



E2E

Eternity to Eternity

BOOK 5 | LESSONS 42-55



NEW HOPE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

The teeming mass of Israelites sprawled out across the Promised Land like sheep across well-watered meadows. The canvas upon which this surreal scene was painted was God's steadfast love and faithfulness. It is mind bending to consider all that God had done to provide this place of thriving for His people. He had conferred upon them an undeserved identity as His chosen people, nurtured them in Egypt, gave them His written word to guide them, freed up Levites and priests to live among them and teach, patiently matured them in the wilderness, enabled them to conquer a strategic, fruitful land in which to live, organized them into a worshipful, community of faith, dotted their calendar with a rhythm of memorials and celebrations to remember His goodness, sent His Holy Spirit to preside over the nation, involved them in His program of announcing the good news of His redemption to the surrounding nations, deconstructed their animistic worldview with astounding miracles, and promised to continue to prosper them as they moved forward. The choice that is ours was also their choice. Would they take ownership of their position in God's program or wander like lost sheep?

Israel had the option of enjoying their privileged standing by applying the principle of faith appropriation. While it is true that God had already provided all of these things I mentioned, Israel would only ever enjoy (appropriate) what they believed God for. They would only enter His rest if they walked with Him by faith and if they submitted to His rulership over their lives. God wasn't keeping them from enjoying something good. He had already provided all that was good. Israel would only ever realize the blessings they actually believed God for. This should make us pause and consider all that God has provided for us and ask ourselves if we are thriving by faith in His past provision or striving needlessly to get things like security and significance He has already gifted us? Have we entered into His rest or are we still wandering around a wilderness of unbelief?

In E2E book 5 Joshua is boldly entering a land on God's behalf that is hostile and dangerous. After completing his life's work, he will fade

from the scene and no human leader will take his place. The time period of the Judges should have been a time of enjoying God as king. Instead, God's people did what was right in their own eyes. Judges is a dark, sad book that chronicles the rejection of God's rule and enthroning of sinful desires. The book of Ruth highlights men and women who lived during the time of the Judges but who rejected the thinking of the day, made good faith choices and enjoyed God's provision and rest. Welcome to E2E book 5.

Ric Bruce wrote lessons 42, 44 and 45. Jacob Iverson wrote lessons 43, 50-53. I wrote lessons 46-49 and 54 & 55. Ric Bruce and Kevin Mungons shared editing responsibilities. Jeanette McWaters painstakingly proof-read each lesson and Darla Prether prayerfully designed the cover and organized the contents. Sam Eling gave the book an online presence on the church website. To each of these I am deeply grateful. Our prayer is that you enjoy the lessons as much as we enjoyed putting them together for you and that each of us will understand all God has provided and enter into His rest by faith.

God bless(ed),

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RKBH' in a stylized, cursive font.

Rich Bruce, Discipleship Pastor

LESSON 42

Spying Out the Land

The essence of many jobs can be boiled down into one simple statement. As a chef, your food should taste good. As a professional athlete, you should play your sport well. Similarly, spies in foreign countries pretty much have one job: they should not get caught. Even if spies don't discover intelligence that radically alters the course of a conflict, spies who avoid detection can still observe the overall mood of the people they encounter, report unusual happenings, or overhear interesting gossip. The two men Joshua sent to spy out the Jericho in Joshua ch. 2 would have known that the house of a prostitute like Rahab constituted an ideal place to gather valuable information. As we read the story, however, we quickly discover that these spies missed the number one rule in spy school: do not get caught. All joking aside, through their divine encounter with a harlot named Rahab, God would weave a remarkable story of faith and salvation through all of history. In fact, God worked behind the scenes to show all of Israel that He could save anyone, even a sinful Canaanite prostitute. Rahab ultimately defied expectations by displaying unwavering faith in Jehovah God. Through her actions, we learn lessons that resonate with our own experience today.

Key Scripture

[Joshua commanded the people to prepare themselves to cross the Jordan River and enter the land God had promised them! The people swore themselves to an oath declaring that if anyone disobeyed Joshua's voice they were to be put to death and they encouraged Joshua to be strong and courageous.]

Joshua 2:1 *Then Joshua the son of Nun sent two men as spies secretly from Shittim, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." So they went and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there.*

[The king of Jericho found out that spies had entered the city and he tracked them to Rahab's house. When confronted by the king's men Rahab lied and told them they had arrived at her house but had left before the gate closed

at night. She encouraged them to pursue them outside the city. Rahab confessed to the spies....]

2:11 When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. 12 Now therefore, please swear to me by the LORD, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father's household, and give me a pledge of truth, 13 and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." 14 So the men said to her, "Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the LORD gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you."

[The spies made Rahab promise to bring her family into her home during the attack and to mark her house by hanging a scarlet cord from her window. This would keep her and her family from being harmed].

Recommended Reading Joshua 1, 2

Joshua sent two spies to Jericho on a mission to gather intelligence before the conquest of the Promised Land, just like Moses had sent Joshua and 11 other men to spy out the land in Numbers 13, many years previous. Unlike Joshua who had gone undetected, it appears that someone told Jericho's King about the two spies' whereabouts immediately upon their entry into Rahab's home (Josh 2:2). Rahab took an incredible risk to hide the spies from the soldiers who sought them out. In an act of profound faith, Rahab acknowledged the power and authority of the spies' God (Josh 2:9-11). She initiated a covenant with them (and with God), requesting safety for her family during the impending assault on the city. The spies agreed to Rahab's terms and gave Rahab a scarlet cord to hang from her window as a sign of protection for her household. Consider the following:

1. Many Christians have wondered if Rahab practiced true prostitution, the kind where she had relations with men for money. Some Jewish scribes and Bible scholars have claimed that Rahab's home was likely more akin to a roadside inn than to a brothel. The Bible does not say. We do know that when Rahab is mentioned in the New Testament, she is called the "harlot" Greek: πόρνη (pornae)¹. While Rahab's lifestyle and her open identity as a prostitute may disgust us, we must recognize the profound truth that Rahab believed God and later turned from her sinfulness. Given the opportunity, she readily

served God and trusted him with her own life. Despite her occupation, she had the courage and compassion to do the right thing by faith. In the end, her brave actions earned her a place in the “hall of faith.” Hebrews 11:31 states, “By Faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.” Perhaps you know someone like Rahab who needs to be invited to take a step of faith. Do not hesitate to engage with lost and hurting people who seem far from God.

2. Rahab told an overt lie to protect the spies. Christians have wondered if Rahab’s lie constituted a sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “What is worse than doing evil is being evil.”² “With this phrase, Bonhoeffer defended his actions in supporting a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler during World War II. The Bible never explicitly condones Rahab’s lie. In both James and Hebrews, the Holy Spirit praised Rahab not for lying to protect the spies but for welcoming them warmly. Perhaps if Rahab had told the truth, God would have chosen to protect the spies in another way. It seems likely, however, that Rahab chose the lesser of two evils when she lied to protect the spies. While that does not excuse her actions, exposing the spies would have certainly called into question Rahab’s profession of faith in the God of the Israelites. Regardless of human actions, God sovereignly orchestrated events. God had a plan to protect the spies and to save Rahab.

3. The scarlet cord symbolized and sealed the covenant that Rahab made with the spies. That cord ensured the safety of Rahab’s family during the violent and tumultuous events during the fall of Jericho. In displaying the cord, Rahab’s house became a place of safety and a sanctuary. Only those family members who took refuge inside Rahab’s house when the walls fell were protected by the covenant of the scarlet cord (Joshua 6:22-23). The image of a scarlet cord has become synonymous with history itself, particularly the epic story of God’s redemption of His chosen people. Matthew 1:5, identifies Rahab as one of the matriarchs in the line of Jesus. In fact, Matthew names her as the wife of Salmon, the father of Boaz, who married Ruth and redeemed her out of a life of shame and obscurity (see the book of Ruth in the Bible). Like the scarlet cord that protected his great-great-great-great grandmother Rahab, Jesus’ blood is the sign of our covenant with God. Just as Rahab trusted in the scarlet cord for protection, we too can rely on God’s faithfulness in our lives, know-

ing that He will provide us with salvation through Jesus.

Rahab's courageous act challenges us to extend compassion to those in need, even when it goes against societal norms and expectations. Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). Let us boldly demonstrate Christ's love and compassion through our actions. Rahab's faith was rooted in her recognition of God's power and authority. Similarly, our faith grows when we deepen our understanding of God's sovereignty over all aspects of our lives. In times of uncertainty or fear, we can trust in His power to guide and protect us, knowing that no circumstance is beyond His control.

Point to Ponder

Our faith in God's faithfulness can transform the most mundane interactions into divine appointments.

From Learning to Living

Remember that the story of Rahab is not merely a historical account but a profound lesson for our lives today. May we embody Rahab's courageous compassion and faith, recognizing God's power and trusting in His unwavering faithfulness. Our lives should proclaim God's transformative power as we impact the lives of those around us.

Prayer Point

"Gracious God, we thank You for the inspiring story of Rahab, a woman whose faith and courage defied societal expectations. Help us to embrace courageous compassion, recognizing Your power and sovereignty over all aspects of our lives. Strengthen our faith in Your unwavering faithfulness, that we may live as instruments of Your grace and love in this world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

LESSON 43

Crossing the Jordan

Toward the end of June, we in the United States adorn our light poles, mailboxes, and front porches with extra banners and flags in preparation to celebrate Independence Day. On the Fourth of July, we mark the occasion by gathering with friends and family, attending parades, and sitting down for a cookout. When the sun sets, we'll set out blankets and lawn chairs for the annual fireworks. We participate in these traditions, eat special food, and attend patriotic displays to commemorate an important day in our history. Our actions remind us that July 4 is special as we remember the faithfulness of others.

Just like modern Americans, the ancient Israelites needed reminders to help them remember God's faithfulness during important events in their history. In Joshua 3–4, the Israelites stood on the banks of the Jordan, looking into the land God had forbidden them to enter for 40 years. As they prepared themselves to finally cross the river, God had them ceremonially prepare themselves and establish memorials so future generations would know what God was about to do. Let's pay close attention to the following Scripture and the ways God prepared Israel to step into the promised land.

Key Scripture

Joshua 3:1 *Then Joshua got up early in the morning; and he and all the sons of Israel set out from Shittim and came to the Jordan, and they spent the night there before they crossed.*

[After three days leaders went through the camp commanding the people to move with the ark but to stay at least 2000 cubits (3,600 ft) behind it. The night before they crossed Joshua called the people.]

3:5 *Then Joshua said to the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do miracles among you." 6 And Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over ahead of the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went ahead of the people. 7 Now the Lord said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel so that they will know that just*

as I have been with Moses, I will be with you. 8 So you shall command the priests who are carrying the ark of the covenant, saying, ‘When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.’” 9 Then Joshua said to the sons of Israel, “Come here and hear the words of the Lord your God.” 10 And Joshua said, “By this you will know that the living God is among you, and that He will assuredly drive out from you the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Hivite, the Perizzite, the Girgashite, the Amorite, and the Jebusite.

