

JOSHUA 2: 1–24
TWO SPIES VISIT JERICHO
Story Notes
File no. 38

Joshua's spies believed they could evade detection by visiting a harlot, but they got better than they planned. Rahab, whatever her past, took the opportunity to confess that Israel's God was the true God and that she was ready to change allegiance. The fear of Israel had come on all Canaan (Deut. 2:25) but Rahab moved beyond fear to faith (Hebrews 11:31). She came under the protection of the God who never abandons those who confess his name. Later, we find that this woman married an Israelite. She became one of the forebears of David, and Christ (Matthew 1:5).

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JOSHUA 3:1 — 5:1

Joshua 3:9–12

CROSSING THE JORDAN

Story Notes

File no. 39

The ark represented God going before Israel to destroy their enemies (Num. 10:33–36). It was God's throne and the sign of his covenant relationship with them. As he was their Leader, so he would see to it that they were provided for as his people. After Israel's arrival at the edge of the Promised Land, there is no more mention of the pillar of cloud or fire that had led them to this moment (Deut. 1:32–33), but now, they were to follow the ark as they had followed the pillar. The God whose presence was over the ark was their leader in battle; apart from him, they would not know where to go or how to fight.

Joshua was made great among his people, but only with a view to Israel knowing that God was among them. Joshua carried out God's commands and made sure everyone knew it was God who did it. God became King over Israel when he led the people to himself at Sinai. It was he who had loved them, sanctified them, and given them his law and made them his people (Deut. 33:1–5).

Bringing a people to live in God's freedom is a miracle. Overcoming the opponents of that freedom is also a miracle. The opening up of the River Jordan is the completion of what was begun at the Red Sea. If there is no miracle here, neither is there any miracle to save us from this world so as to live in the works of God. Joshua made sure Israel could remember this miracle by having actual stones taken from the river bed and built into a cairn by its side. People could come here and say, 'This happened at this place'.

It has been traditional to see this crossing as a type or anticipation of a Christian passing over the river of death into the land of eternal rest. Negro spirituals using this terminology may come to mind.

Entering our rest in *Hebrews* is a reference to the future but with a present expectation. Christ upholds all things by the word of his power and, having purged us from our sins, is seated at the right hand of God. So, of course, Christ can lead us into God's rest. It would be criminal negligence and personal insult not to enter now. So, pay attention to his word!

We should be actively entering that rest, crossing Jordan, destroying strongholds and living in peace in our new possession of all things (1 Cor. 3:21).

With Israel on the other side, the priests brought the ark up from the river bed and the river returned to its flooding. No one but God could have done this, and God was there among them to ensure that it did happen.

Israel had been baptised into Moses (1 Cor. 10:2). We are baptised into Christ (Rom. 6:3–4). He is our 'Joshua' (his name in Hebrew and the name 'Jesus' in Greek both mean 'Jehovah saves'). Our entry into God's rest and into our inheritance is through his death and rising. We could not have planned such a victory for ourselves, and even now, we cannot sustain it. God in Christ has been among us and is among us still. He will bring us to the goal.

God had cared for Israel in the wilderness by miraculous means. It was no less miraculous that Israel now stood in their inheritance and tasted of the natural produce of the land.

JOSHUA 5:13 — 6:27
THE WALLS OF JERICHO
Story Notes
File no. 40

The Lord of armies now appeared to Joshua to equip him also just as he had prepared Moses for the battle with Pharaoh.

Joshua wanted to know if the unknown 'soldier' was for him or for his enemies. He was neither. He was the presence of God among them and Joshua was taught that this presence mattered more than the presence of his enemies. He honoured the Lord as holy and his fears were put in their place (so Isa. 8:12-14).

Joshua explained how the city would be taken: by marching, trumpet blasts and a shout. God would give them their victory. But first, there were to be six days of marching with trumpet blasts. God had spoken from Mt Sinai to the accompaniment of trumpets (Exod. 19:16), but trumpet blasts were also a proclamation of Sabbath rest (Lev. 23:24), and of a year of Jubilee in which each person would be restored to their inheritance (Lev. 25:9). Trumpet blasts also summoned the people to battle (Num. 10:9). So it was now. The shout that brought the walls down showed that nothing was needed from Israel but their unbounded confidence in God. Such faith was in order because the Lord was present on his throne: the Ark of the Covenant (cf. II Sam. 6:14–15). A Psalmist later sang that all who knew this shout were blessed (Ps. 89:15).

Nothing in Jericho was to be spared except reusable metals, and the Rahab family. Anything that could mar the inheritance of God's people or prevent them receiving it was destroyed that day. Rahab and her family had turned to the Lord and were now among the people of God. Joshua's fame was known throughout the land because God was with him.

JOSHUA 7:1 — 8:31

ACHAN'S SIN

Story Notes

File no. 41

Israel had come across the Jordan by a miracle and taken Jericho by a miracle. Only God himself could lead such a people *and he led them particularly by providing for their holiness*. There would be no point in them just living in the land if they filled it with the sins of its past. Like Adam and Eve before him, the fruit of the land (the things in Jericho) appealed to Achan's eye and ruled his action. His evil heart polluted the whole nation. The dramatic exposure of Achan's sin and the drastic action to eradicate it set the nation back on its true foundation (trust in God).

Israel's existence and name had been threatened by the defeat at Ai. But Joshua went to the heart of the matter: what did this mean for the name of God, given that Yahweh was Israel's God? A future without Israel would be a future without God. 'What will you do for your great name?' was his question.

The previous command given was to be strong and very courageous but now it was stated negatively: 'Do not fear or be dismayed!' God's people were not to be mastered by their failure. There was forgiveness with God that he may be feared (Ps. 130:4).

