

# Explore the Bible.®

Winter 2016-17 > Tony Evans, General Editor

*Joshua;  
Judges; Ruth*

LifeWay | Adults

# LIFE BY DESIGN

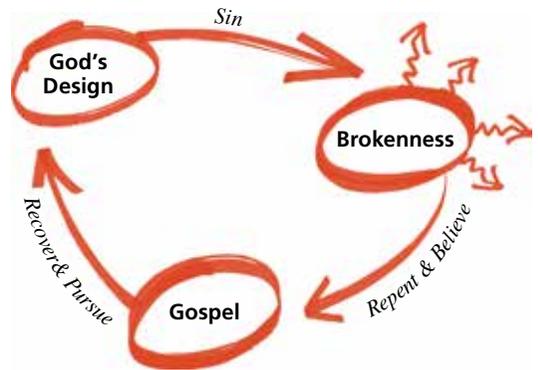
**We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make LIFE work.**

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him. (See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm 19:1.)

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity. (See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.)

At this point we need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's Design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God. (See John 3:16, Colossians 2:14, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.)

We don't have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction. (See Mark 1:15, Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 10:9.)



When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's Design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His Design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity. (See Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10.)

Now that you have heard this Good News, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

*Excerpted from Life on Mission: A Simple Way to Share the Gospel.*

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\* Christmas and evangelistic emphasis    \*\* Sanctity of human life emphasis

## » MEET THE WRITERS

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## A WORD FROM **THE GENERAL EDITOR**

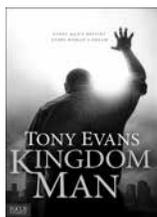


God is moving. It is undeniable when we look into Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. Any thoughts that He is a disconnected deity floating aimlessly somewhere in the heavens is not what the Bible teaches. Instead, these books tell us that God is active and involved in the lives of His people.

In Joshua, God is leading His people into the promised land. Along the way, they face various trials and temptations. Through it all, the Lord is teaching them to be faithful. He is showing them how His ways are the right ways. Then, we move to Judges. God's chosen people have moved from new residents in the promised land to rebellious people in the promised land. But God is not done with them. He sends as leaders unexpected characters who are faithful like Deborah, timid like Gideon, and brash like Samson. In the Book of Ruth, we go from the large story of the entire Hebrew nation to one family struggling to survive. Ruth is a Moabitess who marries into a Hebrew family. But through her loss and redemption, God gives us a powerful picture of how He works.

As you study these sessions, your group will learn that God uses the most unexpected people to do extraordinary feats of power and grace. I'm praying that as you and your Bible study group study Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, God will show you how He is still moving today.

***Dr. Tony Evans***



*Tony Evans, senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas, is founder and president of The Urban Alternative. He is the author of Kingdom Man and numerous other books. For more information about the ministries of Dr. Tony Evans, please visit [TonyEvans.org](http://TonyEvans.org).*

# INTRODUCTION TO JOSHUA; JUDGES; RUTH

## » JOSHUA

The deaths of two great Israelite leaders, Moses and Joshua, serve as bookends for the events recorded in the Book of Joshua. Moses had led the Israelites out of subjugation in Egypt to Mount Sinai, where God gave Israel the law, and during four decades of the Israelites' wandering in wilderness areas outside Canaan. With the Israelites camped on the eastern side of the Jordan River opposite the great walled city of Jericho, God allowed Moses to scale a nearby mountain and peer into—but not to enter—the promised land.

Moses, at 120 years of age, died on the mountain, and his death prompted an extended period of national mourning (see Deut. 34). As Moses' trustworthy assistant, Joshua was well positioned to fill the leadership void. God elevated Joshua as Israel's new commander-in-chief to lead the people in taking possession of the promised land (Josh. 1:1-5). Near the end of the Book of Joshua, the elderly commander gathered the Israelites and challenged them to renew their commitment to serve only the Lord God. The book closes with a report of three burials: Joshua, who died at 110 years of age; Joseph's bones, which had been brought from Egypt at the time of the exodus; and Eleazar, the priestly son of Aaron, Moses' brother (Josh. 24:29-33).

While all Scripture ultimately is a message from God, who inspired it, some Bible books do not name a human writer. The Book of Joshua (as well as Judges and Ruth) falls into this category. Some ancient Jewish traditions propose that Joshua indeed wrote the book bearing his name, with the exception of the three burial notices in 24:29-33. Two references in the book highlight occasions when Joshua was said to have written something: (1) In 8:32, he "copied the law of Moses, which he had written in the presence of the Israelites"; (2) In 24:26, he "recorded [the covenant renewal commitments] in the book of the law of God." However, neither of these passages refers necessarily to Joshua's having written the Book of Joshua.

Other traditions suggest that a later individual—Samuel, for example—might have written the book. Such suggestions are made in light of more than a dozen appearances of the phrase "to this day," signifying a time period later than the actual events. Despite a lack of certainty regarding the human writer's name, we can trust in the truthfulness and value of the book as Holy Scripture. Its theological point of view is thoroughly consistent with the rest of Scripture, especially in its emphasis of themes from the Book of Deuteronomy. Indeed, the narrative in Joshua clearly continues the story of

God's dealings with His people Israel. The divine promise that Abraham's descendants would possess the land of Canaan appears as early as Genesis 12:4-7 and echoes numerous times throughout the Law (Gen. 17:5-8; Ex. 6:8; 32:13; Lev. 20:23-24; Num. 13:1-2; 14:6-9; 34:1-12; Deut. 1:8; 4:21-24; 7:1-2; 11:8-12; 30:5,20; 34:1-4).

Historians debate the time period of events described in the Book of Joshua. One view, based largely on archaeological data, suggests that the Israelites' conquest of Canaan occurred sometime in the 13th century B.C. However, the traditionally conservative view starts from a notation in 1 Kings 6:1 that King Solomon began to build the temple in Jerusalem "in the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of his reign over Israel." By working backward from this date (around 966 B.C.), conservative Bible scholars thus date the exodus at around 1446 B.C. and the events described in the Book of Joshua as occurring around 1406–1380 B.C.

The Book of Joshua relates two major events in Israel's history. The first major event is Israel's conquest of the land (chaps. 1–12), and the second is Joshua's distribution of territories among the tribes (chaps. 13–24). A succinct statement encompassing the overall theme of the book could be this: God was faithful in giving Israel the promised land as the Israelites showed themselves faithful to Him by obeying His covenant commands.

## » JUDGES

Chronologically, the Book of Judges picks up the story of God and His covenant people following the deaths of Joshua and a generation of Israelites who came after Joshua (see Judg. 2:7). Tragically, the subsequent generation of Israelites "did not know the LORD or the works He had done for Israel" (2:10). Thus began a period of more than three hundred years during which the people of Israel were characterized by a steadily downward spiral of idolatry, judgment, repentance, and deliverance.

As with the events in Joshua, we can only estimate when the events in the Book of Judges occurred. Some events that are described in Judges may have overlapped in time with other reported events. Following the traditional view regarding the dates of the exodus and conquest, the time of the judges can be dated around 1380–1060 B.C.

Like the Book of Joshua, the Book of Judges does not name its writer. Some Bible scholars suggest that Samuel was a possible writer, basing their conclusion on the recurring refrain that at the time of the book's events "there was no king in Israel" (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). These references hint that the book's writing was not completed until after the rise of the monarchy under Saul.

As mentioned, the Book of Judges depicts a recurring cycle of sin among the people of Israel. The Israelites developed a stubborn resistance to living according to covenant demands. This cycle, described vividly in 2:11-19, consisted of the following actions:

- The Israelites infuriated the Lord by worshiping the false gods of the pagan peoples living around them (2:11-13).
- The Lord's wrath burned against His people because of their rebellion, and He gave the Israelites over to various "enemies" (2:14-15).
- In pity, the Lord raised up judges, who delivered the Israelites from the domination of their enemies (2:16).
- After the judge passed off the scene, the Israelites reverted to idolatrous ways, kicking off the cycle again (2:17-19).

In each cycle, the Israelites became progressively more rebellious (2:19). Moreover, each successive judge appeared in a less flattering light than the previous judge. Samson, the last judge presented in the Book of Judges, personified the depths of the Israelites' rebellious pride. His life and death resembled more that of a Philistine than an Israelite hero who had been called by the Lord to deliver His people.

## » RUTH

Although set within "the time of the judges" (Ruth 1:1), the story told in the Book of Ruth reflects little of the moral decline depicted in the Book of Judges. Instead, the Book of Ruth presents a wonderful picture of amazing faithfulness, godly kindness, and divine providence.

Like Joshua and Judges, the Book of Ruth has no named writer. The completion of the book likely came during King David's reign, since the genealogy presented in 4:18-22 ends with David's name. Thus, the narrative of Ruth revealed how a woman of Moab came to play a role in the ancestral line of King David.

The account of Naomi and Ruth shows that even in a tumultuous time of spiritual rebellion, living in faithful obedience to God is possible. Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz served as examples of commitment to being the people of God by living out the covenant obligations. In addition, the story presented in the Book of Ruth emphasizes the grace of God in providing for those who trust in Him. The theme of "kinsman redeemer" revealed in the book points unmistakably to Jesus Christ, who would come in the lineage of King David and become the ultimate Redeemer for sinful humanity.

# OUTLINES OF **JOSHUA; JUDGES; RUTH**

## **JOSHUA**

**I. Preparation for Possessing the Land (Josh. 1:1–5:12)**

**II. Victories in the Land (Josh. 5:13–12:24)**

**III. Allotment of the Land (Josh. 13:1–21:45)**

**IV. Worship of God in the Land (Josh. 22:1–24:33)**

## **JUDGES**

**I. Prologue (Judg. 1:1–3:6)**

**II. The Judges (Judg. 3:7–16:31)**

1. Othniel (Judg. 3:7-11)
2. Ehud (Judg. 3:12-30)
3. Shamgar (Judg. 3:31)
4. Deborah and Barak (Judg. 4:1–5:31)
5. Gideon (Judg. 6:1–9:57)
6. Tola and Jair (Judg. 10:1-5)
7. Jephthah (Judg. 10:6–12:7)
8. Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (Judg. 12:8-15)
9. Samson (Judg. 13:1–16:31)

**III. Epilogue (Judg. 17:1–21:25)**

## **RUTH**

**I. A Family Fleeing (Ruth 1:1-22)**

**II. A Family Sought (Ruth 2:1–3:18)**

**III. A Family Redeemed (Ruth 4:1-22)**

# COMMISSIONED

God's commission includes the promise of His presence and the expectation of obedience.

I was a good student in my elementary school years. That is, I generally made good grades and behaved myself. Before entering the fourth grade, I learned that some of my friends received money from their parents for making A's on their report cards. "Wow," I thought to myself. "Why shouldn't I get rewarded for good grades too?" So I garnered my courage and mentioned the subject to my father. To my great delight, he promised to give me five dollars. There was one condition: I had to make A's in every subject all year long.

That was a tougher challenge than my friends faced for their pay; nevertheless, I accepted Dad's promise. When I brought my final report card home to show my parents, I had made all A's—except for one B-plus. True to our agreement, my father did not give me five dollars.

At the time, I thought my dad was being unreasonably stern. My grades were very good; they just weren't perfect. Consequently, at the beginning of my fifth-grade year I said nothing to my father about money for grades. That year my final report card had nothing but A's on it. To my surprise, my father promptly and proudly gave me a crisp new five-dollar bill.

Looking back now, I realize that my father was quite gracious. Money was always tight around our household in those days. Five dollars for making good grades was no easy investment. My father's fulfillment of his promise—at least in my young mind—was a long time in coming to fruition. Yet the fulfillment eventually happened. He was true to his promise.

God always fulfills His promises. The fulfillment may not come in the time frame that we as human beings expect or in quite the way we envision, yet God never fails to fulfill His promises. The promise God first gave to Abraham concerning his descendants' possession of the promised land went unfulfilled for many generations. However, the truthfulness of God's promise did not lessen even though it was delayed. As Joshua and the people of Israel stood poised on the eastern side of the Jordan River and looked into the promised land, God reminded them of His promise. The land would become theirs. God was bringing to fruition the promise He had made centuries earlier.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JOSHUA 1:1-18

From his introduction into the biblical narrative in the early chapters of Exodus, Moses cast a huge shadow across the history of Israel. He was the key human figure in bringing the Israelites out of their slavery and oppression in Egypt to the very borders of the promised land. Moses served as the instrument through whom God brought judgment on Egypt, parted the Red Sea, brought water from the rock (twice), and led the people through a forbidding and barren wilderness. For 40 years Moses had been a constant source of stability for the Israelites. Regardless of problems that arose, Moses had been able to address each difficulty and arrive at a solution. In reality, God had provided the solutions, but the people of Israel recognized Moses as the Lord's authoritative agent.

As the Book of Joshua opens, however, Moses has died. A gaping hole existed in the hearts and minds of the Israelites. No one could take Moses' place in Israel's national consciousness. He had been a constant figure for so long. Whoever followed him in the leadership role seemed destined to be a failure by comparison. Such was Joshua's unenviable situation.

Joshua served as an assistant to Moses throughout the Israelites' years of wilderness wandering. Joshua first appeared in the biblical narrative as one of Israel's military leaders in a battle against the Amalekites (Ex. 17:9). Later at Mount Sinai, he accompanied Moses at least part of the way up the mountain to receive the tablets of law (Ex. 24:13; 32:17).

Still later, Joshua served as one of 12 men Moses dispatched to scout the promised land in preparation for entry (Num. 13:16). Joshua, from the tribe of Ephraim, along with Caleb, from the tribe of Judah, delivered a minority report that urged the people to trust God for victory over the inhabitants of Canaan. Thus, Joshua and Caleb were rewarded for their faith by being the only two adults from their generation and older who were allowed to enter the promised land (14:30). Not even Moses—after having blatantly disobeyed an instruction from God—would be permitted to enter the land. Consequently, Moses was instructed to appoint Joshua as his successor (27:15-23).

Joshua undoubtedly had witnessed the power of God from his perspective as Moses' assistant. On the other hand, heretofore Moses had shouldered the heavy burdens of leadership. Moses had made the life-and-death decisions; he had dealt with the loudest critics; he had received and taught the law of God. Now the full weight of that leadership mantle fell on Joshua's shoulders. Joshua would need to be prepared for what lay ahead, and he would need to prepare the people as well. He needed a sure, encouraging word from the Lord.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## A NEW LEADER (Josh. 1:1-5)

Moses wrote the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy). A different inspired writer penned the Book of Joshua well after the time of Moses. Nevertheless, the overall story of Scripture doesn't skip a beat from one book to the next. In fact, the events narrated at the beginning of Joshua flow seamlessly from the key events narrated at end of Deuteronomy—that is, the events of Moses' death (Deut. 34:5-8) and the successful transfer of leadership authority to Joshua (34:9).

Still, the Lord knew that national leadership transition would not be easy for His people. The Israelites were in a vulnerable situation; they had not yet taken possession of their promised homeland. Major battles and constant struggles lay ahead. The new leader must act courageously and with godly wisdom. The Lord commissioned Joshua to be that new leader, and He promised to always be with Joshua just as He had been with Moses.

### VERSE 1

#### **After the death of Moses the LORD's servant, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, who had served Moses:**

The biblical writer opened the Book of Joshua with two reminders about Moses. One was simply that the people of Israel had moved into a new stage of their history: **after the death of Moses**. The courageous deliverer, guide, lawgiver, intercessor, and judge was gone. His powerful legacy remained, but Moses the man was dead and buried. The second reminder was, appropriately, a reference to Moses' legacy of leadership: he was **the LORD's servant** ("the servant of the LORD," KJV, ESV, NIV).

This approach to leadership later became the model for kingship in Israel. In 2 Samuel 7:8, the Lord referred to King David as "My servant David" and reminded the king: "I took you from the pasture and from following the sheep to be ruler over My people Israel." Moreover, the prophet Isaiah foresaw that a coming Servant of the Lord would be none other than the Promised Messiah (Isa. 42:1-4; 49:6; 52:13-53:12). In the New Testament, Jesus taught His followers this same principle of servant leadership: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles dominate them ... but it must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave to all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

As Israel's new leader, Joshua would have Moses' legacy of servant leadership ever before him. Indeed, Joshua would have witnessed that legacy as it was being built, for he **had served Moses** ("Moses' minister," KJV; "Moses' assistant," ESV; "Moses' aide," NIV). The Hebrew word rendered *had served* is a different term than the word used to describe Moses' servanthood. It can mean "assistant," "aide," or "helper." Still, the term usually referred to a position of trust and responsibility similar to the role of a steward or personal manager. Joshua faithfully assisted Moses even as Moses served the Lord.

## VERSE 2

**"Moses My servant is dead. Now you and all the people prepare to cross over the Jordan to the land I am giving the Israelites.**

The Lord's words, **Moses, My servant is dead**, seem obvious. It may have been, however, that the Lord wanted Joshua to face reality so that he could lead the Israelites effectively into their divinely promised future. Going back was not a possibility. Whatever victories or failures the people of Israel had experienced in the wilderness, those events were in the past.