[The children of Israel obeyed Joshua’s orders and when the priest’s feet stepped into the waters of the Jordan, they parted, and the entire nation crossed on dry ground!]

Judges 4 *1 Now when the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, 2 “Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, 3 and command them, saying, ‘Take up for yourselves twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet are standing firmly, and carry them over with you and lay them down in the encampment where you will spend the night.’”*

[Joshua obeyed and the men laid the stones down at their encampment. Joshua explained that the stones would serve as a memorial to future generations . . .]

14 On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, so that they revered him, just as they had revered Moses all the days of his life.

23 For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord your God had done to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed; 24 so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever.”

Recommended Reading Joshua 3, 4

The Israelites crossed near Jericho, part of God’s strategic plan. The central city in Canaan¹ would serve as an effective base from which Joshua and the Israelites could launch military campaigns into every region of the Promise Land. However, before the Israelites could embark on their campaign, they needed to trust God by crossing the Jordan River in an unusual way. God directed His people—men, women, and children, along with all their possessions and livestock—to cross the river in a single location. To a potential enemy, a column of people so close together could

have posed an easy target. A threat could have quickly ended the Israelites' campaign into the Promise Land. Joshua and all the people had a physical opportunity to step out in faith. God protected His people and had His reasons for having the Israelites cross in this manner.

1. God helped Israel prepare. Before crossing, God instructed the people in Joshua 3:5 to “Consecrate yourselves!” “Consecrate” comes from the Hebrew word *qadash*, which means to set apart². In this context God is saying “step away from your distractions, step away from your daily routine, and get ready for the mission I have for you.” God gave a reason for this setting apart, because “tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.” God wanted His people to be mentally and spiritually ready for the task ahead just as he wants us to be prepared for the work He’s called us to.

2. God continued His covenant with Israel. The Israelites had spent 40 years in the wilderness, a full generation. Most of those who escaped Egypt and crossed the Red Sea had passed away. Would God continue to keep His covenant obligations and deliver the land he promised to Abraham? God showed this new generation of Israelites that He was on their side and would be with them as they entered the land. In a miracle reflecting the crossing of the Red Sea, God caused the river to stop so that it “rose up in a heap” (3:16). When the feet of the priests touched the water, it stopped while they crossed over (3:15).

3. God wanted Israel to be a testimony. Our eternal God knows that people have short memories. More than 500 times in the Bible, God’s people are told to “remember.”³ When God instructed the people to “Take up for yourselves twelve stones” (4:2), He had the people build a monument. He ensured that the enemies of the Israelites, along with Israel’s children would “know that the hand of the Lord is mighty” so that they may “fear the Lord your God forever” (4:24). God knew that memorials are important tools for teaching truth and established a lasting monument of His greatness.

The Israelites crossed the river on “the tenth day of the first month” (4:19), which would have been during the Passover celebration, the same time that their parents had crossed the Red Sea a genera-

tion earlier. This, along with the first Passover, serves as bookends to Israel's journey out of slavery and a reminder to us that God is constant, His grace is continual, and He will always keep His covenants. 19th-century preacher Charles Spurgeon once reminded his listeners that "God has never failed His people nor cast away His chosen; not one promise has lost its fulfillment nor one word its faithfulness."⁴

Point to Ponder

Are you ready for the work God has called you to?

From Learning to Living

We spend a lot of time, money, and effort making memorable occasions and holidays. You may have special reminders during holidays, but what are you doing daily to remember what God has done for you? This week, look for an act of God's faithfulness in your life. Try writing it on a sticky note or creating a recurring reminder on your phone. Pause and think of the ways God has been faithful to you—and tell someone about them. Find ways to step away from your distractions to remember what God has done.

Prayer Point

Gracious heavenly Father, thank you for your commitment to a forgetful sinner like me. Your steadfast loving kindness knows no bounds. Prepare me today for the work you've set before me, and help us to commemorate your faithfulness.

LESSON 44

Mighty Jericho Falls

Vivid moments in life etch themselves into our collective memory, forever imprinted upon our consciousness. These extraordinary events shape the course of nations and define generations. From the devastating impact of 9/11 to the awe-inspiring achievement of landing on the moon, these milestones are seared into our minds, and we can ask a friend, “Where were you when it happened?” and instantly evoke a vivid recollection. These moments transcend individual experiences, uniting us in a tapestry of shared memories and reminding us of the power and impact of our collective journey. Similarly, God’s children would have vividly recalled the breathtaking moment when the walls of Jericho crumbled before the unstoppable power of God. Even today, when we read this captivating story from the book of Joshua, we can learn profound lessons of faith and obedience.

Key Scripture

Joshua 5:1 *Now it came about when all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard how the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the sons of Israel until they had crossed, that their hearts melted, and there was no spirit in them any longer because of the sons of Israel.*

[Soon after they crossed the Jordan God commanded His people to make flint knives and circumcise all the men. The people had failed to circumcise the males who were born in the wilderness.]

5:8 Now when they had finished circumcising all the nation, they remained in their places in the camp until they recovered. 9 Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the shame of Egypt from you.” So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.

[While camped at Gilgal they celebrated Passover and ate some of the produce from the land God promised to them. The next day God stopped providing manna and quail.]

Judges 6 1 *Now Jericho was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel;*

no one went out and no one came in. 2 But the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have handed Jericho over to you, with its king and the valiant warriors.

[God commanded Joshua to circle the city with all his warriors once each day for six days. They followed seven priests who were bellowing out trumpet blasts from trumpets made of ram's horns. On the seventh day they circled the city seven times and...]

20 So the people shouted, and the priests blew the trumpets; and when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted with a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, everyone straight ahead, and they took the city. 21 They utterly destroyed everything in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, sheep, and donkey, with the edge of the sword.

[God had decreed Jericho to be the possession of His people, and He had delivered it into their hands just as He promised.]

Recommended Reading Joshua 5, 6

After the Israelites crossed the Jordan River, news of their miraculous crossing reached the kings of the Amorites and the Canaanites, filling them with fear and causing their "hearts to melt" (5:1). However, before they could proceed to conquer Jericho, God commanded the Israelite men to be circumcised, as required by the covenant. Following their obedience, the Israelites celebrated Passover. While this may seem like an odd start to a military campaign, God used this time to forge His people's hearts in the crucible of trust in Him. As they approached Jericho, the city was tightly shut, but God assured Joshua that He had already handed it over to them. Carefully following God's instructions, the Israelites circled the city once a day for six days, and on the seventh day, they circled it seven times. With a shout and the blowing of trumpets, the walls of Jericho collapsed, and God's people took the city. As the "firstfruits" of the land (Proverbs 3:9-10), God commanded the Israelites to burn Jericho, its inhabitants, and its livestock as a burnt offering to Him (Joshua 6:17-19, Deut. 13:16). Consider the following:

1. Jericho, as a city, represented a significant obstacle standing in the way of God's people. At the time, Jericho was a formidable fortress with its walls serving as an earthly symbol of strength and security. According to The New Unger's Bible Dictionary, "City D, taken by Josh-

ua, was constructed c. 1500 B.C. The wall originally reached perhaps thirty feet.”¹ At the time, a thirty-foot-high wall would have presented a significant obstacle to invading armies! However, no obstacle can withstand the unstoppable power of God. He assured Joshua that the city was already delivered into their hands (Joshua 6:2). This reassurance was not based on the Israelites’ military strength or strategy, but on their obedience and faith in God’s commands. Jericho reminds us that God plays the key role in implementing His plans, not man.

2. God promised the walls of Jericho would fall, but Hebrews 11:30 reminds us that “by faith the walls of Jericho fell.” Faith unlocks the power of God’s promises! The Israelites risked everything to follow God’s instructions and as a result, they watched God perform a miracle. God commands similar trust and obedience from believers today. 1 John 5:3, states, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” The story of Jericho’s fall showcases God’s mighty power and His faithfulness to His promises. It serves as a testament to His sovereignty over all obstacles and His guidance in fulfilling His plans. The people of Jericho, by contrast, scoffed at God and suffered the consequences. No doubt the people of Jericho laughed from atop their high walls, convinced their fortifications would hold against any amount of trumpet blowing and shouting. The story of Jericho’s fall foreshadowed God’s ultimate victory through the bloodline of Jesus Christ, who conquered sin and death on the cross. Just like the walls of Jericho, the power of sin and death in our lives can only be conquered by faith in God’s power and obedience to His commands.

3. Genesis 12:1-2 says, “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation.’” Considering Jericho’s fall in light of God’s promises, conquering Jericho established the Israelites’ presence in the land just as God had promised Abraham. Now, after many years of wandering in the wilderness, God’s people finally found a place to call their own, but the Canaanites and Amorites lived there already! Why was Abraham promised land that belonged to others?² Genesis 15:16 gives the reason and the timeline for this transfer of ownership to Abraham’s descendants, “And they (Abraham’s descendants) shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” The Canaanites and the Amorites had sinned against God from

the time of Abraham to the time of Joshua without repentance. Now the cup of God's wrath (Rev 16:9) had filled to overflowing, and He would use the Israelites to judge a wicked and perverse generation.

The story of Jericho's fall is a testament to the unstoppable power of God and the importance of faith and obedience in Him. As we reflect on this account, let us remember that no obstacle is too great for our God. He goes before us, making a way where there seems to be no way. Let us trust in His power, obey His commands, and confront the strongholds in our lives with faith and determination. May we live as a people who rely on God's guidance, experience His abundant blessings, and walk in the victory He has provided through Jesus Christ.

Point to Ponder

In the face of your Jerichos, trust in the God who conquers strongholds.

From Learning to Living

Just as Jericho represented a stronghold for the Israelites, we all have strongholds in our lives that hinder our spiritual growth and intimacy with God. These strongholds can take various forms, such as addictions, unhealthy thought patterns, or areas of sin. The fall of Jericho reminds us that no stronghold is too strong for God. Reflect on 2 Corinthians 10:4, which states, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds." How can you rely on God's power and utilize the spiritual weapons He has provided to demolish the strongholds in your life? Seek His guidance, pray fervently, and engage with His Word to experience victory in these areas.

Prayer Point

Heavenly Father, we stand in awe of Your unstoppable power and faithfulness. We thank You for the lessons we learn from the fall of Jericho. Help us to trust in You when we face daunting challenges and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Grant us the courage to obey Your commands, knowing that Your promises are sure. Give us the strength to confront and conquer the strongholds in our lives and experience the freedom You have provided through Jesus Christ. Empower us to live victoriously, relying on Your guidance and provision. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

LESSON 45

Conquest of Ai

Companies of soldiers know well the devastating effects that one soldier's actions can have on the entire group. Soldiers place their lives in the hands of their brothers-in-arms. The entire unit must demonstrate trust in their leadership, actively keep up morale, and work together to accomplish assigned objectives. A soldier who panics in the heat of battle, demoralizes his fellows, freezes at a decisive moment, or deliberately disobeys orders puts others in danger and can compromise the mission. Perhaps that's why the US Military Justice Code allows dishonorable discharge, forfeiture of pay and allowances, and up to two years of confinement for each incidence of a soldier failing to obey a lawful and direct general order¹. In Joshua 7 and 8, Israel had just conquered Jericho, but much work lay ahead. God issued a direct order in Joshua 6:17. He ordered Joshua and the people of Israel to burn all the goods and valuables they found in the city of Jericho. Almost every single Israelite obeyed this ban, regardless of whether they understood or agreed with God's command. Almost all of them...