At Jericho, everything was to be destroyed, as for a city in which rebellion had been discovered (Deut. 13:12–18). Now, at Ai, plunder was allowed, but no survivors. The command was obeyed meticulously. If there had been any presumption in sending a small contingent before, there was none now. The whole standing army assembled and they obeyed the battle instructions given by God himself, the 'Captain of the army of the Lord' (5:14).

After the battle, Israel worshipped with awe. Uncut stones for an altar suggested that God did not want human intrusion into the worship he provided. Through the burnt offerings, Israel confessed that she was wholly given up to God (nothing remained of this offering) and through the peace offerings that she was in fellowship with God (parts of the peace offering were eaten in God's presence). These same two offerings were made at the giving of the law. The words of the law were written again by Joshua and the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy (ch. 28) were recited to the people from two hills, one on either side of Israel's camp. Truly, Israel lived by every word that came from God's mouth (Deut. 8:3).

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JOSHUA 9:1 — 10:27

THE MEN OF GIBEON / WHEN THE SUN STOOD STILL

Story Notes

File no. 42

The Gibeonites were as surely defeated as Jericho and Ai were, but preserved their lives by craftiness. Israel's leaders, including Joshua, were remiss in not seeking the will of God about the Gibeonites. but they made the best of their situation by gaining some slaves for menial tasks. So Israel's life thereafter included conditions that were the result of their failures, as always happens, but these were made to serve the worship of God and the welfare of his people.

Israel's new obligation, because of their covenant with the, Gibeonites, now became part of the program of God for the defeat of other surrounding cities. It must have been comforting to Israel to hear the Lord say: 'Do not fear for I have given them into your hand'. They did not have any less of God or his gracious reign because of the alien element in their borders. In fact, God assisted the warriors with hail, and Joshua was bold to ask God for extra time in which to defeat their enemies, and all this, at Gibeon. The five kings were trapped for later treatment while Israel pursued their prey.

The discipline of Ai and Gibeon had served Israel well and now, they simply carried out what God had given them to do. The wickedness of the Amorites was full (Gen. 15:16) and their end had come. This was no mere conquest but a judgment.

God has promised an inheritance to all who turn to him, and he will destroy every power that resists his preparing that inheritance (1 Pet. 1:3-5). In the mean time, as Paul demonstrated, the church is to take every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-6).

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JOSHUA 13:1–7; 14:6–14; 17:14–18; 20:1–9

Numbers 35:1–15, 22–29; Deuteronomy 19:2–7

POSSESSING THE LAND / CITIES OF REFUGE

Story Notes

File no. 43

Joshua 13 – 19

Allotting the land was to be done while Joshua was alive, to complete what Moses, the covenant head, had begun. Even though the land was not yet completely subdued, it could be allotted to each tribe because the Lord would drive out the remaining enemies.

The eastern side of Jordan had already been allotted by Moses to two and a half of the tribes.

The tribe of Levi did not need land to fulfill its vocation or as a means of livelihood: Levites were able to eat parts of the animals offered as sacrifices and received gifts from the offerings of the other tribes. So, the sacrifices were their inheritance, or, the Lord himself (13:14, 33). Here, in Levi, is a suggestion of the true nature of inheritance (Rev. 21:1–7). It is not something in itself but a participation in God and his goodness, and this was true of each citizen of Israel (Ps. 16:5–6).

The Levites were given possession of certain towns to live in together with their surrounding pastures (for example: 14:3–4).

God had prepared all Israel to receive their inheritance. With Joshua, they had been bold and very courageous. Caleb and Joshua were the only two who had been ready to take the land earlier. Now, at 85 years of age, Caleb had the same spirit and asked to be given as an inheritance the very area that had made the hearts of Israel melt before: the region where the giants of Anakim were. So, he drove out the three mighty sons of Anak.

Some of the Canaanites resisted attack and could not be defeated. These are noted in the allotting of the inheritance to Judah (15:63), Ephraim (16:9–10) and Manasseh (17:12–13). Then the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh wanted more territory for their large population, so Joshua gave them the hill country knowing that they would be able to clear the difficult land and drive out the difficult enemies!

The land was basically subdued and Israel met before God at Shiloh where the tabernacle had been erected. Seven tribes still had not conquered territory for their people so Joshua called for the land to be surveyed and allotted in readiness for their possessing it. After this was done, Joshua received a town as his personal inheritance.

Joshua 20

This book shows that everything was done according to the Lord's instruction through Moses. He was still present in this way, as covenant head, to ensure the people of God received their inheritance. The inheritance would remain even though internal violence would threaten it. Safe cities would protect accidental killers until they received a fair trial. They could return home after the death of the High Priest. The same provisions applied to strangers living in Israel even though they had no inheritance there.

Perhaps the death of the high priest suggested that even accidental death mattered to God, not because the killer was guilty but because someone did not live to enjoy their inheritance. A proverb says: 'Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention' (Prov. 15:18). The word used to calm is the same word 'rest', often used for rest from enemies in this book. What would be the value of peacetime if the people self-destructed.

The cities and lands allotted to Levites were devoted for their use even though they remained the inheritance of the other tribes. All the cities of refuge were appointed to Levites.

So God's promise was fulfilled and he had given Israel their land. They possessed their inheritance. They had rest from their enemies. Why, then, did David ignore this and say that Israel should pay attention to God's word so as to possess their inheritance (Ps. 95:7; Heb. 4:8)? He and the writer of Hebrews knew that inheritance was not just a matter of territory but of being in the whole purpose of God. The promised land was Israel's inheritance, but it was a

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testimony to all that God would do for the world. Those who presumed on their inheritance did not truly possess it. The inheritance is given to those who acknowledge it as the work of God's hands and possess it with a view to being a blessing to the world, as did Abraham.

