WHY READ AND STUDY JOSHUA, JUDGES, AND RUTH?

Joshua attacks the fortress city of Jericho, whose imposing walls tower above him. Barak brings his army down from the safety of the mountains to face Sisera’s iron chariots on the plains. Gideon leads a band of 300 men against a horde of Midianites that’s “as thick as locusts.” Ruth leaves the security of her family and nation to help Naomi, not knowing how they’re going to survive. The books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth are filled with stories of faith and courage like these that provide us with great hope and inspiration.

But these books also tell some very troubling stories. Individuals suffer violence and atrocities; whole populations are destroyed. And so Joshua, Judges, and Ruth also pose deep questions about suffering in the world and how God relates to it. The stories of faith and courage they tell don’t take place in unreal settings, removed from what life is really like. Rather, they show how, in the face of violence, suffering, and uncertainty, people whose struggles are as real as ours meet the challenges of their day with courage and trust in God.

If you want to find inspiration and hope for your own challenges, and you’re willing to face the issues of suffering and violence head-on, get together with some friends to read and discuss these books together. The next story of faith and courage could be your own.
UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

JOSHUA
JUDGES
RUTH
Also available in the
Understanding the Books of the Bible series:

John
Genesis
Wisdom: Proverbs/Ecclesiastes/James
Biblical Apocalypses: Daniel/Revelation
Thessalonians/Corinthians/Galatians/Romans
Lyric Poetry: Psalms/Song of Songs/Lamentations—July 2011

Future releases:
Exodus/Leviticus/Numbers
New Covenants: Deuteronomy/Hebrews
Samuel–Kings

Amos/Hosea/Micah/Isaiah
Zephaniah/Nahum/Habakkuk/Jeremiah/Obadiah
Ezekiel/Haggai/Zechariah/Jonah/Joel/Malachi

Job
Chronicles/Ezra/Nehemiah/Esther

Matthew
Mark
Colossians/Ephesians/Philemon/Philippians/Timothy/Titus
Peter/Jude/John

JOSHUA
JUDGES
RUTH

Christopher R. Smith
HOW THESE STUDY GUIDES ARE DIFFERENT

Did you know you could read and study the Bible without using any chapters or verses? The books of the Bible are real “books.” They’re meant to be experienced the same way other books are: as exciting, interesting works that keep you turning pages right to the end and then make you want to go back and savor each part. The Understanding the Books of the Bible series of study guides will help you do that with the Bible.

While you can use these guides with any version or translation, they’re especially designed to be used with *The Books of The Bible*, an edition of the Scriptures from Biblica that takes out the chapter and verse numbers and presents the biblical books in their natural form. Here’s what people are saying about reading the Bible this way:

I love it. I find myself understanding Scripture in a new way, with a fresh lens, and I feel spiritually refreshed as a result. I learn much more through stories being told, and with this new format, I feel the truth of the story come alive for me.

Reading Scripture this way flows beautifully. I don’t miss the chapter and verse numbers. I like them gone. They got in the way.
I’ve been a reader of the Bible all of my life. But after reading just a few pages without chapters and verses, I was amazed at what I’d been missing all these years.

For more information about The Books of The Bible or to obtain a low-cost copy, visit http://www.thebooksofthebible.info. Premium editions of this Bible are scheduled for future release from Zondervan at your favorite Christian retailer.

For people who are used to chapters and verses, reading and studying the Bible without them may take a little getting used to. It’s like when you get a new cell phone or upgrade the operating system on your computer. You have to unlearn some old ways of doing things and learn some new ways. But it’s not too long until you catch on to how the new system works and you find you can do a lot of things you couldn’t do before.

Here are some of the ways you and your group will have a better experience of the Scriptures by using these study guides.

**YOU’LL FOLLOW THE NATURAL FLOW OF BIBLICAL BOOKS**

This guide will take you through the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth following their natural flow. (The way Joshua and Judges unfold is illustrated in the outlines on pages 10 and 56.) You won’t go chapter-by-chapter through these books, because chapter divisions in the Bible often come at the wrong places and break up the flow. Did you know that the chapter divisions used in most modern Bibles were added more than a thousand years after the biblical books were written? And that the verse numbers were added more than three centuries after that? If you grew up with the chapter-and-verse system, it may feel like part of the inspired Word of God. But it’s not. Those little numbers aren’t holy, and when you read and study the Bible without them, you’ll hear its message more clearly than ever before.

To help you get a feel for where you are in each book’s natural flow, in Joshua and Judges the sessions will be headed by a visual cue, like this:

Book of Joshua > Conquest of Canaan > Central Campaign > Battle of Jericho

**YOU’LL UNDERSTAND WHOLE BOOKS**

Imagine going to a friend’s house to watch a movie you’ve never seen before. After only a couple of scenes, your friend stops the film and says, “So, tell me what you think of it so far.” When you give your best shot at a reply, based on the little you’ve seen, your friend says, “You know, there’s a scene in another movie that always makes me think of this one.” He switches to a different movie and before you know it, you’re watching a scene from the middle of another film.

Who would ever try to watch a movie this way? Yet many study guides take this approach to the Bible. They have you read a few paragraphs from one book, then jump to a passage in another book. The Understanding the Books of the Bible series doesn’t do that. Instead, these study guides focus on understanding the message and meaning of one book at a time. Your group will read through Joshua, Judges, and Ruth in their entirety, not just selected chapters or verses.

Sessions 1, 11, and 23 are overviews that will let you experience each of these books as a whole, to prepare you for considering their individual sections. Reading through an entire book at once will be like viewing a whole movie before zooming in on one scene. Groups that read books of the Bible aloud together have a great experience doing this. (If you’ve never done it before, give it a try—you’ll be surprised at how well it flows and how fast the time passes.)

For these overview sessions, the discussion will be briefer and designed to allow people to share their overall impressions. If you’re using The Books of The Bible, you may find it helpful to read the book introductions in that edition aloud before reading each book itself.

As a group leader, you should take a moment after each of these readings to allow people to ask about any words or phrases that weren’t clear and to let the group work to understand them together.
YOU’LL DECIDE FOR YOURSELVES WHAT TO DISCUSS

In each session of this study guide there are many options for discussion. While each session could be completed by a group in about an hour and a half, any one of the questions could lead to an involved conversation. There’s no need to cut the conversation short to try to “get through it all.” As a group leader, you can read through all the questions ahead of time and decide which one(s) to begin with, and what order to take them up in. If you do get into an involved discussion of one question, you can leave out some of the others, or you can extend the study over more than one meeting if you do want to cover all of them.

TOGETHER, YOU’LL TELL THE STORY

The suggestions for reading will often invite the group to dramatize the Scriptures by reading them out loud like a play. The discussion options may invite group members to retell the biblical story from fresh perspectives, for example, from the point of view of one of the characters. This kind of telling and retelling is a spiritual discipline, similar to Bible memorization, that allows people to personalize the Scriptures and take them to heart. This discipline is very timely in a culture that increasingly appreciates the value and authority of story.

If you’re using The Books of The Bible, you’ll find that the natural sections it marks off by white space match up with the sections of the reading. If you’re using another edition of the Bible, you’ll be able to identify these sections easily because their openings and closings will be clearly described.

EVERYBODY WILL PARTICIPATE

There’s plenty of opportunity for everyone to participate, by reading the Scriptures (often taking the part of one of the characters), or by introducing the study or the discussion questions to the group. Group leaders can involve quiet people naturally by giving them these opportunities. And everyone will feel they can respond, because the questions aren’t looking for “right answers.” Instead, they invite people to pursue deeper understanding. In many cases the group will work together on a response.

YOU’LL ALL SHARE DEEPLY

The discussion questions will invite you to share deeply about your ideas and experiences. The answers to these questions can’t be found by just “looking them up.” They require reflection on the meaning of each story, in the wider context of the book it belongs to, in light of your personal experience. These aren’t the kinds of abstract, academic questions that make the discussion feel like a test. Instead, they’ll connect the Bible passage to your life in practical, personal, relational ways.

To create a climate of trust where this kind of deep sharing is encouraged, here are a couple of ground rules that your group should agree to at its first meeting:

Confidentiality. Group members agree to keep what is shared in the group strictly confidential. “What’s said in the group stays in the group.”

Respect. Group members will treat other members with respect at all times, even when disagreeing over ideas.

HOW TO LEAD GROUP STUDIES USING THIS GUIDE

Each session has three basic parts:

Introduction to the Study

Have a member of your group read the introduction to the session out loud to everyone. Then give group members the chance to ask questions about the introduction and offer their own thoughts and examples.
Reading from Joshua, Judges, and Ruth

Read the selection out loud together. The study guide will offer suggestions for various ways you can do this for each session. For example, sometimes you will assign different characters in the story to different readers, and sometimes different people will read different episodes. (In some sessions, reading and discussion will be combined.)

Discussion Questions

Most questions are introduced with some observations. These may give some background to the history and culture of the ancient world or explain where you are in the flow of the book. After these observations there are suggested discussion questions. Many of them have multiple parts that are really just different ways of getting at an issue.

You don’t have to discuss the questions in the order they appear in the study guide. You can choose to spend your time exploring just one or two questions and not do the others. Or you can have a shorter discussion of each question so that you do cover all of them. As the group leader, before the meeting you should read the questions and the observations that introduce them and decide which ones you want to emphasize.

When you get to a given question, have someone read aloud the observations and the question. As you answer the question, interact with the observations (you can agree or disagree with them) in light of your reading from the Bible. Use only part of the question to get at the issue from one angle, or use all of the parts, as you choose.

TIPS FOR HOME GROUPS, SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES, COMMUNITY BIBLE EXPERIENCES, AND INDIVIDUAL USE

If you’re using this guide in a home group, you may want to begin each meeting (or at least some meetings) by having dinner together. You may also want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

If you’re using this guide in a Sunday school class, you may want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

This study guide can also be used in connection with a community Bible experience. If you’re using it in this way:

- Encourage people to read each session’s Scripture passage by themselves early in the week (except for sessions 1, 11, and 23, when the whole church will gather to hear Joshua, Judges, and Ruth read out loud).
- Do each session in midweek small groups.
- Invite people to write/create some response to each small-group session that could be shared in worship that weekend. These might involve poetry, journal or blog entries, artwork, dramas, videos, and so on. Some of these may be created in response to specific questions in this guide that invite and encourage artistic expression.
- During the weekend worship services, let people share these responses, and have preaching on the topic of the session that was studied that week. Speakers can gather up comments they’ve heard from people and draw on their own reflections to sum up the church’s experience of that session.

This guide can also be used for individual study. You can write out your responses to the questions in a notebook or journal. (However, we really encourage reading and studying the Bible in community!)

Note: Anytime you see italicized words in Scripture quotations in this book, the italics have been added for emphasis.
JOSHUA
OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Conquest of Canaan

Session #  | Preparations
--- | ---
2 | Confirming Support of Transjordan Tribes
   | Spying Out Jericho
3 | Crossing the Jordan
   | Circumcision and Celebration of Passover

Central Campaign

4 | Battle of Jericho
5 | Battle of Ai

Interlude

6 | Covenant Ceremony at Mount Ebal

Southern Campaign

6 | Battle of Gibeon
7 | Battles of Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir

Northern Campaign

7 | Battle of Merom

“Then the land had rest from war.”

Division of Canaan

8 | Summary of Kings Defeated
   | Transjordan Tribes
      | Reuben, Gad, Manasseh (east)
   | Major Tribes
      | Judah, Ephraim, Manasseh (west)
   | Remaining Seven Tribes
      | Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, Dan

Concluding Episodes

9 | Dismissal of Transjordan Tribes
10 | Covenant Renewal at Shechem

THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

CONQUEST OF CANAAN

Central Campaign

Southern Campaign

Northern Campaign
EXPERIENCING THE BOOK OF JOSHUA
AS A WHOLE

Book of Joshua (Overview)

INTRODUCTION

The book of Joshua is part of a long story that makes up the first quarter of the Bible. This story tells how God chose to reach out to the whole world through one family, the descendants of a man named Abraham. The story begins in the book of Genesis and continues through the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. By the time the book of Joshua begins, Abraham’s descendants have grown into the nation of Israel, made up of twelve large tribes, each descended from one of Abraham’s great-grandsons. God, through the leadership of Moses, has delivered the nation from slavery in Egypt. He’s made a covenant (sacred agreement) with them to be their God, given them his laws to follow, and brought them through the desert to the Jordan River, the eastern boundary of the land of Canaan.

God promised Abraham that his descendants would live in this land. The Israelites have already defeated two kings whose territory was east of the Jordan. The tribes of Reuben and Gad and part of Manasseh have settled there. (This was land the Israelites weren’t expecting to occupy. They only attacked and defeated the kings there when they refused an offer of peace.) Now the Israelites must cross the river, defeat the people living to the west, and take possession of the land of Canaan itself.
At this critical moment, Moses, their nation-builder, dies. Leadership of Israel passes into the largely untested hands of a man named Joshua. Will he be able to guide the nation as it faces this great challenge? The book of Joshua tells what happens next. In this session you’ll have the opportunity to experience this book as a whole and appreciate the grand sweep of its narrative.

READING

As a group, take turns reading the book of Joshua out loud together. This should take about ninety minutes. It’s on pages 261–89 in The Books of The Bible. (If you’re using another edition of the Scriptures, you can find Joshua in the Table of Contents.)

When it’s your turn to read, think of yourself as telling the story to the rest of the group. Let the next person take their turn whenever you feel you’ve come to a natural break. You can follow the breaks that are marked by white space in The Books of The Bible, but if you wish, you can read only part of a longer passage or read several short passages together. (If you prefer not to read aloud, it’s fine to pass when your turn comes.) As you go through the book, try to recognize what its major themes are and listen for how they’re being developed.

As you read, you can follow how the overall story is unfolding by looking at the outline on page 10. Note that the book first describes three major campaigns that the Israelites fought to conquer the land of Canaan. These are shown on the map on page 11. (Locations on this map will appear in bold when they’re mentioned in sessions 2 through 7.) Then, exactly halfway through, with the statement “Then the land had rest from war,” the book makes a transition to describe how Canaan was divided up among the twelve tribes. The map on page 41 shows these territorial divisions.

Readers of the book of Joshua typically encounter two main difficulties. One is that the second half of the book is often more of a map than a story. Many interesting episodes are interspersed among the accounts of the tribes’ allotments, but much of this part of Joshua consists of descriptions of boundary lines and lists of cities. When you get to the book of Judges, you’ll find that there’s a significance to where each tribe lived, so this is actually valuable material. To help the group appreciate this material here in Joshua, when a reader comes to a boundary description, they should give everyone the chance to find the tribe in question on the map on page 41 so they can trace the boundary as they listen. They can then underline the tribe’s name, put a check next to it, shade in the territory, or in some other way indicate the “possession” of this area, so that by the end of the book your group members, like the Israelites, will have seen the whole land occupied. And when readers get to a long list of hard-to-pronounce city names, they can, if they wish, just say, “The southernmost towns of the tribe of Judah were as listed here,” and not read all the names.

The second major difficulty that readers have with the book of Joshua is that it describes how the Israelites invaded a place where other people were living, slaughtered them all, and seized their land. Does God really condone, even command, genocide like this? This aspect of the book of Joshua creates one of the greatest difficulties in the entire Bible for thoughtful, compassionate followers of Jesus. We will reflect on it in several sessions. As you read through Joshua, it’s all right to be horrified and angered by these depictions of slaughter. You don’t have to think of them as appropriate and acceptable because they’re described as something God commanded. If you finish listening to the book with a huge question in your heart and mind about this, you’re like most other readers. We’ll work together in later sessions to try to understand what place these episodes might have in the big story of God reaching out to humanity through the people of Israel.

DISCUSSION

Was this the first time you’d read a whole book of the Bible out loud in a group? If so, what was the experience like, compared to other ways you may have read the Bible by yourself or with others? If you have read other whole books aloud with people, tell the group which books and in what settings. How was this experience like, and unlike, those experiences?
What things struck you most as you listened to the book of Joshua? What were your strongest impressions? What questions do you have that you’ll want to discuss in the sessions ahead? (Write these down so you can bring them up when you get to the part of the book that raised them.)

What would you say are the major themes or “big ideas” that the book of Joshua develops?

A college student who was required to read Joshua for one of his courses told a friend it was about “some crazy guy who went around killing everybody because he thought God was telling him to.” If you don’t agree that this is exactly what the book is about, what would you say to this student in response? (Base your answer on this experience of listening to the book.)

JOSHUA SUCCEEDS MOSES AND SENDS SPIES INTO CANAAN

INTRODUCTION

The book of Joshua opens with the Israelites at Shittim (pronounced “shee-teem”) on the eastern edge of the Jordan River basin. They need to get across this river to begin their conquest of the land of Canaan. But before they can do this, Joshua, their new leader, needs to meet two significant challenges.