Key Scripture

Joshua 7:1 *But the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully regarding the things designated for destruction, for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, from the tribe of Judah, took some of the designated things; therefore the anger of the LORD burned against the sons of Israel.*

[Unaware of Achan's sin and God's anger, Joshua sent spies to Ai who returned with news that the men of Ai were few in number and that only a small army should be sent to attack them. Joshua sent 3000 men who were soundly defeated and 36 Israelites died! Joshua was distraught.]

7:6 Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the ground on his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, both he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. 7 And Joshua said, "Oh, Lord GOD! Why did You ever bring this people across the Jordan, only to hand us over to the Amorites, to eliminate us? If only we had been willing to live beyond the Jordan! 8 O Lord, what can I say since Israel has turned their back before their enemies? 9 For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear about it, and they will surround us and eliminate

our name from the earth. And what will You do for Your great name?"

10 So the LORD said to Joshua, "Stand up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face? 11 Israel has sinned, and they have also violated My covenant which I commanded them.

[God explained that He would withhold His blessing until the stolen articles were removed from the offending family and fellowship with Him was restored. He said...]

12b "I will not be with you anymore unless you eliminate from your midst the things designated for destruction. 13 Stand up! Consecrate the people and say, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, because the LORD, the God of Israel, has said this: "There are things designated for destruction in your midst, Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you have removed the designated things from your midst."

[Joshua used lots to determine who was the guilty family and Achan was soon brought before him to stand trial. Achan was found guilty and the community of Israel stoned Achan and his entire family to death. They piled up a great heap of stones over their bodies. With the sin dealt with, the children of Israel were able to easily defeat Ai and the neighboring town of Bethel.]

Recommended Reading Joshua 7, 8

In the story of Israel's defeat at the city of Ai, we see the catastrophic consequences that occurred when just one person violated God's proscription against keeping any of the spoils from Jericho (also known as the *cherem* or "ban" in Hebrew). The defenders of Ai killed 36 Israelites, and the hearts of the Israelites, "melted and became as water" (7:5). In Joshua 2:11 and 5:1, the Canaanites experienced a similar heart-rending level of fear at the approach of the Israelites. Joshua, stunned and confused by unexpected defeat, fell on his face, and accused God of acting in bad faith. In Joshua's view, God forgot His children and neglected His own glory and honor before the Canaanites. Joshua whined and complained when he should have confidently expressed trust in God. Because of this lack of faith, God rebuked Joshua in 7:10, "Get up! Why have you fallen on your face?" God used this pivotal moment to make General Joshua a better leader and a more spiritually in-tune man. Consider the following:

1. A careful reading of the differences between Joshua's actions in chapter 7 compared to his actions in chapter 8 reveals that Joshua learned a valuable lesson from defeat. At the beginning of chapter 7, Joshua did not ask for God's permission before he sent 3000 men to take Ai. In

Chapter 8, God gave the commands and Joshua humbly obeyed them. Rather than underestimate the enemy as he did previously, Joshua sent the entire fighting force up to the city of Ai, and he laid a trap for the king of Ai by feigning retreat and then setting an ambush on the city from the rear. While Joshua chapter 7 stands as an illustration of disobedience and its consequences, chapter 8 stands as a testament to God's grace and second chances. According to David Campbell, "Thus Israel, restored to God's favor, won a great victory. After failure came a second chance. One defeat or failure does not signal the end of a believer's usefulness for God."²

2. While God laid the blame squarely on the sin of one man, Achan, His fierce anger burned against the entire assembly of Israel (7:1). Why? Achan made the choice to violate God's ban on keeping goods from Jericho but all of Israel suffered for it. Thirty-six good men died for one man's sin! We must remember God's character and the nature of His covenant relationship with His people. The covenant vows taken by Israel to obey God were not individual ones. Israel had pledged as a people to keep God's laws (Ex. 19:8). That meant they had a collective obligation to eradicate sin from their midst and to remind one another of those obligations. As members of an individualistic society, we may recoil in horror at the idea of accepting punishment for another person's wrongdoing, but ancient Near Eastern cultures had a completely different perspective. Matthews, Cavalas, and Walton remind us in the Bible Knowledge Background Commentary that, "In the ancient Near East a person found his or her identity within the group. Integration and interdependence were important values, and the group was bound together as a unit. As a result, individual behavior would not be viewed in isolation from the group."³

3. When the entire congregation had just cause to punish a wrongdoer, and the penalty of the crime was death, the Bible often imposed death by stoning (Deut 13:11; 17:5). During an execution by stoning, no one knew which stone dealt the final, fatal blow to the guilty party. The entire assembly took part in meting out the punishment and thus cleansing the community of sin in the process. Like a modern-day firing squad, no individual felt the weight of pulling the trigger alone. Again, modern readers balk at the idea of Achan's entire family sharing in his punishment. This reaction assumes Achan's family had no idea that Achan had violated God's law. The text does not specify. Again, we must read God's orders carefully. The *cherem* ban, like the US Military Justice Code, specified

an appropriate and just punishment that would deter future violations of the ban during wartime: obliteration of the entire family line.

If Achan had simply waited a few days, he could have enjoyed all the spoils of Ai. Instead, he stole valuables destined for God's treasury, causing untold misery in the process. The nation of Israel lost God's power and blessing, and the only way they could get it back was to cut the cancer of Achan's bloodline (Achan is a Hebrew name meaning troubler) out of their midst. God views all sin as serious, but we tend to categorize and judge some sins as worse than others. God compares sin to yeast, a small thing that, when added to bread, makes the entire loaf rise. We often underestimate our sins, justifying them or even blaming God for their catastrophic consequences. We fail to see life and truth from God's perspective. When we do not experience victory in our Christian lives, it's often due to an unconfessed or unrepentant area of sin. If we fail morally in the area of sexual purity, for example, but stay outwardly dedicated to God by going to church on Sunday and singing loudly during worship, we become like Achan. We should not wonder when we do not experience victory in our spiritual lives, as long as one area of our lives secretly harbors habitual, unrepentant sin.

Point to Ponder

What sins do I hide under my tent, convinced no one will know?

From Learning to Living

What "small" areas of your life need attention? Do you have a sibling you need to forgive? What little white lies have you told to your spouse this week? Have you pilfered something "harmless" from your workplace? All sin separates us from God and falls short of His standard for our lives. Unless we confess these issues, we will not experience God's power and blessing in other areas including our marriages, our relationships with our kids, or our leadership at work.

Prayer Point

"Dear God of second chances, thank You that you gave Joshua and the people of Israel another chance to obey You after they dealt with sin. Thank You for patiently convicting me of sin through Your Holy Spirit and for giving me a second chance, too. Help me to walk in lockstep with You and not run ahead of Your direction in my life."

LESSON 46

Deceit of the Gibeonites

Throughout history, humans have made decisions independently and contrary to God's will. Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit without consulting Him. Cain, in a fit of rage, murdered Abel believing God would turn a blind eye. People in Noah's day followed their base desires, disregarding God's commands. The people of Babel rejected God's plan to disperse throughout the earth and instead built a tower to reach Him. Abraham, rather than trusting God, resorted to the prevailing practice of concubinage to have a son. Moses, acting impulsively, killed an Egyptian and fled Egypt without seeking God's guidance. Even Aaron, God's priest, disregarded God, bent to the Israelite people's will, and fashioned a golden calf for them to worship. At Kadesh Barnea, all twelve tribes forgot about God's miracles and succumbed to fear upon hearing the spies' report. Now, in the following verses, an unknown people seduced Israel into making a binding covenant. Once again, God's people acted independently, disregarded Him, and neglected to consult Him.

Key Scripture

Joshua 9 1 Now it came about when all the kings who were beyond the Jordan, in the hill country, the lowland, and on all the coast of the Great Sea toward Lebanon, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite, heard about it, 2 that they met together with one purpose, to fight with Joshua and with Israel.

3 The inhabitants of Gibeon also heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, 4 but they on their part acted craftily and went and took provisions for a journey, and took worn-out sacks on their donkeys, and wineskins that were worn out, split open, and patched, 5 and worn-out and patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes on themselves; and all the bread of their provision was dry and had become crumbled. 6 And they went to Joshua at the camp at Gilgal and said to him and to the men of Israel, "We have come from a far country; now then, make a covenant with us." 7 But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, "Perhaps you are living within our land; how then are we to make a covenant with you?" 8 So they said to Joshua, "We are your servants." Then Joshua said to them, "Who are you and where do you come from?" 9 They said

to him, “Your servants have come from a very distant country because of the fame of the LORD your God; for we have heard the report about Him and all that He did in Egypt, 10 and all that He did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon king of Heshbon and to Og king of Bashan who was in Ashtaroath. 11 So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country spoke to us, saying, ‘Take provisions in your hand for the journey, and go to meet them, and say to them, “We are your servants; now then, make a covenant with us.”’ 12 This bread of ours was hot when we took it for our provisions from our houses on the day that we left to come to you; but now behold, it is dry and has become crumbled. 13 And these wineskins which we filled were new, and behold, they are split open; and these clothes of ours and our sandals are worn out from the very long journey.” 14 So the men of Israel took some of their provisions, and did not ask for the counsel of the LORD. 15 And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live; and the leaders of the congregation swore an oath to them. 16 However, it came about at the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them, that they heard that they were neighbors and that they were living within their land.

[Israel realized that the Gibeonites were living a mere 25 miles away from Gilgal! Since God’s people had sworn an oath of honor not to destroy them, their hands were tied.]

9:27 But on that day Joshua made them gatherers of firewood and labor to draw water for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD, to this day, in the place which He would choose.

Instead of fighting Israel, Gibeah and its three sister cities abandoned their histories, their historical alliances, and exclusive worship of their gods and became indentured servants to God’s people. They committed themselves to serve loyally and to contribute to the strength of Israel. In return, Joshua promised to allow them to live, to support their cultural identity, and to defend them in case of attack. The covenant made with the Gibeonites proved to be a continual challenge for Israel, as they became entangled with the world. Consider the following points:

1. Gibeah, situated just 6 miles northwest of Jerusalem, held a strategic position. Surrounded by fertile pastures and elevated 100 feet above Jerusalem, it enjoyed a reliable water source year-round. Bible scholar Lincoln Shute explains it this way, “Like the points of a great star fish, plains or passes extend from Gibeah.”¹ The city controlled multiple passes that extended from it in various

directions. Additionally, its location atop a major East-West pass gave it authority over its sister cities. Joshua must have felt a deep sense of regret realizing that Israel would never have full control over this strategically important area in the Promised Land. Their failure to depend fully on God resulted in missed opportunities.