On the other hand, the spiritual lessons that the Lord had taught His people in the wilderness remained valid—lessons such as that God's people succeed when they faithfully obey the Lord but experience disaster when they rebel against Him. Specific circumstances of life may change, but the principles of God never change. As the people of Israel prepared to move forward and enter the promised land, they would need to remember and apply the lessons they had learned. Joshua's responsibility as leader was to have himself as well as the people prepared **to cross over the Jordan to the land** God was giving them.

The Jordan River formed the natural eastern boundary of the promised land. Although not comparable in size or length to the great ancient rivers such as the Nile (in Egypt) or the Tigris and Euphrates (in Mesopotamia), the Jordan nevertheless served as a significant natural resource for the land of Canaan. Originating from springs at the foot of Mount Hermon, *the Jordan* flowed southward into the Huleh Basin. From there the river entered the so-called "Great Rift," dropping nearly seven hundred feet in less than ten miles, before broadening and flowing gently into the Sea of Galilee. The river formed again at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee and snaked southward for about seventy-five miles (straight-line distance), finally emptying into the Dead Sea at nearly thirteen hundred feet below sea level. The Jordan lived up to the meaning of its name—"the descender"—by cascading down over twenty-two hundred feet in elevation from its headwaters to its final destination. Its serpent-like meandering, especially

between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, extended the river's overall length to more than two hundred miles.

By crossing the Jordan River, the Israelites would enter the land that God had promised to give Abram (Abraham) and his descendants (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-17). Genesis 15:18-20 relates an important event connected to that promise: the Lord established a covenant with Abram. Central to the covenant was the gift of a homeland where Abram's many future descendants, the people of Israel, could dwell as the Lord's holy people. They could worship the Lord exclusively and thus proclaim His great name to the nations. They could live according to His ways that He planned to reveal to them in His law. They could prepare the way for God eventually to send His Messiah into the world to provide the way of salvation and eternal life. The Israelites could enjoy all of these benefits—if they stayed true to the covenant.

Joshua and the descendants of Abraham were now camped beside the Jordan River, poised to experience the fulfillment of the Lord's covenant promise. The Lord had given Abraham the land in a promise. He was now ready to give it to the Israelites in fulfillment of that promise. The only question that remained: Were the Israelites ready to trust and obey the Lord?

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Promise" on pages 1331-1333 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How does a promise incorporate both a declaration and a deed? (Hint: promise and fulfillment) How do God's promises in the Old Testament apply to Christians? What is one promise of God in Scripture that has impacted your life recently?

### VERSE 3

**I have given you every place where the sole of your foot treads, just as I promised Moses.**

The Hebrew verb form rendered **I have given** signifies a completed action. From the Lord's perspective, the transfer of the promised land to Israel was a done deal. From the Israelites' perspective, however, the process of taking possession of the land still lay in front of them. The phrase **every place where the sole of your foot treads** implies that the Israelites would have to enter the land, traverse it step by step, and expel the pagan peoples who currently inhabited it. Since the whole creation belongs to the Lord God, He had the authority to give title and possession of the land to whomever He chose. He chose to give it to the people of Israel, descendants of Abraham

who had followed Moses out of Egyptian slavery and now were prepared to follow Joshua, their new leader, into the land. The certainty of the Lord's statement gave assurance to Joshua—and thus to the people—that the promise would surely come to fulfillment.

The Lord reminded Joshua that He had not changed His plans. His promise was the same one that He had **promised Moses**. As great a leader as Moses had been, he was not the guarantor of Israel's future as a holy nation with a homeland; the Lord was. The Israelites could succeed without Moses as their leader, but they would not prosper without the Lord as their God. Circumstances may have changed, but the Lord had not changed.

In the same way, God's people today are called to put ultimate trust in the Lord, not in human leaders. We as believers are to respect and follow our God-given leaders, yet the Lord is the Guarantor of all the spiritual blessings He has given us in Christ (Eph. 1:3). He sealed His promises to us by giving us the Holy Spirit, who is “the down payment of our inheritance, for the redemption of the possession, to the praise of His glory” (1:14).

#### VERSE 4

### **Your territory will be from the wilderness and Lebanon to the great Euphrates River—all the land of the Hittites—and west to the Mediterranean Sea.**

The Lord noted the general boundaries of the **territory** He was giving Israel—the same boundaries He had revealed previously in His promise to Moses (Deut. 11:24). The description here was not intended to mark out specific borderlines but rather to indicate the general extent of the promised land in each of the four primary directions: south, north, east, and west.

To the south, Israel's territory would extend to **the wilderness** (“the desert,” NIV). The term rendered *wilderness* well described any of the barren, semiarid regions the Israelites had traversed in their 40 years of living as wandering nomads. The wilderness referred to here probably was the Wilderness of Zin that lay south of Beersheba [bee ehr SHEE buh]. Indeed, the phrase “from Dan to Beer-sheba” eventually became another way of describing the northern and southern extents of the promised land (see 2 Sam. 3:10; 1 Kings 4:25).

To the north, the land extended to **Lebanon**. The name *Lebanon* means “the white”—as in the white, snow-capped, mountainous region that was roughly the same territory as the modern nation of Lebanon today. The term may suggest that from his vantage point Joshua could actually see the white peak of Mount Hermon in the distant north.

The eastern extent of the land was designated broadly as **the great Euphrates River** (“the great river, the river Euphrates,” KJV, ESV). In reality,

the headwaters of the Euphrates River began far to the north of Canaan in what today is eastern Turkey. The river then flowed southeastward through what today is Syria and Iraq until it joined with the Tigris River south of ancient Babylon and later emptied into the Persian Gulf. Again, it was only in a general sense that the Euphrates marked the eastern extent of the promised land. In practical terms, the eastern border was later recognized as the Jordan River or, at most, the edge of the Arabian Desert.

The promised land's western extent was well defined: **the Mediterranean Sea**—literally, “the great sea.” Thus, Israel's divinely given homeland extended from “the great river” in the east to “the great sea” in the west. The phrase **all the land of the Hittites** did not refer to the large and powerful Hittite empire that once existed in the region today known as Turkey. That empire had declined significantly by 1200 B.C. However, some of the people groups that formerly were a part of that Hittite empire had migrated into the regions around Canaan. Hittites were among the groups inhabiting Canaan as early as Abraham's time (Gen. 15:20; 23:1-4).

## VERSE 5

**No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live. I will be with you, just as I was with Moses. I will not leave you or forsake you.**

The Israelites had faced only occasional military opposition during their journey to the promised land (see Ex. 17:8; Num. 21:1-3). Taking possession of the land would bring a different situation. Fierce battles and extended conflict could be expected as the Israelites swept into fortified areas to drive out the current inhabitants. Thus, the Lord fortified Israel's new leader with three statements of assurance. First, the Lord told Joshua, “**No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live.**” From his time as a scout, Joshua knew that some of the land's inhabitants would be fearsome and entrenched inside walled cities. The Lord assured Israel's new commander that the enemies of Israel would never be able to thwart the Lord's promise.

Second, the Lord assured Joshua, “**I will be with you.**” The Lord had previously given this word of assurance to **Moses** (Ex. 3:12), and Joshua could verify with many examples the truth of that divine promise. More than that, Joshua could count on the Lord's faithfulness to be present with him as he led the Israelites into battle against fierce pagan foes.

Third, the Lord promised Joshua, “**I will not leave you** (“fail thee,” KJV) **or forsake you.**” These words of assurance carried an implied condition. That is, the Lord's assurance of victory was contingent on Israel's faithfulness to trust and obey the Lord. Whenever the people of Israel obeyed the Lord's

commands, they won their battles and possessed the land. Whenever the people disobeyed, they experienced disaster and defeat. The divine assurances given in Joshua 1:4 bring into sharp focus the need to take seriously the divine expectations presented in 1:6-9.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read about other people in Scripture who received the Lord's promise of His enduring presence in these passages: Genesis 31:3; Exodus 3:12; Judges 6:16; Isaiah 43:2; Matthew 28:20; Acts 18:9-10; Revelation 21:3-4. How do you respond emotionally to the Lord's promise in Scripture to be with His people in all situations? When have you felt the Lord's nearness during a difficult time? What were some evidences of His nearness to you?

### A NEW TASK (Josh. 1:6)

#### VERSE 6

**Be strong and courageous, for you will distribute the land I swore to their fathers to give them as an inheritance.**

This was not the first time Joshua had received an admonition to **be strong and courageous**. Moses had issued this exhortation in his public endorsement of Joshua as Israel's next leader (Deut. 31:7). The Lord used the same words when He commissioned Joshua to lead the Israelites into the promised land (31:23). The exhortation did not necessarily emphasize Joshua's physical prowess or his natural courage. It wasn't about Joshua building self-confidence. Rather, it was about staying focused on the Sovereign Lord. It was about keeping on believing wholeheartedly. To use Moses' words: "The LORD is the One who will go before you. He will be with you; He will not leave you or forsake you" (Deut. 31:8). Centuries later, the apostle Paul would similarly challenge Christ's followers to "be strengthened by the Lord and by His vast strength" and to "put on the full armor of God so that [they could] stand against the tactics of the Devil" (Eph. 6:10-11). Victory would be certain if Joshua consistently placed himself squarely in the plan of God, depended on the Lord's strength, and followed the Lord's guidance.

The ultimate goal of Joshua's leadership was to **distribute the land ... as an inheritance** to the Israelites in fulfillment of the Lord's promise **to their fathers**. Getting to that goal would require courageous fighting and tenacious faith. The Lord, however, did not want Joshua to lose sight of the end game—that is, the ultimate reason Joshua had been elevated as Israel's

commander-in-chief. Joshua would succeed by staying focused on the Lord's purposes, not his own plans or those of any other individual, family, or tribe.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you taken on a new kind of work or been given greater responsibilities that stretched you beyond your comfort zone? What role did your faith in God play in accepting and carrying out the new work or responsibilities? As you look back on the experience, what were some key turning points? Who were your encouragers?

### A NEW TRUST (Josh. 1:7-9)

#### VERSE 7

**Above all, be strong and very courageous to carefully observe the whole instruction My servant Moses commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right or the left, so that you will have success wherever you go.**

The Lord further defined for Joshua what being **strong and very courageous** involved. Joshua would need these qualities not only in his military and administrative leadership but also in his spiritual leadership. Joshua needed to be tenacious and bold in obeying **the whole instruction** (“all the law,” KJV, ESV, NIV) that the Lord had given His people through His **servant Moses**. Behind the phrase rendered *whole instruction* is the Hebrew term *torah* [TOH rah], meaning “direction,” “instruction,” and “law.”

Without question, the Lord meant for Joshua and the Israelites to keep the Ten Commandments. Moreover, *torah* included the greater body of instruction found throughout the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy). This fuller body of Scripture served as Israel's first “Bible.” Joshua was thus to seek divine guidance in the Scriptures—in the same way that we who are believers should do today. He was not to veer **to the right or the left**. No other source of instruction could guarantee true **success**.

#### VERSE 8

**This book of instruction must not depart from your mouth; you are to recite it day and night so that you may carefully observe everything written in it. For then you will prosper and succeed in whatever you do.**

The Lord warned Joshua not to allow **this book of instruction** (“this Book of the Law,” ESV, NIV) to **depart from** [his] **mouth**. The word rendered *depart* could also be translated “remove” or “cease.” In other words, the Lord did not mean that Joshua was never to speak about or teach from the Law. On the contrary, the Law was to be as foundational to his life and leadership as food in his mouth. Joshua was, in fact, **to recite it day and night** so that God’s Word would saturate his thoughts, inform his decisions, and guide his day-to-day actions.

Joshua learned that the surest way to **prosper and succeed** in life was to live by God’s ways. This remains true today whether or not we attain leadership roles, as Joshua did. Too often today, prosperity and success are defined purely in selfish, worldly terms. To quote the bumper-sticker version of this worldview: “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” Jesus demolished such bumper-sticker teaching in His parable of the rich fool. True life, Jesus taught, is not defined by the amount of possessions one can amass but by what people do with all they are given (see Luke 12:16-21). To know God through salvation in Jesus Christ is true prosperity; to honor God in all one’s ways is true success.

## VERSE 9

**Haven’t I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”**

The human tendency in the face of an uncertain future is to fear. The Lord’s command to Joshua was to **not be afraid**. The assurance for a secure future came in the words **the LORD your God is with you**. Joshua’s trust for his future, as well as for Israel’s future, depended on the presence of God. Likewise, our hope as believers rests on the foundation of the Lord’s strength, not our own. The assurance God gave to Joshua was echoed generations later in Paul’s words to the believers at Rome: “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom. 8:31). Our ultimate trust must be in the Lord our God.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Scripture” on pages 1452-1453 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How does the nature of Scripture as a perfect treasure of divine instruction give you confidence in facing life’s challenges? How can you further develop your understanding of and dependence on God’s Word?

# CONQUEST

God gives His people victory when they trust Him and obey His commands.

Modern military planners probably would never adopt the strategy used in the ancient Israelites' conquest of Jericho. Today's battle planning involves a careful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of all combatants, with the goal of outwitting or overwhelming the enemy. To be sure, the Bible contains examples of strategic war-planning. At ancient Jericho, however, Commander Joshua employed a battle plan that defied human logic. In fact, the plan's miraculous success meant that the victory could only be attributed to one sovereign power: the Lord God.

Generations earlier, the Lord had promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants. The time had come for Joshua and the Israelites to trust the Lord for the fulfillment of that promise. Joshua was Israel's leader, but the Lord was the Commander-in-chief. He gave victory to the Israelites when they obeyed His commands. The Lord's plan for conquering Jericho might seem strange and unworkable to a modern-day general, but it was Joshua and the Israelites' only sure path to victory. It reminds us today that we can be confident in living a victorious Christian life when we trust in the Lord and follow His commands.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### JOSHUA 2:1–6:27

Nervous anticipation must have been palpable as the Israelites prepared to cross the Jordan River near Jericho. Joshua gathered members of the tribes that had been given territory on the eastern side of the river and reminded them of their commitment to fight with their brothers until all the promised land was taken (Josh. 1:12-18).

Two huge physical challenges lay in front of the Israelites. First, they had to get their troops across the Jordan while the river was in flood stage. If they

managed to survive the river crossing, then they immediately faced a second, even more formidable challenge—capturing the walled city of Jericho.

Jericho was already one of the oldest cities (if not the oldest city) in the world when the Israelites approached it. It was a fortified town covering some ten acres even in the early stages of its history. In Joshua's day the city was encircled by a massive stone wall with huge gates and guard towers, making it easily defended against nearly any attacking force.

Jericho was not only an ancient, heavily fortified city but also was one of the lowest cities on earth at 750 feet below sea level. The nearby Dead Sea and desert-like climate made much of the surrounding area inhospitable for habitation. Jericho, on the other hand, was supplied by a large, dependable fresh-water spring, enabling it to flourish like an oasis in a wilderness. In addition, the city sat astride an intersection of three land routes leading into the central highlands of Canaan. To gain control of Jericho was to establish a strategic base from which the Israelites could launch an effective three-stage attack against the pagan settlements in Canaan's central, southern, and northern regions.

The account of the actual conquest of Jericho appears in Joshua 6. However, chapters 2–5 describe several events that proved crucial for the Israelites' military and spiritual preparation for battle. These events included:

- Joshua's sending two men undercover into Jericho to discover the city's vulnerabilities and to gauge the enemy's will to fight (2:1-24);
- the Israelites' miraculous crossing of the Jordan River and setting up of a stone memorial to commemorate the Lord's indispensable guidance and power (3:1–4:24);
- the circumcising of all Israelite males in renewed obedience to the Lord's covenant with Israel (5:1-9);
- the keeping of Passover and the start of eating the land's produce instead of manna (5:10-12); and
- the fortifying of Joshua through an appearance of the "commander of the LORD's army" to remind Joshua of his sacred mission (5:13-15).

Each of these events helped to put the conquest of Jericho—and indeed the entire campaign of taking possession of the promised land—in the context of holy war. In Scripture, holy war can be defined as a military campaign initiated by the Lord through His chosen instrument, for His purposes, and in judgment against nations (or groups) entrenched in wickedness. As long as Joshua and the Israelites stayed obedient to the Lord and focused on His holy mission, they could anticipate the assistance of heaven's angelic armies in the fight. However, if they began to pursue their own agenda and to disobey the Lord's commands, then they would quickly experience disaster and defeat at the hands of their enemies.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## PATIENT OBEDIENCE (Josh. 6:12-14)

In 6:1-5, the Lord revealed to Joshua an unusual battle plan for capturing the city of Jericho. Destroying the city's strongest defensive feature—its massive wall—would be the key. Would the Israelites deploy battering rams for the attack? No, they would use rams' horns! The plan would involve seven days of parading around the city with only the rams' horns blaring, followed on the final day by some raucous shouting. The Lord assured Joshua that the battle's outcome was already decided. On the seventh day, Jericho, its king, and its fighting men would be handed over to Joshua.