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JUDGES 2:7 — 3:11; 4:1 — 5:3

Judges 5:4–31

THE PEOPLE FORGOT THEIR PROMISE / DEBORAH AND BARAK

Story Notes

File no. 44

Idolatry continued amongst Abraham's descendants for a long time. Jacob's family kept some idols (Gen. 35:1–4) and there were still idols among Israel in Egypt, and even until the end of their conquest of the promised land (24:23). Surely, now, given all that God had done to show that he was their God, they would leave their idols alone. Joshua said that if they would not serve the Lord, they should choose what other gods they would like to worship. The people of Israel protested that they would be faithful to the Lord. Joshua argued that they could not endure a jealous God who wanted such faithfulness. Still they affirmed they would be faithful.

So, the covenant first made with Abraham, and then with all Israel at Sinai, was renewed, and a stone was set up as a memorial of the occasion. Then the tribes of Israel returned to their inheritance. After all this, Joshua died, having led Israel in true worship during the whole period of his leadership.

The book of Judges gains its name from the twelve people who led Israel between the times of Joshua and Saul.

These judges did not all reign over the same territory and their dates may sometimes overlap. Strictly they did not judge but led, but through this leadership, God declared his judgment in favour of his people when they called to him, but also in disciplining them when they ignored him. He was the Judge (11:27), so that, although there was no Moses or Joshua to appeal to as before, or David as there would be later, God was very much present. This had been the faith of Abraham (Gen. 18:25), but every generation must have direct dealings with their God (Acts 17:31).

The book is the story of Israel learning to live in the land of promise. It can be a depressing book to read because of the people's monotonous turning from God to idols. However, the whole Bible, and this book in particular, is the story of God's faithfulness, not mankind's, and shows how God brings his people to live faithfully before him. It may therefore be justly subtitled 'Grace Abounding'.

When this book of Judges begins, the name of the Lord is revered because of the decisive conquests already gained under Joshua. But more land remains to be taken, and Israel breaks covenant because they do not drive out their enemies as God had told them to do. Rather, they had made covenants with them (perhaps in negotiating with the spies and in settling with other inhabitants to be labourers—and later, in intermarrying with idolaters; see 3:6). God will not break covenant but how will he keep covenant with a non-covenant-keeping people? He will leave the Amalekites and their gods as a thorn in Israel's side (a trap—not as a temptation but a trial). This is the story behind the whole story of Judges. How does this work out?

Chapter two of Judges explains the pattern of events. Each tribe travelled to their own inheritance. But the people did not pay attention to Moses' warnings in *Deuteronomy*. They thought possession of their inheritance was enough and did not remember that they lived by every word from God's mouth. They ignored the Lord and regarded the Baals as more useful to them.

This could not be left without some intervention, so, God takes the side of Israel's enemies instead of helping Israel, and he brings his people into deep distress.

Israel's hope must now rest on God's compassion (Deut. 32:36). Israel calls on the Lord and he raises up judges for them. These men, and one woman, are not only warriors but people with a word to be heeded. However, even this enticement to listen goes unheeded. A third generation—who witnessed this rescue—will be more rebellious again.

THE PEOPLE FORGOT THEIR PROMISE / DEBORAH AND BARAK con't

God's anger now burns against Israel for breaking his covenant, But his covenant is a promise of mercy, so, he leaves enemy nations among them to give his people first hand experience of his victories. Each generation will learn to rely on God.

Othniel comes first, though no details are given. This provides a pattern for the coming stories, even though few details are provided. He is Caleb's nephew, showing that, in very short time, Israel turns to evil and idolatry and attracts God's anger. Their enemy is from part of Syria and has links with Babylonian culture.

God hears Israel's cry and the first deliverer (same word as saved—used 20x) is given. The Spirit of God coming on him identifies him. Israel has clear evidence that their life depends on the immediate and personal presence of God among them.

The first and second commands at Sinai are clear: there must be no other gods but Yahweh, the God who brought Israel out of Egypt; and there must be no likenesses made to keep him at a distance. God is jealous of their immediate affection and trust. By saving them, God establishes them as his witnesses, to stand against the nations' false trusts and to bring the world to true worship. If God does not intervene, the world will be without an immediate word of God for her life.

The second story is about Deborah and Barak. Israel's sin is tiresome in its repetition, but then, God's deliverances are wonderfully renewing, a work of grace.

For the first time in the book of Judges, local inhabitants, those whom God commanded to be destroyed, oppose and trouble Israel. In their aggressive pursuit of superiority and resistance against God's people, they use the latest technology, chariots of iron.

Barak seems to lack courage but may simply acknowledge that God is with Deborah (cf. Exod. 33:12-17). The writer of Hebrews (11:32) acknowledges Barak rather than Deborah as the person of faith, though obviously, she is the leader. Barak does what he is given to do even if he receives 'tarnished' glory for it.

We are not told that the Spirit of God comes on Deborah, but her saying that 'the God of Israel commands you' (4:6, 14) and her song of triumph giving glory to God both suggest a person on whom the Spirit of God has come.

God alone saves Israel. It is his word and power that rouses the army and subdues the enemy, even though Israel is helpless against iron chariots (1:19). The reason for their victory appears incidentally in the song—there is a cloud-burst which makes the River Kishon overflow and bog the chariots (5:20-21). This is a reminder of God's victory at the Red Sea.