2. In the region of Israel, archaeologists have uncovered around forty ancient treaties, known as Suzerain-Vassal treaties.² These treaties were highly detailed, inscribed on writing materials, and solemnly sworn to in ceremonies. Interestingly, these ancient treaties contained curses for those who broke the covenant, with the specific curses named in the treaty. Despite the Gibeonites' deceit, Israel chose to honor God's name and remain loyal to this earthly covenant for thousands of years. God's people had the capacity to uphold this earthly treaty, but later dishonored God by worshiping idols and breaking the Law covenant they had entered into with Him. Joshua, acting as God's general, swore a binding covenant in God's name without consulting Him.

3. Leadership matters! It's about guiding others, and oneself, from the current state to a future, desired state. Throughout biblical history, God tasked servant leaders with representing Him to others. Moses accomplished this by displaying a dependent, humble spirit while leading God's people forward. Joshua had an opportunity to humbly rely on God and demonstrate partnership with Him. Instead, he assumed the sincerity of the Gibeonites, willingly gave away strategic high ground, and condemned Israel to centuries of unwanted influence. We must be aware of our potential to casually ignore God and unknowingly bring unintended consequences upon those under our care.

The covenant with the Gibeonites enraged surrounding Canaanite city-states. King Adoni-Zedek of Jerusalem led a coalition of five kings against Gibeah, forcing Joshua to alter his battle plans and defend the city (see Joshua chapter 10 for more details). The binding nature of this covenant is further demonstrated when, centuries later, King Saul wronged the Gibeonites, resulting in a three-year famine upon Israel. The famine only ended after the Gibeonites put two of Saul's sons and five of his grandsons to death!

Point to Ponder

One never accomplishes the will of God by breaking the law of God, violating the principles of God, or ignoring the wisdom of God – Andy Stanley

From Learning to Living

Trust God to guide you through challenging areas of your life, where you have historically relied on your own will and embraced incorrect beliefs. Approach Him in prayer, and seek His guidance, as He leads you from where you are to where you need to be. May you be sensitive to His initiatives in your life and resist the urge to figure out life on your own.

Prayer Point

Heavenly Father, You understand my human frailties and weaknesses. Psalm 103:24 reminds us, I am “nothing but dust.” Help me to remember Your presence, stay involved in Your work each day, and resist the temptation to navigate life independently of You.

LESSON 47

Conquest and Covenant

God created humanity with unique faculties to enjoy a right relationship with Him. He gave us a mind to acknowledge Him, a will to choose Him, and a heart to love Him. Throughout biblical history, God provided environments for people to thrive in their connection with Him. Adam and Eve experienced the beauty of the garden in communion with God, while Noah witnessed the world after the flood, sharing it with God. However, the potential for humans to flourish in their God-given circumstances always depends on their willingness to trust and obey Him. Without loyalty, humans cannot enjoy a right relationship with God.

The land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, awaited the children of Israel like an enticing Thanksgiving feast. They were about to partake in the abundance of vineyards they did not plant and dwell in cities they did not build. In the following passages, God describes battles that turned the tide in Israel's favor, and allowed them to claim their portions of the land. As you read, pay close attention to the boundaries God set for them to enjoy a life in harmony with Him, as well as the grave warnings should they choose disobedience and disloyalty.

Key Scripture

Joshua 11:1 *Then it came about, when Jabin king of Hazor heard about it, that he sent word to Jobab king of Madon,*

[Jabin called together 10 kings of city states and...]

11:4 Then they came out, they and all their armies with them, as many people as the sand that is on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots. 5 So all of these kings gathered together, and came and encamped together at the waters of Merom, to fight against Israel.

6 Yet the LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid because of them, for tomorrow at this time I am going to turn all of them over to Israel as good as dead; you shall hamstring their horses and burn their chariots with fire." 7 So Joshua and all the people of war with him came upon them

suddenly at the waters of Merom, and attacked them. 8 And the LORD handed them over to Israel, so that they defeated them, and pursued them as far as Great Sidon, and Misrephoth-maim, and the Valley of Mizpeh to the east; and they struck them until no survivor was left to them. 9 And Joshua did to them just as the LORD had told him; he hamstrung their horses and burned their chariots with fire.

[Joshua turned to the North and defeated these ten kings. It is noteworthy that the size of Joshua's enemies increased as he moved forward with God. Joshua spent several more years conquering the land. Even though there were still areas needing subdued, Joshua paused to divide up the land into tribal areas. God's people began to settle into the towns they had defeated.]

Joshua 21 *43 So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and lived in it. 44 And the LORD gave them rest on every side, in accordance with everything that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. 45 Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; everything came to pass.*

[Nearing the end of his life, Joshua gathered all the people of Israel and reminded them of God's goodness and the consequences if they turned to serve idols. He spoke these solemn words...]

Joshua 23 *6 Be very determined, then, to keep and do everything that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, so that you will not turn aside from it to the right or to the left, 7 so that you will not associate with these nations, these which remain with you, or mention the name of their gods, or make anyone swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them. 16 When you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which He commanded you, and you go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the LORD will burn against you, and you will perish quickly from the good land which He has given you."*

Suggested Reading Joshua chapters 10-23

The land of Israel was divided into three geographical areas running north to south: the coastal plain along the Mediterranean Sea in the west, the Jordan River in the great Rift valley to the east, and the hill country nestled between these lower regions. By the end of Joshua's life, Israel controlled most of the hill country, while certain portions of the lowlands remained under the control of other nations. While military operations would continue until the time of King David, by this point the Canaanites could no longer mount a united attack against God's people that was capable of expelling them from the

promised land. Consider the following:

1. God, through Moses, communicated the boundaries of the Promised Land and designated tribal allotments for Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh on the west side of the Jordan River (Numbers 34). After the conquest, Joshua surveyed the land, divided it into sections, and cast lots before God to determine which tribe would inherit each portion (Joshua 18:10). Some tribes inherited prosperous and well-watered pasturelands with fortified towns and villages, while others received unconquered cities and untamed wilderness. God's allotments provided opportunities for trust and growth, regardless of the challenges. Some chose to trust God and thrive, while others rejected His rule and struggled. You and I face the same choice.

2. Like a well-tended olive tree, God carefully provided Israel with the key ingredients required to mature and represent Him to the nations. He provided His written word, Levitical teachers to explain it, His Spirit, a unified community of faith, and organized worship featuring regular festivals celebrating His mighty acts. God presented them with a faith-stretching command to reach the nations, and encouraged them to trust Him even more. In our time, the local church serves as the greenhouse for our growth and maturity. When we disconnect from the body of Christ, we resemble a lone plant struggling to grow outside the nurturing environment of the greenhouse.

3. The book of Joshua begins and ends with reminders of God's faithfulness and appeals to covenant loyalty. In the first chapter, God assured Joshua, "I will not desert you or abandon you" (Joshua 1:5), and instructed him to carefully follow the law to experience prosperity (Joshua 1:8). Later, in Joshua 24, the people heard the reminder that God had given them a land they had not toiled for, and Joshua urged them to fear the LORD, serve Him with sincerity and truth, and forsake the gods of the world. Joshua declared his loyalty to God by exclaiming, "but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). Based on God's flawless history of faithfulness, Joshua pledged to be a loyal, trustworthy servant of God. Meanwhile, others aligned themselves with the gods of the world. Whom do you choose as your teammates?

God granted Israel the perfect environment to thrive and partner with

Him. Yet, like Israel, we face choices every moment—whether to align ourselves with God, utilizing our faculties to contribute to His program, or to join the world’s systems and inadvertently further its agenda. Unfortunately, Israel largely made poor choices, resulting in 350 years of misery as they surrendered their strength to the gods of the world and suffered the consequences. Stay tuned.

Point to Ponder

“For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him.” (2 Chron 16:9 NKJV)

From Learning to Living

Let’s change the way we assess God’s loyalty. I often test God’s loyalty through circumstances. When my day goes according to my plan, I consider God loyal, but if things go wrong, I perceive God as somehow showing disloyalty to me. As we face challenges this week, let’s recall God’s history of faithfulness, seek support from the body of Christ, and redirect our strengths to contribute to God’s program rather than our own.

Prayer Point

“Loyal God, You have a perfect track record of devoted care for me. Thank You for providing an environment where I can grow and develop into an effective tool for You to use in Your program. I pray that I will be Your trustworthy and dependable teammate.”

LESSON 48

Joshua's Farewell and Covenant

The Grand Canyon's splendor, the embrace of a newborn child, or witnessing a star athlete's extraordinary performance provoke a state of awe in us. These grand experiences overwhelm our senses, and in those worshipful moments, we find ourselves transfixed in a state of awestruck wonder.

As God's people settle into the agrarian routine of the Promised Land, the leaders addressed by Joshua in this passage faced a clear choice. They could either live in awe of the Canaanites' imaginary gods or marvel at Yahweh and all the gracious gifts He has bestowed upon them. Pay close attention to God's heart in the following verses, as He gently reasons with His people. Observe how many times the Holy Spirit chooses the word 'serve' to encourage the people to dedicate themselves exclusively to Yahweh.

Key Scripture

Joshua 24 *1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel, their heads, their judges, and their officers; and they presented themselves before God. 2 Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods.*

[God rehearsed His historical faithfulness to accomplish all that He had promised He would do. He spoke of Abraham's humble beginnings, Isaac's descendants, Jacob and Esau, and their miraculous deliverance from the iron grip of Pharaoh. God summed up His undying devotion to Israel by saying...]

13 And I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you have lived in them; you are eating of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.'

14 "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and do away with the gods which your fathers served beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 But if it is

disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served, which were beyond the Euphrates River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

16 The people answered and said, "Far be it from us that we would abandon the LORD to serve other gods; 17 for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves, and did these great signs in our sight and watched over us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. 18 The LORD drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God."

[Joshua explained that if the people turned to idols, God would punish their idolatry by destroying Israel even after having done so much good for them. The people solemnly swore to uphold all of God's commandments.]

27 Then Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, because it has heard all the words of the LORD which He spoke to us; so it shall be a witness against you, so that you do not deny your God." 28 Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance.

29 Now it came about after these things that Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being 110 years old.

Joshua had lived his entire life modeling what a true disciple of God looked like. He lived in obedience, dependence, and partnership with God in His enterprises. Joshua worshipped God, but at the same time, idol worship offered a seductive, alternative explanation of reality that conveniently legitimized and systematized fleshly indulgence. These qualities made idolatry hard to resist for God's people. Consider the following:

1. Just like us, ancient people marveled at delicious food. Ancient culinary interests primarily revolved around survival rather than enjoyment, and they lacked knowledge about processes like pollination and germination. Driven by a desire to survive and control circumstances in their favor, the Canaanites devised an animistic system of Baal worship. According to their beliefs, Baal represented the god of life-giving rain, while Asherah embodied the goddess of mother earth. They selected sacred mountaintops,

such as Mt. Carmel, as sites for debauched rituals that aimed to encourage Baal and Asherah to produce “offspring,” believed to result in a bountiful harvest of crops.¹ This belief system provided an explanation of reality and facilitated indulgence in sinful desires, not unlike certain aspects of belief systems prevalent today. While our modern era’s academia has made strides in understanding science, it often prioritizes worshipping amoral fields of study while dismissing the existence of the Sovereign God who originally designed these processes!