Moses allowed the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh to settle on the east side of the Jordan. In exchange, these tribes agreed to help the others conquer the land west of the Jordan. But Moses is now dead. Joshua needs to get these eastern tribes to honor this agreement.

Joshua’s second immediate challenge is the fortress city of Jericho, directly across the Jordan. It controls the fords of the river, that is, the shallow places where crossing is possible. As long as hostile forces hold this city, the Israelite armies can’t safely operate west of the river, since their escape route back across the Jordan could easily be cut off. Joshua needs some way to get reliable intelligence about the city’s fortifications and defenders so he can size up the possibilities for an attack.
READING

Have someone read God’s words of encouragement to Joshua, beginning at the start of the book and ending with the promise, “the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” (Note: whenever the word LORD is written in large and small capital letters, it’s a translation of Yahweh, the name God used when making his covenant with Israel.)

Have two other people read Joshua’s orders to the Israelite officers and his exchange with the tribes that settled east of the Jordan. One person can read Joshua’s part (along with the brief narrative introductions) and the other can take the part of “the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh.”

Then read, out loud like a play, the episode where Joshua sends spies into Canaan, ending where the spies return and make their report. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Joshua
- The king of Jericho’s informant
- The king of Jericho
- Rahab
- The spies

(Whenever you read stories like a play in this guide, you can leave out cues like “he said,” “she said,” etc. When one of the parts is a group of people, one individual can serve as a spokesperson for that group.)

DISCUSSION

1. To encourage Joshua as he assumes the leadership of Israel, God promises to be with him personally, just as he was with Moses, and enable him to accomplish the great task before him. For his part, Joshua needs to make a careful and continual study of God’s law, so he’ll understand God’s expectations and lead the nation according to the right principles. Joshua also needs to “step up” to the challenge he’s facing: God tells him, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

- What’s the greatest challenge you’re facing in your own life right now? Which of the following do you most need to do to face this challenge?
  a. Be aware of God’s personal presence with you
  b. Recognize where God is working to help you so you can cooperate with him
  c. Meditate on the Scriptures to understand principles that can guide you
  d. “Step up”—bravely face the challenge and not give in to fear or discouragement

- What would a real “stretch” be for you? What challenge can you presently envision that would make full use of your knowledge and abilities and be greatly fulfilling, but would be impossible without God? Can you pray, with godly ambition, for God to give you a challenge like this, if he’ll help you meet it?

2. Joshua has very little leverage to get the Transjordan tribes (that is, the ones living east of the river) to honor their agreement with Moses. If they decide to keep their armies at home, there’s not much he can do about it, short of starting a civil war, which would only make the Israelites even more vulnerable to the nations around them. Nevertheless, Joshua summons these tribes and insists they keep the agreement. In response, they pledge their total cooperation: “as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you.”

- The book doesn’t tell us exactly why the Transjordan tribes honored their agreement when no one could have forced them to. But what do you think? Were they persuaded by something Joshua said? (If so, what?) Was there something about Joshua’s approach that gave them confidence in his leadership? Did they feel a debt of honor to God, for “giving them rest” in a land of their own? Or was there some other reason?
The king of Jericho has his own intelligence network, and it discovers
the spies on their first day in his city. Without Rahab’s cooperation and
assistance, they wouldn’t make it out alive. But she hides them, gets them
out of Jericho, and tells them how to get safely back across the Jordan. She
does all this because she’s come to believe, after hearing what the LORD has
already done for the Israelites, that he’s “God in heaven above and on the
earth below.” In exchange for her loyalty, the Israelites promise to spare her
and her family.

The book of Hebrews in the New Testament describes Rahab as one of
the people who showed great faith in God over the course of Israel’s history.
(One way she demonstrated this faith was by putting the scarlet cord in her
window immediately, even though she didn’t have to put it there until the
Israelite armies actually arrived. She was sure they were coming!) Rahab later
married an Israelite man and became the mother of Boaz, who we’ll meet in
the book of Ruth. Another of her descendants was Jesus Christ himself. But
Rahab was also a prostitute. (In fact, her cover story that helped the spies
escape was basically that she thought they were just “customers” who hadn’t
mentioned where they were from.)

How could Rahab have been used so strategically by God
when she was a prostitute? Doesn’t God expect people to “clean
house” before he’ll work through them? How can the writers of
the Bible offer her story as an inspiration and example to later
generations, without saying that her profession was wrong or that
she gave it up?

**INTRODUCTION**

The Israelites must now cross the Jordan River to get into Canaan. Even
though the Jordan is shallow in many places, it’s still difficult to cross at the
best of times, because the river bed is surrounded by thick vegetation and
the river basin is bordered by rocky heights. But now the river is at “flood
stage,” overflowing its banks. Under these conditions, the river seems to be an
impenetrable barrier. But God tells Joshua to follow an audacious plan . . .

**READING**

Have four people read the story of the Israelites crossing the Jordan, tak-
ing these parts:
- Narrator
- The officers
- Joshua
- The LORD
Include in your reading the accounts of how, after they crossed the river, the Israelites were circumcised, celebrated the Passover, and began to eat the produce of Canaan.

Note: the “ark of the covenant,” a large wooden box carried on poles, was a sacred object that represented the Lord’s presence with the people of Israel.

**DISCUSSION**

1. Drying up the Jordan River was a remarkable demonstration of God’s power. The point wasn’t just to make the Israelites’ crossing swift and efficient so they wouldn’t be vulnerable to counter-attack. This was a “sign,” with some special purposes:
   - To authenticate Joshua’s leadership: “so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.”
   - To assure the Israelites that God was present with them and would give them victory: “This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will drive out [your enemies] before you.”
   - To show the surrounding nations that Israel’s God was the true God: “so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful.”

   ➤ Have you experienced an extraordinary work of God in your life? What would you say was the purpose or special significance of the extraordinary thing God did for you?

2. Joshua says, “The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea.” But there was one significant difference. God parted the waters of the Red Sea and then told the Israelites to march in. But at the Jordan River, he told them to march in first, and that he’d dry up the waters as soon as they “set foot” in them.

   ➤ How can you tell the difference between:
   - a time when you need to wait for the circumstances to open up in order to be sure of God’s guidance, and
   - a time when God wants you to step out in faith despite the circumstances, and have confidence that he’ll change them as you do?

3. Twelve stones are taken out of the river and set up on the shore as a “memorial,” so that future generations will ask about them and hear the story of what God has done. Joshua also takes advantage of the river being dry to set up 12 stones right where the priests are standing with the ark. (Note the NIV’s alternative translation, “Joshua also set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan.” This is in the endnotes in *The Books of The Bible.* The stones on shore would make people ask, “What are these here for?” The stones in the river would make them ask, “How’d anybody do that?” People would not just hear the story of what God had done, they’d see evidence of his power.

   ➤ What objects, practices, poems, songs, etc. can become “memorials” for you, to remind you of God’s work in your own life? (For example, a souvenir from a trip could help you recall how you encountered God in a special way in another place. A song that gave you hope in a difficult time could remind you of how God sustained you. A holiday celebration you learned from friends might remind you of their godly impact on your life.)
SESSION 4

THE LORD TOPPLES THE WALLS OF JERICHO, AND THE ISRAELITES CAPTURE THE CITY

INTRODUCTION

The Israelites’ conquest of Canaan begins with an attack on the strategically located fortress city of Jericho. This is one of many royal cities in the land. All of these cities are ruled by their own kings. They’re centrally organized and have trained armies. The three campaigns that Joshua leads against the central, southern, and northern parts of Canaan (see the map on page 11) will be directed specifically against these royal cities. They represent a powerful threat to the Israelites that must be eliminated by a united assault before the tribes can each settle in their own parts of the land.

READING

Have three people read the story of the battle of Jericho out loud like a play, beginning when Joshua meets the “commander of the army of the Lord” just outside the city, and ending where the story says that after this victory “his fame spread throughout the land.” Have the readers take these parts:

- Narrator
- Joshua
- Commander of the Lord’s army

DISCUSSION

1 We don’t need to try to figure out exactly how the walls of Jericho fell flat when the priests blew their trumpets and the Israelites shouted. This was a miracle, something beyond natural explanation that God did. The important thing is to understand why God used supernatural means on this occasion, rather than working through natural means. God tells Joshua he’s doing this to show that he’s the one who will actually be defeating the Canaanites. In response, the Israelites put the ark of the covenant in the middle of their army, to express their trust in God’s presence and power to give them victory.

Is there a “wall” in your life that you just can’t get through? Pray, silently or with one or two others in your group, and ask God to take down this wall for you, as you trust in him. (Don’t be discouraged or grow impatient if you have to “circle the city” a few times before you experience God’s deliverance. God will be at work in you so he can take down this wall for you.)

2 When Jericho is conquered, all the articles of gold, silver, iron, and bronze are put in the Lord’s treasury as trophies of war, to acknowledge that he has won this victory. Rahab and her family are spared, because she sheltered the spies Joshua sent. But otherwise, the entire city is destroyed, along with “every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.” This is the first example in the book of “devoting” a place or thing to complete destruction. (It’s called “devoted” because it can’t be used for anything else.) How can we account for this troubling practice? Here is one perspective on it.

The Bible sometimes describes judgments of total destruction like this, but at other times God’s judgments are limited and tempered by mercy. The challenge for readers of the Bible is to determine which kinds of episodes are normative and which ones are exceptional, and why those occurred. Jesus’
life and teachings provide, for his followers, the interpretive key to the entire scriptural record of God’s dealings with humanity. In light of them, believers identify what things are normative and what things are exceptional. Jesus taught that we should love even our enemies, and that we should show mercy to others so that we will receive mercy ourselves. He died to save people who were, at the time, his own enemies. So his life and teachings show that judgments of total destruction, like the one described here, are exceptional.

So why did exceptional events like this occur as the Israelites took possession of Canaan?

This is a question that thoughtful interpreters have offered different answers to, but here is one possibility to consider. It may be that God had determined that Canaanite society had become so corrupt that it couldn’t be redeemed. This society was particularly violent, oppressive, and degraded. The Canaanites burned babies alive as human sacrifices and had sex with animals in a quest for magical power. They systematically exploited the poor and weak. If this society was never going to change, then it had to answer the demands of justice. Moreover, if the Israelites imitated the Canaanites, they’d rapidly be corrupted themselves. So their influence had to be removed completely. As God had earlier used flood and fire to purge away irredeemably wicked societies from the earth, now God chose to use the Israelite armies for this purpose. This was not an ordinary war; these armies were on special assignment as agents of divine judgment. This is why, in the case of the opening battle of Jericho, the soldiers weren’t allowed to take any plunder.

Even if the Israelites were on “special assignment” as agents of God’s judgment, their war was still not directed against the Canaanites as an *ethnic group*. Rahab and her family were spared, even though they were Canaanites, because of her faith in God.

Retell the story of the battle of Jericho from Rahab’s perspective. Have her speak in the first person (saying “I,” “my,” etc.). Begin on the morning of the first day when she’s awakened by the sound of the ram’s horn trumpets and looks out to see the Israelite army encircling the city. Supply details from earlier in her story to explain how she knows the men who come and get her after the walls fall, why she and her family are spared, etc. Someone who’s good at writing can organize the ideas that group members contribute and compose the story using pen and paper, note cards, or a laptop computer. When the story is done, have this person read the story back or act it out as a dramatic monologue, in your group or in a worship gathering.

What do you think of this explanation of episodes in the book of Joshua where things are “devoted” to destruction? Do you think it’s on the right track, even if you might not agree with it entirely? Or would you account for these episodes some other way?

Do you think that societies can become so corrupt and oppressive that they can’t be redeemed and need to answer to divine justice, particularly if they’d inevitably make the societies around them equally corrupt? Explain.
ONE SOLDIER’S HIDDEN SIN THREATENS THE SUCCESS OF ISRAEL’S ENTIRE ARMY

INTRODUCTION

The next fortified royal city standing in the path of the Israelites is Ai, about 15 miles from Jericho. The Israelites are stunned when Ai’s army defeats them. Even though this is just a minor skirmish, it shows how well defended these royal cities are. And it provokes a crisis of faith. God must have withdrawn his help, because with his help, the Israelites are invincible. Has God brought the nation across the Jordan, Joshua wonders, only to let its enemies destroy it? What would the world think of a God who did this? But the problem isn’t with God. One of the soldiers has made God turn angrily away, and until his deed is exposed and corrected, the Israelites won’t be able to “stand against their enemies.”

READING

Have the people in your group take turns reading one paragraph at a time through the story of the battle of Ai. Begin where you left off in the last session and end where Ai is destroyed and the body of its king is buried under a large pile of rocks.

DISCUSSION

1

The Israelites are under special instructions during these military campaigns. Joshua warned the army at Jericho that if they took any plunder, they would become “devoted to destruction” themselves. And this is just what happens. A man named Achan takes some gold and silver and an expensive robe from Jericho and hides them in his tent. This compromises the holiness and dedication that must characterize the entire nation while it’s on this special assignment. And so Israel’s armies are turned back by the forces of Ai.

Joshua is gravely concerned for God’s reputation. Why did God promise the Israelites victory if they’d cross the Jordan, only to let them be defeated by the Canaanites? Joshua prays desperately and God reveals that there’s secret sin in the camp. Achan is identified by lot and Joshua tells him to “give glory to the Lord . . . and honor him.” The consequences of Achan’s actions have called God’s character and trustworthiness into question. By admitting his own responsibility, Achan clears God of the implicit accusations against him.

This story shows how secret sin prevents God from blessing a person or group and how it can ultimately harm God’s reputation. Have you ever seen this principle illustrated, either in an individual’s life or in a group’s experience? If so, share the story (discreetly, protecting people’s identities). Pray together that God would lead those in your community to forsake any secret sins in their own lives. If you want to confess and forsake something wrong that you’ve secretly been doing, find a trustworthy person to speak with (such as a good friend, a pastor, or a counselor), confess to them and to God, and ask them to pray with you and help hold you accountable for the changes you need to make in your life. But be discreet—you don’t need to share all the details with your group or church.

God says, “Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant . . . they have stolen, they have lied.” Achan stole and lied when he took and hid plunder from Jericho. He later admits that he also “coveted” these treasures. In other words, he’s broken at least three of the Ten Commandments that God gave Israel as the foundation of his covenant with them. Achan didn’t
need to understand all the intricacies governing things “devoted to destruction” to know that what he did was wrong. It was enough to know that he was violating these basic commandments.

As a group, see if you can list all of the Ten Commandments. Then check your answers, and add any you might be missing, by comparing your list with the one at the end of this session.

Are you wrestling with something in your life that feels like a “moral dilemma”? If so, can you rule out some possible responses to the situation on the grounds that they violate one or more of the Ten Commandments? Does this give you a clearer idea how to proceed?

Ai is turned into a “permanent heap of ruins.” Its king is impaled on a pole (this could be translated “hanged on a tree”) and buried under a heap of stones at the entrance to the devastated city. This same principle of total destruction is applied to Achan’s household before the battle. His sons and daughters, and even all of his livestock, are stoned to death, burned, and buried under a pile of rocks because of what he alone did. How do we account for actions like these, which the story says were performed at God’s command?

We may never reach a place where we understand these things in a way that makes us consider them “all right.” But we can recognize that they take place within a cultural context that’s far removed from ours not just in place and time, but even more importantly in its view of the world. Within this cultural context, the fundamental concern is to purge the nation and the land completely of influences that are morally and spiritually corrupting and debilitating. These actions aren’t motivated by racial hatred or personal vengeance. (Joshua speaks gently with Achan, calling him “my son” and using the Hebrew form for polite requests.) This culture also understood identity as more corporate than individual. Just as Rahab’s entire family was spared because of her loyalty, Achan’s entire family is executed because of his disloyalty. God appears to be working within a distant cultural context that we can’t completely appreciate.

However, this doesn’t mean that God is endorsing the values or outlook of that culture for all places and times.

Do these observations help you continue to develop a meaningful perspective on the episodes of total destruction in the book of Joshua? Talk about how you view these episodes.

Once God returns to help the Israelites in battle, he doesn’t do this by miraculously toppling the walls of Ai, as he did the walls of Jericho. Instead, he provides Joshua with the right military strategy, telling him to set an ambush behind the city. The extraordinary gives way to the ordinary. But God is still working to give the Israelites victory.

The miraculous things that God did for the Israelites were, as we’ve seen, for special purposes when they first entered the land of Canaan. The Israelites crossed the Jordan River on dry ground, but then, for the rest of their history, they had to use the fords. The walls of the first royal city fell flat before them, but the others had to be conquered militarily. (However, there will be some significant divine intervention in the next battle.)

How can people who experience an extraordinary work of God in their lives for a special purpose then become accustomed to God working through ordinary means again? (For example, a person might experience a dramatic healing on one occasion, but have to see a doctor and take medicine on later occasions.) How can we recognize where and when God is at work through “ordinary” means?