One part of Moses' family, Heber the Kenite, defects to the Canaanite Jabin and informs him of Israel's intentions. But nothing can avert the intention of God to hear his people's cry and finish Sisera.

Did Jael see the shift in power coming? Was she a woman of faith? Whatever, her thrust serves the same end as God's in sending the storm.

The heart of this story is in Deborah and Barak's song.

The righteous acts of God and his people are one (5:10). Deborah claims that Israel suffered until she took a lead (5:7) but then attributed her being stirred to the 'people of the Lord' (5:11-12).

The story began with Canaan's confidence in her chariots, but concludes with the fact that her confidence is an illusion.

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The whole account is punctuated with exhortations: 'Go!' (4:6, 14); 'Here this you kings!' (5:3); 'March on, my soul; be strong!' (5:21).

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JUDGES 6:1–34
GOD CHOOSES GIDEON
Story Notes
File no. 45

For a fourth time in this book, we are told that Israel does what is evil in the sight of the Lord. This means they do not obey God in his directions for living, and, instead, worship idols of the nations amongst whom they live. As always, this arouses God's anger and he gives them into the hand of their enemies, this time, the Midianites who live West of the Jordan River (with the help of the local Amalekites). With their huge numbers of soldiers and camels (the latest technology), their raids were terrifying. None of their crops were left to ripen, and the people were reduced to living in caves.

Israel, spiritually speaking, is back where they were in Egypt, and, as in Egypt (Exod. 2:23), they cry to the Lord. This time, the Lord does not send a deliverer straight away, but sends a prophet to remind Israel of how he saved them from Egypt, and of his command not to fear these idols they are worshipping.

But the Lord hears Israel's cry of distress, and sends his Angel, the same 'Angel of the Lord' who appeared to Hagar (Gen. 16:7) and to Abraham (Gen. 22:11), and then, to Moses (Exod. 3:2-4). He has already appeared at the beginning of this book, warning Israel about their idolatry (2:1-5), but here, he comes to prepare Gideon for victory. Some think the Angel to be an appearance of the Son of God before the days of his coming to earth as a man, but what is clear is, that everyone who see the 'Angel of the Lord' has been met by the Lord himself. He always comes to intercede or to intervene for the welfare of the Lord's people.

'The Lord is with you', and, you are a 'mighty man of valour' says the Angel, but Gideon can only think of the pain of Israel and, how remote God seems to be. The Angel keeps talking to Gideon, and talks about his 'might'. His 'might' is simply that he is sent by God.

Gideon has the same difficulties as Moses in accepting that he is Israel's deliverer, and raises excuses of the same kind, but as with Moses, the Lord will be with him (cf. Exod. 3:11-12). That is enough.

The Lord graciously provides the assurance that this encounter is, indeed, an encounter with God. Gideon prepares a meal for a man, but the Angel of the Lord asks for it to be placed and poured out on a rock, effectively as an offering on an altar, and it is consumed by miraculous fire, something that also happened at the consecration of Aaron as priest (Lev. 9:23-24) and would later happen for David, Solomon and Elijah. God is restoring true worship for his people by showing he is among his people and will accept them and their offerings. Again, like Moses (Exod. 3:6), Gideon has seen God face to face, and will have peace, not the threat of death. So will all Israel, through his leadership.

The Lord has come to restore true worship, so the false altar must come down. Gideon is part of a culture of fear, of the Midianites, but also of Baal, and does his deed at night. In the morning, it is wonderful to see Gideon's father, Joash, recognise the validity of what his son has done, not because he seeks to protect his son but because he knows the challenge to Baal is legitimate. 'Let Baal protect himself!' None-the-less, Gideon gets the name 'Let Baal contend against him'. This man is now a personal affront to, and target for, the false god Baal, and the story will demonstrate this as it unfolds.

We are not told why the Midianites and their allies mount an offensive against Israel at this time, but they cross the Jordan and head for the famous battleground of the Jezreel valley. But God has prepared his man, and anoints him with the Spirit. Local men and many from surrounding tribes, 32,000 in all, recognise he is sent by God and prepare for battle.

JUDGES 6:33 – 8:28

GIDEON PREPARES FOR WAR / HOW GIDEON WON

Story Notes

File no. 46

God has told Gideon he is a 'mighty man of valour' who will save Israel. Gideon has destroyed the local altar of Baal, and his father has challenged Baal to look after himself if he is a god. Israel is now, again, in the sole care of the God who brought them up from Egypt (6:13). And now is the time when Midianites choose to launch an attack from Trans-Jordan into the Jezreel Valley.

The Midianites have allies in the Amalekites, long-time enemies of Israel (Num. 14:45; Jud. 3:13), and other unidentified people from the East who have their own reasons to resent the presence of Israel in the land. But now, as with Othniel, and other leaders of Israel before him (Num. 11:24-29), the Spirit of the Lord identifies Gideon as God's chosen man to deliver his people, and a large army of Northern Israelis assembles under his leadership.

Gideon is not naturally confident, and Israel has no recent victories to inspire them. Nor is Gideon persuaded of victory by the gathering of an army. Baal's altar is down. It must be the Lord that gives victory now and God graciously provides him with confirmation of all that is to happen. (Note that the fleece test is not for guidance but for confirmation of guidance already given.) However, Israel is still at risk of saying they have been responsible for their own victory, so, by dismissing the faint-hearted, and then, dismissing all but those soldiers who happen to drink in a certain way, God selects 300 to do his work. Again, Gideon is given extraordinary confirmation of his victory by being led to an enemy tent where a vision (one of the ways that Israel's God speaks to his people) points to a comprehensive defeat of Midian. Gideon, and the Lord, are acknowledged by the enemy. Finally, Gideon is ready for battle and he boldly announces the Lord's victory. These men must share his confidence in the Lord as they set off, 300 against a myriad of men and camels. Israel has returned to the confidence they had when their armies marched around Jericho.