2. In the above verses, the author vividly depicts a solemn ceremony. Bible scholar Richard Hess notes “That the people presented themselves before the God implies two things: (1) God was going to make a covenant with them; and (2) it was a time of transition in the leadership.”² Joshua, the aged leader who shared a profound history with them, stepped back from his central role as leader. In this momentous ceremony, God took on the role of their king and placed a treaty, or covenant, on the table for His subjects to ratify. The treaty recounted God’s favor in leading them to the promised land and promised continued blessings in exchange for their exclusive worship. Despite Joshua’s insinuation that they might already be serving idols (Joshua 24:23), the leaders wholeheartedly pledged their loyalty. Ominously, the book of Joshua concludes with a grave warning that turning to foreign gods would result in God’s wrath, even after all the good He had bestowed upon them (Joshua 24:20). God presented a clear choice. Israel had to decide whether to wholeheartedly devote themselves to King God, and in so doing receive innumerable blessings, or to embrace idol worship and live under God’s curse.

3. In Shechem, the very place where Jacob had once abandoned idols to serve God, Israel ratified this covenant. A memorial stone now stood tall at the spot where Jacob, centuries before, had buried the idols brought by his wives and concubines from their family home in Haran (Genesis 35:2-4). Interestingly, while Jacob’s family had responded to God’s demands by burying their idols, the leaders in the current account appeared reluctant to call out their idols by name or vow to forsake their idols.³ These omissions cause the book of Joshua to end on a cautionary note.

As the children of Israel settle into towns and villages they did not

build, and enjoy the fruits of vineyards they did not plant, they now possess an exclusive identity as God's representative people. In the post-Joshua phase, who would inspire their awe? From whom would they draw guidance as they moved forward? The pivotal choice they faced was between serving God and adhering to His laws, which establish healthy moral boundaries, or succumbing to the allure of the land's gods. The way Israel answered these questions would determine whether they would strive against God or thrive under His care.

Point to Ponder

“Only when awe of God rules your heart will you be able to keep the pleasures of the material world in their proper place.”⁴ – Paul Tripp

From Learning to Living

Take some intentional time out of your busy schedule to take a quick inventory. Reflect on how you allocate your resources, both financial and temporal. Examine your spending habits to gain insights into your priorities and values. Do you invest in things and activities that align with your faith and devotion to God, or are you inadvertently supporting activities or products that contradict your beliefs? Analyze whether the entertainment you indulge in aligns with your identity as a worshipper of God. But don't stop there; go a step further and invite the guidance of God's Spirit into this process. Pray earnestly, seeking the Spirit's illumination and wisdom. Allow the Spirit to reveal any areas in your life where you may not be wholeheartedly worshipping God. Be open to conviction and consider changes to align your choices with your devotion to Him.

Prayer Point

Dear God of awe and wonder. As I journey through life, may I never lose sight of Your unparalleled majesty and immeasurable love. May my heart continually overflow with praise and adoration for You, my Heavenly Father. May all that You have accomplished on my behalf prompt my soul to worship You and You alone. All honor, glory, and worship belong to You, and You alone. In Your name, I pray. Amen.

LESSON 49

The Judges

Politicians are notorious for failing to keep their campaign promises. They often prioritize their own hidden agendas over the needs of the people they serve, which creates a frustrating cycle of unfulfilled promises, dashed hopes, and everyday realities like potholes. In a similar manner, the people of Israel, despite making solemn promises to God, repeatedly abandoned Him and fell into harmful and unrestrained behavior. Pay attention to the cycle of sin in the verses below. God's people gave lip service to Him but then drifted back into indulgent, hurtful behavior.

Key Scripture

[Judges chapter one chronicles Judah's victories over local Canaanites and then sums up many failures of God's people. The people conquered a few tribal areas but then failed to occupy the entirety of their allotments in the Promised Land. God explained the consequences of breaking their covenant with Him.]

Judges 2 *1 Now the angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, 2 and as for you, you shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed Me; what is this thing that you have done? 3 Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out from you; but they will become like thorns in your sides, and their gods will be a snare to you.'" 4 Now when the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people raised their voices and wept. 5 So they named that place Bochim; and there they sacrificed to the LORD.*

[The generation that followed Joshua quickly forgot God and abandoned following Him...]

11 Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, 12 and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they followed other gods from the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them; so they provoked the LORD to anger. 13 They abandoned

the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth. 14 Then the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He handed them over to plunderers, and they plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand against their enemies.

18 And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who tormented and oppressed them. 19 But it came about, when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their obstinate ways. 20 So the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, "Because this nation has violated My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not listened to My voice, 21 I in turn will no longer drive out from them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died,

Recommended reading Judges chapters 1, 2

The verses above provide a concise overview of the book of Judges, capturing its central themes. Throughout a span of 400 years, Israel continuously broke their promise to God, worshipping foreign deities. As He promised, God then allowed devastating consequences in the form of foreign invasions. Tired of foreign oppression, Israel cried out to God, who answered their pleas by sending judges or deliverers to save them. This cycle of disobedience repeats itself seven times in the book. Despite Israel's persistent apostasy and ingratitude, the entire narrative underscores God's unwavering faithfulness to His promises. Consider the following:

1. As we examine the book of Judges, we repeatedly encounter Israel's fatal attraction to idols. Modern readers may feel confusion, shock, or disgust by their unfaithfulness. Just like us, they sought answers for their everyday struggles and had genuine needs. Just like us, they struggled to survive. They needed rain for crops, strength to wage war, and offspring to keep their clans strong. Without the scientific knowledge we possess today, they resorted to the Canaanite system of idol worship to find solace. In today's world, we face similar temptations, whether idolizing people and events from Hollywood, or adopting the philosophies of Las Vegas about fun and happiness.

2. God's divine attributes and mankind's despicable tendencies leap from the pages of the book of Judges. Despite the people's stubborn refusal to trust Him, God displayed a steadfast, faithful love toward them. The Hebrew word "*chesed*" captures this concept—it signifies a love that remains true, without an exit strategy. Karen Mason writes, "The word 'faithful' is *chesed*, which implies the love from which springs faithfulness to a relationship."¹ It demonstrates that God remains committed to His covenant, even when His people forget Him. The human tendency to sideline God for the thinking and pleasures of this world should sober us while the stubbornly faithful love of God should inspire us.

3. Among all the tribes, Judah exhibited the most loyalty to God's covenant in the book of Judges. Judah partnered with the neighboring tribe of Simeon to defeat the Canaanites and they conquered significant cities like Hebron, where King David temporarily reigned hundreds of years later. God's promise that, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah," (Gen 49:10) laid the groundwork for the future reign of King Jesus. While humanity pursued its own agendas, our intentional, concerned God diligently worked to advance His redemptive plan. Though God may feel distant, He is still working to bring this age to a close with the imminent return of Jesus.

4. Israel frequently suffered from identity amnesia. They forgot the identity that God had assigned them and adopted the behavior and thinking of idol worshippers. They constructed an alternative reality based on their fleshly urges, rather than embracing the truth declared by God. They willingly became children of Baal and Asherah, settling into a reality they made up. Remember, our feelings do not determine reality, God's declarations do. Even if something feels right, if God declares it wrong, it remains wrong.

Throughout the time of the Judges, Israel descended into a spiral of depravity. They broke their promises, abused their relationship with God, and exhausted themselves in the service of idols. As we read through the book of Judges, we witness God's unwavering faithfulness to His promises, while His people stubbornly forget His mighty acts. In the book of Judges God's words should have been echoing in our minds, "But as for you, you are to keep my statutes...so that the land will not spew you out..." (Leviticus 18:26-28)

Point to Ponder

Tie your thoughts, actions, and emotions to the identity God has declared for you in Christ, rather than to fleeting desires.

From Learning to Living

We cannot grow spiritually without applying the lessons we learn from scripture to our daily lives, which means putting our knowledge into practice! Consider a conscious sin you have committed and reflect on whether you have walked through the cycle of sin with God. Did you feel the sting of conviction, reevaluate your actions (repent), admit your wrongdoing to God and the person you harmed, and experience the freedom of forgiveness? If not, walk through these steps now, and apply the “repentance cycle” described in Judges to your life!

Prayer Point

“Creator God, thank You for Your unwavering faithfulness, even when I fall short. Help me to remember who I am in Christ and align my thoughts and actions with Your truth.”

LESSON 50

Gideon

Current culture loves to tell us, “we have what it takes to face any challenge,” and we often fall for this idea. We believe we can tackle any task, big or small, if we work hard enough or out-hustle everyone else. When we listen to business leaders, entrepreneurs, or influencers, we hear how they overcame some barrier or reached their current level of success—always because of their hard work and intelligence. If you listen to popular music, you hear how singers (and by association their listeners) have an innate quality that creates success in any romantic conquest or personal challenge. Some churches even offer motivational sermons that emphasize God’s desire to bless us—solely for being us—with little mention of our need for a savior.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of situations we face that we are not equipped to handle. Thankfully God knows we are broken people. We are not perfect and do not have what it takes to face every challenge. Gideon was an imperfect person—he doubted God’s direction and was fearful to step out in faith. On his own he was not up to the task to which God called him. Let’s see how God displayed His glory by choosing to work through him anyway.

Key Scripture

Judges 6:1 *Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord handed them over to Midian for seven years.*

[The Midianites punished Israel by trampling their crops and carrying away every farm animal they could find, creating immeasurable misery. God sent a prophet to remind Israel of His goodness, and that their suffering was the consequence of worshipping false gods.]

Judges 6:11 *Then the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. 12 And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, “The Lord is with you, valiant warrior.” 13 Then Gideon said to*

him, “O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, ‘Did the Lord not bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and handed us over to Midian.” 14 And the Lord looked at him and said, “Go in this strength of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?”

[Gideon offered God an excuse, claiming he was from a lowly tribe and insignificant family. God assured Gideon by miraculously sending fire from heaven, then commanded Gideon to destroy a disgusting altar to Baal and Asherah. As an angry mob tried to kill Gideon for destroying the altar, the land was invaded by Midianites!]

36 Then Gideon said to God, “If You are going to save Israel through me, as You have spoken, 37 behold, I am putting a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that You will save Israel through me, as You have spoken.”

[God complied and the ground was dry the next morning. Gideon then asked God to reverse the scenario and make the fleece dry and the ground wet. Again, God assured Gideon by making the fleece wet the next morning and the ground dry. Gideon called for the men of war and 32,000 showed up. Astonishingly, God created tests that whittled the number of fighting men to a mere 300!]

Judges 7 19 So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle night watch, when they had just posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands. 20 When the three units blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and shouted, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” 21 And each stood in his place around the camp; and all the army ran, crying out as they fled. 22 And when they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set the sword of one against another even throughout the entire army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the edge of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. 23 And the men of Israel were summoned from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and they pursued Midian.

[The Midianites were destroyed, and the land was at peace.]