### VERSE 12

#### **Joshua got up early the next morning. The priests took the ark of the LORD,**

In Joshua 6:6-11, the biblical writer reported that the Israelites carried out the first day of the battle plan exactly as the Lord had instructed. Verses 12-14 describe the second day's activities, which by the Lord's command was a repeat of first day's march. The description began with the notation that **Joshua got up early** (literally, "he rose up, namely Joshua, in the morning"). The verb rendered *got up* ("rose," KJV, ESV) could denote simply the act of arising from sleep at a usual time. In some contexts, however, the verb could express the nuances of eagerness, diligence, and persistence (see Jer. 7:13, "time and time again"). Given Joshua's situation, all of those meanings make sense. That is, the commander awoke before daybreak, filled with eagerness to worship the Lord in private devotion and then to commence the second day's march around Jericho in obedience to the Lord's command.

**The priests took the ark of the LORD.** The priority given to *the ark of the LORD* in the start of the second day's activities, along with its central position in each day's procession around Jericho, reveals how important it was in Israel's theology. Throughout the Old Testament the ark was known variously as "the ark of the testimony" (Ex. 25:22; Josh. 4:16), "the ark of the LORD's covenant" (Num. 10:33; Josh. 6:8), "the ark of the covenant" (Josh. 3:6), "the ark of God" (1 Sam. 3:3; 2 Chron. 1:4), or simply "the ark" (Ex. 25:14). It was built according to the Lord's precise specifications while the Israelites were camped at Mount Sinai (Ex. 25:10-22). It was the sacred centerpiece of Israel's worship, resting in the tabernacle's holy of holies when the Israelites were not traveling. According to Exodus 25:21-22, the Lord promised His people: "I will meet with you there above the mercy seat, between the two

cherubim that are over the ark of the testimony; I will speak with you from there about all that I command you regarding the Israelites.” In essence, then, the Lord was promising that His eternal, holy presence would reside with His people in a special way atop the ark.

Thus, the powerful, underlying message of the ark’s central place in the procession became clear. Israel’s divine King was enthroned above the ark. The presence of the ark signified that the Lord was moving step by step with His people as they circled the doomed city. The Israelites carried the ark into the battle at Jericho not to manipulate their God but rather to obey their God. Neither Joshua nor his troops were in ultimate command of this battle; the Lord God was in command. The ark’s presence gave daily courage to the Israelites and mounting dread to the citizens of Jericho.

No New Testament writer drew more upon the rich meaning of the Old Testament tabernacle than the writer of Hebrews. For that writer, everything about the tabernacle pointed to Jesus Christ and the new covenant established through His perfect sacrifice on the cross (Heb. 9:11-12,15). Whereas the ark signified the invisible presence of Holy God, Jesus the Son was (and is) “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of His nature” (1:3). Because of our salvation in Christ, therefore, believers can “approach the throne of grace with boldness” (4:16), “draw near [to God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (10:22), “run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus” (12:1-2), and “continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise” (13:15). The battle is over; the Enemy is defeated; Jesus is Lord!

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read Exodus 25:10-22 and the article titled “Ark of the Covenant” on pages 112-114 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How was the ark a symbol of God’s presence, yet was not an idol? What assures you as a believer that God is present with His people?

### VERSE 13

**and the seven priests carrying seven trumpets marched in front of the ark of the LORD. While the trumpets were blowing, the armed troops went in front of them, and the rear guard went behind the ark of the LORD.**

The number seven appears repeatedly in Scripture. At times it is used to express more than a literal count of something. That is, the number also implied the

completeness, wholeness, or perfection of something. For example, the seven days of creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3 not only indicated the actual seven days of God’s creative activity but also the perfection and completeness of that activity. In the New Testament, the apostle John frequently used the added meaning of the number seven in the Book of Revelation. He spoke of “seven churches in Asia” (1:4), “seven gold lampstands” (1:12), “seven stars” (1:16,20), “seven spirits of God” (3:1), a scroll sealed with “seven seals” (5:1), a lamb that appeared to be slain yet was standing, having “seven horns and seven eyes” (5:6), “seven angels” who were given “seven trumpets” (8:2), another “seven angels with the seven plagues” (15:6), and “seven bowls of God’s wrath” (16:1). Like these instances in Scripture, the **seven priests carrying seven trumpets** mentioned in Joshua 6:13 represented a greater reality: the complete victory the Lord would give to the people of Israel as they followed Him.

The word rendered *trumpets* (“trumpets of rams’ horns,” KJV, ESV) is a Hebrew term that comes into modern English as *shofar* [SHOH fahr]. The ancient Israelite *shofar* was made from the hollow horn of a ram or wild sheep. Its tonal range was limited to two sounds, a low and a high pitch, yet it could be heard over great distances. Thus, this kind of trumpet served primarily as a signaling device—to call the Israelites together for special worship times (Lev. 25:9), to announce a new king (2 Sam. 15:10), or to join with the Lord and others in battle (Neh. 4:20). Perhaps all of these meanings were being signaled as the Israelites marched around Jericho each day with the ark.

A contingent of **armed troops** preceded the priests, leading the procession. Another detachment of soldiers followed **behind the ark** as a **rear guard**. The precise order of the procession indicated an important theme for Israel: God dwells in the midst of His people (Ex. 29:45–46; Ezek. 43:7). Whenever the people of Israel camped during their wilderness travels, the tribes positioned themselves in a specific manner around the tabernacle (tent of meeting), which was in the center (Num. 2:2).

Even a lengthy procession could complete a circuit around Jericho in less than one day’s time. Some Bible students estimate the circumference of the ancient walled city to have been slightly more than one-third of a mile. The marching Israelites would have kept a sufficient distance between themselves and the wall to avoid an assault from archers. Still, the procession’s total travel distance around the city likely would have been no more than one mile. It is possible that the front part of the procession approached the completion of their circuit before the rear guard started to march.

#### VERSE 14

**On the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did this for six days.**

This verse is a summary description of the **second day** (described in Josh. 6:12-13), plus a statement that the procession was carried out in like manner once each day **for six days**. Joshua and the Israelites obeyed the Lord's instructions precisely as they were commanded. If Joshua had questions or second thoughts about the plan for victory, he did not voice them. Instead, he trusted in and obeyed the Lord without being able to know every detail of how the plan would succeed.

This is an important truth for God's people today too. Obeying the Lord presumes faith in Him—faith that He is “able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us” (Eph. 3:20). The Lord's immediate purpose for Joshua and the Israelites at Jericho was to bring them to the place of trusting Him. The Lord could destroy the city at any time with or without human agency. If, however, the people of Israel were to become a holy people in the promised land to carry out the Lord's ultimate saving plan, then they needed to trust God and act in obedience to Him. As Christians, we too must learn that the path to true victory in life is obedient faith—whether our steps forward are brightly lit or shadowed by tests of faith.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What is a recent experience when you had to patiently trust the Lord for something without knowing all the particulars of how He might bring it about? What did you learn about the Lord from that experience? What did you learn about yourself as a follower of Christ?

## FINAL PREPARATIONS (Josh. 6:15-19)

### VERSE 15

**Early on the seventh day, they started at dawn and marched around the city seven times in the same way. That was the only day they marched around the city seven times.**

The added emphasis of the number seven appears again in this verse. The narrative slows down slightly to emphasize that the Israelites' daily journey around the city was reaching a climax **on the seventh day**. Unlike the previous six days when the procession circled the city only one time, on this day the procession would march **around the city seven times**. In light of having to make six additional circuits around Jericho, the people rose **early**, and the procession **started at dawn**. Just as Joshua had led them to obey the Lord precisely each of the first six days, he would do so on day seven as well.

We can only speculate as to what the citizens of Jericho thought as they witnessed the Israelites' daily trek around the city. Maybe they scoffed at the sight. Or perhaps each day's sighting simply multiplied their sense of dread, since we know from Rahab's testimony that the people of Jericho were already terrified before the Israelites crossed the Jordan River (Josh. 2:8-9). Whatever the case, the citizens of Jericho likely noticed the Israelites' additional circuits on the seventh day and wondered what it meant. They were about to learn the answer.

#### VERSE 16

**After the seventh time, the priests blew the trumpets, and Joshua said to the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city."**

With the completion of the seventh lap on the seventh day, the action took a different turn. On all of the previous circuits that day (and on the six previous days' circuits), the Israelite soldiers had remained silent (6:10). They had not uttered a word. Now **the priests blew the trumpets** as a signal, and Israel's commander ordered the people to **shout** as loudly as they could. These were to be enthusiastic shouts of victory and praise, for as Joshua announced, **"the LORD has given you the city."**

Shouting during a military assault has long been an element of warfare. Examples in Scripture can be found in Judges 7:20; 1 Samuel 4:5-8; and 2 Chronicles 13:15. The thunderous cries of charging soldiers could provoke panic among enemy forces. Shouting also could bolster the courage of those soldiers charging toward an enemy.

The shouts of Israel's army were a common part of warfare, but the shouting did not cause the defeat of Jericho. Instead, that defeat came because the Lord was fighting for His people. He was driving out the inhabitants of Canaan, just as He promised He would. Although Israel had a role to play in obeying the Lord, the victory was His.

#### VERSE 17

**But the city and everything in it are set apart to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and everyone with her in the house will live, because she hid the men we sent.**

The phrase **set apart to the LORD for destruction** refers to a feature of holy war. The Hebrew root word behind *set apart ... for destruction* ("accursed," KJV; "devoted ... for destruction," ESV) can mean "ban," "devote," or "destroy utterly." Such an action could be carried out in one of two ways. First, the objects or people put under the ban could be restricted in function;

they were devoted solely to the Lord—either to His sanctuary’s treasury or service. Second, the objects or people put under the ban could be completely destroyed, often by cremation. In this way the devoted items were irrevocably surrendered to the Lord, the One whose purposes were foremost.

The phrase **the city and everything in it** (“all that are therein,” KJV) may have referred specifically to the people and animals of Jericho. They were under judgment and were all to be totally destroyed by fire (see 6:24, where the same phrase is used)—with one exception. Because of her courageous assistance to the two Israelite scouts (chap. 2), **Rahab the prostitute and everyone with her in [her] house** were to be spared from death as promised.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the articles titled “Accursed” on page 18 and “Holy War” on pages 774-775 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Why do you think God did not want His people to claim any rewards from Jericho as their personal property? What are ways that you as a believer can acknowledge God’s sovereignty and lordship in the matter of possessions?

### VERSE 18

**But keep yourselves from the things set apart, or you will be set apart for destruction. If you take any of those things, you will set apart the camp of Israel for destruction and bring disaster on it.**

If 6:17 refers mainly to buildings and people, then the phrase **the things set apart** in this verse likely refers to items of treasure. As the Israelite soldiers swept through the city in conquest, they were sure to come across money, jewelry, clothing, and the like. Soldiers were to resist the temptation to take any of these items for themselves. To do so would be to **set apart** [themselves] **for destruction!** Even worse, the entire **camp of Israel** would fall under the judgment curse against Jericho and would experience **disaster** (“trouble,” KJV, ESV, NIV) because of it. This is one of the clear examples in Scripture that teaches the infectious impact of sin (see Josh. 7). Sins can have disastrous temporal consequences on other family members, our church congregations, and communities—not to mention the consequences to ourselves.

### VERSE 19

**For all the silver and gold, and the articles of bronze and iron, are dedicated to the LORD and must go into the LORD’s treasury.”**

Jericho's treasures of **silver and gold, and the articles of bronze and iron** belonged solely to the Lord by virtue of the holy-war ban, so they were to be put **into the LORD's treasury**. Practically speaking, this meant that the articles were deposited with the priests to be used in support of the Lord's tabernacle and its ministry.

## **OBEDIENCE REWARDED** (Josh. 6:20-25)

### **VERSE 20**

**So the people shouted, and the trumpets sounded. When they heard the blast of the trumpet, the people gave a great shout, and the wall collapsed. The people advanced into the city, each man straight ahead, and they captured the city.**

Joshua had obeyed the Lord precisely in His instructions for battle. The Lord, in turn, fulfilled His promise. The **people shouted**, the **trumpets** blared, and **the wall collapsed** ("fell down flat," KJV, ESV). Recent excavations at the site of ancient Jericho uncovered part of an intact mud-brick wall, with collapsed material around it. Mud bricks remain to this day an abundant and common building material in dry climates of the ancient Near East.

With Jericho's key defensive feature flattened, the Israelites **advanced into the city** and **captured** it. The phrase **each man straight ahead** literally reads "a man in front of him." The emphasis may be that the Israelite troops had the city surrounded when the wall collapsed. The city was open to attack from all sides. Joshua and his men had no impediments; they simply charged *straight ahead* and overwhelmed Jericho's terrified defenders.

### **VERSE 21**

**They completely destroyed everything in the city with the sword—every man and woman, both young and old, and every ox, sheep, and donkey.**

In accordance with the Lord's command, the Israelites **destroyed everything in the city with the sword**. The slaughter of all living things was God's judgment against the city's wickedness. The Israelites were never allowed to commit such acts of their own choosing. Rather, the act was a matter of obedience to the Lord's specific command.

### **VERSES 22-23**

**Joshua said to the two men who had scouted the land, "Go to the prostitute's house and bring the woman out of there, and all**

**who are with her, just as you promised her.” So the young men who had scouted went in and brought out Rahab and her father, mother, brothers, and all who belonged to her. They brought out her whole family and settled them outside the camp of Israel.**

Joshua did not forget about Rahab or about the promise made to her by the two Israelite scouts. Joshua sent **the two men** to rescue her and all who were **with her** in her house. That turned out to be **her whole family**.

The phrase **settled them outside the camp** should be understood as an act of grace, not discrimination. Rahab and her family enjoyed the protection of and acceptance by the Israelites for the rest of her life (6:25). Indeed, the New Testament writer of Hebrews included Rahab as an exemplary woman of faith (Heb. 11:31). Like the remarkable young Moabite woman Ruth, Rahab married an Israelite man and became part of the ancestral genealogy of not only King David but also the Messiah and King of kings, Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5-6,16). Such was the grace of God operating in the midst of His judgment!

#### **VERSES 24-25**

**They burned up the city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD’s house. However, Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, her father’s household, and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent to spy on Jericho, and she lives in Israel to this day.**

The biblical writer again emphasized the Israelites’ obedience. As commanded by the Lord, **they burned up the city and everything in it** and placed the valuable metal articles in **the treasury of the LORD’s house**. In addition, **Joshua spared Rahab** and her entire family. The note about Rahab’s living **in Israel to this day** could mean either that Rahab was still alive when the book was penned or, more likely, that Rahab’s descendants were fully included *in Israel* at the time of the book’s writing.

### **EXPLORE FURTHER**

Rahab was a recipient of God’s grace and deliverance. Recall your life prior to conversion to faith in Christ. How was God’s grace and deliverance made real to you? How does Rahab’s example encourage you to live with gratitude and obedience to God?

# COMMITMENT KEPT

Always in control, God uses all situations to bring about His purposes.

When I reflect on significant events in my life, I notice that great times of insight and spiritual growth have come during periods of great struggle. I think about, for example, my father's untimely death when I was only 14 years old. Or I think about the time as an adult when my doctor informed me that I had cancer. I recall the day of surgery and the difficult follow-up treatments to prevent the cancer from returning.

Another significant event that caused me to do some deep spiritual soul-searching was Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Those of us living in or near that killer storm's path had to come to grips with horrible losses of human life and property as well as the damage done to the soul of a great American city. All of these events (and others) brought intense struggle into my life. They forced me to evaluate life and to consider the fleeting nature of human existence. However, they also helped shape my thinking, my attitudes, my faith, and my reverence for God.

Don't misunderstand. The mountaintop experiences of life are wonderful! During those times I can feel God's presence in an exhilarating fashion. I come away from them joyful, confident, and grateful. Much of life, however, is not lived on the mountaintop but in the valley. That is exactly where I—like many others before and after me—have learned more of God's faithfulness and power than I would have otherwise. That is also where I learned to trust Him more and to walk in obedience to His perfect Word (see Ps. 23:4).

This session focuses on realizing that God is in control of His people's ultimate destiny. He uses all their situations to bring about His purposes. Joshua and the Israelites faced challenge after challenge as they marched forward in faith to take possession of the promised land. Through all the hardships and rigors of their experiences, God showed them His character. He remained true and faithful—even when the Israelites did not.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JOSHUA 7:1–12:24

With the conquest of Jericho, the Israelites had taken their first step in taking possession of the promised land. The biblical writer summarized the aftermath of that victory by stating that “the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land” (Josh. 6:27). The Israelites no doubt gained great confidence in their leader; the pagan groups in Canaan grew even more terrified.

The opening verse of chapter 7 signaled a problem, however. Achan [AY kuhn], one of Joshua’s soldiers and a man of the tribe of Judah, had squirreled away for himself some valuable items taken from Jericho. In doing so, Achan brought the Lord’s wrath on himself and the entire camp of Israel. The Lord’s anger became evident when a contingent of several thousand Israelite troops were soundly beaten by the defenders of a small outpost called Ai [IGH (eye)]. The defeat caused the Israelites’ confidence to melt into waves of fear (7:2-5).