**NOTE**

List of the Ten Commandments for discussion point 1 in section 2:

- Worship only God and no one else.
- Don’t make any idols.
- Don’t misuse God’s name.
Keep the Sabbath.
Honor your parents.
Don’t murder.
Don’t commit adultery (= don’t have sex outside marriage).
Don’t steal.
Don’t give false testimony (= don’t say things that aren’t true).
Don’t covet (desire and want to take) anything that belongs to someone else.

ISRAEL’S TREATY WITH GIBEON LEADS TO WAR WITH THE NEARBY CITIES

INTRODUCTION

With the royal cities of Jericho and Ai no longer a threat, Joshua can safely bring the people north to Mount Ebal to conduct an important ceremony. But it’s not long before hostilities break out again. The powerful city of Gibeon makes a peace treaty with Israel, and this leads several royal cities in the southern part of Canaan to band together and attack Gibeon so it can’t offer any assistance to the Israelites. Joshua is summoned to help this new ally and finds himself fighting the armies of five royal cities at once.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1. Have someone read the account of how Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal and how he read the law of Moses to all the Israelites there.

Before he died, Moses commanded the Israelites to hold a special ceremony when they got to Canaan. He told them to go to Mount Ebal, right in the center of the land, build an altar to the LORD there, and write out the
whole law on large stones. This stakes out the Lord’s claim over the entire territory and makes his instructions to Moses the law of the land.

As part of this ceremony, half the people stand on the slopes of Mount Ebal, and the other half stand on the slopes of Mount Gerizim just to the south. As Moses commanded, they shout across the valley the curses for disobedience recorded in the law. Then Joshua reads the entire law aloud to the nation, to establish it as the foundation for their life together.

If you wanted to place the worship of God and the discipline of reflecting on his word at the center of your own personal or community life, in what practical and demonstrative way could you do this?

Read, out loud like a play, the story of how the Gibeonites sent a delegation to the Israelites at Gilgal and deceived them into making a peace treaty, ending with the description of how they became “woodcutters and water carriers . . . to this day.” Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Gibeonites
- Israelites
- Joshua
- Israel’s leaders

The Gibeonites have heard how the Israelites destroyed Jericho and Ai. They’ve also heard what God did to the Egyptians and the kings east of the Jordan. Fearing for their lives, they decide to seek a peace treaty with Israel. But they also know that Moses told the Israelites to take “the whole land and to wipe out all its inhabitants.” They doubt they’ll be spared if they admit they live in central Canaan themselves. So they resort to an elaborate ruse. They pose as representatives of a distant people who’ve come a long way to make peace and who’ve only heard the older news (they say nothing about Jericho or Ai). The Israelites have a nagging suspicion about what might be going on here (“perhaps you live near us,” they wonder), but they don’t “inquire of the Lord.” Instead, they allow the Gibeonites’ aging provisions and worn-out equipment to convince them they’ve really come from a great distance. By the time the deception is exposed, the Israelite leaders have already sworn an oath not to harm them.

Have you ever had an experience where you had nagging doubts about something, but dismissed them, only to discover that you should have taken those doubts seriously? Have your doubts ever made you pray for God’s guidance rather than trust your own assessment of a situation? What did you discover when you prayed?

Just as Rahab and her family were spared at Jericho, now the Gibeonites are also spared from destruction. They don’t acknowledge God exactly the same way Rahab did, but they’re nevertheless awed by the “fame of the Lord” and know that their gods and armies can’t stand against him. Do you think that, on the basis of this rudimentary faith, God would have told the Israelites to spare the Gibeonites even if they’d admitted who they were from the start? Explain.

The king of Jerusalem, which isn’t far from Gibeon, is concerned that this “important city” will help the Israelites attack his own city. So he forms a coalition with several royal cities to the south—Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Debir—to destroy Gibeon before it can join forces with the Israelites. (See the map on page 11.) But with a fresh promise of assistance from God, Joshua surprises these coalition forces after an all-night march from Gilgal and defeats them, opening the way for the Israelites to conquer the entire southern part of Canaan.

Even though the Gibeonites got the Israelites to make a treaty with them under false pretenses, this provided the occasion for Israel to defeat the assembled armies of the royal cities in southern Canaan. What part do you think God played in all of this? Did he allow the Israelites to be deceived so they’d have to come to the aid of the Gibeonites? Did he see an opportunity to advance his purposes even in a mistake the Israelites made? Or was God just
letting human self-interest work itself out (as the Gibeonites sought a treaty and the southern royal cities formed a coalition), knowing this would eventually serve his own purposes?

As the contest for Canaan moves to a new level, with coalitions of cities now opposing the Israelites, God once again steps in to offer supernatural assistance. He pelts the fleeing enemy forces with deadly hailstones, and makes the sun stand still to give the Israelites a lengthened day so they can finish defeating them.

The sun standing still is easier to envision within the ancient observational perspective of the Bible than it is within our modern understanding of the solar system. The ancients believed that the sun moved through the solid dome of the sky above a flat earth. Halting its progress, while still a mighty miracle, wouldn’t involve stopping the earth’s rotation. We today recognize that this would require God to perform a whole series of further sustaining and preserving miracles until that rotation resumed.

Select the best expression of your understanding of what happened when the “sun stood still” over Gibeon?

a. I take the account at face value, and trust that God did whatever was necessary throughout the earth to preserve it until things got back to normal.

b. The Book of Jashar, quoted here in the book of Joshua, accurately records that Joshua did call on the sun and moon to stand still, and its author is expressing his faith that God truly helped the Israelites when he says that they did stand still.

c. I’ll give you the hailstones, but I’m not so sure about the sun and the moon.

THE ISRAELITES BATTLE THE COMBINED ARMIES OF CANAAN’S ROYAL CITIES

INTRODUCTION

With the southern coalition armies completely defeated, Joshua ceremonially executes their kings and then systematically captures and destroys all of their cities. The kings in the northern part of Canaan, led by Jabin of Hazor, hear what has happened and assemble an even larger coalition. With horses and chariots and soldiers “as numerous as the sand on the seashore,” they gather at Merom to fight against Israel.

READING

Have someone read how the five kings hiding in the cave at Makkedah were discovered, trapped, and then executed.

Then have several people read the short accounts of how Joshua attacked and captured the royal cities of Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon,
Hebron, and Debir. Have another person read the summary of this southern campaign, which ends with Joshua returning to Gilgal.

Have someone read the description of the northern campaign, which begins with Jabin, king of Hazor, summoning his allies, and ends with Joshua burning Hazor.

Finally, have someone read the summary of all three campaigns, which begins, “Joshua took all these royal cities and their kings” and ends, “Then the land had rest from war.”

**DISCUSSION**

1. As we’ve noted, these campaigns are directed against the royal cities in the land. Canaanite kings were supreme figures who ruled absolutely and who symbolically represented their subjects and territory. The book of Joshua reflects this perspective. It characteristically uses expressions like “that city and its king” to express how closely a place and its population were identified with its ruler. The book speaks similarly of “Joshua and all Israel with him,” treating Joshua as a leader who represents and embodies his own nation. While the fighting actually involves the entire armies of the Israelite tribes and the Canaanite city-states, it’s often depicted as a contest between these symbolic leaders.

   This is why, when Israelite soldiers discover the five fleeing kings hiding in a cave at Makkedah, they consider them a more valuable prize than the armies they’re pursuing. They have to be told to trap the kings inside, to be dealt with later, and continue fighting. This is also why the kings are executed ceremonially after the battle. They’re understood to embody the royal cities they rule, so their demise means those cities are doomed as well.

   Everything the Israelites do to these kings has symbolic significance:
   - The army commanders put their feet on their necks to depict their complete subjugation.
   - These kings are impaled on poles (or “hanged on trees”) as a way of ceremonially annihilating them: suspended between earth and sky, they belong to neither realm, so they’ve symbolically ceased to exist. (This was considered such an accursed state that the law of Moses required bodies to be taken down at the end of the day on which they were hanged.)
   - Making a huge mound of rocks at the burial place creates a perpetual reminder of the destruction of these kings. (The king of Ai was hanged and buried under a pile of rocks for these same reasons.)

   The book of Hebrews in the New Testament describes Jesus as a representative leader like Joshua (although Jesus is the “prince of peace,” not a warrior). If you’re a follower of Jesus, in what ways does he embody your own identity and future? What objects or observances signify for you the connection between you and Jesus? (For example, the cross is a perpetual reminder of Jesus’ death. What use do you make of this symbol?)

   The New Testament book of Galatians says that when Jesus died on the cross, he took on the accursed state of “everyone who is hung on a pole.” He did this on our behalf, so that we wouldn’t have to suffer the curse we deserved for turning away from God. In light of what Galatians says, does this story in Joshua give you a new perspective on what Jesus did for us at the cross?

2. The author of the book of Joshua observes that except for the Gibeonites, “not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites.” The author adds that “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” (literally “so that they would not receive mercy”). This statement raises a couple of difficult questions:
   - A. How do we account for God actively hardening people’s hearts to prevent them from receiving mercy?
   - B. If God did harden the Canaanites’ hearts because he wanted them all to be destroyed, why weren’t the Gibeonites’ hearts hardened? (For that matter, why did Rahab help the spies?)
In answer to question A, we should note that the author’s primary concern here is to document that Joshua faithfully carried out what “the Lord commanded Moses.” Canaanite culture was so corrupt and oppressive that God didn’t want it to supply any part of the model on which the new Israelite society would be built. But this meant that Canaanite influence had to be completely eliminated. So God led the Canaanites “to wage war against Israel so that he”—Joshua—“might destroy them totally . . . as the Lord had commanded Moses.” The fundamental goal is the complete removal of the corrupting Canaanite influence, so that a new society can be built on God’s laws, as a model for the rest of the world. Everything else—the hardening, the war, and the destruction—follows from that.

This helps us answer question B. If the ultimate goal is to make it possible for the Israelites to model God’s ways for the rest of the world, then it’s consistent with that goal for some people outside Israel, at any point, to choose in favor of God. But this means that the hardening must have been general, on the Canaanites as a whole, and not specific, in each one of their individual hearts. (The Hebrew text uses the collective singular: “It was from the Lord to harden their heart.”) To seek the God of Israel, an individual person or city would have to make a choice contrary to what everyone around them wanted to do. In this culture of corporate identity, this would not have been easy. But as the cases of Rahab and the Gibeonites show, it wasn’t impossible.

What group do you most strongly identify with: your immediate or extended family, your circle of friends, your faith community, your ethnic heritage, your nation, etc.? Would you describe this group as “hardened” against God or open to him? How has identifying with this group influenced the way you’ve responded to God personally? If you’ve chosen to follow Jesus, how has this affected your situation within the group?

Based on a map at www.bible-history.com.
THE LAND OF CANAAN IS DIVIDED AMONG THE ISRAELITE TRIBES

INTRODUCTION

Now that the royal cities in Canaan have been defeated, the combined armies of Israel can be disbanded. Each tribe will be assigned its own territory and sent to conquer it on its own. Much of the second half of Joshua describes this process. Since this section of the book consists mainly of lists and boundary descriptions, we won’t re-read it. Instead, we’ll skim through it, noting significant information, and discuss some particular details.

The map on page 41 shows the tribal boundaries and will help you see how Canaan was divided. Tribal and city names highlighted in bold sessions 8 through 10 can be found on this map.

SKIMMING AND DISCUSSION

Have individual people take turns reading the nine points below, which summarize how Canaan was divided among the tribes. (This section of Joshua is on pages 274–85 in The Books of The Bible. If you’re using another edition of the Scriptures, use these nine points to recognize the extent of this section.) As the points are being read, group members should skim through the book, noting the material that’s summarized in each point. To start with, everyone should turn to the place where the book of Joshua announces, “Then the land had rest from war.” (This is where you stopped reading in the last session.)

1 In this section, the book of Joshua first catalogs the kings that the Israelites defeated. It names two kings east of the Jordan and then lists thirty-one kings west of the Jordan. What city names do you recognize on this list from your earlier reading and discussion?

2 The Lord then speaks to Joshua and describes the extent of the land in Canaan that still remains to be taken over.

3 The book describes how “the other half of Manasseh, the Reubenites and the Gadites” received an “inheritance . . . east of the Jordan.” This land is described first as a whole, and then as it was divided between these individual tribes. Find this territory on the map. These Transjordan tribes soon came to be regarded and treated as “outsiders.” In our next session, and also in the book of Judges, we’ll see how tensions flared between them and the rest of Israel.

4 The “areas the Israelites received as an inheritance in the land of Canaan” are then described. But before the book traces these individual territories, it relates how a man named Caleb, the only person besides Joshua who’s still alive out of all the Israelites who left Egypt, steps forward to claim his promised inheritance.

Have someone read Caleb’s story, beginning, “Now the people of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal” and ending where the book says once again, “Then the land had rest from war.”

Forty years before this, Caleb and Joshua were among twelve spies that Moses sent into Canaan. These two men were the only ones who believed God could give Israel the land. The other ten spies gave a despairing report that made the nation fear and disobey. As punishment, the Israelites had to wander in the desert until that whole generation perished. But now a new generation has conquered the land, and Caleb, insisting, “I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then,” wants the privilege of personally conquering the hill country around Hebron.
How do you think Caleb was able to “keep his eyes on the prize” for so many years, never giving up hope and staying in shape so that he was ready to seize this long-awaited opportunity when it finally came his way?

The “allotment for the tribe of Judah” and the “allotment for Joseph” (comprising the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, descended from his sons) are the first ones described. Find the territories of these tribes on the map. Judah will play a leading role at a couple of key points in the book of Judges. Later the royal house of David will come from this tribe.

Ephraim and Manasseh held a central and strategic location that gave them control of north-south traffic in Israel. Ephraim held the fords of the Jordan and so also controlled east-west traffic. It repeatedly supplied armies to support the judges. It considered itself a “power broker” and jealously guarded this status, sometimes with deadly results, as we’ll see.

The Israelites “gathered at Shiloh and set up the tent of meeting there.” This city right in the middle of the country becomes their center of worship. From Shiloh, Joshua sends out a survey team to divide up the rest of the land into seven portions, to be assigned by lot to the remaining tribes. Look at the map and note how Benjamin (lot #1) and Dan (lot #7) are given territory right between the large and powerful tribes of Judah, Ephraim, and Manasseh. Dan’s allotted territory is right next to the Philistine cities. (We’ll see later in Judges how Dan gained territory in the north.) Samson came from the tribe of Dan and, as we’ll see in Judges, this put him on a collision course with these enemies of Israel. The territory of Simeon (lot #2) is within Judah’s; this tribe will eventually lose its independent identity. Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, and Naphtali (lots #3–6) receive territory in the north of Canaan. Though distant and isolated, these tribes still contributed armies to support some of the judges.

Finally, Joshua receives his personal inheritance, at Timnath Serah within the territory of his own tribe of Ephraim. “And so,” the book concludes, “they finished dividing the land.” But there are still two important items of business left.

First, the Israelites must designate “cities of refuge,” as Moses commanded, where people who accidentally kill another person can flee. Read the description of these cities that begins, “Then the Lord said to Joshua: ‘Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge’” and ends, “and not be killed by the avenger of blood prior to standing trial before the assembly.” Look at the map on page 41 and find the cities of Kedesh, Shechem, and Hebron west of the Jordan, and Golan, Ramoth in Gilead, and Bezer east of the Jordan. Note how they’re in the north, center, and south of the territories on either side of the river, so that any Israelite can reach one of them easily.

In this culture, families and clans designated an “avenger of blood” to track down and kill anyone who murdered one of their relatives. But if the death was accidental and unintentional, the person who caused it wasn’t supposed to be killed. These “cities of refuge” provided a safe haven. Those who fled there could prove their innocence to the elders and live peacefully until they were allowed to return to their hometowns.

Some communities of Jesus’ followers today provide what they call “sanctuary” (shelter and protection) to people who are at risk of being killed unjustly in their home countries. These communities even help people who’ve entered their own countries illegally. They hide them from the authorities. What do you think of this practice? Is this a modern-day version of a “city of refuge”?

The Israelites must also designate towns for the Levites to live in. The tribe of Levi has no territorial inheritance of its own, because God has chosen the Levites to serve at the nation’s central place of worship. They’ll take care of the ark of the covenant and the “tent of meeting.” They’ll also make and keep copies of the law, and use it to decide difficult legal cases and to diagnose and treat certain diseases. While on duty at the sanctuary they’ll be supported by the gifts and offerings that people bring. But most Levites will only work there a few months at a time. The rest of the time they’ll need places to live with fields and grazing land so they can support themselves. The Levites are given forty-eight towns throughout Israel’s territory on both sides
of the Jordan. (Five of these are also “cities of refuge.” This way Levites will already be living where “difficult legal cases” may arise.) But as we’ll see in the book of Judges, sometimes Levites also “sojourned” in other parts of Israel where they thought they could make a living.