Suggested Reading: Judges 6–8

God wanted Israel to understand that the battle could not be won in their own power. He chose a reluctant leader, narrowed down their army to a laughable number, and sent them to face their enemies

armed with torches, horns, and pitchers (Judges 7:16). God wanted their confidence and ego stripped away to show them that they were unable to deliver themselves. He showed the people that even though they were insufficient, He was capable against all odds. Nothing could stand in the way of His divine will, as seen in the following ways. Consider the following:

1. God calls people to true worship. Once again, “the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (6:1), a line that is repeated seven times in Judges. In 1 Corinthians 10:7, we’re told that the people of Israel fell into idolatry when they put their desires for personal pleasure before God. Though God wanted to be the central focus of their lives (Deut. 4:1–14), Israel worshiped themselves. God told them He would be their protection, but they sought safety from items made from stone. God promised rest, they sought escapism. They were putting what felt right before what was right. Today we don’t pursue stone statues, but we do pursue money, status, personal peace, and pleasure. We choose to worship ourselves, our desires, and goals rather than the God who promises purpose and satisfaction.

2. God equips inadequate people to do His work. Noah built a seemingly impossible boat. Joseph, a slave and prisoner, protected an entire nation. Abraham and Sarah bore children despite their elderly age. By working through insufficient people, God gives opportunities for our faith to grow and for His glory to be displayed. As pastor and author Cary Schmidt put it, insufficiency is “the ever-present reminder that we are not the Savior.”¹ When the angel of the Lord first visited Gideon, He addressed him as a “mighty warrior”(which he was not), but God knew Gideon would become mighty by following Him². Just as God helped Gideon, we can take comfort in God’s strength and provision. He will delight in the opportunity to display His glory.

3. God faithfully provides a path to redemption. Despite Israel’s failure to keep their covenant, God raised up leaders, prophets, and judges to help provide deliverance for His people. Already we’ve learned about leaders like Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Ehud, and so many more. Unfortunately, these human deliverers always fell short. As noted in the Moody Bible Commentary, “Moses was sent to deliver the people from Egypt and ended up presiding over funerals for 38 years. Joshua, whose name means ‘Deliverer’ or ‘Savior,’ succeeded only partially in delivering the people.”³ All of the previous judges failed

to establish permanent change. Gideon eventually fell short as well, and his actions led the people back into idolatry (8:22–35). Placing our trust in human leaders will always lead to disappointment. Only through God can we truly find salvation.

Point to Ponder

“When we live in the safety of His strength, things like money, relationships, dreams, and desires submit more readily to His perfect will.” - Joseph M. Stowell⁴

From Learning to Living

Has God called you to something that seems impossible; something where you know your efforts will inevitably fall short? Remember—God knows you’re not sufficient. As you go throughout your week, acknowledge your weakness before Him and ask for Him to show you ways to rely on His strength. Like Gideon, it may not turn out how you may expect, but rest in the knowledge that His glory will ultimately be displayed.

Prayer Point

Heavenly Father, sustain me and give me strength for whatever You’ve called me to do. Expose my reliance on myself and teach me to trust You for my strength. Let my walk with You be a testimony of Your glory and strength to those around me. In Your name, Amen.

LESSON 51

Samson

All societies have epic myths about larger-than-life figures who fight for right and vanquish evil. Author Joseph Campbell spent years traveling around the world and interviewing various tribes and people groups to gather their sacred legends and heroic stories. He found that these tales follow the same basic formula: An average man is called out of his quiet life (sometimes before he was born), is given a special power to fight evil, and restores a sense of justice in society. Sometimes these heroes falter, but they eventually prevail.¹ We see this pattern repeated in our own epic hero stories. Think of Luke Skywalker, Clark Kent, or Harry Potter. Again and again, the pattern repeats itself.

In Judges 13–14, we learn of Samson, a man called by God and given supernatural abilities to fight for the children of Israel against their enemies, the Philistines. Let's read about his unique origin story and whether he would fulfill his divine responsibility.

Key Scripture

Judges 13 *1 Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord handed them over to the Philistines for forty years.*

2 And there was a man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was infertile and had not given birth to any children. 3 Then the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold now, you are infertile and have not given birth; but you will conceive and give birth to a son. 4 And now, be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. 5 For behold, you will conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he will begin to save Israel from the hands of the Philistines."

[When this woman told her husband, Manoah, he begged God to send the angel again. The angel re-appeared and warned Manoah to make his wife adhere to the strict purity requirements of a Nazirite vow. Manoah and his wife were commanded by God to raise their son as a Nazirite. They received the angel of the Lord into their home and the angel performed miracles in their presence.]

21 Now the angel of the Lord did not appear to Manoah or his wife again. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord. 22 So Manoah said to his wife, "We will certainly die, for we have seen God." 23 But his wife said to him, "If the Lord had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor would He have shown us all these things, nor would He have let us hear things like this at this time."

24 So the woman gave birth to a son, and named him Samson, and the child grew up and the Lord blessed him. 25 And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him when he was in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

Judges 14 1 Then Samson went down to Timnah, and he saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. 2 So he came back and told his father and mother, "I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; so now, get her for me as a wife." 3 But his father and his mother said to him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" Yet Samson said to his father, "Get her for me because she is right for me." 4 However, his father and mother did not know that this was of the Lord, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. And at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel.

[At the wedding feast Samson challenged his Philistine friends to solve a riddle. They could not solve it, so they coerced his bride to extract the answer from him using her charms. Then she divulged the answer to her relatives and Samson was humiliated. He left the wedding banquet in a rage, and his wife was given away to his friend.]

Suggested Reading: Judges 13—14

Before he was born, Samson was uniquely chosen to fight as one of God's judges. The angel of the Lord said Samson's mission would be to "begin to save Israel from the Philistines" (13:5). Unlike all the other judges who served in times of crisis, Samson had no chance to respond on his own. Because he was called to be a Nazirite, his lifestyle and appearance were set apart for God. Numbers 6 laid out the requirements in detail: a Nazirite was not supposed to drink alcohol, eat grapes, cut his hair, or go near a dead body. While most Nazirite vows are temporary and voluntary, God instructed that Samson would be under the requirements his entire life. Despite Samson's divine calling and birth, he played the part of the epic hero reluctantly. He flaunted the power God gave him, broke each

requirement of his vow, and fought for his own benefit rather than for the people he was called to lead. Consider the following:

1. Our sovereign God can work through reluctant people, despite their best efforts to the contrary. Biblical scholar Arnold Fruchtenbaum noted that Samson can be seen as a picture of Israel. Both were supernaturally chosen and set apart for a life of devotion to God. But just as Samson was drawn to foreign women and married a Philistine, Israel pursued other gods in a way that was like a man chasing after foreign women. Both Samson and Israel rebelled against God's giftings and callings.² God would continue to keep His promises and use both Israel and Samson for His redemptive purposes and ultimate glory. Even today, God will accomplish His sovereign will whether we choose to partner with Him or not.

2. Samson's name has a dual meaning. In Hebrew, it can be read as *Shimshon*, which means, "to be strong or daring." However, it can also mean, "duel sun," possibly a reference to the nearby city of Beth Shemesh, which was famous for its shrine to a sun god.^{3 4 5} It's unlikely that Samson's parents would have named him after a foreign god, but this dual meaning could indicate the life Samson later lived. On the one hand, he would be a strong man who committed daring acts. On the other, he would be a man who chased after his own idols and the people and pleasure of another nation. Like Samson, we can choose whether to serve our own idols, or serve God and follow His calling on our lives.

3. Samson made himself the center of the story. In contrast to the other judges who were vessels for God's justice and deliverance, Samson served his own agenda. He was to save Israel from their 40-year oppression by the Philistines—but instead, we're shown a self-serving young man, consumed by his desires, demanding his parents arrange a wedding to the enemy of their people. Samson also gave little regard for God's Word. On his way to Timnah, He slayed a young lion (14:5–6). But when he found the lion's carcass full of honey, he ate it and gave some to his parents—a clear defiance of his Nazirite vow to not go near a dead body. Like so many others, Samson's desire for self-gain and his desire to be at the center of attention came in direct contrast to his divine calling.

All the elements of a hero's perfect story are present in the life of Samson—a man called from obscurity for a greater purpose, given supernatural abilities, and empowered to defeat his enemies. Unfortunately, Samson would exchange his calling for “cheap self-indulgence.”⁶ He lacked the discernment to see that his calling would provide greater purpose than his fleeting desires.

Point to Ponder

How often do we exchange our callings for the temporary pleasures of this life?

From Learning to Living

Throughout the book of Judges, we've seen God accomplish His purposes by working through broken, sinful, and reluctant leaders. Today God offers us the chance to participate in His story. Despite our own potential failures, He'll remain faithful and still accomplish His goals for us. Are you reluctant to participate in something He's called you to do? You can join His work in confidence, knowing that God will accomplish His goals as He graciously asks you to join in His great story.

Prayer Point

Heavenly Father, thank You for the examples of people You give in Your Word. Lord, help me to faithfully live out my calling, giving up temporary pleasures to remain focused on Your goals. Direct my attitudes and actions to Your purposes and help me to be used by You.

LESSON 52

Samson's Ministry and Death

On a late October afternoon in 1964, defensive end Jim Marshall recovered a fumble for the Minnesota Vikings and ran 66 yards to what he thought was the San Francisco Forty-Niner's end zone. Believing he had just scored for his team, Jim enthusiastically tossed the ball out of bounds in celebration. In the excitement of the game, Jim couldn't hear the astonished cries of the announcers and fans as they shouted, "he's running the wrong way!" Jim, having lost sight of the correct goalposts, got turned around and scored for the opposing team! It doesn't matter the profession—when caught up in the moment, aiming for personal glory, or compromising important principles, it is easy to lose focus and run towards the wrong goal. God provides clear goals to Samson, but as soon as Samson "picked up the ball" and began his ministry, he immediately lost focus and started running the wrong way.

Key Scripture

***Judges 15 1** But after a while, in the time of wheat harvest, Samson visited his wife with a young goat, and said, "I will go into my wife in her room." But her father did not let him enter. **2** Her father said, "I really thought that you hated her intensely; so I gave her to your companion. Is her younger sister not more beautiful than she? Please let her be yours instead." **3** Samson then said to them, "This time I will have been blameless regarding the Philistines when I do them harm." **4** And Samson went and caught three hundred jackals, and took torches, and turned the jackals tail to tail and put one torch in the middle between two tails. **5** When he had set fire to the torches, he released the jackals into the standing grain of the Philistines and set fire to both the bundled heaps and the standing grain, along with the vineyards and olive groves.*

[The Philistines responded by killing Samson's father-in-law and wife, so Samson slaughtered many Philistines in revenge. The Philistines pursued Samson and sent soldiers to Judah to find him.]

***9** Then the Philistines went up and camped in Judah, and spread out in Lehi. **10** So the men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" And they said, "We have come up to bind Samson in order to do to*

him as he did to us.” 11 Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam and said to Samson, “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?”

[Samson gave himself up to the men of Judah, but after he arrived in the Philistine camp, he killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey.]

Judges 16 4 After this it came about that he was in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. 5 So the governors of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, “Entice him, and see where his great strength lies and how we can overpower him so that we may bind him to humble him. Then we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver.”