In 7:6-15, Joshua turned to the Lord in anguished prayer for answers. The Lord revealed that His people had a sin problem. Further, He would no longer give victory to Israel until the one responsible for violating the holy-war ban was dealt with and the devoted items were destroyed. The Lord then laid out a process by which the guilty soldier could be identified. Joshua responded by initiating the process early the next day, demanding Achan’s confession, and leading the people of Israel to carry out the Lord’s judgment against Achan, his family, and the stolen items (7:16-26).

Following the purge of Israel’s sin, the Lord then gave the Israelites victory over Ai (8:1-29). Using a remarkable strategy of deception and flanking movements, Joshua and his army overran the outpost and completely destroyed it. Joshua then led the Israelites to renew their commitment to the Lord and His law in a special worship event between two mountains, Mount Ebal [EE buhl] and Mount Gerizim [GEHR uh zim] (8:30-35).

Joshua’s strategy for conquering the remainder of Canaan involved a three-pronged campaign (9:1–11:15). First, the Israelites would subdue the central region (9:1-27), then turn south in response to an attack by five kings of southern cities (10:1-43), and finally move against a strong alliance of cities in the northern region (11:1-15). In 11:16–12:24, the biblical writer summarized the conquests, including a list of the numbers of pagan kings the Israelites defeated on the western side of the Jordan River.

One group in the land, the citizens of Gibeon—perhaps a subgroup of Hivites [HIGH vights] or Amorites [AM uh rights] (see 9:7; compare 2 Sam. 21:2)—used a ruse to avoid a military encounter and establish a peace

treaty with the Israelites. A delegation of Gibeonites approached Joshua and pretended to be travelers from a distant land. Joshua and a council of Israelite leaders fell for the ruse and established a peace treaty with the Gibeonites.

The city of Gibeon occupied an important position overlooking one of the main access roads from Jericho through the central hill country of Canaan and leading westward toward the coastal areas. Near the Mediterranean coast, this road intersected with an international highway that stretched from Egypt to Mesopotamia. Only a few good roads led off the international highway into the mountains of central Canaan, and Gibeon controlled one of those access points. At the time of Joshua, Gibeon was a large and important city (see 10:2); thus, its alliance with Israel created much concern among the other peoples and cities of Canaan. Joshua learned of the Gibeonites' deception when five kings from the south united their forces to attack the citizens of Gibeon for making a treaty with the Israelites.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **A COMMITMENT REMEMBERED** (Josh. 10:6)

The Gibeonites used deceit in their attempt to survive Israel's expected conquest. They put worn-out sacks and wineskins on their donkeys, dressed in old clothes and sandals, and took stale provisions as food (9:3-5). They approached Joshua under the pretense of being citizens from a distant country who desired to establish a treaty of peace with Israel. Although Joshua seemingly was wary of the group's request (9:7), the Israelite leaders did not seek God's counsel in the matter. The biblical writer specifically mentioned the Israelites' lack of prayer as a point of concern (9:14). The lack of prayer in seeking God's direction created problems for Israel. Based on lies, Joshua and the Israelite leaders made a covenant promise to spare the Gibeonites from the judgment the Lord had declared (9:15).

A few days later, Joshua learned the truth concerning the Gibeonites. Rather than being from a far country, they represented a pod of four cities in the central highlands of Canaan (9:17). Some Israelites wanted to immediately attack the Gibeonites in response to their deceit, but Joshua and the Israelites had entered into the treaty of peace, and such a covenant could not be discounted regardless of how it was made. An oath had been sworn, and Joshua had to abide by the conditions of the promise. Generations later, in fact, the Lord sent a three-year famine on Israel as punishment for the murder of some Gibeonites by King Saul (2 Sam. 21:1). An oath and a covenant could not be ignored without consequences.

## VERSE 6

**Then the men of Gibeon sent word to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal: “Don’t abandon your servants. Come quickly and save us! Help us, for all the Amorite kings living in the hill country have joined forces against us.”**

In a move of retaliation, **all the Amorite kings living in the hill country** formed an alliance to punish the Gibeonites for entering into a peace treaty with Israel. If the Gibeonites thought they had escaped danger by tricking the Israelites into a covenant, they were shortsighted. They now faced the prospect of being slaughtered as traitors by other pagan groups in the land. Resolving one crisis by deception only led them into another crisis, and the **men of Gibeon** had but one option: they **sent word to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal**.

*Gilgal*, located near Jericho, served as an early and important military base of operations for the Israelites. The name means “circle,” perhaps in reference to a circular altar or memorial. Joshua established Gilgal as the Israelites’ camp immediately following the Jordan River crossing (Josh. 4:19). Four important events took place there even before the conquest of Jericho. First, the Israelites set up the 12 memorial stones they had taken from the Jordan River (4:20). Second, Joshua had all Israelite males circumcised in obedience to God’s law (5:2-9). Third, the Israelites kept the Passover for the first time in the promised land (5:10). Fourth, the Lord’s gift of manna ceased after the Israelites ate food from the land (5:11-12).

A place known as Gilgal also figured prominently in Israelite history during the time of Samuel (see 1 Sam. 7:16; 10:8; 13:7-8). Bible scholars differ as to whether the city in Samuel’s time was the same location as in Joshua’s time or was another site located more to the north near Shechem. In any event, the Gibeonites were aware of Joshua’s actual location and quickly sent a delegation to implore the Israelites to honor the newly established treaty.

The panic of the Gibeonite delegation was expressed in four urgent pleas. First was the plea, **“Don’t abandon your servants”** (“slack not thy hand,” KJV; “do not relax your hand,” ESV). The intent of the appeal was to encourage Joshua and the Israelites not to stand idly by in the Gibeonites’ time of need. The second plea, expressed in imperative form, was for the Israelites to **come quickly** (“come up to us quickly,” KJV, ESV, NIV). The third plea, **save us**, came in the form of an emphatic imperative, further indicating the need for immediate assistance. The Hebrew term rendered *save* can also mean “deliver,” “liberate,” or “rescue.” The final plea, **help us**, expressed the Gibeonites’ awareness of their dire situation. Their only hope lay in Joshua’s willingness to honor the covenant of peace.

The term *Amorites*, which literally means “mountain-dwellers,” was used at times in Scripture to refer generally to all the various people groups inhabiting Canaan prior to the Israelite conquest (see Gen. 15:16). At other times, the term was used in a narrower sense to refer to groups residing in the hill country of central and southern Canaan (Num. 13:29). Since the king of Jerusalem was included among the Amorite kings attacking Gibeon (Josh. 10:5), probably the more general meaning of the term fits better here. Jebusites inhabited Jerusalem (Josh. 15:63); in the narrower sense, then, Jebusites and Amorites, although related by ancestry (Gen. 10:16), probably comprised different people groups.

The king of Jerusalem had taken the leadership role in building the coalition of kings to come against the Gibeonites (Josh. 10:1-4). The close proximity of the four Gibeonite cities to Jerusalem, plus the Gibeonites’ treaty with the people of Israel, presented a clear and present danger to the king of Jerusalem—especially given the utter destruction of Jericho and Ai.

Joshua and Israel’s leaders had committed to being faithful in their covenant with the Gibeonites. The terms of the covenant stipulated that the Israelites would not destroy the Gibeonites but would allow them to live. For their part, the Gibeonites would become servants of the people of Israel (9:21). Implicit in the agreement to allow the Gibeonites to live was an obligation to protect the Gibeonites from attack. With the attack of the Amorite kings against the Gibeonites underway, Joshua and the people of Israel showed commitment to the covenant they had made.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Peace” on pages 1261-1262 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Take note of the paragraph that begins with the words “A bilateral treaty of peace ...” What does it mean to you that Joshua and the leaders of Israel maintained a covenant of peace with the Gibeonites even after learning the Gibeonites had deceived them? How important is it to you as a Christian to live at peace with others? What is involved in doing so?

## STAYING TRUE TO HIS WORD (Josh. 10:7-8)

### VERSE 7

**So Joshua and his whole military force, including all the fighting men, came from Gilgal.**

Upon hearing the Gibeonites' desperate plea for help, Joshua acted immediately. Unlike the ill-fated decision at Ai to send only a portion of his army—although a sin problem in Israel was in play there—this time **Joshua and his whole military force** (“all the people of war,” KJV, ESV; “his entire army,” NIV) marched from Gilgal to aid the people of Gibeon. Included as well were **all the fighting men** (“mighty men of valour,” KJV; “the best fighting men,” NIV). The phrase *fighting men* likely was equivalent to what today would be referred to as special forces. They were elite, highly trained soldiers who could effectively carry out the most difficult battle missions. The nature of Joshua's strategy suggests that the commander saw not only the need to prove trustworthy to a covenant but also the opportunity to strike a significant blow against a sizable number of the Lord's enemies.

#### VERSE 8

**The LORD said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them, for I have handed them over to you. Not one of them will be able to stand against you.”**

The words **the LORD said to Joshua** imply that Israel's commander had learned another lesson from the initial defeat at Ai. That is, Joshua would not make the mistake again of failing to approach the Lord in prayer before the battle. We are not told the content of Joshua's prayer, but the Lord's response suggests that the commander pleaded for assurance that the Israelites were acting in concert with God's will. After all, they were facing an impending battle that resulted from a covenant based on deception. Joshua did not want the Israelites to suffer another disaster like the one at Ai.

The Lord reassured Joshua by repeating the same encouraging truths He had given the new Israelite leader at the start. Joshua must **not be afraid of** the Amorite kings and their combined armies. This echoes the Lord's words in 1:9—“Haven't I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” Further, the Lord had already **handed** [the Amorites] **over to** Israel's forces (compare 2:24). Victory was certain, even though the battle was yet to be fought. And finally, the Lord assured Joshua that none of the groups in Canaan would **be able to stand against** the Israelites (compare 1:5).

No doubt Joshua welcomed this reassuring message. As Israel's commander, he already had experienced the thrill of miraculous, God-given victory and the bitterness of sin-rooted defeat. The Lord had not given him an exact plan for fighting the upcoming battle, but He had assured Joshua of the outcome. Despite setbacks brought on by the Israelites' disobedience and carelessness, the Lord was staying true to His promises to His covenant people.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you participated with a group working for the Lord in some way or place that evoked fear? What were some of the fears the group experienced? What gave you and others courage to continue the work for the Lord?

### DIVINE INTERVENTION (Josh. 10:9-14)

The Lord caused confusion among the armies of the five Amorite kings. Joshua and his army conducted a surprise attack, and the armies of the Amorite kings panicked and fled. Joshua and his troops gave chase even as the Lord intervened by sending a hailstorm and by miraculously prolonging the day.

### VERSE 9

#### **So Joshua caught them by surprise, after marching all night from Gilgal.**

Joshua responded immediately to the Gibeonites' urgent plea. Notice the brevity of 10:9. The biblical writer wasted no words in telling how quickly the Israelite forces arrived in the region around the city of Gibeon. The narrative omits any details of the difficulties the Israelite troops faced in a long, overnight march. The writer's intent no doubt was to emphasize the speed with which Joshua and his army responded.

In reality, the march from Gilgal to Gibeon involved a grueling and exhausting journey, especially at night. Although Gilgal's precise location is uncertain, the site lay slightly east of Jericho's ruins near the Jordan River (Josh. 4:19). This would have involved **marching all night** to travel the distance of approximately 20 miles.

Distance wasn't the only obstacle. The marching Israelites would have gone from an elevation of about 750 feet below sea level at their Gilgal encampment to a region that was some 2,400 feet above sea level. The route's topography presented yet another obstacle. The hills rose sharply only to fall steeply into valleys. As the road wound around the hills, the overall trend of the march was upward, but at times the road would descend into a valley only to trend steeply upward again. For the entire Israelite army to traverse such unfamiliar, uneven terrain on foot under moonlight and torches was a testament to the Lord's empowerment of His people.

The coalition of Amorite troops did not expect the Israelites to make such a speedy response. Joshua and his troops **caught them by surprise** (“came unto them suddenly,” KJV). Again, the biblical writer gave only the necessary details of the matter. Did the Amorite kings fail to have scouts watching the Israelites’ movements? Did they presume Joshua would be more than happy to abandon the Gibeonites, who after all had deceived him into making a covenant with them? The biblical writer did not explore these questions. His emphasis was only that Joshua and the Israelites did the unexpected so they could get in position for the Lord God to do the impossible.

#### VERSE 10

**The LORD threw them into confusion before Israel. He defeated them in a great slaughter at Gibeon, chased them through the ascent of Beth-horon, and struck them down as far as Azekah and Makkedah.**

Joshua and his army did their part by trusting the Lord and marching overnight to Gibeon. Then the Lord took charge of the battle. He **threw** [the Amorites] **into confusion before Israel** (“discomfited them before Israel,” KJV; “threw them into a panic before Israel,” ESV). **The LORD** is the implied subject of all the verbs in verse 10. He **defeated** the Amorites; He **chased** the fleeing enemy; He **struck them down**. Joshua and the Israelite warriors might have been the Lord’s human agents in the fight, but the biblical writer made clear that the victory belonged to the Lord. He was fulfilling His promise to give Israel the land of Canaan.

Although the battle began in the area around Gibeon, it quickly developed into a running battle that reached **Beth-horon** and went **as far as Azekah** [uh ZEE kuh] **and Makkedah** [ma KEE duh]. The route of the Amorite retreat followed an important road westward and southwestward from Gibeon toward the Mediterranean coastal plain. *Beth-horon* actually was the name of twin cities separated by a couple of miles and several hundred feet of elevation. Lower Beth-horon was located about three miles northwest of Gibeon, with an elevation of 1,050 feet. Upper Beth-horon lay two miles farther and had an elevation of 1,750 feet. Thus, the biblical writer could speak of the Amorites fleeing **through the ascent** (“the way that goeth up,” KJV) **of Beth-horon**. From there the chase continued to *Azekah*, a town located about 15 miles south of Beth-horon, and then to *Makkedah*, some 5 miles farther. The total distance of the battle covered about 30 miles. Such a distance of fighting and pursuing the Amorites could easily take a full day.

A complicating factor for the Israelites was that they had endured an exhausting night march of 20 miles just to reach the battlefield. Then, without

any time to rest, Joshua and his troops engaged the Amorites in an intense battle that covered another 30 miles of mountainous terrain. Israel's physical stamina would have failed without God's sustaining strength.

#### VERSE 11

**As they fled before Israel, the LORD threw large hailstones on them from the sky along the descent of Beth-horon all the way to Azekah, and they died. More of them died from the hail than the Israelites killed with the sword.**

The biblical writer continued to show that Israel's God was actively engaged in the battle against Canaan's pagan groups. **The LORD threw large hailstones** ("great stones from heaven," KJV) on the Amorite troops as they fled toward **Azekah**. The timing, target, and size of the hail (large enough to cause death to a human) all gave unmistakable evidence of divine intervention on behalf of Israel. That more Amorites were killed **from the hail** than by Israelite swords left no room for human boasting. The Lord was in control.

Hurling huge hailstones at the enemy wasn't even the most miraculous thing God did that day, however. At the request of Joshua, the Lord paused the very movement of time on earth.

#### VERSES 12-13

**On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to the Israelites, Joshua spoke to the LORD in the presence of Israel: "Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and moon, over the Valley of Aijalon." And the sun stood still and the moon stopped until the nation took vengeance on its enemies. Isn't this written in the Book of Jashar? So the sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed its setting almost a full day.**

The Lord gave an even greater sign for Israel that day. **The sun stood still and the moon stopped until the nation took vengeance on its enemies.** The wording of verse 12 is unusual in that the command given to the two celestial bodies appears to have come from the mouth of Joshua. A literal rendering of the Hebrew text reads "and he said before the eyes of Israel," leaving unclear whether the pronoun *he* refers directly to **Joshua** or **the LORD**. Another possible understanding is that Joshua made an appeal to the Lord for a miracle, and the Lord then performed it. The bottom line in either case is that only the Lord as Creator has sovereign authority to pause the movement of the sun and moon **in the middle of the sky ... almost a full day.**

The Lord's miraculous pausing of time during this battle had a specific purpose: to allow the army of Israel to take full *vengeance on its enemies*. This vengeance was not repayment for anything the pagan groups in Canaan had done to the Israelites per se, but rather it was for their stubborn wickedness and rejection of the one true God (Deut. 9:4-5). The people of Israel served as God's instrument of judgment upon wicked nations in Canaan. Throwing the Amorites into confusion, hurling hailstones at them, and pausing time were supernatural events that demonstrated the Lord's empowerment of His chosen instrument of judgment.

Interestingly, the biblical writer revealed in Joshua 10:13 one of the written sources available at the time. The **Book of Jashar** [JASH uhr] is mentioned also in 2 Samuel 1:18 as the source of a lament-song that David sang in honor of the fallen King Saul and his son, Jonathan. The word *Jashar* means "the just, upright." Apparently this book and a similar one called "the Book of the LORD's Wars" (see Num. 21:14) were collections of poems on important events and heroes in Israel's history.