Their strategy is childlike in its naivety but they believe in God, and in what he is doing in Gideon. Later, the psalmist says, 'Blessed are the people who know the festal shout [or 'battle cry'], who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face' (Ps. 89:15). God orchestrates the victory by sending terror and confusion to his enemies and they flee back towards the Jordan River. So, word is sent to the tribes who sent troops before, to reassemble, and they pursue the Midianites. Word is also sent to the Ephraimites (omitted from the previous muster) to secure the fords where the fleeing Midianites will try to cross the Jordan and return to their territory. They capture and execute two Midianite kings.

But Israel is still true to its history of complaint. The tribe of Ephraim has been left out of the earlier muster and Gideon must placate them with reference to their supplementary but significant place in the victory.

Then again, Gideon is not living in the simplicity of God's victory over his enemies. He is still leading his 300 men as a separate band, and, as we discover, is on a personal mission. He is pursuing the meagre remnants of Midian's allies from the East (only 15 of the original 135 thousand soldiers still remain). On his quest, East of the Jordan, he is snubbed by the towns of Succoth and Penuel, and threatens them with reprisal. The enemy army of Eastern allies thinks they have outrun Gideon but are overwhelmed by his men, and two of their kings are captured. But Gideon is not at rest. He returns to flog the elders of Succoth and to kill the men of Penuel who have refused to aid his mission. Then he confronts the captured kings. Who had they killed back in Tabor, at the Eastern end of the Jezreel Valley? They had slaughtered Gideon's own brothers, and he wants his youngest son to join him in their execution.

These two kings have referred to Gideon's family as royalty (8:18), probably in flattery. Now, his own countrymen ask him to rule over them. This is the first time ruling has been mentioned in this book. God has given judges and saved his people, but, as Gideon rightly says, 'the Lord will rule over you'. He won't take up the task. Neither will he begin a dynasty. On the other hand, he asks for an ephod to be made. This was a garment prescribed by God for priests and was used

GIDEON PREPARES FOR WAR / HOW GIDEON WON con't

when seeking the Lord's will (Ex. 28). We suppose that one such ephod already existed at Shiloh (18:31). But Gideon wants to be sure of access to God and his guidance, and perhaps, to attract the loyalty of Israel to his leadership by having his own ephod made. Gold is given in plenty from the booty collected from their enemies, and this is woven into this elaborate garment. The eagerness of Israel to supply this gold tells us the eagerness with which they want visible means of God's direction. Already, Israel is moving away from God ('whoring' after the ephod) to idols. But the Lord graciously grants them 40 years of peace.

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JUDGES 13:1 – 14:7,20; 15:9–20

A BABY PROMISED BY GOD / SAMSON FIGHTS THE PHILISTINES

Story Notes

File no. 47

13:1—14:7

For the fifth and last time in this Book, we are told that Israel sinks into evil (that is, idolatry) and the goal of them occupying their promised land seems remote. This time, they are given into the hands of Philistines, and this trial lasts for twice as long as any other period mentioned. Israel no longer cries out for a deliverer and, rather, accommodates herself to being under the enemy, a long way from what was happening under Othniel at the beginning of the Book (3:10).

The Angel of the Lord announces what God will do. This is the same figure who announced Israel's failure at the start of the Book (2:1) and who calls Gideon a valiant warrior (6:12). But this time, the announcement is made to a mother. As with Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, and later, with Hannah, God gives a child to a barren woman, a child who will advance the Lord's purposes with his people.

Israel's law prescribed how a person may voluntarily devote themselves to the Lord for a period of time (Num. 6). A person taking this Nazirite vow was not to go near a dead body, eat or drink anything from a vine, or cut their hair for the period of the vow. But here, the mother is commanded to rear her child as a Nazirite.

This family comes from the tribe of Dan, perhaps still nomadic because no inheritance had been settled on them as yet (18:1). They seem to be a godly couple, wanting to do what the messenger from God has required. The husband, Manoah, offers hospitality but is told to prepare a burnt offering instead. As always, the Lord's purpose is communion with his people, in true worship. In preparing the sacrifice, Manoah and his wife discover that the messenger is indeed the angel of the Lord, the one who has led Israel in former years.

Samson is named, and grows, is blessed by God and stirred by his Spirit. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that he must have known something of God's great love for Israel and his purpose to save them.

We seem to be poised for a great story of a godly man and a great deliverance, but Samson reflects the spiritual indolence of the nation rather than challenges it. He wants what is right in his own eyes, the same as what is later said of all Israel (v. 3 with 17:6; 21:25) He wants a Philistine wife, contrary to God's command and to the grief of his parents. God cannot find a man like Othniel or Gideon or a woman like Deborah so he uses an 'anyone' from among the people. It is God who is 'seeking an opportunity against the Philistines', not Samson.

Samson takes his parents into Philistia to confirm a wedding arrangement, and on the way, needs to defend himself from a lion. He is in a vineyard (perhaps to eat what is prohibited?) but is enabled by God's Spirit to rip the beast apart. He now knows what he can do. But, perhaps because he doesn't want his parents to know about his being in a vineyard, he doesn't tell them about the deed.