[Delilah relentlessly sought the source of Samson’s strength until Samson couldn’t bear it anymore. He confessed that if he broke the Nazirite vow by cutting his hair he would be as weak as any other man. Delilah coaxed him to sleep, cut his hair, and called for the Philistines. The Philistines bound Samson, blinded him, and put him into forced labor. During a temple festivity, they called for Samson to be their entertainment. As Samson stood there being gawked upon and jeered at, Samson asked to have his hands placed on two pillars holding up the building. He prayed for strength, and pushed with all his might and the entire building collapsed, killing him and hundreds of Philistine rulers. Samson had judged Israel for a total of 20 years.]

Suggested Reading: Judges 15–16

Proverbs 4:23 tells us to guard our hearts, since everything we do flows out of it (also see 1 Cor. 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:22). Instead, Samson did not guard his heart, and his moral compromises led him deeper into sin. Samson gratified his own pleasures and lost sight of his goal. He disregarded God and the people he was chosen to judge—which led to pride, lust, murder, vengeance, deceit, sexual immorality, and more. “Sin, if persisted in, makes a person irrational and vulnerable. Such is its deceitfulness.”¹ Samson didn’t realize that his sin had caused him to become weak until it was too late. Consider the following:

1. The early judges rallied the people to out their enemies, cast down their idols, and rededicate themselves to the Lord. After the early judges like Othniel and Deborah, each leader did less for the people, and by Samson’s time, they had little to no interest in becoming free (15:13–20). Samson was little more than a vigilante against the Philistines. He killed many but didn’t cause lasting change. Sin has consequences and generations of sin took its toll on the Israelites.

Bad habits become harder to break after they've had years to solidify. It's important to keep our eyes focused on the goalposts God sets before us, lest we get stuck running in the wrong direction.

2. Note the emphasis on Sampson's eyes. While we focus on Samson's immense strength and long hair, we don't often notice his eyes. In the four short chapters about Samson, his eyes are mentioned eight times. Samson saw what he wanted and eagerly sought to indulge his desires. He lusted over women, clothes, status, and recognition. Author and Bible teacher Arnold Fruchtenbaum points out that Samson is shown morally failing more than any other judge.² It's easy to fault Samson for his failures. In moments of arrogance, we may even secretly think we would not fail had we been in a similar situation. Chase Replegole made this point, "There is no reason to try to convince yourself that the same whirlwinds of infatuation and adventure don't tear through the boredom of your life as well. You know that subtle temptation to walk away and go looking for something more exciting—the glistening images of distant shores and fascinating new experiences... the greener grass just on the other side."³

3. God's Word illuminates our way and points out hazards as we journey through life. The psalmist described God's word as "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). In the New Testament, James described Scripture as a mirror, exposing our sins so we can have the opportunity to correct them. Samson never sought God's word or His guidance. He only prayed twice (15:18; 16:28–30), each time for his own gain. Samson blindly stumbled through life and relied on his exceptional strength—guided by nothing but his own sinful motivation. Without leaning on God, Samson became weak. Let us learn from his example and seek God's Word for guidance and strength.

"Samson's story is not just about a foolish man who gave up the secret to his supernatural powers. Samson's story is about the realization that your heart's desires will eventually betray you."⁴ Think of the judge that Samson could have been had he submitted his strength to God. Samson's selfishness and disregard for God's Word caused him to run toward his own goal and fail in his mission to deliver the people from the Philistines. After Samson's death, the people continued in sin and struggled with the consequences, waiting for deliverance.

Point to Ponder

“The flesh only knows one word: more.”—Pastor Rich Bruce⁵

From Learning to Living

It can be hard to discern the goals God has set for you. This week dedicate some time to reading the following scripture passages: Micah 6:8, Matthew 28:16–20, Galatians 5:16–26, Ephesians 4:1–6, Philippians 2:1–4, Philippians 3:12–14, 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12, 2 Timothy 1:10, 1 Peter 2:9–10, 1 Peter 4:10–11. These passages provide a basic framework for living a godly life, which you can use as goalposts to begin running to.

Prayer Point

Lord, expose the ways I am selfish and focused on the wrong goals. Establish me in the work You have called me to and give me a heart that longs for Your word and the guidance it brings. Help me not to rely on my own strength but on the strength that reliance on You provides.

LESSON 53

Ruth

In our broken world, it can feel as if trials, disappointments, or frustrations constantly assault us; sickness, job uncertainties, and family frustrations abound, leading to depression, isolation, and despair. When our lives are full of stress and anxiety, it is easy to believe that God has turned His back on us. Certainly, if He loved us, He wouldn't allow us to go through these hardships. Suffering can feel crushing, and as we struggle under its weight, we wonder if maybe God is the one causing all the hardships. Ruth lost everything—her husband, family, home, and security. Through her story, we get a glimpse of a God who works through suffering and hardships to provide for His people. Let's find out about the safety found in God's almighty hands.

Key Scripture

Ruth 1 1 Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to reside in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. So they entered the land of Moab and remained there. 3 Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. 4 And they took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other, Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. 5 Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

[Naomi decided to return to Israel. Although asked to stay in Moab, Ruth chose to return with Naomi. When they arrived, Ruth provided for herself and Naomi by gathering wheat off the ground in the field of a relative named Boaz.]

Ruth 2 8 Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but join my young women here. 9 Keep your eyes on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have ordered the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw." 10 Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and

said to him, “Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” 11 Boaz replied to her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth and came to a people that you did not previously know.

[Boaz showed her special kindness and Ruth followed his reapers around from field to field working hard to feed herself and Naomi. Naomi decided to boldly ask Boaz to marry Ruth.]

Ruth 3 1 Then her mother-in-law Naomi said to her, “My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may go well for you? 2 Now then, is Boaz not our relative, with whose young women you were? Behold, he is winnowing barely at the threshing floor tonight. 3 Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor, but do not reveal yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 And it shall be when he lies down, that you shall take notice of the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you should do.” 5 And she said to her, “All that you say I will do.”

[Ruth boldly asked Boaz to marry her. Boaz promised he would take up her proposal with another relative and the town council. Boaz received the blessing to marry Ruth from both the council and Ruth’s other relative.]

Ruth 4 13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he had relations with her. And the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. 14 Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. 15 May he also be to you the one who restores life and sustains your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.”

16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. 17 And the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi!” So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Suggested Reading: Ruth 1–4

Frustration, confusion, and loss abounded in Ruth and Naomi’s lives, but God did not fail them. He provided redemption through which David and eventually Jesus would come. Pastor Tim Keller reminded us to, “never, ever, ever, ever, ever think that God’s not working, no matter how much it seems like He’s absent.”¹ Ruth’s story shows us the God who is always working in the margins to

graciously bring redemption. Consider the following:

1. God can and does work through brokenness.² Elimelech and Naomi broke God's commandments by moving from the promised land. Elimelech sinned again when he encouraged his sons to take wives from among the Moabites, a group the Israelites were forbidden to marry (Josh 23:12). Naomi and Ruth lost everything—their families, possessions, community, and security. They were broken, bitter, and destitute when they moved to Israel. God worked through their broken and sinful pasts to accomplish His purposes. He provided redemption for their land and line through a redeemer (Boaz), an incredible picture of Christ, our Redeemer. It's easy for our pasts to cause bitterness in our lives, but we need to remember that God has not forgotten us. His hands are always at work behind the scenes to provide for our ultimate redemption.

2. Ruth and Boaz stand in direct contrast to the rampant sin of the society around them. They provide examples of godly living while surrounded by cultural chaos. Ruth demonstrated her commitment to following God when she said to Naomi, "Your God will be my God" (Ruth 1:16). Boaz knew it was his duty to redeem Ruth and Naomi and willingly stepped into that responsibility. Each evaluated their decisions in light of what they knew about God and His word. The book of Ruth could have been a story like so many during the time of the Judges, where people capitulated to the sin and chaos in their culture. Instead, it's a story of people who chose to walk in faith and trust God.

3. The Hebrew word *chesed* appears three times throughout the story. *Chesed* exemplifies the idea of lovingkindness and communicates a deep consideration and tenderness in the way someone treats another. It's, "the doing good to one who is not entitled to it and all."³ The first use was in Ruth 1:18 when Naomi asked God to "deal kindly" with her daughters-in-law. The second was 2:20 when Naomi asked God to bless Boaz for his kindness. Finally, Boaz used the word in 3:19, when he referenced the kindness Ruth showed Naomi. Its frequent use reminds the reader that tender consideration should be shown to everyone, even those who may not deserve it. Like Boaz showed kindness towards Ruth, an outsider among the people, God extends grace and mercy towards sinners and outcasts like us. His lovingkindness is threaded through the whole Bible. His goal

is always clear—to bring blessing to everyone and to redeem the creation that was lost to sin.

Like Ruth and Boaz, we may never fully understand the reason for the trials we face. We can trust that no matter the chaos of our broken situations, God is working to bring about His redemptive plan.

Point to Ponder

“Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God”—
Corrie Ten Boom

From Learning to Living

It can be incredibly difficult to remain faithful without a strong community around you, especially during seasons of loss, suffering, and grief. Are you surrounded by faithful friends who can come alongside you in the hard times, and who can help you to live faithfully considering who God has revealed Himself to be? If not, find that community. A great place to start is by joining either the men’s or women’s groups here at New Hope, or by joining a small group.

Prayer Point

Good and gracious God, thank You that I can rest with confidence knowing that You hold every circumstance in Your hand. Teach me to find confidence in Your strength and, “the power, O God by which You have worked for us” (Psalm 68:28).

LESSON 54

Life without God

The Barna worldview research surveys' findings have shocked pastors and believers alike. Only 4% of practicing Christians now possess a biblical worldview¹, a significant drop from the previous 9% in 2003.² This troubling statistic reveals that a majority of Christians no longer rely on God's Word to discern right from wrong. Instead, they allow societal influences, personal preferences, and human influencers to dictate their values and actions. This situation mirrors the time described in the book of Judges, "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes," (Judges 17:6). The verses that follow unravel a tragic tale that serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of living without God.

Key Scripture

Judges 19 *1 Now it came about in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite staying in the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, who took a concubine for himself from Bethlehem in Judah. 2 But his concubine found him repugnant, and she left him and went to her father's house in Bethlehem in Judah, and remained there for a period of four months. 3 Then her husband set out and went after her to speak gently to her in order to bring her back, taking with him his servant and a pair of donkeys. And she brought him into her father's house, and when the girl's father saw him, he was glad to meet him. 4 His father-in-law, the girl's father, prevailed upon him, and he remained with him for three days. So they ate and drank and stayed there.*

[The Levite eventually left with the girl and travelled through the town of Gibeah in the land of Benjamin. An old man from Gibeah received the pair into his home.]

Judges 19:22 While they were celebrating, behold, the men of the city, certain worthless men, surrounded the house, pushing one another at the door; and they spoke to the owner of the house, the old man, saying, "Bring out the man who entered your house that we may have relations with him."

[The man tried to reason with the mob and even tried to appease them by offering his virgin daughters...]

25 But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and brought her outside to them; and they raped her and abused her all night until morning, then let her go at the approach of dawn. 26 As the day began to dawn, the woman came and fell down at the doorway of the man's house where her master was, until full daylight.