#### VERSE 14

**There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD listened to the voice of a man, because the LORD fought for Israel.**

The biblical writer concluded his report of the battle against the Amorites by saying there had been **no day like it before or since**. Interestingly, however, the writer seemed to emphasize that what made the day unique was not the enemy's confusion, lethal hailstones, or the stoppage of time but rather a time **the LORD listened to** ("hearkened unto," KJV; "heeded," ESV) **the voice of a man**. The battle had been another fulfillment of the Lord's promise to exalt Joshua as the leader of Israel just as Moses had been exalted (Josh. 3:7).

The account leaves no doubt of this fact: **the LORD fought for Israel** in the battle. Joshua and the Israelite army had roles to play, but the Lord gave the victory. He took a situation wherein His people had been tricked into an unwise agreement and turned it into an opportunity to advance His holy purposes. He still works through His Spirit in mighty ways for believers today.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Miracles, Signs, Wonders" on pages 1135-1136 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What emotional response do you have when you read in Scripture about miraculous events such as the divine delay of a sunset? How would you explain to a new believer about the wonderful works of God in transforming your life?

# SAVIOR ANNOUNCED

God intervened in history, sending His Son to be the Savior.

The title of one of my favorite Christmas songs asks this question: “Mary, did you know?” The song ponders what things Mary the mother of Jesus might have understood or not understood about Him when He was an infant. The Child would grow into manhood and accomplish marvelous, miraculous things. But those achievements would come in unusual, unexpected ways. Did Mary know this as she tenderly held the newborn Child, nursed Him, and smiled down on His cooing, trusting face? The answer to that question, I believe, is no. Mary could not have understood all that Jesus would do, because no one like Him had ever lived in all of human history. The birth of Jesus the Messiah was a one-of-a-kind event, and Jesus was a one-of-a-kind Person. To be sure, Mary was aware that the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth were unusual. However, she—along with the rest of the world—would have to wait several decades to grasp fully the significance of her Son.

God’s methods are not limited by human abilities or imagination. In His divine wisdom, God chose Mary, a young Israelite virgin who was betrothed but not yet married at the time she became pregnant, to carry in the womb and give birth to the Son of God. God called Joseph, the man to whom Mary was betrothed, to marry her and become the Child’s paternal guardian. We will explore in this session how God chose the place, the time, and the people involved to personally intervene and bring salvation into the world.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### LUKE 1-2

Luke wrote the Third Gospel with the skill of a historian and the purpose of an evangelist. His aim in writing was to present and preserve the story

of Jesus Christ in “an orderly sequence” (1:3) so that readers and hearers could be certain about the gospel message they had been taught. In other words, Luke wanted to persuade people to believe in Jesus as Savior without hesitation or uncertainty. The truth concerning Jesus—not lies, fabrications, or exaggerations—was the sure hope of salvation for every believer. Thus, Luke made certain to record the real history of Jesus, what truly happened.

Of the four New Testament Gospels, only the Gospels of Luke and Matthew provide details about Jesus’ birth and infancy. Further, only Luke’s Gospel interweaves details about the birth of John the Baptist with the account of Jesus’ birth and reports the intriguing account of Jesus’ trip as a 12-year-old to the temple in Jerusalem.

After his introduction (1:1-4), Luke described the amazing events surrounding the births of John and Jesus in 1:5–2:40. Both births were preceded by life-altering announcements by the angel Gabriel to one of the upcoming parents of John and Jesus, respectively. First, Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, an elderly Jewish priest serving at the temple in Jerusalem, and announced that the priest and his long-childless wife, Elizabeth, would give birth to a son (John). That son would become the prophetic forerunner of the Promised Messiah (1:5-25). Second, Gabriel appeared six months later to Mary, a young maiden living in Nazareth who was engaged to be married but was not yet wed. Gabriel announced to Mary that God had chosen her to miraculously conceive and give birth to the holy Son of God. Mary could not understand how such a miracle could happen, but she humbly submitted herself to God’s plan (1:26-38).

Luke followed the two angelic announcements with an account of Mary’s three-month stay with Elizabeth (1:39-56). When Mary arrived, Elizabeth’s baby (John) moved inside the womb, causing the Spirit-filled mother-to-be to then proclaim a blessing of childbirth over Mary. Mary responded with a poem of praise to God for His matchless favor on her.

In 1:57-80, Luke described events directly connected to the birth of John, who would eventually be known as John the Baptist (see 7:20,33; 9:19). The boy’s birth was met with great joy in the neighborhood, for it meant that God had truly shown mercy to Elizabeth (1:57-58). At the circumcision ceremony eight days later, Elizabeth declared—and the father, Zechariah, agreed—that the child would bear the name “John,” even though it wasn’t a family name (1:59-66). Then Zechariah, who had been unable to speak for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, became filled with the Spirit and prophesied about the role his son would play in preparing for the Savior’s coming (1:67-79). A one-verse summary of John’s spiritual growth concluded the section (1:80).

Luke then turned to events related directly to Jesus’ birth (2:1-40). He began by setting the historical context, in particular the census registration

decreed by Caesar Augustus that brought Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem when Mary was near the time of giving birth. Indeed, she soon gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem in the humblest of surroundings, having to lay her newborn Child in a feeding trough because Joseph was unable to find other lodging (2:1-7). Meanwhile, a band of shepherds working in the area received a startling angelic announcement of the Savior's birth and came to see the Child for themselves (2:8-20).

In 2:21-40, Luke described two affirmations of the baby Jesus as the divinely sent Savior. The affirmations occurred at the time Joseph and Mary brought the eight-day-old Child to the temple for His circumcision ceremony (2:21-24). The first one happened when a devout man named Simeon saw Jesus and proclaimed Him to be the bearer of God's salvation. Simeon warned Mary that Jesus' mission as Savior would be opposed by some, bringing her great grief (2:25-35). The second affirmation came when an elderly widow named Anna approached the family and spoke about God's plan of redemption (2:36-38). Luke concluded the section on Jesus' birth by reporting the family's return to Nazareth, where Jesus grew up and demonstrated even in childhood the wisdom and grace of God (2:39-40).

In 2:41-52, Luke (and he alone among the four Gospel writers) reported the one specific incident in the Bible taken from Jesus' adolescent years. The incident involved a family pilgrimage to Jerusalem at Passover time when Jesus was 12 years old. When the festival ended, Joseph and Mary departed the city with a host of other travelers, thinking that Jesus was somewhere among the group. Discovering that He was absent, however, the couple returned to Jerusalem and found Jesus at the temple sitting among the Jewish teachers, listening and asking questions. Asked by Mary about His actions, Jesus insisted that He had to give priority to the things of His (Heavenly) Father (2:41-50). A summary statement about Jesus' obedience to His earthly parents and continuing growth ends the section (2:51-52).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### A MESSAGE SENT (Luke 1:26-29)

#### VERSE 26

**In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,**

Luke's narrative of the exceptional birth of John the Baptist to an elderly, childless couple only set the stage for an even greater event: the miraculous

birth of Jesus the Son of God to the virgin Mary. Both births signified that God was intervening actively in history to bring about His redemptive plan for sinful humanity. That intervention would be so life-changing that God announced it ahead of time through an angel.

The phrase **in the sixth month** refers to the time in Elizabeth's pregnancy when Mary received her angelic visit (see 1:36). However, the time reference also gives a historical detail that was important to Luke: it indicates the relative age difference between John the prophetic forerunner and Jesus the Messiah. In human terms, John was about one year older than Jesus.

**The angel Gabriel** was the same angel who had announced John's upcoming birth to the aged priest Zechariah (1:19). Gabriel, whose name means "strong man of God," had also been sent by the Lord in Old Testament times to encourage and give insight to the prophet Daniel (Dan. 8:16; 9:21).

Gabriel appeared to Mary in her hometown of **Nazareth**, a village located in the region of **Galilee**. The region, which wrapped around the western half of the Sea of Galilee, consisted of two parts. Upper Galilee was a mountainous, relatively isolated area that never figured prominently in the history of Israel. South of that area, however, Lower Galilee was comprised of gentle hills and broad, fertile valleys. This area, which included the village of Nazareth, came to serve as the geographical setting for much of Jesus' ministry.

While Lower Galilee was notable at times in Israel's history, the village of Nazareth was not. It received no mention at all in the Old Testament. Even in the early days of Jesus' ministry, it possessed a reputation of insignificance, as evidenced by the disciple Nathanael's disdainful question: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Like most first-century Jews, Nathanael—who himself was from Galilee—scoffed at the idea that the Messiah might hail from such an unheralded village.

Luke emphasized the humble, unexpected surroundings of Jesus Christ's incarnation (His first coming into the world). Nothing would be attributable to human fame, achievement, or expectation. It was a unique, God-authored event; it happened in the flow of history, yet it divided history into B.C. and A.D. God was working mightily, but He worked His plan through the lives of humble individuals who were obedient to Him.

## VERSE 27

**to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.**

Luke introduced **Mary** into the gospel narrative by describing her before naming her. First, she was **a virgin**. The Greek term rendered *virgin* refers to a young woman of marriageable age who has not had sexual intercourse.

The mention of Mary's virginity further highlighted the unique nature of what God was about to do. John's mother, Elizabeth, had become pregnant even though she was well past childbearing years. Mary would become pregnant totally apart from the normal process of human reproduction. John's birth was extraordinary; Jesus' was miraculous!

Second, Mary was **engaged** ("espoused," KJV; "betrothed," ESV; "pledged to be married," NIV). Marriage in first-century Jewish life consisted of two stages: (1) a period of engagement, or betrothal; and (2) the marriage proper, initiated by the wedding ceremony. The engagement often involved a formal agreement (accompanied by payment of a bride price) made between the families of the groom and bride. During this period the couple, though not yet married, were legally bound to each other. They could break the engagement only by divorce, and any sexual relations with another person was tantamount to adultery.

Mary was betrothed **to a man named Joseph, of the house of David**. In the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph's direct lineage from King David (and also from Abraham) is made clear at the very start (Matt. 1:1-16). The genealogy of Jesus in Luke's Gospel comes later in the narrative (3:23-38), takes the point of view of Mary's family line, and goes back to Adam, the first human. The ancestral connection of Joseph and Mary to *the house of David* in both Gospels provides an unmistakable link between Jesus and Old Testament prophecies foretelling that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David (2 Sam. 7:12-13; Ps. 132:11; Jer. 23:5) and would establish an everlasting kingdom (Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 7:13-14; compare Luke 1:32-33).

The Bible never mentions the exact ages of Mary and Joseph at the time of their engagement. Thirteen was a common age of betrothal for Jewish daughters in the first century. Joseph may have been several years older than Mary, since he was able to establish a household and business in Nazareth to support his family.

## VERSE 28

**And the angel came to her and said, "Rejoice, favored woman! The Lord is with you."**

We aren't told where Mary was in the village or what she was doing at the time **the angel came to her**. Neither are we told about Gabriel's form or appearance. Those were unnecessary details at this point, even for Luke the historian. Much more important was the angel's message. It began with a warm, welcoming greeting: **"Rejoice, favored woman"** ("Hail," KJV; "Greetings," ESV, NIV). The Greek term rendered *rejoice* comes from a root word that means to be "glad," "happy," or "joyful." It came to be used as a

simple term of greeting similar to our modern English expressions “Hello!” and “Greetings!”

A sense of joy was no doubt embedded in the fabric of Gabriel’s greeting, for the angel declared Mary to be a *avored woman* (“highly favored,” NIV). The Greek word translated *avored* implied the bestowal of divine grace on an individual. Divine grace is always undeserved and cannot be earned. Mary, to be sure, proved to be a humble and godly young woman, but her good character was not the reason God favored her. Instead, God’s own perfect goodness and grace lay behind His choice of this young Jewish woman for a unique role.

Gabriel further assured Mary with the words **the Lord is with you**. While these words could also be understood as a form of greeting (see Ruth 2:4), Gabriel likely spoke them to Mary as an assertion of reality. That is, God’s presence was in fact with Mary in a significant way. God’s presence with an individual indicated both an assurance of protection and a call to service. Mary came under God’s special favor for service, and that task would involve a high cost.

## VERSE 29

**But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be.**

In Scripture, the appearing of angels, whether in dreams or in human form, typically evoked an anxious response. Accordingly, Mary **was deeply troubled** by Gabriel’s unexpected appearing. It was not so much the angel’s outward form that troubled her, however, but rather his **statement**. Her anxious feelings arose from the **kind of greeting** (“manner of salutation,” KJV) Gabriel had used. In what way was she a “favored woman”? What did it mean for an angel to say that the Lord was with her? Mary was unsure how to understand what was happening. She would have even more questions when she heard the remainder of Gabriel’s message.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What hopes and dreams for life might Mary have entertained in view of her promised marriage to Joseph? What key moments or events in your life has God used to break through and give you a message or a greater understanding of His purposes? How did you respond when the moment of breakthrough came?

## THE MESSAGE DELIVERED (Luke 1:30-33)

### VERSE 30

**Then the angel told her: Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.**

Gabriel quickly comforted Mary, telling her, “**Do not be afraid**” (“Fear not,” KJV). These same reassuring words came previously to John’s father, Zechariah (1:13), and later to a group of shepherds when they received an angelic announcement of the Savior’s birth (2:10-11). Although the appearance of an angel with a message from God might unsettle an individual, the announcement of the Messiah’s being born was one of comfort and reassurance. The message of Jesus Christ’s first coming was one of joy, not fear, because God was working to redeem sinful humanity.

Gabriel then echoed the declaration in his earlier greeting (1:28) that Mary had **found favor with God**. She did not need to be afraid, because God’s grace had been bestowed on her for a special task. That grace would equip and empower her to serve the Lord in a unique way. Having God’s favor did not mean the task would be easy. Rather, it indicated that her humble, obedient service would bring great glory to God and great blessing to humanity.

### VERSE 31

**Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call His name Jesus.**

The words **now listen** (“behold,” KJV, ESV) signified that Gabriel was about to reveal the heart of God’s message to Mary. The prior greeting and statement of encouragement had been meant to prepare her to hear this startling promise: **You will conceive and give birth to a son**.

How would Mary have interpreted this statement? On the surface, such a promise would have been welcome news. That is, most every first-century Jewish bride wanted to bear children—especially a son—with her husband; it was regarded as a great blessing from the Lord (see Ps. 127:3-5). Was Gabriel’s announcement thus referring to a blessed future *after* Joseph and Mary became husband and wife? If so, the promise was good news indeed.

What if, however, Gabriel was promising a pregnancy and birth in Mary’s immediate future—that is, *before* her wedding? In the eyes of the Jewish community in Nazareth, such an event would be not only a scandal but also a crime to be punished (see Matt. 1:18-19). For Mary, though, the idea of an immediate fulfillment of Gabriel’s message evoked a more pertinent question of how such an event could happen. She knew that she was a virgin. Mary’s question would be addressed momentarily (Luke 1:34-35).

Mary learned that her Child would be special, beginning with the name He was to be given: **Jesus**. In the New Testament, the name *Jesus* is the Greek rendering of *Joshua*, which in Hebrew means “salvation” or “Yah[weh] saves.” The special meaning of Jesus’ name received even greater emphasis when the Lord’s angel appeared to Joseph, instructing Joseph to go forward with his marriage to Mary and to “name [the Child] Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). In other words, the Child’s very name communicated that He was the promised Messiah and Savior.

### VERSES 32-33

**He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.**

The Child to be born would **be great**. In Scripture, the phrase *be great* in reference to an individual usually described the person’s importance. In this regard, Jesus would share standing with John the Baptist, as indicated by Gabriel’s earlier promise to John’s father, Zechariah (Luke 1:15). As the forerunner and the Savior, respectively, John and Jesus would fulfill special roles in God’s salvation plan. Mary could not comprehend the entire truth concerning the Son who was to be born. She did, however, receive a hint of His unique role in the announcement from the angel.

Jesus also would **be called the Son of the Most High**. The title *Most High* appears numerous times in the Old Testament in reference to the unequalled sovereignty of the God of Israel (Gen. 14:22; 2 Sam. 22:14; Ps. 46:4; Ps. 97:9). It appears five times in the seventh chapter of Daniel alone (7:18,22,25,27), a chapter that prophetically envisions the Messiah’s saving mission. Daniel 7:27 concludes the prophetic vision with these words: “The kingdom, dominion, and greatness of the kingdoms under all of heaven will be given to the people, the holy ones of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will serve and obey Him.”

Further, Jesus would be the fulfillment of God’s promise to King David of an everlasting kingdom (see 2 Sam. 7:11b-16). A proper interpretation of that promise takes into account not only its first fulfillment in the kingship of David’s son, Solomon, but also its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah. Jesus would receive **the throne of His father David** and make it into an everlasting kingdom before which all earthly kingdoms eventually will bow.