14:8—15:20

Samson returns to Philistia to marry his bride and stops to view the remains of the lion on the way. Again, he should not go near a dead body, but, in fact, scoops honey from the carcass. This provides him with a riddle to enrich himself at the expense of the men provided for his wedding party. Here, Samson finds he can be prevailed upon by a woman, to his harm. He pays for his lost wager by killing thirty Philistines from a neighbouring Philistine town. The whole action is far from noble, but, God uses Samson as he is, and begins his purpose to defeat the Philistines.

Samson, thinking he still has a wife, returns to Philistia to visit her, only to find she has been given to another man. He may have had pangs of conscience about killing 30 men to pay for his gambling, but feels justified in setting fire to vast areas of grain crops with his amazing feat of

A BABY PROMISED BY GOD / SAMSON FIGHTS THE PHILISTINES con't

catching 300 foxes and setting them loose as living torches. The harshness of the times is revealed by the action of Philistines burning the father and daughter 'responsible' for this loss. Samson, again, takes revenge, though we are not told how. Then, he goes to hide in the hollow of a rock called Etam. He thinks the score is even and that there will be no more trouble.

Samson's hiding place is in the territory of the tribe of Simeon, which, in turn, is nestled within the borders of Judah. The Philistines send their army to attack a city of Judah. All they want is Samson. He is the only resistance they fear. Judah, who led the nation at the beginning of this Book (1:2), is now wholly compliant with the people they were sent to destroy, and completely unheeding of the fact that God has sent them a deliverer. They know where Samson is and negotiate with him to be bound and given to the Philistines. He knows that ropes will not hold him. And so it happens, that, when he is presented to the Philistines, the Spirit enables him to tear the ropes away. Single-handed, he kills 1000 Philistines with no more than the jawbone of a donkey. Again, by approaching a dead body, he has breached a condition of his Nazirite vow, but his hair is still intact.

What friends does Samson now have? He is the focus of Philistine malice and the victim of Israelite cowardice. He is alone, and, understandably, thirsty. Only God can save him, and he calls on the Lord. After this great salvation granted to Israel, will he himself fall back into the hands of the Philistines? God hears him. A miracle such as happened for Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 17:6) happens again. He now knows, personally, that the Lord is near to him. He will need to know this again before long. He has been the sole means by which God has given judgement in favour of Israel for 20 years, a point that is made again at the end of his life.

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JUDGES 16:4–31

SAMSON AND DELILAH / SAMSON'S DEATH

Story Notes

File no. 48

16:1-31

Samson seems little changed by the Spirit coming upon him, or by his experience of personal deliverance. He does not appear to have learned how to deal with his personal weaknesses and seems careless about visiting Philistia. He finds, not a wife but a prostitute among his enemies. They are notified of his presence, but Samson, having some knowledge or premonition of this, leaves at midnight, complete with the town gates. He not only uproots them, but transports them on his back some 60 kilometres away to Hebron, a central town of the tribe of Judah. He has climbed from the seaboard town of Gaza some 1000 metres into the Judean hills. It seems he wants to make a statement, not only to Philistia, but also to his own people, by placing the evidence of his victory in front of their eyes.

Still, he is drawn to Philistia, and, for a third time, to a woman. But this time we are told that he loves her. The lords of the Philistines take their opportunity to find the source of this man's strength. They know they are dealing with more than his physical prowess. In an ominous sequence of questions, Samson begins to reveal his heart to Delilah. If you do this or that, he says, I will be 'like any other man' (vv. 7, 11, 13, 17). Perhaps this is what he longs to be, not a Nazirite devoted to the Lord and with the weight of Israel on his shoulders, but just like anyone else, able to enjoy home comforts. Eventually, his soul is 'vexed to death' (v. 16) and he tells her 'all his heart' (v. 17).

Delilah does not return Samson's affection, and prefers the 1100 pieces of silver she will receive for betraying him. His hair is cut. His vow is concluded. He is no longer devoted to the Lord. In the saddest of lines, Samson thinks he will do as he has done before and doesn't know the Lord has left him. He thinks his strength is of himself. He loses his eyes and his freedom.

But then, his hair on his head begins to grow back. His mother had told her husband, prophetically, that he would be a Nazirite 'to the day of his death' (13:7). This is more than what she had been told by the angel. Perhaps we are meant to see that he whom God chooses for his purpose cannot thwart that purpose by his or her foolishness.

The Angel of the Lord had announced that Samson would 'begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines' (13:5), so God's purpose with this man is not yet finished. Philistia gathers to honour Dagon, the god 'who has given their enemy into their hand'. All the lords of the Philistines are there, and a total of 3000 spectators. What could be better for their entertainment than the man himself?

Samson has called on the name of the Lord once before and been saved from the hand of the Philistines. This time, he asks to be avenged for the loss of his eyes, and expects, not to be saved from them but to die with them. He does not pray for Israel, or for the glory of God, but, in his death, he inflicts more damage on Philistia than he ever had in his life. He has also silenced the false claim that Dagon could subdue the people of God.

Samson is buried with honour in his own homeland. But the defeat of the Philistines has only just begun. This task will finally be given to King David (1 Sam. 9:16; 17:51; 2 Sam. 1:8, 15).

RUTH 1:1 – 4:22

Leviticus 19:9,10

RUTH

Story Notes

File no. 49

The book of Judges sets the scene for this story. Israel has fallen, persistently, and ever more deeply, into idolatry, and its national character and institutions have been eroded. But in these very times, the township of Bethlehem, and some of its citizens in particular, provide us with an example of how rich the life of those who trusted in Yahweh can be. They show that even one who feels deserted by Yahweh can be a witness in a foreign land, and that one of the despised Edomites can become a faithful and fruitful member of Israel. Israel's institutions are not dead, her people not without hope, and God advances his purpose of raising up a king who will lead the nation to victory and to true worship.