Do you know people who feel called to devote their lives to teaching the Scriptures, helping others follow God, and leading them in worship? How do these people get their income? Are they supported entirely by gifts and offerings, or do they also do other kinds of work? What responsibility do you feel to help support those who regularly teach you the Scriptures and lead your community in worship? How do you fulfill this responsibility?

What’s the most interesting thing you’ve learned as your group has surveyed the way the land of Canaan was divided up among the Israelite tribes?

TENSIONS FLARE AS THE TRANSJORDAN TRIBES BUILD AN ALTAR BY THE JORDAN RIVER

INTRODUCTION

The tribes that will settle east of the Jordan have deployed their armies west of the river for several years, enabling the other tribes to conquer the land of Canaan. Now Joshua sends these soldiers home, with thanks for fulfilling their commitment and with a generous portion of the plunder to share with their families. But they’re barely back across the river before tensions flare so severely that the Israelites in Canaan mobilize to fight a war against them.

God has commanded Israel to have only one central altar where offerings are made, at the tabernacle, now in Shiloh. But the tribes across the Jordan have built an altar of their own. Have they “broken faith” with the Lord so quickly? If God punished the whole nation because one man, Achan, broke faith like this, what will God do now that an entire region has turned away from him? The “assembly of Israel” is prepared to “go to war against them” and “devastate the country” where they live, wiping them out as they did Achan and his family, rather than face God’s wrath for allowing this apostasy.

BOOK OF JOSHUA > CONCLUDING EPISODES > RETURN OF TRANSJORDAN TRIBES
TENSIONS FLARE AS THE TRANSJORDAN TRIBES BUILD AN ALTAR BY THE JORDAN RIVER

READING

Read, out loud like a play, the story of how the Transjordan tribes returned across the river. Begin where Joshua summons “the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh” to send them home. End where these tribes give their altar the name “A Witness Between Us—that the LORD is God.” Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Joshua
- Phinehas (spokesperson for the Israelite delegation)
- Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh (choose a spokesperson)

DISCUSSION

1 This episode begins well, with Joshua appropriately gathering the armies of the Transjordan tribes together to express his thanks, encourage them to continue serving the LORD, and send them off with generous gifts. Their sacrificial service over many years deserves to be acknowledged publicly like this.

- In your own culture, in what ways is a person’s faithful service recognized when they come to the end of an important assignment or a distinguished career? If you’ve had the opportunity to give someone this kind of recognition, or to receive it from someone else, share your story with the group. How can communities of believers show that they’re expressing thanks on God’s behalf to those who have served them?

2 As the armies of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh head back home, they build an altar “at Geliloth near the Jordan.” This may not be an actual place name; geliloth in Hebrew means “regions.” The word is used this way earlier in the book, when God says the Israelites still need to conquer the “regions of the Philistines and Geshurites.” (If you have a translation other than the NIV, it may say that this altar was built in the “region near the Jordan,” or something similar.) So we can’t be exactly sure where the altar was placed. But it was somewhere in the Jordan valley, on the western side of the river. Some interpreters believe it was placed atop a rocky crag overlooking the river, since the text says literally that it was built “above the Jordan.” In any event, the altar was “imposing” (“great to see”), visible from a distance. This altar was a “replica,” an accurate copy of the one at the tabernacle. It was designed to show the tribes on both sides of the river that the worship of the LORD didn’t stop at this natural boundary, but reached across it to include faithful Israelites living to the east.

- Have you ever seen a group of believers express their loyalty to Jesus by creating a “replica” of a famous expression of faith in him, such as by choosing a particular name, crafting a sacred object, building a worship space in a particular design, etc.? If so, tell the group about it. If time and money were no limitation, what kind of “replica” would you like to have to express your own faith?

3 When they’re accused of “breaking faith” and “rebelling against the LORD,” the Transjordan tribes respond with a profession of faith: “The Mighty One, God, the LORD!” They’re using three divine names to say that they still believe the Mighty One (El), the supreme God (Elohim), is the LORD (Yahweh). The name of the altar uses an abbreviated form of this chant: “A Witness Between Us that Yahweh is Elohim.” The Transjordan tribes haven’t abandoned God; their only concern is that the Israelite tribes west of the river might try to forbid them to worship him.

- Were the Transjordan tribes right to be concerned that the western tribes might someday insist that “the LORD has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you” and that “you have no share in the LORD”? Have those who’d initially say “yes” move to one side of the room, and those who’d say “no” move to the other side. Have the two sides discuss the question back and forth. Can you agree on a final answer?
JOSHUA, NEAR DEATH, URGES THE ISRAELITES TO CONTINUE FOLLOWING THE LORD

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the book of Joshua, Moses is honored with the title “the servant of the LORD,” while Joshua is simply called “Moses’ aide.” But by the end of the book, because of his faithfulness to God and courageous leadership, Joshua has become known as “the servant of the LORD” himself.

He’s now very old and knows he’s about to die. He summons Israel’s leaders (probably to his home at Timnath Serah) and urges them to remain faithful to God after he’s gone. He then assembles “all the tribes of Israel” at Shechem to renew their covenant to worship the LORD alone.

Shechem is located between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Joshua brings the people back to the place where they first pledged themselves to the LORD when they entered the land of Canaan. They now can look back over the years and recognize the truth of Joshua’s words, that “not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed.”

READING

Have one person read how Joshua summons the Israelite leaders and urges them to be faithful to God after he’s gone.

Then read, out loud like a play, the account of the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Joshua
- The LORD (who speaks through Joshua, beginning right after, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says.” Joshua’s part resumes with, “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness.”)
- The people (a spokesperson can read their first answer to Joshua; your whole group should read their next three short lines).

Finally, have someone read the conclusion to the book, which describes how Joshua and others in his generation died and were buried.

DISCUSSION

Both in his conversation with the nation’s leaders, and in the covenant renewal ceremony, Joshua insists strongly that the Israelites serve the LORD only. Foreign gods must not be worshipped, sworn by, or even mentioned by name. This is because the worship of these gods will convey a view of the universe, and result in a social structure, directly contrary to what the LORD commanded the Israelites through Moses. As we saw earlier, Canaanite religion was a bloodthirsty quest for power that crushed the weak and needy. Introducing any aspects of it into Israel’s budding national life would inevitably bear the fruits of violence and injustice. So a definitive decision must be made for or against these gods. “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve,” Joshua challenges the Israelites.
He also warns them that if they choose the Lord, they must be absolutely and entirely committed. The Lord is “holy” and “jealous.” He won’t trifle with people who claim to be loyal to him but then flirt with other gods around them. “He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins,” Joshua warns, meaning that God won’t pardon those who abandon him for other gods, but will make them experience the consequences of their disloyalty: “You will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.”

If you were challenged like the Israelites here to make a definitive decision to exclusively worship and serve God or some other god (or no god at all), how would you respond?

Joshua tells the Israelites to “be very careful” (literally “guard your soul greatly”) “to love the Lord your God.” In what practical ways can a person who’s chosen to serve God guard their soul so that nothing compromises their devotion? What degree of association can believers have with those who aren’t committed to the Lord: Friendship? Roommates at school? Business partnership? Dating? Marriage?

Many countries have instituted freedom of religion on the premise that different faiths can peacefully coexist within a single society that’s built on secular values. Do you agree that this is possible? Or do you think that members of any religious or ideological tradition will eventually try to shape the society around their own values, so that the only question is really which religion or ideology will predominate?

The Lord speaks directly through Joshua at Shechem. To urge the Israelites to remain loyal, he shows them their place in the story of his dealings with their nation, beginning with their earliest ancestors. Even as the Lord describes events that happened before the current generation was born, he frequently speaks as if they participated in these events: “I afflicted the Egyptians . . . and I brought you out. When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea. . . . They cried to the Lord for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians.” The people recognize their place in the story and respond with renewed loyalty. They retell the story with themselves in it, saying, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord. . . . It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt”—even though they hadn’t been born at the time.

If you’ve chosen to follow Jesus, you’ve become part of this same story, because the story Joshua tells here continues for many more centuries and ultimately culminates in Jesus.* This means that, in a sense, you participated in the great events recorded in the book of Joshua. Choose the episode in the book that you most identify with and retell it from your own eyewitness perspective. How did being part of this event confirm your loyalty to God?

Questions about the book of Joshua as a whole:

In session 1, you were asked how you’d respond to the college student who said the book was about “some crazy guy who went around killing everybody because he thought God was telling him to.” Now that you’ve read and discussed the entire book, what more might you say in reply to this student?

Put yourself in the place of Joshua at the end of his life. A reporter has come to interview you for a feature article. Decide how you’d answer one of the following questions. Then have everyone in the group share their answer to the question they chose.

• What would you say were the high points in your career as Israel’s leader?
• What was the worst difficulty you ever got into—something you weren’t sure you’d ever get out of?

* It’s not possible to tell the whole story in this study guide, but in the New Testament, the last quarter of the Bible, you can read how Jesus brought this story to its culmination.
• Do you have regrets about any decisions you made?
• Why did God keep telling you to “be strong and courageous” when you first started—were you unsure you could do the job?
• What was the biggest surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, that you ever got?
• What advice would you give someone who wanted to be known as a “servant of the Lord” like you?

Conclude your study of the book of Joshua by watching, if you wish, this video of Brian Doerksen singing “Today (As For Me and My House)”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEBEKVe4Hs. (If you can’t find the video at this link, search for it on the Internet.)
Outline of the Book of Judges

Prologue
Conquest of the land by the individual tribes

Stories of the Judges*

- Othniel
- Ehud
- Shamgar
- Deborah
- Gideon
- Abimelek
- Tola
- Jair
- Ibzan
- Elon
- Abdon
- Samson

Epilogue
Anarchy in Israel during the tribal period

*There are six major judges (in bold italics), six minor judges (in italics), and an anti-judge (underlined).

The careers of the major judges are all introduced by a common formula:
“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord... And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him, he sold them into the hands of X... Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord...”

The careers of the first four major judges are all concluded by a common formula:
“The land had peace for Y years.”

Abimelek is denied the customary opening and closing formulas because he’s the opposite of the kind of leader the nation needs.
EXPERIENCING THE BOOK OF JUDGES AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

The book of Judges continues the long story that begins in Genesis and runs through Joshua. It describes the period in Israel’s history when the twelve tribes formed a loose confederation that sometimes cooperated to fight off enemies, but at other times was torn by internal conflicts and eroded by social disintegration.

The history of this period follows a recurring pattern. Over and over again, the Israelites “did evil in the eyes of the Lord” and worshipped other gods. To punish and correct them, God allowed them to be oppressed and plundered by the nations around them. But when they returned to the Lord and cried out for deliverance, he “raised up judges, who saved them.” These judges were men and women from various walks of life. They came from different parts of Israel. And as we’ll see, many of them were unlikely candidates to be used by God as national deliverers. This shows that the deliverance came from God himself, not through human strength or ability.

Unfortunately, as soon as a judge died, the nation would forsake the Lord once again, and the cycle would continue. After tracing the careers of twelve individual judges, the book describes conditions in this period more...
generally, documenting the anarchy and atrocities that occurred when “Israel had no king” and “everyone did as they saw fit.” In this way it makes the case for the nation changing from a traditional tribal confederation into a monarchy, a more centralized state governed by a king who would maintain order and justice.

This was the original purpose of the book. It’s not a live issue for us today how ancient Israel was to be governed. But the book of Judges is still vital reading for us. It provides inspiring examples of people who faced great dangers and overcame determined opposition because of their bold faith and trust in God. And it shows how anyone, no matter what their background, circumstances, or human limitations, can be used in powerful ways if they will answer the call that comes to them from God in their own day.

**READING**

As a group, take turns reading through the book of Judges out loud together, the same way you read through Joshua. This should take about ninety minutes. It’s on pages 291–319 in *The Books of The Bible*. (If you’re using another edition of the Scriptures, you should find Judges right after Joshua.)

As you read, you can follow how the story is unfolding by looking at the outline on page 56. You can find the locations it mentions on the map on page 57.

Notice how the book has two prologues. Each begins with a reference to the death of Joshua. The first prologue still has the flavor of the book of Joshua. It describes how the individual tribes went to conquer the territories they’d been assigned. The second prologue summarizes the rest of the book of Judges, describing its recurring pattern. Listen for this pattern as the book unfolds:

- The Israelites forsake the *LORD*
- He lets their enemies conquer them (literally “sells them into their hands” like slaves)
- They cry out for deliverance
- God raises up a judge to save them
- The judge ultimately defeats the enemies
- The “land has peace” for the rest of the judge’s lifetime
- Then the Israelites forsake the *LORD* once again

Note that a total of twelve judges are described, six at length and six more briefly. These may not have been all the judges God raised up in this period, but rather a representative selection, equal to the number of tribes of Israel. Also note how, at the beginning and the end of the book, the Israelites ask God, “Who shall go up first?” and the answer both times is, “Judah shall go up first.” This is a foreshadowing of how the royal house of David will later come from the tribe of Judah to lead the nation. (That story is told in the biblical book of Samuel–Kings, which completes the long story that begins in Genesis.)

Reading through Judges can be an inspiring experience, as the book relates story after story of how God worked through improbable leaders to bring great deliverance. But it can also be a horrifying experience, as the book describes the atrocities of this lawless period in unflinching detail. The group should be especially sensitive to people who’ve suffered from physical or sexual violence, who may find that some of these stories strike very close to home. During the reading anyone should feel free to ask the group to take a short break, and any reader should feel free to ask someone else to take over in the middle of a story.

**DISCUSSION**

- What’s your overall reaction to the book of Judges?
- Which of the judges was your favorite? Why?
- Which episodes in the book did you find most inspiring? Which ones made you say, “Hey, if God could do that in their situation, then God can do something like it in my life, too.”
- Which episodes were the most horrifying? Why do you think episodes like these are included in the Bible? What value do they have for readers of God’s Word?
The book’s first prologue explains that the individual tribes left many of the Canaanites living among them. The Israelites eventually intermarried with them, and this is why they repeatedly “forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs” (Canaanite gods). This only partial completion of the conquest sets the whole cycle of the book of Judges in motion. How do you think the story of Israel would have been different if the individual tribes had conquered their entire allotments? Would God still have raised up great leaders like Deborah and Gideon for the nation?

GOD RAISES UP OTHNIEL, EHUD, AND SHAMGAR TO DELIVER ISRAEL

INTRODUCTION

The second prologue to Judges summarizes the recurring pattern of disobedience, distress, and deliverance that runs through the book. After this prologue, there are short accounts of the exploits of three judges—Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have several people take turns reading a paragraph each of the second prologue to Judges, beginning, “After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land,” and ending, “They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.” (If you are using a Bible that has chapter numbers, don’t stop reading at the chapter break that comes in the middle of this section.)
The new generation that arises after Joshua’s death hasn’t seen great miracles like the Jordan drying up, the walls of Jericho collapsing, or the sun standing still. But they can still see God do great works in their own day if they’ll step up to meet the challenges before them. Joshua urges the tribes to defeat the Canaanites remaining in their territories, promising that “the Lord your God himself will . . . drive them out before you.” But even while he’s alive the tribes make excuses. The Ephraimites, for example, complain they can only conquer the hill-country portion of their territory because “all the Canaanites who live in the plain have chariots fitted with iron.” After Joshua’s death most of the tribes leave significant portions of their territories in Canaanite hands. As a result, they don’t acquire a firsthand knowledge of who God is and what God can do. This leads them to “quickly turn from the ways of their ancestors” to “follow other gods and serve and worship them.” But the punishment for this disloyalty is also an opportunity for renewed loyalty: the remaining nations are left to “test the Israelites,” to “see whether they would obey the Lord’s commands.” Every new generation can have a fresh experience of God’s deliverance if it will step out in bold faith.

Would you say you have a firsthand knowledge of God and that you’ve experienced his power firsthand? Or is what you know about God mostly secondhand, something you believe because you’ve heard it from people you trust? How can a person move from secondhand faith to firsthand faith?

What great challenges lie before your own generation to advance the purposes of God in the world? What reasons might someone give why these challenges can’t be met? What would it look like for you to step out in bold faith to do your part in meeting these challenges? What kinds of things would God need to do for you?

Do you agree or disagree with this statement? “Secondhand faith, unless it becomes firsthand faith, is the transitional stage between firsthand faith and abandoning God.” Explain.

Have someone read the story of how Othniel defeated Cushan-Rishathaim, king of Aram Naharaim (in northwest Mesopotamia).

Othniel is the first judge described in the book. We’ve actually met him before. The story of how Othniel earlier distinguished himself in battle is told both in the book of Joshua and in the first prologue to Judges. As we saw in session 8, Caleb (his uncle) asked Joshua to let him conquer his own personal allotment in the territory of Judah. But Caleb found the city of Debir particularly difficult to take. He offered his daughter Aksah in marriage to anyone who could capture the city. Othniel answered this challenge. Later in Israel’s history, as we now see here, Othniel won an even greater battle. Empowered by the Spirit of the Lord, he led the nation against Cushan-Rishathaim, a king from northwest Mesopotamia, and freed the Israelites from his domination.