Finally, the Child to whom Mary would give birth would come to **reign over the house of Jacob forever** in an unending rule. The phrase *house of Jacob* underscores the connection of Christ’s mission to the redemptive plan that

God initiated with the patriarchs (Gen. 28:10-14), built into the foundation of the law for Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:3-6), and promised to King David and the prophets (2 Sam. 7:13; Jer. 31:31-34). While Mary likely did not understand all the implications of what Gabriel was saying, she would have realized this much: the Lord God in His divine grace had selected her to give birth to the Messiah!

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the section marked “New Testament” in the article titled “Kingdom of God” on pages 987-989 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How does the idea of God’s kingdom impact your daily life? What does it mean to you that Jesus was born as King over God’s kingdom?

## QUESTIONS ANSWERED (Luke 1:34-37)

### VERSE 34

**Mary asked the angel, “How can this be, since I have not been intimate with a man?”**

Mary’s question “**How can this be?**” reveals that she understood the pregnancy would occur before her marriage to Joseph. She also would have been aware of the basics of human reproduction. She was a virgin; she had **not been intimate with a man** (“I know not a man,” KJV). How would the promised Child be conceived?

Mary’s question evidently did not contain the kind of unbelief Zechariah expressed upon learning that he and Elizabeth would have a son (John) in their old age (Luke 1:18; compare 1:20). Gabriel did not rebuke Mary, but rather explained how the miracle would happen.

### VERSE 35

**The angel replied to her: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.**

Jesus’ conception would occur as the result of divine power, not from human activity. Using two parallel poetic statements, Gabriel explained that God would miraculously empower Mary’s body to conceive. The phrases **the Holy Spirit** and **the power of the Most High** are parallel in that they both refer to the Third Person of the Trinity. The two parallel verbal phrases (**will**

**come upon** and **will overshadow**) refer to the sovereign activity of God. No male human being would be involved. As a result, **the holy One** conceived in Mary's womb would **be called the Son of God**. The term *holy* could describe not only the Child's divine nature but also His being set apart for a God-given mission.

### VERSES 36-37

**And consider your relative Elizabeth—even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called childless. For nothing will be impossible with God.”**

Had Mary already heard the news about the long-awaited pregnancy of her **relative Elizabeth**? We as readers of Luke's Gospel already knew, but Gabriel appeared to be informing Mary for the first time of that extraordinary event. Soon after her conversation with Gabriel, Mary “set out and hurried” to visit Elizabeth (1:39-40). In any case, Gabriel's mention of Elizabeth's being in her **sixth month** of the pregnancy served as assurance to Mary that **nothing** [would] **be impossible with God**.

### WILLING SUBMISSION (Luke 1:38)

#### VERSE 38

**“I am the Lord's slave,” said Mary. “May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel left her.**

Mary's statement of submission was remarkable. She knew only a little of what God would ultimately accomplish through her service as **the Lord's slave** (“handmaid of the Lord,” KJV; “the Lord's servant,” NIV). Her obedience and willingness to allow God to use her revealed the character of this humble and godly young woman. She was willing to obey even when she did not possess all the details of what was involved. In doing so, she serves as a model for how all Christians should respond to the God of grace and power who sent His Son Jesus to be the Savior. May we also humbly submit to His Word!

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Faith involves trusting in and submitting to God even when we don't have all the answers to our questions. In what situation at this time in your life can Mary's example motivate you to trust in and submit to God? Who are some other strong examples of faith in your circle of relationships at this time? How do their examples inspire you to serve God?

# SETTLED

The rewards of faithfulness come with the expectation of continued obedience.

What do these three statements have in common?

- “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”
- “You can observe a lot just by watching.”
- “It ain’t over till it’s over.”

If you answered that all three statements are “Yogi-isms,” then you are correct. These are three of literally hundreds of pithy colloquial expressions attributed to one Lawrence “Yogi” Berra, former professional baseball player, manager, and coach. Berra was an 18-time all-star and 10-time World Series champion as a player with the New York Yankees. He went on to excel as a manager with the Yankees and later with the city’s National League team, the New York Mets.

It was during Berra’s stint as manager of the Mets that he reportedly uttered the memorable line “It ain’t over till it’s over.” The team began their 1973 season in April with great promise, jumping into first place in their division with a 12-8 record. By the end of July, however, bad play and injuries to key players left the Mets in last place. They were still in the cellar of their division in late August with only one month to go in the regular season. Fortunately, none of the other teams in the division were doing great either, so the Mets still had hope. Fueled by Berra’s keep-on-keeping-on attitude, the team won a remarkable stretch of victories, vaulting back into first place in their division by the season’s end. Berra had been right: the team’s season wasn’t hopeless as long as they got back to playing as they did at the start.

Long before the game of baseball was invented, Joshua gathered together some of the Israelite tribes to remind them that their commitment to the Lord and His covenant wasn’t over simply because they had won enough victories to take possession of the promised land. The people needed to keep on keeping on, both in their obedience to the Lord and in their commitment to all the tribes of Israel. The rewards of faithfulness came with the expectation of continued obedience. That same word of truth challenges us today as believers to keep on living faithfully as followers of Jesus Christ.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JOSHUA 13:1–22:24

The narrative in the Book of Joshua can be divided into two large sections. Section one, covering chapters 1–12, deals with the Israelites' conquest of the promised land under the leadership of Joshua. Section two, spanning chapters 13–24, deals with Joshua's distribution of the land to the Israelite tribes. The book concludes with an elderly Joshua—drawing near to his time of death—challenging the Israelites to commit themselves to live faithfully in their exclusive covenant with the Lord God after he is gone (chaps. 23–24).

In 11:23, the biblical writer noted: “Joshua took the entire land, in keeping with all that the LORD had told Moses. Joshua then gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. After this, the land had rest from war.” The writer followed that summary description with a listing in chapter 12 of pagan kings the Israelites defeated, beginning with kings on the eastern side of the Jordan River and followed by deposed rulers (identified by their city-kingdoms) on the western side of the river. These lists paved the way for a similar pattern of describing the tribal allotments, beginning in 13:8. Before that, however, the writer noted that Joshua was getting old and “a great deal of the land [remained] to be possessed” (13:1). In other words, although the Israelites had effectively conquered the promised land, there were still pockets of territory where pagan groups had not been completely driven out. The tribes still had much work to do; however, Joshua needed to complete his mission, which included the assignment of Israel's tribal boundaries.

Even before Moses died, two and one-half tribes—the tribes of Reuben and Gad plus half the tribe of Manasseh—had requested to inherit territory on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Moses had granted their request with the agreement that these tribes' warriors would cross the river and fight alongside the other tribes until the land was conquered (see Num. 32:16–22). After Joshua became Israel's commander upon Moses' death, he reminded the two and one-half tribes of their agreement and instructed their warriors to join the battle formation in preparation for the conquest (Josh. 1:12–18). In 22:1–8, with the promised land having been subdued and the tribal boundaries allotted, Joshua summoned the two and one-half tribes and gave them leave to return to their families and territories east of the Jordan River. In doing so, Joshua challenged these tribes not to forget who they were or the God to whom they belonged. They were to keep on worshiping the Lord and obeying His ways. If they did so, they could expect to enjoy the rewards of faithful obedience.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## A PROMISE KEPT (Josh. 22:1-3)

Joshua, Israel's aging commander, gave three farewell speeches to Israel before he died (chaps. 22–24). The first one, recorded in chapter 22, was directed particularly to the two and one-half tribes that settled on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Joshua dismissed those Israelites from their fighting duties and warned them to remain faithful to the Lord and His ways. They had kept their promise; now they could reap the rewards.

### VERSES 1-2

**Joshua summoned the Reubenites, Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh and told them, “You have done everything Moses the LORD’s servant commanded you and have obeyed me in everything I commanded you.”**

The wording of the Hebrew phrase rendered **Joshua summoned** literally is “then he called, namely Joshua.” The word “then” could suggest a chronological sequence. That is, it suggests the events of chapter 22 followed immediately or soon after the completion of events described in chapters 13–21. More likely the case in this context, however, is that the word “then” marks a change of topic in the narrative, not a strict chronological change. The events of chapter 22 may have occurred around the same general time frame—or even prior to—the notation in 13:1 that “Joshua was now old, getting on in years.” This is why some Bible translations either exclude the word “then” (HCSB) or use a general phrase such as “at that time” (ESV) at 22:1.

One of the overarching themes in the Book of Joshua is God's fulfillment of His promise of land to the people of Israel. A connected theme is the expectation of the people's obedient faith in taking possession of the land. Practically (and chronologically) speaking, the tribes of Reuben and Gad plus the half-tribe of Manasseh had taken possession of their land inheritance even before the other nine and one-half tribes had crossed the Jordan River. The biblical writer's focus on the two and one-half tribes at this point provided an overall conclusion to the account of Joshua's distribution of the land. The writer's purpose was to further emphasize the theme of obedience. That is, God's promise of the land remained in effect for the Israelites, but the people were expected to continue in faithful obedience to the Lord.

The city of Shiloh had served as the site for official land distribution ceremonies (18:1). This was also the location at which Joshua delivered his farewell challenge to **the Reubenites, Gadites, and half the tribe of**

**Manasseh** (see 18:9). Shiloh went on to become an early worship center for the Israelites. The ark of the Lord was housed at the sanctuary there until the time of Samuel (1 Sam. 4:3).

Before Moses' death and the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan River at Jericho, the tribes of Reuben and Gad plus half the Manasseh tribe had requested to settle in lands on the east side of the river, stretching from the Arnon River in the south to Mount Hermon in the north. The Israelites had taken control of these lands when they defeated Sihon, the king of Heshbon, and Og, the king of Bashan (see Deut. 2:24–3:7). Moses agreed to the request of the two and one-half tribes, but in turn Moses required a serious commitment from them. The warriors of these tribes were to accompany their fellow Israelites across the Jordan to fight for possession of all the promised land before returning home to their lands and families (Num. 32:28–30; Deut. 3:18–20). The two and one-half tribes had renewed their promise when Joshua became Israel's leader (Josh. 1:12–18).

A question could be raised as to whether God's plan was for all of Israel's tribes to settle in Canaan proper—that is, in the land west of the Jordan River. The river provided a natural boundary and thus a natural defense against attack. The territories on the eastern side of the Jordan River were often vulnerable to attack from invaders. Indeed, the writer of 1 Chronicles noted that the two and one-half tribes were among the first Israelites to be conquered and deported into exile in the eighth century B.C. by the Assyrian army (1 Chron. 5:26). The area of Bashan (in the Manasseh territory) was especially susceptible to attack from the north; it fell under the control of the king of Damascus as early as 900 B.C.

The tribes that settled outside of Canaan proper never played a prominent role in Israel's affairs. Their request to inherit lands to the east of the Jordan River was granted, but they also dealt with unforeseen consequences of their request. Their choice was never specifically condemned in Scripture; nevertheless, the subsequent history of the two and one-half tribes suggests their decision was not wise.

In spite of their settling outside Canaan proper, the two and one-half tribes maintained their commitment to the other tribes. They helped the other tribes secure the territories on the western side of the Jordan River. They kept their obligation to seek the welfare of the whole congregation of Israel. In a similar way, we as believers have responsibilities not only for personal spiritual growth but also for the well-being of the larger body of Christ (see 1 Cor. 12:12–26). As believers, we have responsibilities to the Christian community that are not lessened by our individual choices. God holds us accountable for our individual responsibilities as well as for building up the church.

Joshua commended the tribes of Reuben and Gad, plus half the tribe of Manasseh, for the fulfillment of their obligation to fight alongside their fellow Israelites in conquering the land. They had **done everything Moses ... commanded** them (Num. 32:20-24). Moreover, they had **obeyed** Joshua in all that he had required of them (Josh. 1:12-18). The two and one-half tribes had obeyed the stipulations placed upon them.

### VERSE 3

**You have not deserted your brothers even once this whole time but have carried out the requirement of the command of the LORD your God.**

Joshua commended the tribal representatives for their faithfulness in fighting alongside their fellow Israelites in the conquest of the land. They had **not deserted** [their] **brothers**. The words *not deserted* (“have not left,” KJV; “have not forsaken,” ESV) indicated that these tribesmen had kept their commitment to the Lord and to Israel’s commander. They had honored their duty toward the congregation of Israel. The same Hebrew term had been used in God’s word of assurance to Joshua that He would never forsake Israel’s leader (Josh. 1:5).

The phrase **even once this whole time** (“these many days unto this day,” KJV; “these many days, down to this day,” ESV; “for a long time now—to this very day,” NIV) literally reads in the Hebrew “this many days as far as this day.” The idea, however, is clear: the two and one-half tribes had faithfully kept their commitment over a long period of time, not failing once to carry out their responsibilities.

The Israelites who chose to settle on the eastern side of the Jordan River had faithfully **carried out the requirement of the command of the LORD** [their] **God**. The Hebrew noun translated *requirement* (“charge,” KJV, ESV; “mission,” NIV) derives from a verb meaning “to keep, guard.” In fact, in this verse the verb *carried out* and the noun *requirement* both derive from the same Hebrew root word. In other words, the tribes had “kept on keeping” God’s command.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Joshua commended the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh for their faithfulness in obeying the Lord’s command. When have you received commendation for completing a challenging, God-given task? What impact did the commendation have on your continued commitment to serve God?

## AN ONGOING RESPONSIBILITY (Josh. 22:4-5)

Joshua officially discharged the tribes of Reuben and Gad, plus the half-tribe of Manasseh. They were free to return to their families and lands on the eastern side of the Jordan River and to build their lives as the Lord's covenant people. Joshua charged them to continue in wholehearted faithfulness to the Lord God.

### VERSE 4

**Now that He has given your brothers rest, just as He promised them, return to your homes in your own land that Moses the LORD's servant gave you across the Jordan.**

The tribesmen of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh had obeyed the Lord faithfully in the past by fighting with their fellow Israelites during the conquest. Joshua noted their faithfulness and commended them in the completion of the mission. The fulfilling of the mission to help their brothers apparently had lasted a long time. The tribes had remained true to their word for many months, or possibly years. They were praised for such faithfulness.

Past faithfulness, however, cannot substitute for obedience in the present or in the future. The task of being faithful to the Lord is a daily command. Joshua called the two and one-half tribes of Israelites to the present imperative of obedience—that is, **now**. The Lord had remained faithful in giving the land to His people, Israel. He had proven in every situation to be committed to His people and to completing everything He had promised. He had given the Israelites victory after victory, and now He had given them **rest**. Here the term *rest* related specifically to the conquest. In other words, the main fighting phase was over. Now the Israelites were to remain faithful to the Lord and to His ways so that their possession phase would be a long and fruitful experience. The continuing enjoyment of the land and its benefits would be connected to the people's continuing obedience to the command of the Lord God.

The Lord had promised the land to His people. In His promise, however, He also warned the people of the need for continued obedience. In Deuteronomy 28, the Lord had specified the blessings of obedience and the curses of disobedience. The blessings and curses related primarily to physical prosperity in the promised land. Following the list of blessings (28:1-14) were warnings of judgment if the Israelites disregarded the Lord's ways (28:15-68). Particularly sobering among the warnings were the words of Deuteronomy 28:63-64: "Just as the LORD was glad to cause you to prosper and to multiply you, so He will also be glad to cause you to perish and to destroy you. You will be deported from the land you are entering to possess. Then the LORD

will scatter you among all peoples from one end of the earth to the other, and there you will worship other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known.”

The land had been conquered as the Israelites obeyed the Lord. The land would be possessed and enjoyed by the people as they continued in faithful obedience. But the land also could be forfeited by the Israelites if they did not continue to serve the Lord exclusively.

Joshua instructed the tribesmen of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh to **return to [their] homes** (literally “tents,” KJV, ESV). While it is possible that the Israelites were still dwelling in tents at this time, they also could have begun to build or take possession of more permanent wooden and stone structures. Whatever the case, the emphasis was that Joshua was now discharging these fellow Israelites to joyfully go home to their families and lands on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

## VERSE 5

**Only carefully obey the command and instruction that Moses the LORD’s servant gave you: to love the LORD your God, walk in all His ways, keep His commands, remain faithful to Him, and serve Him with all your heart and all your soul.”**

Verse 5 captures a passionate plea. Joshua implored the people of the two and one-half tribes to **carefully obey the command and instruction** (“the commandment and the law,” KJV, ESV, NIV) **that Moses the LORD’s servant gave you.** The Hebrew wording literally reads “keep exceedingly to do the command and the law.” Despite the awkwardness of the literal wording, the urgency of Joshua’s admonition can be seen. After all that the Israelites had experienced in the years of wilderness wanderings and then in the period of conquest, Joshua did not want any of the Israelites to falter at this high point in their history because of a lack of faithfulness to the Lord.

In some ways, we know from experience that staying faithful to the Lord can be more difficult in good times than in challenging times. That is, the difficulties of life can sometimes drive us to trust the Lord because we recognize more completely our utter dependence on His provision. Too often in the good times, however, we’re tempted to rely more and more on our own human resources and abilities. We can begin to look at ourselves as self-made individuals who do not need anyone or anything else. We can forget that our blessings were gifts to us from the Lord. Joshua’s imploring words still serve us today as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus taught that those who love Him will obey His commands (John 14:15). Careful obedience to God remains a demand for God’s people today.