Chapter one

Naomi's family, all identified by name, are eager to feed themselves in a time of famine, and move to Moab. This is enemy territory for Israelites, but there is food there. Very quickly, we are told that her family is decimated by death, and she, now, simply referred to as 'the woman', is left with two foreign daughters in law. What was probably only going to be a short stay ('sojourn') turns out to be ten years, culminating in tragedy.

The story now focuses on 'returning'. The word occurs 12 times in the rest of the chapter in various contexts. She hears that the Lord has visited Judah. How she must feel the need of sharing in this 'visitation' of the Lord! She says the Lord's hand has been against her (v. 13), the Almighty has dealt bitterly with her (v. 20), testified against her and brought calamity on her (v. 21). Her own description of her state is that she went away full and returns empty.

Abraham made a similar journey at the beginning of Israel's history. He arrived in the land in which God promised to bless him, but in time of famine, travelled to Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20). Things did not go well for Abraham either and he soon returned to the land of blessing. Learning to live by faith is never an even path, and trouble is a part of the journey. Luther often spoke (in German) of *anfeschung*, by which he meant an assault of temptation or affliction, which may come from the world or flesh or the devil, but be used by God to make us despair of ourselves and our own righteousness and to cast ourselves on his mercy (cf. 2 Cor. 1:9). It would be easy to say that Abraham, or Elimelech, had done wrong to move away from Judah, but it would be better to say that the Lord jealously draws those he loves closer to himself, through difficulty, or even what seems to be an attack, so that we will learn to have no confidence in ourselves and wholly lean on him. What Naomi sees as an assault on her well being becomes the way of his revealing his kindness to her and to others around her, as we shall see.

Naomi's daughters in law both want to return with her to Judah, but Naomi, generous in her protests, is able to persuade Orpah to remain in her homeland with the possibility of finding 'rest' in the house of another husband. Naomi believes the Lord's steadfast love will be with her in this way (v. 8) even though she will return to her own gods (v. 15). But Ruth is not able to be persuaded. She is wholly settled that Naomi, and her homeland, her people and her God will be hers as well. She takes an oath in the Lord's name that only death will make her do otherwise. Her action is certainly a kindness to Naomi (2:11-12), but is also a wholehearted turning to Naomi's Lord and to the land and people he had promised to bless (Gen. 12:1-2). Ruth also 'returns' to Judah, though she has never lived there. Return is the word consistently used for 'repent' in Israel. She has 'come home' even though this has never been her home.

Israel's law (Deut. 23:3-6) says no Moabite should be admitted to, or assisted by, the assembly of Israel, so it becomes a matter of interest to see how this woman will fare. As it happens, she moves into a godly, law keeping family, and she will encounter kindness. This book teaches Israel, and us, how to discern between weightier and lesser matters of the law (cf. Micah 6:8; Matt. 23:23) and shows that the Lord is able to discern the heart of a person (cf. Rahab in Joshua 6:17, 25) and to lead his people in true living under his law.

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Naomi, whose name means 'pleasant', arrives in Bethlehem, and is recognised, but wants to be known as Mara, or 'bitter'. But the story leads us on. It is harvest time in the land the Lord has visited.

Chapter two

Naomi does not feature in this part of the story until verse 20. Ruth takes the initiative and asks to go out to glean. She must know Israel's law well enough to understand that it allows the poor to gather remnants after the reapers have finished reaping (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:21). She is a fulfilment of someone outside Israel realising what a remarkable God and remarkable law Israel has (Deut. 4:6-8), and, as we shall see, there is more to come.

She 'happens' (v. 3) to find a field belonging to Boaz, a rich relative of Naomi's. He happens ('came' has the sense of 'just then' in verse 4) to attend this field at the time when Ruth is there. We hear the godly manner of his greeting and the godly reply he expects. He makes enquiry about her and knows what she has done for Naomi and makes generous provision for her safety (not all young men are like Boaz), her meal, and for the success of her gleaning. As a foreigner, she expects no favours (v. 10), but finds that there is one law for Israelite and alien alike (Num. 15:13-16, 27-29; Deut. 31:12). Boaz speaks clearly to her of the reward she may expect for her faithfulness to Naomi, now that she has come to take refuge under the protection of Israel's Lord. Here is a man and a community where the blessings of the Lord are in full evidence, even in the time when the judges ruled. If Boaz has a personal interest in Ruth, it is hidden, and the concern he expresses and the provisions he makes are for Naomi.

Ruth goes home loaded with grain, probably more than 20 litres of it. When Naomi discovers that her benefactor is Boaz, her sense of being without God's favour evaporates. The Lord's steadfast love has not forsaken her, or those who died in Moab (v. 20). Over all those tragic days, there has been the Lord's care, bringing her to this day. The proof, for her, lies in the fact that Boaz is a near relative, a 'kinsman-redeemer' (*goel*) and she asks for the Lord's blessing on him.

Israel's law provided that when a woman was left with no husband or heirs, her husband's brother (or other relative) could buy her property and father children for her (Deut. 25:5-10). In this case, Naomi sees how this meets her need of an ongoing inheritance for her family, and Ruth's need of 'rest' in the house of a husband. Ruth is the widow of an Israelite, and she may bear a child who will inherit Naomi's and Elimelech's name and property. She sees all this in a flash and is fully alive to the covenant blessings of Israel. Much remains unresolved and even uncertain. She probably knows that Boaz is not the nearest kinsman, but values him as the most appropriate. Being conscious, now, of God's favour, she knows what to do and is ready to guide Ruth.