27 When her master got up in the morning and opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, then behold, his concubine was lying at the doorway of the house with her hands on the threshold. 28 And he said to her, "Get up and let's go," but there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out and went to his home. 29 When he entered his house, he took a knife and seized his concubine, and cut her in twelve pieces, limb by limb. Then he sent her throughout the territory of Israel. 30 All who saw it said, "Nothing like this has ever happened or been seen from the day when the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt to this day. Consider it, make a plan, and speak up!"

Suggested Reading Judges chp 19-20

The divine author leaves the readers speechless. How could a Levite cruelly mistreat the innocent child bride and then sacrifice her to a raucous crowd of men's desires? Similarly, the stark lack of customary ancient near eastern hospitality would have stunned the hearers as the town's leaders should have welcomed the Levite with open arms. Horrific objectification of women, deviant sexuality, indifference to God's law, and total anarchy of this magnitude had not been conceived since Sodom and Gomorrah. Consider the following:

1. The book of Judges spans 350 years, and the gruesome events described in chapter 19 occurred soon after Joshua's death.³ Bible scholars point to the fact that Phineas, mentioned as the high priest during Joshua's life, was still alive during the time of the concubine's death. Also, the nation's response mirrored their call to arms over an unauthorized altar at the end of Joshua. Finally, the Philistines' domination toward the end of Judges would have made a unified response like the one described here, impractical. The chilling events of these chapters sets the tone for the rest of the book of Judges.

2. Scholar D.A. Carson states, "Taking a concubine was a practice common in the ancient Near East and allowed under OT law."⁴ A concubine functioned as a second wife but without the customary ceremony and dowry. However, it resulted in a lower status for the

women involved. The cruel treatment in Judges 19 that the young woman endured unfortunately illustrates the low status of concubines in the ancient world. The men of Judges lived as if God didn't care, making their lustful desires their god, and using and abusing others to fulfill their cravings. Polygamy and slavery became institutionalized expressions of man's evil desires, contrary to God's original design of one man and one woman in Genesis chapter one. While the Law allowed for concubinage, the inherent negative consequences of deviating from God's standard of normalcy remained. This episode resulted in a civil war that almost completely wiped out the Benjaminites (see Judges 20-21).

3. Bible interpreters look for clues to the historical and theological reasons God wrote this passage to the original readers. The recurring phrase, "When there was no king in Israel," (Judges 19:21; 21:25) builds tension, ultimately leading to Saul's appointment as king (1st Samuel 10). The theological reason for Judges seems clear. Israel violated their covenant with God and since God is a covenant keeper, He would not drive the Canaanites from the land (Judges 2:1-3, 20-22). Judges serves to highlight Israel's violation of their covenant with God and the need for a king to address the nation's problems. a careful interpreter of the book of Judges thus concludes that mankind may leave the table of God's fellowship, but God remains faithful to the relationship.

The book of Judges serves as a solemn reminder that disregarding God's Word leads to a host of grievous consequences. Sexual deviancy, witchcraft, drug abuse, and violence began to plague Israel when they turned away from God. In times of obedience, men sacrificed for women, but in times of moral decline, women were sacrificed for the sinful desires of men. The nation would soon respond to this tragedy, but without seeking guidance from God. The next chapter will sharpen the contrast and highlight the consequences of living life far from God.

Point to Ponder

“The believer caught between the flesh and Spirit is also caught between death and life”⁵

From Learning to Living

Reflect on your recent choices and thought patterns. Allow the Holy Spirit to reveal areas where you may be veering from God’s ideals. Start by examining the sins you justify, such as poor eating habits, destructive media choices, or reckless spending. Do these choices reflect your identity as God’s child? Be willing to let God’s Word challenge your personal, political, racial, and national sentiments.

Prayer Point

Ever-present God, I thank You for adopting me into Your family and committing to love me despite my flaws. Help me live each moment with the awareness that I am a fallen creature redeemed by Your grace. May Your Word guide my choices and actions, and remind me to eagerly await Your imminent return.

LESSON 55

Moral Chaos

The murder of Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana immediately ignited a wave of violence known as the Rwandan genocide, lasting from April 7 to July 15, 1994. During this period, Hutu extremists brutally killed 662,000 Tutsi tribal people using machetes and rifles. The world watched, horrified as angry mobs hunted down Tutsis who sought shelter in churches and schools, mercilessly hacking them to death. Others endured gruesome torture before being shot.¹ In today's text, God's people, fueled by their outrage over the events of Judges 19, prepared to wage war against their relatives from the tribe of Benjamin. In the following verses, notice how God's people embraced the half-truths told by the husband of the murdered woman and sought God's blessing for their misguided efforts to bring the Benjaminites to justice.

Key Scripture

Judges 20 1 Then all the sons of Israel from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, came out, and the congregation assembled as one person to the LORD at Mizpah. 2 And the leaders of all the people, all the tribes of Israel, took their stand in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand foot soldiers who drew the sword. 3 (Now the sons of Benjamin heard that the sons of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) And the sons of Israel said, "Tell us, how did this wickedness take place?" 4 So the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, "I came with my concubine to spend the night at Gibeah which belongs to Benjamin. 5 But the citizens of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house at night, threatening me. They intended to kill me; instead, they raped my concubine so that she died. 6 And I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces, and sent her throughout the land of Israel's inheritance; for they have committed an outrageous sin and vile act in Israel. 7 Behold, all you sons of Israel, give your response and advice here."

[The sons of Israel banded together to punish the tribe of Benjamin but the men of Benjamin stubbornly defended the guilty men. The sons of Israel swore oaths and pressed on to punish Benjamin. After attacking Gibeah and suffering two humiliating defeats, they sought the Lord again and eventually won killing thousands of men. In a cruel twist, the sons of Israel killed

every man, woman, and child in the cities of Benjamin and only 600 men of Benjamin escaped to the hills.]

Judges 21 *1 Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpah, saying, “None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin in marriage.” 2 So the people came to Bethel and sat there before God until evening, and raised their voices and wept profusely. 3 And they said, “Why, LORD, God of Israel, has this happened in Israel, that one tribe is missing today from Israel?” 4 And it came about the next day that the people got up early and built an altar there, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.*

[After making offerings to the Lord they panicked that there were no wives for the 600 men of Benjamin who had fled to the hills. They decided to commit mass murder against Jabesh-Gilead, an Israelite city, for not participating in the slaughter of the Benjaminites. However, they spared 400 virgin girls from this city and offered them as a gesture of peace by giving them in forced marriage to the men of Benjamin. The men of Benjamin then kidnapped 200 more girls while they danced at a yearly festival in Shiloh.]

21:23 The sons of Benjamin did so, and took wives according to their number from those who danced, whom they seized. And they went and returned to their inheritance, and rebuilt the cities and lived in them. 24 And the sons of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and each one departed from there to his inheritance.

Suggested Reading Judges chp 20-21

What a disaster! Old Testament scholar Dale Davis explains the situation in Judges 20-21 as a mix of rightness and wrongness in Israel’s actions. “They rightly punished Jabesh-Gilead but did so with unjustifiable severity. Israel upheld their oath regarding wives, only to disregard the rights of the Shiloh girls and their families.”² Davis calls this a combination of consistency and confusion. Israel suffered irreversible consequences by relying on themselves rather than wholeheartedly trusting God. Consider the following:

1. In the face of such evil, important questions arise: What is evil? Where does it come from? Where does it reside? Evil is not a cosmic force but simply the absence of good, in the same way that darkness exists in the absence of light. We can summarize evil as anything “unlike God”.³ It entered the universe when Satan rebelled against God, committing what theologians call the sin of untruth (Jn 8:44, Isaiah chp, 14; Ezek chp 28). Satan departed from his intended role and abused his moral freedoms.⁴ Lastly, evil resides within the

heart of every human being. When we deviate from God's moral boundaries and allow hatred, bitterness, anger, vengeance, pride, deceit, and similar traits to fester in our hearts, we harbor evil instead of goodness. We must not underestimate the dangers of mankind without God. This awareness should keep us humble, mindful of the potential to live our lives outside of God's moral boundaries.

2. The failures depicted in the book of Judges dealt a significant blow to God's purposes for all mankind. Israel should have embodied God's redemptive heart to the world. Positioned strategically, Israel's land served as a hub for trade routes, attracting merchants and travelers from various nations. Traders from many nations used Israel's Mediterranean Sea ports while others used overland routes to access Egypt, Assyria, ancient India and the Hittite Empire. As Israel received these merchants into their towns and villages, the unique system of worship and theocracy established by God aimed to draw people to the worship of Yahweh. Rahab, for example, trusted Yahweh because of His great works through His people (Joshua 2:8-11). However, Israel's fascination with idols, their immoral lifestyles, and the violence of civil war demonstrated that they had lost their distinctive, God-honoring qualities and had nothing exceptional to offer.

The book of Judges concludes with the verse: "In those days, there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). The purpose of this book was to emphasize the colossal failure of the theocracy, with human authority becoming necessary to rectify the situation. God had not abandoned His role as king, but Israel had become disloyal subjects, living their lives without Him.

Point to Ponder

Functional atheism says, “Yes, we believe that God exists, that he created the heavens and the earth, that the Bible is accurate, and that paradise awaits, but we often live—at a functional level—as if there is no God.”⁵

From Learning to Living

Reflect on this verse, allowing the Spirit of God to guide you, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will” (Romans 12:1-2). Pray for God’s revelation regarding areas in your thinking and behavior that serve the world’s system instead of aligning with Him.

Prayer Point

“Father God, Your desire is that every facet of my being exist in complete submission to Your will. Reveal to me areas of need and compromise so that I will be a clean, effective conduit for Your love to reach others.”

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The purpose of the Small Group Ministry is to be a vessel, through community, for discipleship. Small Groups are meant to reinforce the four scriptural principles set forth as the purpose of New Hope Church:

*“The purpose of this church is to glorify God by producing maturing followers (disciples) of Jesus Christ through the four scriptural principles of **Learning, Loving, Worship and Prayer.**”*

Small Groups will seek to accomplish this through creating a safe and supportive atmosphere for people to wrestle with the truths of God as they mature in their faith.

As Pastor Mark says, “What you believe about *GOD* determines what you *DO* next.” Based on this week’s Scripture, sermon, and devotional reading, please consider the following questions placed within these two categories:

GOD

1. What do you believe about God? What do you learn about God’s character from this week’s Scripture passage, message, and devotional?
2. What stirs up praise, love, or thankfulness to God? During prayer time, PRAISE HIM for who He is, His character, His attributes, or THANK HIM for what He has done/is doing.

DO

1. What do you learn about humanity or yourself specifically from this week’s Scripture passage, message, and devotional?
2. Is there something God is asking you to do? What do you believe you are to do next? How will you seek to be obedient to what you are learning?
3. What is the tension/challenge in obeying God? Can you identify what you are feeling or what’s causing a reaction?
4. How can your small group support you in yielding to what God wants you to do?
5. How can you pray for yourself or others according to these verses?

PRAYER TIME

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