Joshua summarized the Lord's commands and instructions in the law into a few concise statements. He was not presenting a new set of laws. Rather, he was bringing forth the essence of the entirety of the law. The emphasis was not on a set of rules to be obeyed; the focus was a relationship with the Lord God. The same focus can be seen in Jesus' words concerning the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37).

The people of the two and one-half tribes (and by extension, all of the Israelites) were to **love the LORD** [their] **God**. The range of meaning for the word *love* is as varied in the Hebrew as it is in English. Abraham loved Isaac (Gen. 22:2). Isaac loved delicious food (Gen. 27:4). In Hosea 3:1, the biblical text speaks of spousal love, adulterous (sexual) love, God's love for His people, and the Israelites' love for raisin cakes—all in one verse!

In light of these various possibilities of meaning, what did Joshua's command to the two and one-half tribes emphasize? In all probability Joshua was echoing Deuteronomy 6:5, in which the Israelites were commanded to love the Lord God with a fullness of heart, soul, and strength. Their devotion to Him was to encompass every area of their lives.

Further, the Israelites were to **walk in all His ways**. Walking was a metaphor for living, implying decision, activity, and lifestyle. The Israelites were to take their cues about right and wrong from their relationship with the Lord. What He revealed to them as commands, they were to do. God did not give Israel the law as a way for them to enter into the covenant relationship. Entering the covenant was a matter of God's gracious choice. God gave the law so that His covenant people could know and live by His instructions. To illustrate this reality, consider Exodus 19 and 20. In Exodus 19, God offered the Israelites—whom He recently had rescued out of slavery—a covenant relationship based not on their merit but on His grace. He said they could be God's own possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation set apart for God (19:5-6). These features of the covenant relationship anticipated a response of obedient faith: "if you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenant" (19:5). The covenant was given through God's grace in Exodus 19. The law—that is, the Commandments—then were stipulated in Exodus 20. God established His relationship with Israel in grace first. Then, in response to God's grace, the people were to obey by living out their relationship with God in everyday life.

Israel was to **serve** the Lord **with all** [their] **heart and ... soul**. These words again echo the command of Deuteronomy 6:5. To many people today, the *heart* merely symbolizes affection. In the biblical context, however, the heart was seen as the seat of the will. The *soul* implies life itself. Serving God must not be thought of as a mere religious ritual. Serving God involves

an internal relationship (by grace, through faith) that prompts actions of obedience with an outward manifestation.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Transjordan” on pages 1613-1615 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What were some dangers likely to be faced by the two and a half tribes who settled across the Jordan River from their fellow Israelites? Have you or someone you know ever moved to a less secure area of the world to share the gospel? How did you stay connected? How did the Lord strengthen your relationship with Him and with His people in other places?

## A WELCOMED BLESSING (Josh. 22:6-8)

### VERSE 6

**Joshua blessed them and sent them on their way, and they went to their homes.**

Joshua **blessed** the two and one-half tribes gathered before him at Shiloh. The concept of blessing was important to Israel. Blessing had a cultural aspect that does not translate precisely to the modern understanding. For ancient Israelites, words spoken in either a blessing or a curse had an element of power to bring to fruition what was spoken. The importance of the spoken blessing came into play in the story of Jacob stealing Esau’s blessing. After Isaac had blessed Jacob (Gen. 27:26-29), Isaac could not revoke the blessing (27:33). The words of blessing had gone forth, and Isaac could not recall them, even though Jacob had deceived his father in order to receive the blessing.

### VERSE 7

**Moses had given territory to half the tribe of Manasseh in Bashan, but Joshua had given territory to the other half, with their brothers, on the west side of the Jordan. When Joshua sent them to their homes and blessed them,**

In Numbers 32, the tribes of Reuben and Gad received the primary focus in the narrative concerning the tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan River. The half-tribe of Manasseh does not appear by name in that narrative until Numbers 32:33, with no explanation as to why the half-tribe was not added until that time. The biblical writer wanted to give an explanation of

the inclusion of the half-tribe of Manasseh alongside the tribes of Reuben and Gad. Half of Manasseh's tribe settled in **Bashan**. The tribe's other half settled in Canaan proper among the other tribes. *Bashan* lay east of the Sea of Galilee in what today is the Golan Heights region. The Bashan area received more rainfall than regions to the south, making it ideal for raising cattle. The reference of the prophet Amos to the "cows of Bashan" (Amos 4:1) alluded to the cattle from the lush pastures of the area. The prophet Ezekiel also noted that Bashan produced well-fed cattle (Ezek. 39:18).

#### VERSE 8

**he said, "Return to your homes with great wealth: a huge number of cattle, and silver, gold, bronze, iron, and a large quantity of clothing. Share the spoil of your enemies with your brothers."**

Joshua's blessing to Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh offered them physical prosperity in the form of **great wealth** ("much riches," KJV). Based on such promises, the Christian might be tempted to equate God's blessing with an absolute promise of physical prosperity. God promised prosperity for the obedient people of Israel in that they would keep the land. As they obeyed, God would bless them in the land (Deut. 28:8), but disobedience would bring judgment through exile from the land (Deut. 28:63). A specific promise to Old Testament Israel in a particular setting is not necessarily directly transferable into a Christian application today.

God indeed blesses the obedient Christian life, but that blessing should not be defined by mere dollar signs or material possessions. The assertion that God always grants physical prosperity to all obedient Christians is misleading. Such an assertion relegates Christians who endure persecution (or even martyrdom) because of their faith to the category of being disobedient. An equating of God's blessing for obedience with physical prosperity can be sustained neither through proper understanding of the entirety of Scripture nor through example from church history. Faithfulness brings God's blessings, but the blessings of God reach far beyond physical prosperity.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the paragraphs on blessing in the article titled "Blessing and Cursing" on pages 223-224 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. If the word *bless* means "to fill with benefits," how would you say God has blessed you recently? Who in your community would be greatly helped if you, as a representative of Christ, blessed them? How could you do so this week?

# CHALLENGED

Faithfulness grows through reflection, evaluation, and renewed commitment to God.

Do you remember what it was like being part of the young generation? We all were there at some point. Sociologists love to label the generations with descriptive names such as “builders,” “boomers,” and “millennials,” or with alphabetical terms like “Gen X,” “Gen Y,” and “Gen Z.” Whatever generation you identify with, this much is true: as long as time remains, your generation will one day hand over the leadership reins to the next generation.

God set human life in motion at the start, and He gives each generation a time of stewardship. Part of that stewardship is to help prepare the next generations to lead. This truth dawned on me in a fresh way recently when a group of students at the seminary where I teach gathered to pray with and for the school’s faculty members. I glanced around the room at my professor colleagues, all of whom—like me—showed unmistakable signs of advancing age. Then I observed the students’ faces—young-looking, eager, yet committed to the serious business of leading God’s people. The light came on as I realized anew that God was still moving in the world to change lives. I quietly thanked Him for raising up a new generation of men and women to serve Him as leaders. I also thanked Him for letting me have a part in challenging these young people to be faithful and godly leaders.

This session focuses on Joshua’s realization that he would soon deliver the mantle of leadership to the next generation of Israelites. Like Moses before him, Joshua would pass from this life. New leaders would emerge as the people faced new circumstances in the promised land. Joshua wanted to challenge the Israelites to be ever faithful to the Lord.

Joshua’s words to Israel in that day continue to challenge and motivate us as God’s people today. God remains constant. He is always true to His commitment to His people. The passing of one leader or one generation does not lessen His commitment. Likewise, God does not change in His expectation of faithfulness on the part of His people. Our faithfulness as followers of Jesus Christ can grow through reflection, evaluation, and renewed commitment to the Lord.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JOSHUA 23:1–24:33

These two chapters contain the elderly Joshua's two farewell speeches to the people of Israel. The speech in chapter 23 may have taken place in Shiloh, where the ark was stationed and the land distribution ceremonies had been conducted (see 18:1; 22:10). The speech in chapter 24 took place at Shechem (24:1), a significant ancient town near the site of a previous covenant renewal ceremony (see 8:30–35; see also Gen. 12:6–7; 33:18–20). Both speeches occurred in Joshua's final years (Josh. 23:2; 24:29). Joshua used the events to remind the Israelites of God's faithfulness, to warn them of the consequences of spiritual rebellion, and to challenge them to renewed faithfulness.

In his first farewell speech (chap. 23), Joshua challenged the Israelites to faithfulness by recalling the major themes that had been introduced throughout the Book of Joshua. He reminded the people (and their leaders in particular) how the Lord had driven out strong and powerful groups to give the land to His people. The Israelites, therefore, were to keep on obeying the law and to keep themselves separate from the pagan peoples who remained. God's people were not to intermarry with pagans but were to keep on driving out these groups from the land. If Israel remained true to the covenant, the people could expect God's promises to be fulfilled. If the people broke the covenant, however, they could expect the Lord to drive them out of the land just as He had done to the pagan groups.

Joshua's second and final farewell speech takes the form of a covenant ceremony. First, the people were summoned to present themselves before God (24:1). Second, Joshua named the superior party involved in the covenant, "the LORD, the God of Israel" (24:2a). Third, Joshua recounted key historical markers in the Lord's relationship with Israel—the vassal, or subservient party, in the covenant (24:2b–13). Fourth, Joshua stipulated the exclusive covenant demands on Israel, including personal and group affirmations of commitment to fulfill those demands (24:14–24). Fifth, Joshua recorded, sealed, and signified the covenant with a memorial stone (24:25–27). Sixth, Joshua dismissed the people to their homes (24:28).

In 24:29–33, the biblical writer concluded the Book of Joshua with three burial notices. First, Joshua died at the age of 110 and was buried in the tribal territory of Ephraim (24:29–30). His example of faithfulness continued to influence Israel for years after his death (24:31). Second, the Israelites buried Joseph's bones at Shechem (24:32). This was done in fulfillment of an oath sworn to Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 50:25). Third, Aaron's son Eleazar died and was buried at Gibeah, also in the tribal territory of Ephraim (Josh. 24:33).

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE EXAMPLE SET (Josh. 24:14-15)

## VERSE 14

**“Therefore, fear the LORD and worship Him in sincerity and truth. Get rid of the gods your fathers worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and worship Yahweh.**

Covenant-making was an important feature in ancient human relations, particularly among city-states, kingdoms, and other political entities. A covenant could be established between relatively equal parties or between unequal parties. In the latter kind, a stronger nation usually decided the terms by which the weaker nation, or vassal, was to fulfill the covenant. Such terms might include making annual payments of money and providing young men to serve in the stronger nation’s army. For its part, the stronger nation provided benefits to the vassal nation such as protection and administration.

The Lord had instructed the people of Israel not to enter into treaties with the pagan groups in Canaan (Ex. 34:15). The reason was that the Lord had established a covenant relationship with Israel that took priority over all other relationships. That covenant stretched back to God’s call of Abraham and His promises to the patriarchs (Josh. 24:2-4). It was built on God’s rescue of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, His provisions and protection in the wilderness years, and His guarantees of victory as the Israelites took possession of the promised land (24:5-13).

In light of the Lord’s mighty actions, Joshua now called on the Israelites to understand and affirm the covenant’s stipulations. He demanded that they decide a course of action concerning their covenant God. First, the people of Israel were to **fear the LORD**. This *fear* was not a sense of horror that led to an aversion from God. Rather, it was a deep, reverential awe that produced an attractive desire to please God. Israel’s covenant relationship with *the LORD* demanded that the people have a proper understanding and respect for who He is. Such an understanding would produce both an overwhelming attraction to be in His presence and an overwhelming humility because of His presence.

Further, the Israelites were to **worship** (“serve,” KJV, ESV, NIV) the Lord **in sincerity and truth**. The Hebrew word translated *sincerity* comes from a verb that meant “completeness,” “wholeness,” or “perfection.” In other words, Joshua urged the Israelites to devote themselves fully and exclusively to the Lord as their God. True worship involves not merely saying the proper

words of worship; it involves the individual's entire personality—thoughts, attitudes, and actions. The root word rendered *truth* (“faithfulness,” ESV, NIV) means “to be firm and certain.” The English word *amen*, meaning “so be it” or “yes” harks back to this Hebrew term. A person who says “Amen” to a declaration affirms its absolute certainty and trustworthiness. Joshua stipulated that the Israelites' worship was to be characterized by authenticity. No pretense. No divided loyalty. No halfheartedness. Just full, unashamed devotion to the one true God.

Centuries later, nothing earned Jesus' indignation more than the hypocrisy shown by many of Israel's religious leaders. Jesus condemned them for giving lip service to God. Their worship was empty, not wholehearted; they taught human traditions, not God's commands (see Mark 7:6-7). Today, as in Jesus' day (and Joshua's day), true worship involves more than words. If words of praise to God are not accompanied by true and faithful hearts as evidenced by true and faithful actions, then our worship—as Jesus indicated—is empty and worthless.

Joshua next commanded the Israelites to **get rid of the gods** [their **fathers worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt**]. This was a sobering warning, because it implied that some Israelites might still be drawn to the false gods of their ancestors. The phrase *beyond the Euphrates River* (“on the other side of the flood,” KJV) pointed to the ancient region of Mesopotamia (biblical Babylonia; modern Iraq), from which the Lord had called Abraham to follow Him to the promised land. The region was steeped in polytheism, and Abraham's family had engaged in the worship of “other gods” (24:2). Were some of the Israelites in Joshua's day tempted to give credence to their distant ancestors' beliefs? If so, Joshua warned them to stop doing so, to put away that attitude. The Lord deserved and demanded their wholehearted devotion.

The Israelites' more recent ancestors—the generations prior to and during the exodus—had been influenced by the many false gods *in Egypt*. As slaves of the Egyptians, the people of Israel must have been told each brutal day that Egypt's gods had the power of life and death over Israel. Some Israelites undoubtedly were tempted to believe their oppressors' taunts and had sought to appease, if not worship, Egypt's gods.

Joshua urged the people to **worship Yahweh** (“the LORD,” KJV, ESV, NIV), meaning *Yahweh* alone. The other nations and peoples did not have to choose between gods. Among the other nations, worship of many gods was expected. Centuries later, the prophet Isaiah would teach clearly that false gods (idols) really are not gods at all; they do not exist but are merely the concocted products of deceived minds (Isa. 44:12-20).

## VERSE 15

**But if it doesn't please you to worship Yahweh, choose for yourselves today the one you will worship: the gods your fathers worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. As for me and my family, we will worship Yahweh."**

Joshua demanded that the people **choose for** [themselves] **today**. The covenant ceremony was a time of decision for the next generation of Israelites. The Lord (**Yahweh**) had chosen Israel once and for all to be His "own possession," His "kingdom of priests," and His "holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6). Nevertheless, each subsequent generation of Israelites had to make an intentional decision regarding **the one** they would **worship**. Joshua called for such a decision to be made that day.

Joshua had mentioned in verse 14 the false gods in Mesopotamia and the false gods in Egypt. Here in verse 15, he added yet another potential object of false worship: **the gods of the Amorites** that dominated the land of Canaan where the Israelites now lived. Among the so-called gods of Canaan was Baal [BAY uhl], whose worship involved especially perverted and degrading acts. Baal worship included ritual prostitution within the worship setting. The lure of Baal worship plagued the people of Israel throughout their entire history in Old Testament times.

Always an exemplary leader in both the nation and his household, Joshua led the way in reaffirming the decision he had made long before that day. He declared, **"As for me and my family, we will worship Yahweh."** Whatever others might choose to do, Joshua and his family would serve the one true God. This was the God who had fulfilled all His promises to His chosen people. Joshua presented his decision in clear terms that no one could misinterpret.

Joshua challenged the people to follow his example. True leadership involves personally making the correct choices before God and then publicly living out those choices as an example for others to follow. Making a choice for God may not be easy or popular, but it's always the best choice.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What are some false gods today that tempt people to forsake the Lord? How can Christians resist the temptations of false gods and solidify their devotion to the one true God? What Christian leader has most encouraged you to revere the Lord and worship Him in sincerity and truth?

## THE PEOPLE'S REFLECTION (Josh. 24:16-18)

### VERSE 16

**The people replied, “We will certainly not abandon the LORD to worship other gods!”**

The people responded to Joshua with a strong commitment. They began by declaring an emphatic negative: **we will certainly not abandon the LORD** (“God forbid that we should forsake the LORD,” KJV; “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD,” NIV). The Israelites were expressing in the strongest terms their rejection of the notion that they would forsake the Lord God. Joshua’s words in verses 14-15 evidently had struck a sensitive place. Perhaps they felt offended that their leader suggested they were open to the temptation of worshipping **other gods**. If so, they would have done well to consider the wisdom expressed centuries later by the apostle Paul: “Whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

### VERSE 17

**For the LORD our God brought us and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery, and performed these great signs before our eyes. He also protected us all along the way we went and among all the peoples whose lands we traveled through.**

To their credit, the people then acknowledged that their very existence in the promised land was because of **the LORD [their] God**. They recounted the great works of God that Joshua had previously recalled (Josh. 24:5-13).