Chapter three

Naomi tells Ruth that she should seek 'rest' for her in the home of a husband. Boaz will be at the threshing floor, staying overnight, and Ruth should present herself, secretly, but attractively (anointed), during the night, to Boaz. She should uncover his feet, clearly, presenting herself to him as a woman to whom he could be husband (Cf. Ezek. 16:8). Then, Boaz will know what to do. All this, Ruth agrees to, and does.

It is midnight before Boaz notices that his feet are cold and finds her there! She identifies herself, not as a foreigner but as 'your maidservant'; she sees herself as part of Israel. She asks him to spread his skirt, literally, his wings, over her (v. 9), using the same term that Boaz used when he wished her to be blessed by the Lord—under whose 'wings' she had come to trust (2:12). She asks him to be *goel* to her, and, effectively, to Naomi.

Boaz recognises the steadfast love (*hesed*) Ruth is expressing for Naomi. She could have a younger husband but is acting obediently within the framework of Israel's covenant provisions and is a worthy woman. As Naomi has said, Boaz knows what to do. He must eliminate the

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possibility that the nearest kinsman will want to perform this duty, but otherwise, he will redeem (be kinsman-redeemer) to her. He provides for her safety by asking her to stay the night, and secures her integrity by asking her to leave before daylight. She is returned to her mother in law with more grain than before. Naomi thought she had returned to Israel empty (1:21), but she has had Ruth, and now, further evidence of God's bounty to her. Boaz understands that the law of the Lord is to be fulfilled diligently (Ps. 119:4) and this includes providing for those in need. Naomi, now full, knows the matter will be resolved soon.

The chapter ends with the assurance to Ruth that Boaz will not rest until proper provision is made.

God himself is kinsman-redeemer to Israel. He redeems them (Ex. 6:6). He is 'the Lord their Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel (Isa. 41:14). 'Their Redeemer is strong... and will surely plead their cause' (Jer. 50:34). 'From oppression and violence he redeems their life' (Ps. 72:14). Both words for redeem in the Old Testament (*padah* and *gaal*) signify 'release by payment of a price' and can be used interchangeably, but the latter emphasises the family connection of the one who redeems.

Boaz foreshadows our Lord who is our kinsman—our brother. By him and in him, we have redemption (Rom. 3:24; Col. 1:14), clearly, at profound cost to himself (Eph. 1:7; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18), and with a view to us being adopted as sons of God (Gal. 4:5). By him, we who were empty, are filled, and brought into the covenant blessings promised by God to his people.

Chapter four

Boaz is already at the city gate to do business as our chapter starts. Naomi is right in telling Ruth that he will not rest until he has settled the matter. Again, providence brings the prime redeemer figure into play immediately. So Boaz, this man of stature (2:1) quickly gathers sufficient elders of the town to conduct a legal transaction. He invokes the law of land redemption (Lev. 25:23-25) to be done, again, by the nearest kinsman-redeemer (*goel*). We do not know the precise way in which the law was understood in their customs. Nor do we know what has happened to Naomi's property that is being offered for sale. Is it too small to make a living, or is she ineligible to own it as a woman? Whatever the situation, everyone understands that Naomi's property should be claimed by a member of her family so that her inheritance will not be lost.

On the other hand, Boaz wants to fulfil the request of Ruth that he be her kinsman-redeemer and skillfully orders his business to gain his objective. The closest relative, thinking that property only is involved, is happy to take up the offer because it will mean an increase of his estate. Fathering a child with Naomi (if the kinsman has thought of this) will not be required because she is too old to produce an heir for the deceased Elimelech, or Mahlon or Chilion. The property will be for his descendants alone. But Boaz says Ruth must be cared for, according to the 'levirate' (Latin for brother in law) marriage law. We are not sure why the other relative is unaware of this requirement, but the matter is not questioned. He cannot undertake the task, either because it will disadvantage him too much, or because he cannot afford to spend money on something that will not, in time, pass to his children.

Israel's law required that men not willing to perform the duty of kinsman were to be shamed by having their sandal removed by the widow (Deut. 25:7-10). This law led to the custom of acknowledging a transfer of 'right of redemption' from the next of kin to the next appropriate relative by the transfer of a sandal. With this custom observed, Boaz buys property that will pass to a child born to Ruth. And Boaz says publicly, that he will not just be kinsman-redeemer to Ruth but take her as his wife (v. 10).

All who are present recognise Boaz's kindness to this family, and his faithfulness to their law in what he undertakes to do. They participate in what has been a work of God's kindness by invoking the Lord's blessing on Ruth. May she be as fruitful as Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, whose children were the fathers of Israel's tribes, and may she be truly noble. They also invoke a blessing of a sure inheritance for Ruth, through the child that would be born to her, and they do so with reference to Perez. This man was born to Judah, father of the tribe destined to

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produce Israel's kings. Judah had taken a Canaanite wife, and in very shabby circumstances, had a child by his daughter in law, Tamar. The child is Perez (Gen. 38), and the Lord had preserved the inheritance of this illegitimate son born to a Canaanite (1 Chron. 2:4). In fact, he would become an ancestor of Jesus (Matt. 1:3). The mention of Perez is an assurance that the union of Boaz and Ruth is one that it is right for God to bless.

The story concludes, as it began, by focusing on Naomi. As Boaz and Ruth become a family with their first child, the women of the community gather around Naomi and tell her how blessed she is. She has had a kinsman-redeemer worthy of great honour, a restorer of her life and sustainer of her in old age. She has a daughter in law who loves her—more valuable than seven sons. No more can she claim to be empty! Indeed, our narrator tells us that her great grandson will be King David, who will, indeed, 'build up the house of Israel' (v. 11). The women wish for more than they realize.

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