What do you think was Othniel’s primary motivation for attacking Debir?

a. He was in love with his cousin Aksah and wanted to win her hand in marriage.
b. He wanted to advance his own standing within the powerful clan of Caleb.
c. He wanted to measure his skill as a warrior against the toughest competition around.
d. He saw that God needed a champion to fulfill his purposes in his own day, and he resolved to be that champion.
e. All of the above. (Do any of these motivations rule out any of the others? Does God use love and even ambition to draw us into his purposes?)

If Othniel had been too afraid to attack Debir, would the Spirit of the Lord still have chosen him later to lead the nation against Cushan-Rishathaim? Explain your thoughts.

Have someone read the story of how Ehud assassinated Eglon, the king of Moab, and delivered Israel from Moabite occupation.
Eglon has invaded Israel and seized Jericho. (It’s called the “City of Palms” in this story. Its walls and fortifications haven’t been rebuilt because of Joshua’s curse, but people are living on the site once again.) From this strategic location Eglon controls the fords of the Jordan and can safely deploy his occupying armies west of the river. He’s forcing the Israelites to bring him regular tribute.

A man named Ehud from the tribe of Benjamin devises a devious plan to assassinate Eglon and free the country. As a left-hander, he can hide a specially designed sword where no one would look for it, but where he can easily reach it and use it. On his way back from delivering tribute to Moab, he turns around at Gilgal. There are now “stone images” there: the place that was supposed to commemorate the LORD’s miracle of drying up the Jordan has apparently become a center of idol worship. But this gives Ehud the opportunity to pretend he receives a special message from God there that he has to go back and give Eglon. This gets him alone with the king, and he stabs him left-handed with the hidden weapon. He escapes back to Israel and rouses the armies of the powerful tribe of Ephraim to seize the fords of the Jordan and slaughter the Moabite occupation force stranded on the wrong side of the river. Israel regains its freedom for another eighty years.

Do you think God approved of Ehud’s tactic of secret assassination, and perhaps even gave him the idea to do it? (Judges says that God “gave” Ehud to Israel as a deliverer, and Ehud calls his sword thrust a “message from God.”) Or did God really want Ehud to lead Israel’s armies against Moab openly on the field of battle, but he took matters into his own hands and used means that God didn’t approve? (The book doesn’t say that the “Spirit of the LORD came upon” Ehud, as it does for several of the other judges.)

Very little is said about Shamgar, but he’s still commemorated for one heroic deed that also “saved Israel” from one of its enemies, the Philistines. Shamgar only has an “oxgoad” to fight with. If this was like the traditional oxgoads of Palestine, it was an agricultural tool, several feet long, with a point on one end to prod oxen and a scraper on the other end to clean plows. With a godly zeal for the freedom of his people, Shamgar uses this, the only tool at his disposal, to defeat an occupation force of 600, freeing the Israelites from Philistine domination in his generation.

Many years before this, when Moses was first called to lead Israel, he asked God how he could ever deliver the nation, and God replied, “What is in your hand?” Shamgar had an oxgoad in his hand, and by God’s power, that was enough. What’s in your hand?
INTRODUCTION

After Ehud dies, the Israelites turn away from the Lord. He “sells them into the hands” of Jabin, king of Hazor. (Jabin means “the discerning one” and it was probably a royal title, like “Pharaoh” in Egypt. This is not the same Jabin who led the northern coalition against Joshua, since he was defeated and killed. Rather, this is a successor who has rebuilt and reoccupied Hazor.)

Jabin’s general Sisera controls the coastal plain with 900 iron chariots operating out of Harosheth Haggoyim in the Kishon River valley. This allows Jabin to dominate the entire northern part of Israel. He’s disarmed the Israelites—“not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand” (a host the size of Joshua’s army)—and cowed them into submission: “Villagers in Israel would not fight.” The people are so intimidated that “the highways are abandoned” and “travelers take to winding paths.”

But then “Deborah arises” as a “mother in Israel.” Speaking on God’s authority, she commands Barak, a leader of the tribe of Naphtali who lives in Kedesh, right next to Hazor, to lead an army against Sisera. On the face
of it, her plan doesn’t sound like a very good one. Barak is to gather ten thousand soldiers and lead them from the relative safety of Mount Tabor in the highlands down onto the coastal plain, where Sisera’s chariots can be used with deadly effect. All Barak has to count on is Deborah’s promise: “Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?”

READING

Have five people read the story of how Deborah called Barak to raise an army and fight Sisera. Read up to the start of Deborah and Barak’s song. Have people take these parts:
- Narrator
- Deborah
- Barak
- Jael
- Sisera

Then have the whole group take turns reading through the song of Deborah and Barak, taking a short portion each.

DISCUSSION

1 Deborah is a remarkable figure in the book of Judges. She’s first of all a “prophet.” God communicates with her directly with messages for the nation and individuals. She speaks to Barak in the LORD’s name and commands him to lead an army against Sisera. Deborah is also a “judge,” in this case meaning someone whose wisdom and insight were so respected that “the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.” (Deborah will also prove herself to be a “judge” in the sense of a national deliverer when she accompanies Barak to battle.) It’s not clear what tribe she’s from, but she’s established her court in the center of the nation, in Ephraim just south of Bethel, to make it easier for everyone to reach her.

How do you account for the fact that Deborah, a woman, held such a position of leadership in Israel and gave authoritative commands even to tribal leaders like Barak? Choose the answer you agree with most:

a. No big deal. God is an equal-opportunity employer. He gave Deborah prophetic and wisdom gifts and expected that she would use them, and that the people would support her as she did.

b. These must have been exceptional circumstances, because God doesn’t ordinarily want women “to teach or to assume authority over” men. God must have turned to Deborah only when no man would do the job.

c. This is an interesting example of God gifting and calling a woman to do things that other passages in the Bible seem to suggest she shouldn’t. These different texts need to be put in conversation with one another to arrive at a balanced view.

When Deborah commands Barak to lead the army, this actually expresses a “judgment”: the people of Naphtali and Zebulun live closest to Hazor. It’s in Naphtali’s tribal allotment. So it’s only right for them to take the lead in addressing a problem that began in their own territory. How would you define your “territory,” your area of spiritual responsibility in the world? What problems does God want you to address there?

2 Deborah and Barak’s song provides some important additional information about the battle. The narrative account says simply that the LORD “routed” Sisera and his chariots. The song explains exactly how God did this: “The heavens poured, the clouds poured down water,” and “the river Kishon swept them away.” Sisera had to lead his chariots up the Kishon River valley so he could intercept Barak’s army below Mount Tabor. When Barak and his troops got down into the valley, they found that God had sent heavy thunderstorms that had swollen the river, and it had carried off or bogged down the iron chariots. Barak’s army chased Sisera’s forces all the way back to their headquarters, wiping them out.
The song also specifies which tribes then came to help in the long-term campaign against Jabin and which tribes didn’t help. (See the map on page 68.) Dan and Asher, the tribes along the coast, were the most vulnerable to Sisera’s chariots and may not have wanted to risk joining a rebellion. Reuben and “Gilead” (Gad and east Manasseh), the tribes across the Jordan, may have decided this was a “western” problem that didn’t concern them. All these tribes are shamed in the song because “they did not come to help the Lord . . . against the mighty.”

This song is one of the earliest writings contained in the Bible. The book of Judges was written some time after the events it relates, but this song was composed right after the battle. It was preserved by a means that’s described in the song itself:

You who ride on white donkeys,
sitting on your saddle blankets,
and you who walk along the road,
consider the voice of the singers at the watering places.
They recite the victories of the Lord,
the victories of his villagers in Israel.

In other words, after it was written, the song was sung year after year by the “singers at the watering places” along the roads in Israel, who entertained waiting travelers (perhaps hoping for a tip, like someone playing the guitar in a subway station) with tales of the “victories of the Lord.”

Do you know of any songs that were written to commemorate something special that God did in the life of a community of believers? Has this ever happened in a community you were part of? If so, tell the group about it.

Encourage any songwriters in your group (or in your church, if you’re using this guide as part of a community Bible experience) to write songs to commemorate your shared experience of the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, or any other occasion when you’ve seen God work in your midst.

Barak shows great courage by leading his army down onto the plain where Sisera’s chariots are. But earlier he seems to lack courage. He tells Deborah, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.” There’s nothing wrong with Barak wanting Deborah along. She’s very willing to accompany him. But Barak shouldn’t put conditions on his obedience. He recognizes Deborah as a prophet, so when she tells him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you” to attack Sisera, he should obey unconditionally. Because he doesn’t, the “honor” of his victory in battle will be diminished. God will deliver Sisera into the hands of an unlikely captor: Jael, a humble nomadic woman who’s not even an Israelite.

Do you think Barak would have received “honor” from this victory if he hadn’t put conditions on his obedience? In other words, do you think God likes to reward with honor those who exercise bold, unconditional faith in him? Explain.

By delivering Sisera into the hands of Jael, God is stressing how much this victory depends on his own divine power. By announcing ahead of time that this will happen, is God punishing Barak or reassuring him? (Consider that Barak is named as a hero of the faith in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament.)

The first prologue to Judges explains that most of the Kenites, descendants of Moses’ father-in-law, settled in the southern part of Judah’s territory. However, one of them, a man named Heber, moved to the north of the country and settled near Kedesh. There he made an alliance with Jabin, siding with Israel’s enemy rather than with his clan’s adopted nation. But his wife Jael still sympathized with Israel. Knowing that Sisera would count on her to help him, she invited him into her family’s tent and appeared to extend hospitality and protection. But while Sisera was unsuspectingly sleeping, she grabbed a hammer and a tent peg and “crushed his head.”

Deborah and Barak’s song says Jael is the “most blessed of women” because of what she did. Do you agree? Was this warfare, conducted with the only weapons available (like
Shamgar’s oxgoad)? Or was it murder? Put Jael on trial for the murder of Sisera, with a district attorney arguing for a conviction and a defense attorney insisting that she was a combatant who killed an enemy in war and so can’t be prosecuted. One member of your group can take the part of the judge and conduct the trial. The lawyers can ask other group members to take the part of any witnesses they want to call (Heber, Barak, Jael, Deborah, Israelites oppressed by Jabin, etc.). The rest of the group can be the jury and deliberate to reach a verdict.
GIDEON ANSWERS THE LORD’S CALL TO FIGHT THE MIDIANITES

INTRODUCTION

After Deborah and Barak’s victory over Jabin, the Israelites are free from oppression for forty years. But then they turn away from the Lord to worship Canaanite gods again. The Lord allows them to be overrun by the “Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples.” These are nomadic tribes who live out in the desert east of Moab and Ammon. Discovering the weakness of Israel’s confederation, they regularly cross the Jordan in the north, at the Valley of Jezreel, and from there they plunder the land all the way south to Gath. They’re not interested in capturing the cities and settling in the land themselves. They just want to carry off all the crops and livestock, and leave the people in place to grow more for them the next year. The Israelites are impoverished and reduced to hiding “in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.” They cry out to the Lord for deliverance, and he sends a prophet who reminds them of everything the Lord has done for them, and how they owe him their exclusive allegiance. This sets the stage for the “angel of the Lord” to visit a young man from an insignificant clan in the tribe of Manasseh and call him to deliver Israel.

Place names that appear in bold in sessions 14 and 15 can be found on the map on page 75.

READING

Read the first part of the story of Gideon out loud like a play. Begin where the Israelites once again do “evil in the eyes of the Lord,” and end where Gideon sends all but 300 of his soldiers home. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- The prophet
- The angel of the Lord/the Lord/God
- Gideon
- People of the town
- Joash (Gideon’s father)

DISCUSSION

1 The “angel of the Lord” is an embodiment of the Lord himself. He represents God on earth, in his dealings with the nation and particular individuals. (He’s appeared once before in Judges, in the first prologue.) When the angel of the Lord speaks, the Lord himself speaks, as the text often indicates. God has come personally to call Gideon to “save Israel out of Midian’s hand.”

Gideon knows the story of God’s great historical deliverances. But he can’t find his place in that story, because in his day, it isn’t continuing as it began. If the Lord really is with Israel, Gideon knows, they shouldn’t be defeated by their enemies. The Lord tells Gideon he’s just about to get the story back on track, and wants him to help.

To be sure this is really God speaking, Gideon asks him to accept a meat and grain offering. The Lord not only accepts it, showing that his favor and blessing rest on Gideon, he consumes it with fire that “flares from the rock.” This assures Gideon of God’s power as well as his presence.

When Gideon is told, “The Lord is with you,” he counters, “Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about?” Do you understand the story of God in such a way that you expect amazing things to happen wherever God gets involved? Or do you have a different script in your head, which says that
God basically comforts and encourages people, but shouldn’t be expected to make headlines anymore? Explain.

2 Gideon’s first order of business is to tear down his father’s altar to Baal, along with the Asherah pole beside it. All Israel needs to know that a family that worships the Lord has delivered the nation, not one that worships Canaanite gods.

Gideon tears down Baal’s altar and builds a proper one to the Lord. As God commands, he sacrifices the second-oldest bull from his father’s herd. This bull is seven years old and so represents the sins that have led to these seven years of oppression. God asks for it because he wants to accept it as a sin offering for the nation.

The people of the town want to put Gideon to death for this. But his father, Joash, is impressed that Gideon has already survived the night without suffering Baal’s wrath, and persuades everyone to take a wait-and-see approach. If Baal is really a god, he can defend his own altar. If he doesn’t, then Joash is prepared to follow his youngest son back to the Lord.

The townspeople agree, but they’re not taking any chances. They give Gideon a new name, Jerub-Baal, marking him as the one who tore down the altar. The name is almost a curse: “Let Baal deal with this man!” But when nothing happens to Gideon, his new name takes on a different connotation: “This is the man who dealt with Baal.”

Do you have an equivalent to Joash’s Baal altar in your life? If so, how can you tear it down? (You can do this “at night,” without telling everyone exactly what you need to do to be completely devoted to God, unless some public restitution or reconciliation is required.)

Have younger members of your family (siblings, children, grandchildren, etc.) ever helped inspire you to deeper devotion to God? If so, how?

3 The next time the “eastern peoples” invade the country, the Spirit of the Lord comes on Gideon, and he summons Israel’s armies to oppose them. Those of his own clan, the Abiezrites, are the first to follow him. The fact that Gideon hasn’t met an untimely death at the hands of Baal has convinced them to follow the Lord. Gideon also calls the armies of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali to battle. The Midianites and their allies are camped in the Valley of Jezreel, in the midst of Issachar’s territory, so Gideon can’t raise an army from that tribe. But he assembles the forces of all the surrounding tribes on Mount Gilboa (called Mount Gilead in this story), overlooking this valley.

Gideon then asks God for a special sign of his presence and help. He’s not looking for guidance. Rather, he’s seeking reassurance about the outcome of a course he’s taken in obedience to guidance already received. He knows that if he goes into battle without being certain of God’s help, he could get all of the 32,000 soldiers who’ve followed him killed.

Gideon doesn’t just ask for a sign. He asks for a miracle. God’s power is seen in its magnitude and precision. The first night, the ground remains completely dry, while the fleece Gideon sets out gets thoroughly soaked with dew. (Gideon wrings out a giant bowl full of water—that’s the meaning of the Hebrew term used here.) The next night, something even more amazing happens: dew falls all over the ground, but the fleece remains dry.

Have you ever heard followers of Jesus talk about “putting out a fleece” to seek guidance from God? This is when a person decides that if a certain thing happens, they’ll take one course, but if it doesn’t, they’ll take another. If you can, give examples of “fleeces” you’ve heard or seen people use. How is this similar to, and different from, what Gideon does here? Would you recommend “putting out a fleece” as a means of seeking guidance? Why or why not?

4 God tells Gideon to reduce the size of his army so that when the Midianites are defeated, Israel won’t boast, “My own strength has saved me.” Gideon first sends home everyone who’s afraid. This reduces the army from 32,000 to 10,000. But this is still too many. So God has Gideon test the soldiers at a brook. Those who squat down and scoop out the water with their hands, all the time remaining alert and ready for battle, can stay.
get down on all fours and “lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps,” letting down their guard, have to go. This leaves only 300 soldiers. But they’re the most courageous and capable ones. This battle will be won by the power of God, but that power needs human channels to work through, and God has retained the channels he can count on most.

Which of the following do you need to be a more effective channel of God’s power?

a. Bolder faith
b. Greater skill in the area you’re called to work in
c. Both of these things
d. Something else (name it)

What practical steps can you take to become more courageous and more capable, so that you’re available to God for the widest range of assignments?

