☐ 1 Pe		
January			
1/1	☐ 2 Pe	1/2	☐ 1 John
1/3	☐ 2 John-Jude	1/4	☐ Rev 1-3
1/5	☐ Rev 4-8	1/6	☐ Rev 9-12
1/7	☐ Rev 13-16	1/8	☐ Rev 17-19
1/9	☐ Rev 20-22		

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