Do you have too many resources for God’s glory to be seen clearly in your life? How can you give up some resources, or not depend on them, so that you and others won’t think that “your own strength has saved you” when God works through you?

Gideon has sent almost all of his army away, but God gives him fresh assurance that he can still defeat the Midianites. Gideon is energized by a dream he hears recounted and interpreted in the enemy camp, and he mobilizes his remaining men for a night attack. It’s 300 against an invading force that has “settled in the valley, thick as locusts.” But the Lord has told Gideon, “Go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands.” So in the middle of the night, he creeps down toward the Midianite forces . . .
READING

Read the rest of the story of Gideon out loud like a play. Begin where Gideon and his servant Purah go down into the camp of Midian, and end where Gideon dies and is buried. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- The Lord
- Midianite soldier who has a dream
- His friend who interprets the dream
- Gideon
- The Ephraimites
- Officials of Sukkoth
- Zeba and Zalmunna (have two actors speak alternate lines)

DISCUSSION

1 God has already given Gideon guidance and reassurance in several extraordinary ways: by appearing to him as the “angel of the Lord,” by consuming his offering with flames, and by granting his requests to use the fleece as a sign. Now God speaks to him through another extraordinary means. Gideon arrives in the Midianite camp just in time to hear a soldier recount a dream and his friend interpret it.

In the dream, the tent represents the forces of the nomadic, tent-dwelling Midianites and their allies. The barley loaf represents the settled, agricultural Israelites. Barley was a cheap grain that only the poor ate; this symbolizes how Israel has been impoverished by years of plundering. But the little loaf smashes and flattens the tent, foreshadowing how Gideon’s small force will destroy the Midianite hordes. When Gideon sees how the enemy soldiers are already expecting defeat, he returns to his men and plans a bold attack.

- Has God ever spoken to you in an extraordinary way, such as through a dream or a remarkable sign? Why do you think God used this means on that occasion? Was there something about your situation that called for more than ordinary guidance?

- How can you tell whether a particular dream might be a message from God and not just an ordinary dream?

2 Gideon’s attack is calculated and timed for maximum impact. Soldiers with trumpets and torches typically went at the head of an army, so the Midianites think there are many more soldiers behind the ones they can see and hear. The attack comes “at the beginning of the middle watch,” when soldiers coming on and off duty are moving through the camp, so those who are roused from sleep think the invaders are already among them. The Midianites are leading a coalition of many different nations, so it’s difficult for them to tell friend from foe, particularly at night. But ultimately the attack succeeds because “the Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords.” Gideon has done all he can, with courage and good strategy, and the Lord does the rest.

As the Midianites flee, Gideon brings back the rest of his army, and they chase the enemy down to the south. The armies of Ephraim are called to join the battle and they block the southern fords of the Jordan. As a result, 120,000 Midianites are slain, and only 15,000 make it back across the river. But the Ephraimites, who consider themselves the leading tribe in Israel, nevertheless feel slighted and demand to know why they weren’t asked to join the campaign to begin with. Gideon appeases them by insisting that their capture of Oreb and Zeeb, Midian’s generals, is a greater accomplishment than his defeat of their entire army. In this culture where enemy leaders are the ultimate prize in battle, this argument works.

- What percentage of the victory over Midian would you say is due to the courage and strategy of Gideon and his troops, and what percentage is due to the Lord’s intervention, which caused the enemy soldiers to turn against one another? Does God ever bring us into a situation where we’re expected to contribute 0% to the ultimate solution? What percentage of a victory can humans be allowed to contribute before they’re tempted to say, “My own strength has saved me”?

- How do you think Gideon was able to respond humbly and prudently to the Ephraimites? What do you think would have happened if Gideon had answered them arrogantly and confrontationally?
With their army virtually wiped out, the Midianites probably won’t trouble Israel again for a very long time. But Gideon wants total victory. He and his hand-picked 300 men pursue the fleeing enemy across the Jordan and, following the “route of the nomads,” track them all the way to their home base of Karkor. In a surprise attack they destroy the remaining force and capture the two kings, Zeba and Zalmunna.

Gideon asks the Israelite cities of Sukkoth and Peniel, east of the Jordan in the territory of Gad, to feed his weary troops. Both cities refuse, knowing how vulnerable they’ll be to Midianite reprisals if Gideon’s attack fails. When Gideon returns in triumph, he punishes both cities. Back in Deborah’s time, there was resentment against the tribes that wouldn’t help fight an enemy. Now there’s violence against them. This will only grow worse as Israel’s tribal confederation fractures further in the years ahead.

Where do you think Gideon got the idea that “saving Israel out of Midian’s hand” meant more than expelling these enemies from the nation’s territory? Why did he understand his mission to include pursuing them far into the desert and exterminating them at their home base? How do you understand the work God has given you to do? What would it look like for you to take it a big step farther than you might currently be envisioning?

Retell this part of the story from the perspective of one of the elders of Sukkoth, beginning when Gideon’s weary troops come into your town. Why do you decide not to feed them? What do you expect will happen to them out in the desert? Do you deserve the punishment they inflict when they return? (What do those thorns and briers feel like?) Do you learn anything about the Lord through all of this?

Gideon responds well to some of the challenges of success. The Israelites offer to let his family rule Israel for three generations, but he refuses, insisting, “The Lord will rule over you.” But he can’t resist some other rewards. He asks for a huge quantity of gold in payment for his services, and this gets turned into a sacred object that gets worshipped as an idol. Gideon also takes a concubine in Shechem and names her son Abimelek, which means, “My father is king.” Even though he’s refused the crown, when he’s away from home he’s acting as if he really has become king. This secret life that Gideon cultivates, fantasizing about the forsaken rewards of victory, will have disastrous effects for his family and the nation in the next generation, as we’ll see in session 16.

When a person achieves fame, fortune, and status, they encounter much stronger temptations than when they’re struggling to overcome adversity. How can a person prepare to face these stronger temptations even while they’re on the way to “success”?

Do you have a secret life in which you permit yourself indulgences you’d never acknowledge in public? If so, pray urgently that God would help you to get real and give up fantasies that could destroy you and your family and friends. Speak with a pastor or counselor to get more help with this.

Leadership studies show that in the wider community of Jesus’ followers, only one out of five leaders finishes well.* The rest fall to the temptations of money, pride, or sex, or they plateau, settling for a comfortable routine and never fulfilling their leadership potential. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is failure that permanently tarnishes the reputation of a previously faithful and successful person, and 10 is lifelong consistency in obeying God and being used in ever-greater ways for his purposes, where would you put Gideon at the end of his life? (As benchmarks, name people that you would consider a 1 and a 10.) What kind of a finish are you heading for right now? What would you say are the keys to finishing well?

* This information and terminology comes from J. Robert Clinton’s research in leadership studies at Fuller Seminary. For an introduction to his work, see his book *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988).
ABIMELEK MURDERS HIS BROTHERS AND MAKES HIMSELF KING

**INTRODUCTION**

When Gideon takes a concubine (secondary wife), has a child with her, and names him Abimelek, “my father is king,” he’s creating a deadly mixture: an outcast son with grand ambitions. Once Abimelek grows to adulthood, he gets his mother’s clan to persuade the leaders of Shechem to help him murder all of his half-brothers (who’d have a better claim to any throne) and anoint him king over Israel. But this sets a cycle of violence in motion that spirals out of control and ultimately consumes all of these original conspirators.

Place names that appear in **bold** in the remaining sessions can be found on the map on page 86.
READING

Read the story of Abimelek out loud like a play, beginning where the Israelites worship Baal again after Gideon dies, and ending where God repays the wickedness of Abimelek and Shechem by making the curse of Jotham come on them. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Abimelek
- Citizens of Shechem
- Jotham
- Gaal
- Zebul

DISCUSSION

1 After Gideon’s death, Israel falls into deep apostasy. The city of Shechem becomes a center of Baal worship. A temple is built to him there under the name “Baal-Berith,” meaning “Baal of the covenant.” At the very place where the Israelites once swore loyalty to the Lord as their covenant God, they now claim that their covenant is with Baal. And they begin to take on the character of this bloodthirsty god. The leaders of Shechem help Abimelek slaughter his seventy brothers, and they crown him king “beside the great tree at the pillar in Shechem,” that is, at the stone Joshua set up as a witness of their promise to serve the Lord alone.

☞ What do you think were God’s primary emotions when the Israelites called Baal their covenant god and built him a temple at Shechem? Anger? Grief? Hurt? Betrayal? Other things? What might a believer do today that would provoke these same emotions in God?

2 Jotham stands atop Mount Gerizim and shouts down a parable to the participants in Abimelek’s coronation ceremony. In it, the olive tree, fig tree, and grape vine decline to become king over the other trees because they’re busy with important agricultural work. Only the useless thorn bush has nothing better to do than prance around as king. But even this bush is suspicious that the other trees might abandon him as capriciously as they crowned him, and he warns this will lead to violence. Jotham’s parable presents a double warning, against Abimelek’s idle ambition and against his supporters’ fickle loyalty. Then, from the very height where the Israelites once shouted out curses for disobeying the Lord (session 6), Jotham shouts down curses on Abimelek and his followers.

☞ Why do you think Jotham told this parable of the trees, instead of expressing his warnings more literally?

3 Abimelek makes Arumah his headquarters and appoints deputies to run the cities under his control. (It’s not clear how much of Israel’s territory he actually holds, but he has a foothold in the center of the land.) The Hebrew doesn’t say that he “reigns” legitimately. Rather, it uses a term for oppressive, despotic rule. After three years, to repay Abimelek for his treachery, God “stirs up animosity” (“sends a bad spirit” or “evil spirit”) between him and his followers. Gaal is able to persuade the citizens of Shechem to betray Abimelek as easily as Abimelek was able to persuade them to betray Gideon’s legal sons. This leads to a messy conflict in which Shechem is destroyed and Beth Millo (its tower) is burned up, killing everyone in it. Jotham’s curse is fulfilled literally: “Let fire come out from Abimelek and consume you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo!” But Jotham also cursed Abimelek and he, too, is killed while trying to enforce his rule over Thebez. (This city has probably rebelled like Shechem.) Abimelek’s only legacy is that he manages, on a technicality, to avoid the disgrace of being killed by a physically weaker opponent. Or so he thinks. Later in the Bible we discover that Abimelek did become known as a warrior who was killed by a woman. The cycle of violence he began has ended in his own destruction and disgrace.

☞ Abimelek’s experience with the citizens of Shechem shows that anyone who will be disloyal for you is also likely to be disloyal to you. Think of some contemporary examples to illustrate this principle. How can you identify a loyal person who will make a trustworthy friend and supporter? (What personal characteristics will they have?)
How much divine intervention was required to bring Jotham’s curse upon Abimelek and his followers? Did the “bad spirit” have to work overtime, or could it just reinforce the tendencies the leaders of Shechem had already chosen to follow? Comment on the following statement: “Being cursed is when God ceases to save you from yourself.”

JEPHTHAH DELIVERS ISRAEL FROM THE AMMONITES

INTRODUCTION

Abimelek, the anti-judge, is followed by two legitimate judges, Tola and Jair. Very little is said about them, but we can infer that as judges they defended the country and helped keep it faithful to the Lord.

Unfortunately, after Jair dies, the Israelites turn farther than ever away from the Lord. They worship the gods of all the surrounding nations. God allows them to be oppressed by the Philistines in the west and the Ammonites in the east. Even when the Israelites cry out for deliverance, the Lord won’t help them at first. But when they get rid of all their foreign gods and throw themselves unconditionally on his mercy, he raises up judges to save them: Jephthah in the east and Samson in the west. But the outlook and way of life that accompanies the worship of foreign gods has become so deeply ingrained in Israel that these two men, even as they show great faith and courage and serve as instruments of the Spirit, are deeply flawed. We’ll look at the story of Jephthah in this session and at Samson’s story in the next two sessions. (Be prepared to encounter some very troubling material.)
READING

Have two people read the short accounts of the judges Tola and Jair.

Then read the story of Jephthah out loud like a play, beginning where the Israelites again do “evil in the eyes of the Lord,” and ending where Jephthah dies and is buried. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Israelites
- The Lord
- Leaders/elders of Gilead
- Jephthah’s brothers
- Jephthah
- Ammonite king
- Jephthah’s messengers
- Jephthah’s daughter
- Ephraimites

DISCUSSION

1. It wasn’t unusual for an Israelite who was counting on the Lord to make a vow, as Jephthah did. This was a promise to acknowledge God publicly when he brought deliverance. Vows like this are described often in the Psalms, for example, in Psalm 66:

   I will come to your temple with burnt offerings
   and fulfill my vows to you—
   vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke
   when I was in trouble.

   There would have been nothing wrong with Jephthah’s vow if he had only known the law. Moses allowed the Israelites to offer anyone or anything they wanted to the Lord in payment of a vow, but it specified that if they dedicated a human being, they had to “redeem” that person by offering the value of their labor instead. (These regulations are found at the end of the book of Leviticus.) Jephthah should have paid ten shekels of silver into the Lord’s treasury, rather than sacrificing his daughter as a burnt offering. But by now the Israelites were so used to Baal worship, which included human sacrifices, that they were actually prepared to offer human sacrifices to the Lord—even though he had expressly forbidden them in the law. And so Jephthah’s daughter suffered a horrific fate.

   However, apart from his ignorance of the law and these tragic consequences, Jephthah is in other ways an exemplary judge. He continually acknowledges the Lord as the one who delivered Israel in the past and who should be trusted to do so again. The narrative says that the “Spirit of the Lord” was on him, and that “the Lord gave [the Ammonites] into his hands.” The book of Hebrews names him as a hero of the faith.

   How would you rank Jephthah by comparison with the other judges you’ve met so far, such as Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Barak, and Gideon? Which judges were the greatest, and why? Which ones weren’t so great? Why weren’t they?

   Was Jephthah the best man he could have been, given his nation’s state of spiritual decline? Or could he have been better? If so, how?

   What consequences do you see in your own culture of an ignorance of God’s ways? What activities are accepted, perhaps without question, that God doesn’t want people to practice?

2. The king of Ammon argues that the land between the Arnon and Jabbok rivers, from the Jordan to the desert, rightfully belongs to his people, not Israel. Jephthah replies that the Israelites had no designs on this land until its king attacked them when they were coming as refugees from Egypt. “The Lord, the God of Israel,” defeated this former king and gave Israel his land. Jephthah concludes that Israel is entitled to all the land their God has given them, and that the Ammonites should be content with the little that their god Chemosh has been able to retain for them. This isn’t political, Jephthah insists; it’s a struggle between gods, and his God is stronger.
Disputes over land continue to this very day in this same part of the world. Do you believe that the modern state of Israel should be able to keep any land it has acquired, on the grounds that God must have taken it from weaker spiritual forces and given it to Israel? Or do you believe that the problem really is political, not religious, and that this land can and should be (re)allocated in whatever way best makes for peaceful coexistence in the region?

In the time of Deborah, the tribes east of the Jordan didn’t answer the call to come fight against Sisera. They also wouldn’t help Gideon when he was pursuing the Midianites. And the Ephraimites, for their part, didn’t answer Jephthah’s pleas for help when his land was overrun by the Ammonites.

But now, jealous of the spoils and glory of victory, the Ephraimites cross the Jordan in force and demand to know why they weren’t summoned to lead the fight against the Ammonites. The Gileadites (eastern tribes) are enraged when they’re insulted as “renegades” and they strike back violently. Jephthah and his forces seize the fords of the Jordan and use a difference in dialect (Ephraimites said “s” where Gileadites said “sh”) to identify those who are trying to flee back across the Jordan. They slaughter 42,000 men.

The Ephraimites and Gileadites should be rejoicing together over God’s deliverance from a common enemy. Instead, they turn savagely against one another. What attitudes on both sides lead to this? Have you ever seen a community of Jesus’ followers torn apart by division in a time of great spiritual advances? What factors would you say are responsible for this? How can unity be preserved?

SESSION 18

SAMSON PICKS A FIGHT WITH THE PHILISTINES

INTRODUCTION

Jephthah has defeated the Ammonites in the east, but the Philistines are still oppressing the Israelites in the west. They’re a stronger and more entrenched enemy, operating out of five cities on the Mediterranean coast that are outposts of a sea-based empire. Israel will struggle for many years to get free from them.

Samson will be the first to fight against the Philistines. (The story of Israel’s struggle against them continues in the biblical book of Samuel–Kings.) After three other judges are described briefly, Samson’s story is told at some length. We’ll look at the first part of it in this session and finish it in the next one.

READING

Have three people read the short accounts of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.
Then read the first part of the story of Samson out loud like a play, beginning where the Israelites again do “evil in the eyes of the Lord,” and ending where Samson angrily leaves his own wedding feast. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Angel of the Lord
- Manoah
- Manoah’s wife
- Samson
- Samson’s companions/men of the town
- Samson’s wife

DISCUSSION

1 We aren’t told much about Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon, but we do get hints of how they tried to promote more cohesion among the Israelite tribes. By going outside his own clan to get spouses for his many sons and daughters, Ibzan creates a wide network of contacts and allies. Abdon has his many sons and grandsons ride around the country on their donkeys so they can inform him of the latest news and bring him disputes to settle.

- If you had lived in this place and time, what do you think your life would have been like? How many wives, and how many children, would your father have had? What kind of marriage would he have arranged for you? If you wanted to help Israel remain faithful to the Lord, how could you have used the resources and customs of this culture to do that?

- Decide who in your group comes from, or has lived in, the culture that’s most similar to the one described here. What insights can they share about how God’s purposes can be advanced in contexts like these?

2 The angel of the Lord appears to Manoah’s wife, who hasn’t been able to have children, and announces that she’s going to have a son. The boy has to live in a particular way. The law of Moses provides for people to take a special “Nazirite” vow if they want to spend a season of their lives especially devoted to God. During that time, they can’t cut their hair or drink any alcoholic beverages, and they have to be careful to maintain ceremonial cleanness. At the end of this season, they return to their normal activities. But Samson will be a Nazirite for his entire life, showing that he’s been brought into the world for a special purpose, to “take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines.”

- How can a person today spend a special season of their life particularly devoted to God? Share the story of anyone you know who’s done this, or the story of the closest thing to it you’ve done yourself.

- Judges says that Samson “grew and the Lord blessed him, and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him.” The word translated “stir” means to push or kick something forward. What do you think this looked like in Samson’s case? If you have children, can you see the Spirit “stirring” them? To do what? Did the Spirit “stir” you when you were growing up?

3 Samson tells his parents to get him a certain Philistine woman as his wife. His parents want him to marry an Israelite woman instead (as the law says he should). But Samson insists, “She’s the right one for me.” He says literally, “She’s right in my eyes.” This is the same phrase the author of Judges uses at the end of the book: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit,” literally “everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” The lawlessness that will eventually sum up this whole period is Samson’s personal rule of life: do what you think best, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

But the author of Judges sees God at work even in these circumstances: “This was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines, for at that time they were ruling over Israel.” This could be paraphrased, “God wanted to pick a fight with the Philistines, because he was tired of them oppressing the Israelites.” Israel was passively accepting Philistine domination; later in Samson’s story, the men of Judah will ask,
“Don’t you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us?” No, Samson doesn’t “realize” this. And apparently God doesn’t, either.

Who does God want to pick a fight with around you? That is, what circumstances or arrangements have you accepted as normal that God wants to shake up and change?

What, exactly, do you think was “from the LORD” here: Samson’s meeting with this Philistine woman? His desire to marry her? His obstinacy in refusing his parents’ counsel? Something else? Does God work even through our bad choices and attitudes? If Samson had honored his parents and married an Israelite woman, would this have thwarted the purposes of God?

Bridegrooms in this culture ordinarily bring a number of companions with them to their wedding feast. When Samson shows up solo, the Philistines supply these companions for him. Guessing riddles is a common entertainment of this time. Samson is so confident he has an impossible riddle that he makes an extravagant wager on it. The “sets of clothes” described here are very valuable, so if Samson wins this bet, he’ll take a small fortune from his hosts. But they’re able to learn the secret through his wife. The Spirit of the LORD “comes powerfully upon him” (“rushes upon him”). He goes to the coastal city of Ashkelon (where luxury clothes can be found), kills thirty men, takes their clothes, and pays off the bet. The conflict between him and the Philistines has begun.

What alternatives did Samson’s wife have to prying the riddle out of him through emotional manipulation? For example, what would have happened if she’d come to Samson and asked him, as her husband, to protect her from the men who were threatening to burn her and her father alive?

Do you think the Spirit of the LORD gives Samson exceptional strength on this occasion but leaves him responsible for what he does with it? Or does the Spirit actually guide him to go to Ashkelon and kill these Philistines? Explain.
INTRODUCTION

When Samson gets over being angry with his wife, he goes back to see her, only to discover she’s been given to another man. He swears he’ll “get even with the Philistines,” and this leads to an escalating cycle of violence. It culminates in a great victory for Samson that gives Israel relief from Philistine domination for many years. But eventually, his fatal weakness brings him right back into a situation where a Philistine woman is wearing him down to find out a secret—in this case, the secret of his strength itself. If it’s discovered, he’ll become “as weak as any other man,” and no longer able to deliver Israel from its oppressors.

DISCUSSION

1 Samson sees his world in simple terms. There are Israelites, and there are Philistines. If one Philistine does him wrong, he needs to strike back against that nation to even the score. He seems to feel regret for overreacting and killing thirty men when the Philistines got his wife to betray him. But “this time,” he says, “I have a right to get even.” He destroys the entire harvest of the surrounding area.

The Philistines don’t consider that things are now even. To take their own revenge, they burn his wife and father-in-law to death. This leads to wider and wider violence that ultimately culminates in a great slaughter and an uneasy cessation of hostilities, only because the Philistines don’t feel strong enough to confront Samson. But they never stop working to capture him, and they ultimately succeed. Still, the feud doesn’t end there. Samson’s final prayer is, “Let me . . . get revenge on the Philistines.”

Because Samson sees the world in simple, tribal, blood-feud terms, the Israelites are delivered from Philistine oppression for many years. Nothing else is leading any of them to oppose the Philistines at this time. The tribe of Judah has three thousand men who could follow Samson as their warrior champion into battle, but instead they come to tie him up and hand him over, saying, “Don’t you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us?” Samson’s readiness to feud may have been the only tool God had available to pick a
fight with the Philistines. But just because God makes use of this tool on this occasion, this doesn’t mean he approves of feuding. Samson’s story also shows that both parties in a feud will always be trying to even the score and it will only end when one or both of them is destroyed.

What examples can you give of present-day feuds? (For example, within families, or in politics, or in long-running conflicts between ethnic and religious groups.) Are you aware of conflicts among followers of Jesus that may have begun with disagreements over beliefs and practices, but which have now become highly personalized and taken on many of the characteristics of a feud? What effects do conflicts like these have? How can they be resolved?

Like Jephthah, Samson is a flawed hero. In some ways, he’s a great judge. He wins significant victories over Israel’s enemies. In answer to his prayers, God even brings water from a rock—a Moses-like miracle. But Samson has a fatal weakness. He’s never disciplined his eyes or his desires, so that when he sees a woman he wants, he can’t resist her. He sees Delilah try out each of the different means he describes for subduing him, but he still lets her wear him down. Each time he tells her something closer to the truth, until he finally reveals his secret. God is giving him a “do-over,” a chance to learn from his first experience of letting a woman pry a secret out of him. But even given this second chance, Samson fails.

Samson’s story illustrates that the longer a person flirts with temptation, the closer they come to giving in. It also shows that a person will inevitably be worn down by words if the person who’s trying to persuade them is persistent enough. The only way to escape a situation like this is to get out of it.

Are you in a situation where you’re coming closer and closer to doing something you know is wrong or where someone is persistently trying to wear you down? Resolve right now, before God, to get out of the situation, and ask God to show you an escape route you can take immediately. Find a friend you can share and pray with about this.

Do you have a fatal weakness that’s making you vulnerable to temptation and defeat, and preventing God from using you effectively for his purposes? As a group, pray that God will enable each member to find the disciplines, resources, and accountability relationships they need to build self-control and greater spiritual strength into their lives. (Group members should speak with a pastor or counselor to get more help as needed.)

Would you like God to give you a “do-over,” a second chance to meet a particular kind of challenge? How will you prepare now to respond better when God gives you another chance?

In the story, it almost appears that Samson’s strength comes from his long hair. His strength is actually a divine gift that enables him to fulfill his special role as Israel’s deliverer. But his long hair is a necessary sign of that role. It shows he’s a Nazirite, dedicated to God. Without this sign, his exploits could be attributed to his own power or even to another god. So his responsibility is to maintain the public evidence of his Nazirite status so that the Lord will always receive glory for Israel’s deliverance.

When Samson reveals his secret and Delilah shaves his head, he fails in this responsibility, and he forfeits the divine gift that was entrusted to him on this condition. But when his hair grows back, he has the opportunity once again to deliver Israel as someone who’s visibly dedicated to God. His strength returns and he kills more Philistines in death than he did in life. And he wins a victory over the Philistine god Dagon by destroying his temple.

What kinds of things do people in your culture do, or not do, as a sign that they’re dedicated to God for a particular purpose, or in a particular area of life? Do you think that maintaining this sign gives them greater spiritual strength?

A girl in a church youth group goes to a “True Love Waits” conference and pledges before God that she won’t have sex until she’s married. She gets a pendant to wear around her neck as a sign of this pledge. A couple of years later she has a boyfriend
who tells her he doesn’t think the pendant is very attractive and wonders aloud why she has to wear it all the time. If she takes the pendant off to please him, will she still have the same amount of spiritual strength behind her resolution? It’s just a piece of jewelry, right? Or is it?

THE PEOPLE OF THE TRIBE OF DAN BECOME IDOL WORSHIPPERS

INTRODUCTION

After telling the stories of twelve individual judges, the book of Judges concludes with two accounts that illustrate the general conditions of this period when “Israel had no king.” The book’s author has been making the case that Israel should have a godly king. The stories of the judges have shown that it’s not sufficient to rely on leaders who arise spontaneously, because as soon as they die, the people turn back to their old ways. This description of general conditions now reinforces the case for a king by documenting how deeply corrupted the nation became without consistent national spiritual leadership. The first account, which we’ll look at in this session, shows how the people of an entire tribe became idol worshippers shortly after Moses and Joshua died.

READING

Read the story of how Micah made an idol and the Danites took it from him when they went to conquer Laish. Begin where Micah admits to his mother that he took her silver, and end where the Danites make Jonathan and his sons their priests and the narrator says for the third time, “In those days Israel had no king.” (If you’re using a different edition of the Bible, this phrase
The people of the tribe of Dan become idol worshippers.

May be attached to the beginning of the next account.) Read the story like a play and have people take these parts:

- Narrator
- Micah
- Micah’s mother
- The Levite (Jonathan)
- The Danites
- The five spies

Discussion

1 When Micah returns his mother’s silver, she announces, “I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord.” This would ordinarily mean she’s contributing it to the tabernacle at Shiloh. But instead she says it’s “for my son to make an image overlaid with silver.” He sets this idol up in a shrine and installs one of his own sons as priest. And then he has what seems to him like a great stroke of fortune.

A Levite named Jonathan comes by “looking for a place to stay.” He’s a descendant of Gershom, so he could live in one of the Levite cities in Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, or east Manasseh that have been assigned to his clan. But he’s been sojourning instead, living wherever he can find a way to support himself, most recently in Bethlehem. When Micah learns he’s a Levite, he offers him a generous salary and benefits package to become his personal priest. Jonathan should decline, since the law of Moses said that only Levites who are descendants of Aaron can be priests. (And they’re supposed to serve the Lord at the central sanctuary in Shiloh anyway.) But Jonathan, clearly an opportunist, accepts, and Micah declares, “Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest.”

What things or people do those in your culture think will bring them “good luck” or “God’s blessing”? How widespread within your community of Jesus’ followers is the belief that these objects or people bring good fortune?

What qualifications do religious opportunists today claim to have? That is, how do they present themselves to make people think, “Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, thanks to this person who _____”? What are the danger signs that a religious-sounding person is actually an opportunist or con artist?

As the account continues, it shows what people become when they stop trusting in the Lord and start relying on idols. Idol-worship begins with a desire to get power to do what we want, and develops quickly into the belief that this power gives us the right to do what we want.

The tribe of Dan has failed to conquer its allotment, despite Joshua’s encouragement to the tribes with territory on the coast: “Though the Canaanites have chariots fitted with iron and though they are strong, you can drive them out.” Instead of boldly stepping out in faith, the Danites look for an easier place to conquer. The spies they send out stop at Micah’s house and Jonathan tells them, “Your journey has the Lord’s approval.” They take this to mean that any opportunity they encounter is one God wants them to take full advantage of. When they find the people of Laish living peacefully and securely in the far north of Israel, they decide to take their land, even though these people come from Sidon and aren’t among the nations God has authorized the Israelites to drive out.

On their way to Laish, the Danites steal Micah’s idol and persuade Jonathan to be their tribal priest. When Micah protests, they tell him, “Don’t argue with us, or some of the men may get angry and attack you, and you and your family will lose your lives.” Micah sees that they’re “too strong for him” and gives up. The Danites have adopted, and are enforcing, the principle that might makes right. They slaughter the unsuspecting people of Laish and set themselves up in their isolated territory. And for the rest of their time in the land of Canaan, they worship Micah’s idol, never rejoining the rest of Israel in serving the Lord.

Explain why you either agree or disagree with the following statement? “God gives us challenges that are way beyond us so we’ll rely closely on him. Looking for something easier to do is the same as saying we don’t want to be close to God.”
If you’re legitimately convinced that God has directed you to take a certain course of action, does this mean that any opportunity you encounter on that course comes from God and you should take advantage of it? If not, how can you determine which opportunities have God’s approval and blessing and which ones don’t?

THE CITY OF GIBEAH SHOWS IT’S AS WICKED AS SODOM AND GOMORRAH

INTRODUCTION

In the next two sessions we’ll look at the other account in the book of Judges that illustrates the general conditions of this period. This account describes a horrible atrocity that was committed by the men of Gibeah and the vast bloodshed that resulted when the entire tribe of Benjamin defended and protected these men instead of turning them over to justice. This account shows that with no allegiance to a central authority, the Israelites could put tribal loyalty ahead of the principles of justice embedded in the law of Moses. It also shows what anarchy the nation could fall into when “everyone did as they saw fit” and improvised solutions that actually created worse problems than the ones they were designed to fix.

After hearing of the chaos of this period, readers finish the book of Judges convinced that this nation does need some kind of central authority. This leads them into the story of the monarchy, which is told in Samuel–Kings. The book of Ruth introduces that story by describing an important aspect of King David’s family background.

But this conviction comes at a high price. Readers also finish the book of Judges horrified and traumatized by hearing how wickedly these people treated one another. The next two sessions will make for difficult reading and
discussion. Show special consideration to members of your group who have suffered from violence or who are close to people who have.

READING

Have one member of the group read the first part of this account aloud, beginning where it introduces the “Levite who lived in a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim” and ending where it describes how “Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand swordsmen, all of them fit for battle.”

DISCUSSION

Like Jonathan in the previous account, the Levite in this account is sojourning, living outside the cities assigned to his tribe. He has a “concubine,” that is, a woman he acquired as a slave but also married, so that he’s both her “husband” and her “master” (as the account says at different points). While many translations, including the NIV, say that she was “unfaithful to him,” the Hebrew may instead mean that she “became angry with him.” (If you’re using a different translation, it may say this in the text or in a footnote.) This would explain better why she’s welcomed back into her father’s house and why her husband has to come and “persuade her to return” (literally “speak to her heart,” speak gently to her). It may also explain why her father is reluctant to let her go and keeps delaying their departure until, on the fifth day, the Levite unwisely leaves in the afternoon, not giving himself enough time to get back to his own home before dark.

The Levite doesn’t want to seek overnight lodging in Jerusalem, because it’s still largely in Jebusite hands. He’s afraid that he and his companions will be abused in any city “whose people are not Israelites.” So he presses on to Gibeah in Benjamin. Initially “no one took them in for the night,” even though providing hospitality and protection to travelers was a sacred duty in the law of Moses. This is a first dark clue that the people of Gibeah don’t fear the Lord. An old man, a sojourner from the hill country of Ephraim, has settled among these Benjamites, and when he comes in from his work in the fields, he offers the party lodging in his home.

But their comforts are short-lived. Some “wicked men of the city” surround the house and demand that the Levite be surrendered to their sexual abuse. It’s a scene right out of Sodom and Gomorrah. The audience of Judges would know that story and be horrified to discover the same extreme wickedness in one of their own communities. But the men inside the house are just as guilty of victimizing, rather than protecting, the people who should be under their care. The old man offers the women under his roof to the mob as victims. The Levite literally “seizes” his concubine and throws her out to them. With his life on the line, he regards her as disposable property, not as the woman who’s his wife. After suffering a night of unimaginable abuse, she’s found at the doorway of the house, her hands on the threshold, reaching out for the hands inside that never pulled her back to safety.

In some settings in today’s world (prisons, gangs, etc.), groups of men still try to rape other men. Why do they do this? What is this act supposed to symbolize about the relative standing of the perpetrators and the victims? How can men measure themselves against other men without resorting to acts of destructive aggression—sexual, physical, commercial, political, or otherwise?

In what ways are women today treated as commodities, as disposable property? If a man looks at photos or video of a sexually trafficked woman, how different is he from the men in the mob at Gibeah? Are these acts different in kind or only in degree?

This account in the book of Judges looks beneath the surface to show what was really happening “at night” in the days when “Israel had no king.” If someone could see beneath the surface of your life, if they could see your life “at night,” would they conclude that it had no governing moral authority? Or would they decide that your thoughts, words, and actions were all ordered by the fear of the Lord?
After he returns to his home, the Levite dismembers his concubine’s body and sends the twelve pieces throughout Israel. This may have been a way of summoning all the tribes to gather together to reunite her body and to restore wholeness to the nation, by judging and executing the perpetrators to “purge the evil from Israel.” But the dismemberment and dispersion of the concubine’s body is still a further indignity she must endure after suffering a horrible death.

In her book *Texts of Terror*, Phyllis Trible argues that this concubine is a Christ figure. Her sacrificial death saved others, and her “body was broken and given to many.” What do you think of this interpretation? What implications might it have for our understanding of what Jesus did for us?

The Israelites convene a national judicial assembly and agree that the “wicked men of Gibeah” must be punished. But the Benjamites refuse to surrender them, giving their first loyalty to their own tribe, not to the demands of justice. The other tribes mobilize a huge army and converge on Gibeah. But it won’t be easy for them to take the city. The Benjamites call up their own troops, and these include some special forces. Like Ehud, the second judge (who was also from Benjamin), they’re left handed. The Hebrew literally calls them “bound in the right hand,” probably indicating some kind of military training that developed unexpected capabilities in the left hand by temporarily restricting the right. They’re experts at slinging stones, allowing them to attack from a distance while safe from counterattack. Benjamin’s terrain is mountainous and forbidding, and the tribe is also highly militarized, so it’s confident it can defy the combined forces of the rest of the nation.

Does having great military power lead a nation to act as if it doesn’t have to answer to international justice? Explain your thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

After describing the outcome of Israel’s war with the tribe of Benjamin, the closing account in the book of Judges shows how the nation’s leaders actually circumvented the principles of justice as they improvised solutions to problems of their own making, in these days when “Israel had no king” and “everyone did as they saw fit.”

READING

Have someone read the rest of this account aloud for the group, beginning where you left off last time and reading through to the end of the book.

DISCUSSION

With an overwhelming advantage in troops, and with repeated encouragement from the Lord, the Israelites attack the Benjamite army defending Gibeah. They expect to capture the city and bring the men who committed the horrible crime there to justice. But in their first attack and their second,
the Israelites suffer great casualties and are driven back in defeat. (As we saw in the last session, the tribe of Benjamin is highly militarized and its terrain is mountainous and difficult to attack.) The Israelites ask the Lord’s guidance once more and he promises them victory. They’re able to defeat the Benjamites in a third attack, but this experience shows how difficult it can be to oppose entrenched evil. Overcoming it may require prolonged and costly sacrifice.

What situations of entrenched evil do you know about in the world today that will require a sustained sacrificial campaign to overcome? What can you do to offer encouragement to those fighting against this evil, to let them know that God wants them to prevail and that they have your support? How can you become part of their efforts?

The Israelites believe they’re fighting a just war to bring the “wicked men of Gibeah” to justice. But this escalates into a holy war. They treat the Benjamites just like the Canaanites, even though the Lord hasn’t authorized this. After defeating Benjamin’s army, they kill all the people and animals and burn the cities to the ground. Only afterward do they realize that this extreme use of force has virtually exterminated one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

What do you think led the Israeliite armies to use such excessive force? Based on your answer, how would you say they could have restrained themselves and only inflicted damage and casualties necessary and proportionate to their aims?

Look up the “principles of a just war” on the Internet. (For example, see www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pol116/justwar.htm.) How well do Israel’s armies uphold these principles in the course of this campaign? Does Israel’s assembly have any viable alternatives to war in this instance if it wants to uphold justice in the nation?

The Israelite assembly tries to find wives for the 600 surviving men of Benjamin so they can rebuild their tribe. But to do this, the assembly compromises the very principles of justice and holiness its military campaign was supposed to uphold. If the Israelites were genuinely going to hold the city of Jabesh Gilead accountable for not supporting this campaign, they should punish only those who were supposed to take part in it (the city’s leaders and soldiers). If, for some reason, they feel they have to destroy the entire city, they have no real grounds to spare only the virgins. The charge of “failing to assemble before the Lord” is a pretext. The real agenda is to try to undo at least some of what the armies did on their rampage. The virgins of Jabesh Gilead see their families slaughtered, and they’re carried off across the Jordan and given as wives to fugitive warriors from another tribe—all on the authority of the nation’s leaders.

But there still aren’t enough wives for the surviving men of Benjamin. So the assembly finds another expedient. They’ve all sworn an oath not to give their daughters in marriage to anyone from this tribe, but if the Benjamites take some women for themselves, no one’s broken the oath, have they? Israel’s elders even tell the survivors where to find some young women away from their fathers’ and brothers’ protection. The women of Shiloh celebrate an “annual festival of the Lord” with dancing. This is probably Passover, and the women are reenacting how Moses’ sister Miriam led the women of Israel in singing and dancing after the Lord parted the Red Sea. The dancing takes these young women outside the city, and the Benjamites, who are hiding in the vineyards on the instructions of Israel’s elders, snatch them and carry them off. The elders agree to “fix” things if the fathers or brothers complain (literally “appeal for justice”).

The oath that all the Israelites swore is honored only technically, not in reality. A festival celebrated in honor of the Lord is shamefully exploited. The assembly that set out to uphold justice ends up denying it to these women and their families. And the victimization of one woman by a mob grows in the victimization of 600 by the nation.

What alternatives did the elders of Israel have to taking these women from Jabesh Gilead and Shiloh? (For example, if they weren’t really going to honor the oath, could they have released everyone from it and allowed willing families from any tribe to arrange marriages with the Benjamites?)
Do you think the elders of Israel really believed that letting someone take your daughter (and telling them where to find her) isn’t the same as giving her to them? If not, why did they work so hard to maintain the appearance of honoring the oath, when they were clearly looking for a way around it? Why don’t people, in cases like this, admit openly what their agenda is, and work fairly with others to achieve it?

Questions about the book of Judges as a whole:

In session 11, after you read through Judges, you were asked which judges you liked the best. Which judge’s “approval rating” went up the most in your mind once you had the chance to consider their story in detail? Which judge’s rating went down the most? Why?

What’s the main message you’ll take away from the book of Judges for your own life today?
EXPERIENCING THE BOOK OF RUTH AS A WHOLE

Note: This will be a shorter session, while the next one will be longer. If you finish this one with some time remaining in your meeting, you may want to get started on the next one.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Ruth begins “in the days when the judges ruled” and ends with the name David. And so it provides a transition from the time when Israel was a confederation of tribes to the time when it was ruled by King David and his descendants. The book of Judges was probably written during the monarchy period to defend the idea of a king. The book of Ruth was likely written during this same period to defend a particular king—David himself.

Many Israelites would have wondered whether he should really rule over them because he was descended from a woman from Moab, the foreign country that had oppressed Israel. (Ehud assassinated the king of Moab to free Israel from his domination, as we saw in session 12.) This book shows that Ruth, David’s Moabite great-grandmother, was a woman of genuine faith in the God of Israel, so David shouldn’t be disqualified from the throne because of her. The book also shows that even in the chaotic period of the judges, there were some Israelites who were God-fearing and compassionate,
who protected the weak and needy rather than victimizing them. And so this book provides a welcome contrast and relief after the horrifying scenes at the end of Judges.

As readers of the book of Ruth today, we’re not so concerned about the implications of David’s pedigree for his claim on the throne of ancient Israel. But we can still find great encouragement and inspiration in the story of a woman who, in her own circumstances, trusted in God as boldly as the greatest judges did.

READING

The book of Ruth reads very much like a play. There are short narrative comments to set the stage, but most of the information comes from the mouths of the characters themselves. And so it’s natural and appropriate to read through the whole book like a play. Do this as a group. This should take about 10 or 15 minutes. Have people take these parts:

• Narrator
• Naomi
• Orpah (speaks one line with Ruth)
• Ruth
• Women of Bethlehem
• Boaz
• Harvesters/overseer
• Guardian-redeemer
• Elders and people at the gate

DISCUSSION

デザ You’re a theater critic who’s just seen the book of Ruth performed on stage. When your review is published, the producers are going to pull out one or two adjectives and put them in their advertisements. (You may have seen this done before, for example, “The Daily News calls The Book of Ruth ‘captivating’ and ‘heart-warming.’”) Without writing the whole review, can you say which adjectives the producers would probably choose if you did write it?

デザ Which characters in the book did you like the best? Why? Which ones would you have liked to see do something different? What?

デザ Boaz tells Ruth, “I have told the men not to lay a hand on you.” Naomi tells her, “In someone else’s field you might be harmed.” What danger are they talking about? Where did Ruth find the confidence and courage to go out and pick up leftover grain in the fields (the only source of support for her and Naomi) despite this danger?

デザ We saw in the book of Joshua how Rahab and the Gibeonites escaped destruction and became part of Israel. Now another foreigner has come to “the LORD, the God of Israel.” Why do you think Ruth didn’t “go back to her people and her gods” the way Orpah did? What brought her to faith in the LORD, when the only Israelite left in her life was saying, “The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me”?

デザ According to the gospel of Matthew, Boaz was the son of Rahab, the woman who sheltered Joshua’s spies in Jericho. How do you think being her son influenced him?

FOR YOUR NEXT MEETING

Encourage the people in your group or church who’ve been working on songs about your shared experience of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth (as suggested in session 13) to have these songs ready to share at the end of the next session.
INTRODUCTION

Two of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in ancient Israel were widows and foreigners. In this culture women depended on male relatives for support and protection. If a woman’s husband and sons died she was left destitute. Foreigners who were traveling or living away from the protection of their own clan and nation were likely to be taken advantage of and abused.

Naomi is an older widow, and Ruth is both a widow and a foreigner. Even so, their story has a much happier ending than the ones at the end of Judges. They aren’t abused and they don’t die in poverty. This is because of the combination of three factors:

• First, God built protections and provisions for vulnerable people into the law of Moses.
• Second, at least in some parts of Israel during this period, there were people of good will who feared the LORD and bravely and generously honored these provisions.
• Third, God, in his providence, arranged the circumstances of Ruth and Naomi’s life so that they were in the right place at the right time for good things to happen.

In this session we’ll go through the book of Ruth section by section and see how these three factors interacted to protect and provide for a widow and a foreigner even in these days when “Israel had no king.”

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the first section of the book of Ruth, beginning at the start of the book and ending where Naomi stops urging Ruth to go back to Moab.

Naomi doesn’t see any divine providence at work on her behalf once her husband and sons die. Instead, she says, “the LORD’s hand has turned against me!” But she does see her daughters-in-law showing her good will by being willing to accompany her back to Bethlehem. “You have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me,” she tells them. Even so, Naomi can’t bear to condemn Orpah and Ruth to the destitute fate she believes awaits her back home. If she had other grown sons, it would be their duty under the law of Moses to marry their brothers’ widows and give them children who would provide for them. But Naomi has no other sons and is now too old to get married again and have more children. The most reasonable solution—indeed, the only way she can see for Orpah and Ruth to survive—is to release them from any obligation to her and let them “find rest in the home of another husband.” Orpah agrees and returns to Moab. But Ruth refuses to go. She swears that not even death will separate her from Naomi. In other words, she’s knows Naomi is likely to die in poverty, even starve to death, if she returns alone, and rather than let that happen, she’s prepared to put her own life on the line to help her.

☞ Retell this episode from Ruth’s perspective, starting when Naomi tells her, “I’m going back to Bethlehem, but I really don’t want you to come with me.” What is Ruth thinking as she and Orpah head down the road with Naomi? What are her fears about going to a strange country with no means of support? How tempted is she to give up when she sees Orpah turn back? Why does she finally vow to stay with Naomi for life? Someone in the
group who’s good at writing can record everyone’s ideas and work them into a dramatic monologue, which they or another group member can then perform, either for your group or in a worship gathering.

2 Have someone read the next section of the book of Ruth, beginning where Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem and ending where it says that Ruth gleaned until the barley and wheat harvests were finished while living with her mother-in-law.

Ruth is counting on a key provision of the law to help her get food for Naomi and herself. The law of Moses told the Israelites not to go back over their fields once they’d harvested the grain to pick up any leftovers. It even told them not to harvest all the way to the edges of their fields. They were supposed to intentionally leave behind some grain for the poor to gather up. But in this period not everyone honored this provision. Ruth has to find a field where this would be allowed and get permission to glean. In the providence of God, she ends up in the portion of the fields surrounding Bethlehem that belongs to Boaz, a relative of Naomi’s late husband. He’s a “guardian-redeemer.”

This was another provision of the law. Male relatives were supposed to take on the role of “guardian-redeemer” and care for members of their extended family who’d fallen on hard times.

But this part of Ruth’s story is written mostly by good will. Ruth asks Boaz, when he allows her to glean, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes?” He explains that his good will to her is simply an acknowledgment of her good will to Naomi: “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law.” Boaz wishes that she will be “richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” He helps this reward along by doing everything he can to maximize her “take” from gleaning. When Naomi hears of Boaz’s generosity, she revises her opinion of how God has been treating her. “The Lord. . . has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead,” she concludes.

It’s only fair to Ruth to acknowledge that one more vital element in the story is her own courage and hard work. By the end of the day she’s gleaned an “ephah” of barley—about thirty pounds. Even with everything that Boaz does to help her, that’s still an awfully hard day’s work out in the hot sun.

Boaz does at least eight specific things to help Ruth. See how many you can name. (You can compare your list with the one at the end of this session.) How would each of these things help Ruth maximize the amount of grain she’s able to bring home?

How do your community and nation care for the poor? What laws exist to protect them, and what programs provide for them? What channels of generosity have individuals and organizations created beyond those established by law? What can you do, as a small group or as a church, to support these efforts?

What’s the closest you’ve ever been to the situation Ruth was in, where she had to beg for food? Who showed you good will in this situation?

3 Have someone read the rest the book of Ruth, beginning where Naomi tells her, “My daughter, I must find a home for you,” and ending with the “family line of Perez” that leads down to David.

Ruth’s good will continues to inspire Boaz to generous acts of his own. Instead of “running after the younger men” to find a new husband for herself, she’s asking him, an older man, to marry her so she can provide for Naomi. In response, Boaz promises, “I will do for you all you ask.” God’s providence opens the way for Boaz to keep this promise: he gets to the city gate “just as the guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along.” And the compassionate provisions of the law enable him to provide a secure future for Ruth and Naomi.

To get enough money to live on, Naomi is selling the portion of the fields around Bethlehem that belonged to her late husband Elimelek. The hope is that, as the law intends, a “guardian-redeemer” will “redeem” this property, buying it from Naomi, but also on her behalf, so that she has both the money from the sale and the field’s produce year by year. The other guardian-redeemer
is initially willing to make this sacrifice. But when he learns he must also marry Ruth and give her children in her late husband’s name, he backs out, explaining, “I might endanger my own estate.” (He can’t afford to part with the money for the property and then divide his remaining worth among his current children and those Ruth will have in the future.) But Boaz is a “man of standing” who’s in an adequate position to help out financially in this way.

Boaz and Ruth are married, and Ruth soon has a son, Obed, whom the women of Bethlehem recognize as a future “guardian-redeemer” for Naomi. “He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age,” they assure her. The threat of poverty and starvation is gone. But these two vulnerable women haven’t just found security. They’ve also provided Israel, in the person of Ruth’s great-grandson David, with a godly king.

By lying down next to Boaz at night, Ruth is symbolically proposing marriage to him. She puts on perfume and her best clothes to show that the mourning period for her late husband is over and she’s available to be married. All of this is done honorably, within the customs of this culture. But Ruth still has to trust Boaz not to take unfair advantage of the situation. How does she know she can trust him? What does Boaz do to protect Ruth’s honor and reputation?

Boaz describes Ruth as a “woman of noble character,” literally a “woman of valor,” the same term that’s used in Joshua and Judges for valiant warriors. What have you seen Ruth do in this book that makes her worthy of this description?

To conclude your study of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, give people an opportunity to share the songs they’ve written about their experience of these books. People can also share their overall thoughts and other artistic responses (paintings and drawings, journal entries, dramatic monologues, etc.).

NOTE

List of things that Boaz does to help Ruth (discussion point 1 in section 2):

- Approves the overseer’s decision to let her glean
- Lets her rest in the shelter when she needs to
- Lets her follow along with the women who work for him
- Tells the men not to lay a hand on her
- Lets her drink from the water jars that his servants fill (literally “draw” from wells)
- Gives her a bigger lunch than she can finish herself
- Tells the harvesters to let her glean even where the harvested grain has been stacked in sheaves
- Tells the harvesters to pull stalks out for her to pick up

- chapter and verse numbers removed
  (chapter and verse range given at bottom of page)
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