The phrase **our God** indicates that the Israelites affirmed they were in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, the Lord. As the sovereign party in the covenant, the Lord had rescued the people from slavery in Egypt, had **performed ... great signs** in their sight, and had **protected** (“preserved,” KJV, ESV) them **all along the way** through the wilderness and in battles against the people groups of Canaan.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Sign” on pages 1501-1502 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How can a God-given sign give courage and direction to God’s people in facing difficulties or opposition to the faith? What are the dangers of relying too much on signs as proof instead of trusting God and obeying His clear message?

## VERSE 18

**The LORD drove out before us all the peoples, including the Amorites who lived in the land. We too will worship the LORD, because He is our God.”**

If the Israelites’ initial response to Joshua began with an emphatic negative (24:16), it ended with an emphatic positive: **we too will worship the LORD**. Even the most stubborn of the Israelites had to concede God’s power and care for Israel, because the whole nation had witnessed what the Lord did.

## A SOMBER WARNING (Josh. 24:19-20)

### VERSE 19

**But Joshua told the people, “You will not be able to worship Yahweh, because He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not remove your transgressions and sins.**

Joshua’s follow-up response must have shocked his hearers: **“You will not be able to worship Yahweh.”** Joshua well knew the Israelites’ penchant for doubting and complaining against the Lord. He wanted them to know the seriousness of the promise they had made.

First, Joshua reminded the people that the Lord **is a holy God**. When used of God, the term *holy* refers to His absolute otherness, His uniqueness. There is nothing else remotely comparable to Him. All His attributes—goodness, righteousness, love, power, and the like—are perfect and infinite. Because of His holiness, that which is sinful, impure, and insincere must be banished from His presence. Second, Joshua emphasized that the Lord **is a jealous God**. His jealousy is an intense zeal for the well-being of His people. He will not stand by and allow His people to ruin themselves by worshiping idols. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord declared: “I will not give My glory to another or My praise to idols” (Isa. 42:8). Genuine worshipers take on the characteristics of the God they worship; the Lord intensely desires for His people to take on His qualities.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Holy” on pages 772-773 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What does the reality of God’s holiness mean to you? In what way is Jesus the complete fulfillment of God’s holiness? (See Rom. 3:25-26 for insight.)

As followers of Jesus Christ—whose death on the cross makes forgiveness of sin available to all who believe in Him—what are we to make of Joshua’s assertion that the Lord would not **remove** (“forgive,” KJV, ESV, NIV) the Israelites’ **transgressions and sins**? Had not the Lord described Himself to Moses as “a compassionate and gracious God, ... forgiving wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin” (Ex. 34:6-7)? The key to understanding Joshua’s statement is to remember that he was testing the genuineness of the Israelites’ commitment to faithfulness. Joshua was warning the people against superficial worship, similar to the way that Jesus later warned against those who say “Lord, Lord” to Him but in reality do not belong to Him (Matt. 7:21-23).

#### VERSE 20

**If you abandon the LORD and worship foreign gods, He will turn against you, harm you, and completely destroy you, after He has been good to you.”**

If the Israelites’ declaration of commitment to the Lord turned out to be an empty boast, they were inviting disaster. This same God who previously had rescued, provided for, and protected them would **turn against ... harm ... and completely destroy** them. These terms reflect the background of covenant expectations in the ancient world. A vassal nation, or lesser party, in the covenant who pledged loyalty to a strong nation but later rebelled could then expect to be treated as an enemy, worthy of attack and destruction.

#### A PUBLIC DECLARATION (Josh. 24:21-28)

#### VERSE 21

**“No!” the people answered Joshua. “We will worship the LORD.”**

The people repeated their statement of commitment. In this affirmation of loyalty to God, they insisted their intent was to **worship the LORD** alone. Their faith appeared to be sincere, as the words of Joshua 24:31 bore out. The people did not make a rash commitment. Instead, faithful living accompanied their promise.

#### VERSE 22

**Joshua then told the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you yourselves have chosen to worship Yahweh.” “We are witnesses,” they said.**

Joshua once again reminded the people of the seriousness of their commitment. Covenants in the ancient world included witnesses to

the proceedings of the covenant. Similar to modern notaries, witnesses served as honest observers of the proceedings and truth-tellers regarding the agreements made. Joshua required the Israelites at Shechem to serve as **witnesses against** themselves. In doing this, the people took upon themselves either the blessings of the covenant if they obeyed or the curses if they rebelled.

### VERSE 23

**“Then get rid of the foreign gods that are among you and offer your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”**

Now came the time for faithful action. The people had pledged their exclusive devotion to the Lord. Now every person needed to do a thorough, honest spiritual inventory and **get rid of the foreign gods** that might have seeped into their everyday lives. They needed to **offer** [their] **hearts** anew **to the LORD, the God of Israel**. Genuine commitment to the Lord must not be halfhearted or superficial. Rather, genuine commitment would involve offering their whole selves to Him in words, worship, and living.

### VERSES 24-25

**So the people said to Joshua, “We will worship the LORD our God and obey Him.” On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people at Shechem and established a statute and ordinance for them.**

When the people again affirmed their commitment to **worship ... and obey** the Lord alone, Joshua was satisfied they were sincere. He **made a covenant ... and established a statute and ordinance for them**. This is the first and only time the word translated *covenant* appears in chapter 24. However, Joshua’s actions throughout verses 14-28 make clear that he summoned the people together for the express purpose of covenant renewal. Writing down a record of the agreements and rules solidified the people’s commitment.

### VERSES 26-27

**Joshua recorded these things in the book of the law of God; he also took a large stone and set it up there under the oak next to the sanctuary of the LORD. And Joshua said to all the people, “You see this stone—it will be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words the LORD said to us, and it will be a witness against you, so that you will not deny your God.”**

Joshua then took two further actions to mark the occasion and to solidify the Israelites' commitment. First, he **recorded these things** ("these words," KJV, ESV) **in the book of the law of God**. Joshua made sure that a written record of the promises and affirmations made that day would be preserved. However, Joshua probably did not record the document into the body of what we know as the Pentateuch, or Law of Moses. More likely, he wrote the words of the ceremony into another scroll so that it might be preserved as a witness and reminder to the people of Israel.

Second, Joshua erected **a large stone ... under the oak next to the sanctuary of the LORD**. The stone memorial also served as a tangible reminder of Israel's commitment to the Lord. Significantly, Joshua included himself in the reminder, saying that the stone would be **a witness against us**. That is, the stone would be a reminder that Joshua had committed himself and his family to serve only the Lord. He desired to guard himself against this sin of disobedience. Further, however, it would stand as a reminder to the people not to **deny** ("deal falsely with," ESV) the Lord their God.

## VERSE 28

**Then Joshua sent the people away, each to his own inheritance.**

With the covenant renewal complete, Joshua **sent the people** to their homes. Joshua had witnessed God's faithfulness to His promise to give Israel the land of Canaan. He had divided the land among the various tribes as inheritance. He had challenged the people to remain faithful to the God who had done so much for them. Now, he had finished his task. The time had come for him to step aside and allow the younger generation to pick up the mantle of leadership.

Joshua would soon pass from the scene. However, his influence would live on. His life of faith and faithfulness made a positive impact on the next generation (24:31). Likewise, we all will leave a legacy behind us when we die. Our legacies can either encourage or discourage the ones coming behind us. May the words we say and the deeds we do as believers point others to Christ.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

How would you say that the covenant renewal led by Joshua foreshadowed the new covenant Christ established by His death on the cross? (Read Luke 22:20-22 for further insight.) What expectations are placed on God's people when they enter into covenant with the Lord God?

# VALUE ALL

Jesus values all people.

Martin Niemöller [NEE muhr luhr] was a prominent German pastor during the mid-20th century. He was imprisoned for seven years in Nazi concentration camps for his outspoken—though belated—opposition to Adolf Hitler. After the war ended, Niemöller acknowledged in his subsequent sermons and lectures that he, along with thousands of other German church leaders, had been guilty of being silent far too long as the Nazi regime persecuted, imprisoned, and murdered millions of people. His best known poetic line, displayed in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., warns of the danger of inaction simply because one's own group is not yet the primary target of abuse, cruelty, or discrimination.

While Niemöller was still preaching and lecturing worldwide about the danger of inaction in the face of evil, I was growing up in the South as an active participant in all the usual church activities—Bible study, discipleship training, summer Vacation Bible School, youth group, and all the rest. I recall that in one of the first sermons I really paid attention to, the preacher talked about two types of sins: sins of commission (doing something I shouldn't do) and sins of omission (failing to do what I should). I realize now that, in talking about sins of omission, my pastor was warning of the same problem Niemöller preached about—Christians who fail to stand up against that which they know is wrong and is harmful to vulnerable people.

This session focuses on the sanctity of human life and the duty we have as believers to stand up for those in danger of being abused, aborted, abandoned, or devalued. As followers of Christ, we are called and equipped by the Holy Spirit to value whom and what the Lord Jesus values. Jesus values all people. We who belong to Him in faith must value all people too. In our modern culture that increasingly devalues human life—from the unborn in the womb to the abandoned elderly—we as believers must find ways to act compassionately and boldly to uphold the sanctity of human life. It is a biblical truth found in both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, we will explore two brief passages, one in the Book of Proverbs and the other in the Gospel of Mark.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## PROVERBS 24; MARK 10

Christians often turn to the Book of Proverbs to find wisdom from God on how to live. Indeed, the acquisition of godly wisdom is the central theme of the book (Prov. 1:1-7). A proverb is a brief, pithy observation of truth concerning a particular subject. On the other hand, proverbs should not be understood as absolute divine promises of human success in every situation. They are, rather, general statements of truth.

In compiling the Book of Proverbs, the inspired writer drew from the principles of God, from nature, and from experience in life. He sought to encourage others toward wise living by providing counsel through his proverbs. These sayings represented years of experience by the wise, and their aim was to impart wisdom to the inexperienced. The proverbs reflect instruction from God, and an individual gains wisdom by following the principles set forth.

Among several subjects the biblical writer addressed in Proverbs 24 was the sin of inaction in situations that demand action. In some circumstances, the believer's failure to act compassionately and boldly offends the Lord. Even if such intervention opens the Christian to danger or criticism, the action taken to right a wrong honors God.

In Mark 10, Jesus was making the final trip of His earthly ministry from Galilee to Jerusalem, where He would be crucified. He was aware of the sufferings and trials that He would undergo over the upcoming days. He even warned the disciples of what He would encounter in the city (Mark 10:33-34). The enormity of the upcoming events weighed heavily on the mind of Jesus. However, in the last few days with the disciples, Jesus continued to teach them. One area of instruction dealt with the importance of people who were deemed less than valuable by the prevailing culture. During the final week of His earthly ministry, even when facing death Himself, Jesus chose to emphasize that each human being possesses importance and value to God.

All of the events reported in Mark 10 relate in some way to the theme of life's value and helping those who are taken advantage of in life. In the first event, the Pharisees attempted to entrap Jesus in an argument, questioning Him about divorce (10:1-12). Prior to this event, John the Baptist had publicly denounced Herod Antipas for divorcing his wife to marry his brother's wife. As a result Herod imprisoned John and subsequently decreed John's execution (Mark 6:16-29). By posing a question about divorce, the Pharisees may have hoped Jesus would make a similar public denunciation of Herod and thus meet a similar fate as John the Baptist.

In first-century Jewish life, divorce was weighted in favor of the man, usually to the detriment of the divorced woman. A husband could declare a divorce; a wife could not do so without her husband's consent. An unfaithful husband might receive no punishment; a wife who committed adultery could be stoned to death. Jesus, however, refused to answer the Pharisees' question about divorce in the way they framed it. Instead, He focused on the Creator's original design for marriage (10:6-9). Jesus placed husbands and wives under the equal obligation to be faithful in marriage.

The second event reported shows the value Jesus placed on children (10:13-16). When a group of parents brought their children to Jesus to be blessed, the disciples rebuked the parents. In the prevailing culture, children were not to be seen or heard. Jesus became indignant, however, when He saw His disciples' dismissive attitude regarding children. Jesus gladly blessed the children and used the incident to teach His disciples the significance of these vulnerable people. Children represented the very qualities that were most valued in God's kingdom.

In a third event, Jesus encountered a wealthy Jewish leader (the so-called "rich young ruler") who wanted to know what he must do to inherit eternal life (10:17-22). Jesus used the encounter to expose the man's trust in his wealth. Jesus then turned to His disciples and further explained that those who seem to be most important in this life—especially in terms of material wealth—are the last to enter God's kingdom (10:23-31). Neither wealth nor poverty commend a person to God; only faith in God can do that. The wealthy individual and the poor person are of equal importance to God.

A fourth event took place as Jesus and His disciples journeyed on a road toward Jerusalem. After warning His disciples of what awaited Him in the city—His arrest, condemnation, death, and resurrection—Jesus confronted two of His disciples for craving positions of worldly power through appointment rather than true glory through self-giving service (10:32-45). The lesson for James and John, as well as for the other disciples, was that greatness in God's sight is measured in serving, not in being served. Jesus was the ultimate example of this kind of greatness.

A fifth and final event in the chapter occurred outside Jericho, where Jesus healed a blind man named Bartimaeus [BAHR tih MEE uhs] (10:46-52). Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus for help even while others told the blind beggar to keep quiet. Jesus took the time to stop His journey and to heal Bartimaeus, commending the man's faith in Him. Like the previous events, this event emphasized the value Jesus placed on all people, especially those on the margins of society who needed someone to stand up for them. This session will help us focus on what we as followers of Christ can do to value and stand up for the vulnerable people of our day.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## A CALL TO PROTECT LIFE (Prov. 24:11)

Proverbs 24:10-12 is part of a section of proverbs running from 22:17 to 24:22 and described as “the words of the wise” (22:17). In all likelihood, Solomon was responsible for most, if not all, of these sayings (see 1:1,6). In 24:11, Solomon challenged God’s people to take steps to rescue people who had been wrongly condemned to death.

### VERSE 11

#### **Rescue those being taken off to death, and save those stumbling toward slaughter.**

The situation envisioned in this proverb likely was not one of applying capital punishment in the case of a justly convicted criminal. The Mosaic Law authorized capital punishment in cases the Lord had specified and in which a just judgment had been rendered (Gen. 9:5-6; Ex. 21:12-17; 22:18-20; Lev. 20:2,9-13). Instead, Solomon envisioned situations in which an individual or group was being unjustly targeted—that is, they were **being taken off to death** (“drawn unto death,” KJV; “led away to death,” NIV). The Hebrew verb rendered **rescue** (“forbear to deliver,” KJV) is an imperative; it called for action. The verb’s form also has a causative aspect; thus, it can be translated as “cause to rescue” or “cause to be delivered.” In other words, God’s people were commanded to find ways to advocate for and protect those who were in danger of being unjustly condemned to death.

We could wish that situations envisioned by the first half of Proverbs 24:11 were confined to the ancient world. That is not the case. The modern world still witnesses all too many examples of ungodly, unjust cruelty. Think of the genocidal actions by the Nazi regime against millions of Jews and other minority groups during World War II. Consider the murderous actions of today’s terrorists, targeting innocent men, women, and children while giving no thought to the value of their victims’ lives to God. Then consider also the continuing scourge of abortion, not just in America but throughout the world. Since 1973 and the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion in the U.S., more than 50 million abortions have occurred in our nation alone. Compassionate Christians cannot and must not stand by silently while so many yet-to-be-born babies are devalued as “tissue” and discarded. Too many of the unborn in our world today must be considered among those *being taken off to death*.

If the first part of verse 11 describes people who are victimized by others, the phrase **those stumbling toward slaughter** seems to refer to people who

unknowingly or foolishly fall into activities that threaten their own well-being. The New Testament Book of Jude presents a similar message when it urges Christians to “have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; [and to] have mercy on others but with fear, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh” (Jude 22-23). Solomon encouraged God’s people to actively **save** (literally, “hold back”) such people. This is not a reference to the salvation from sin that only Christ can give; rather, it is synonymous with the term *rescue* in the first part of verse 11. Regardless of whether the need for intervention arises from unjust treatment by others or from a person’s own foolish actions, the mandate to help remains the same.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Justice” on pages 968-970 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what ways can the modern practice of abortion be considered an extreme case of injustice in God’s eyes? What are some efforts you have seen Christians make to stand up for the value of vulnerable groups such as the unborn or the elderly?

## A WARNING AGAINST INACTION (Prov. 24:10,12)

Proverbs 24:11 expresses a call to wise action for God’s people. That verse is sandwiched between two verses that warn against failing to act in response to God’s call. In these verses, Solomon addressed two empty excuses God’s people sometimes offer to justify their inaction.

### VERSE 10

#### **If you do nothing in a difficult time, your strength is limited.**

This verse is difficult to translate smoothly into English. Literally, the verse reads: “You have shown yourself slack (or inactive) in a day of distress; your strength is narrow.” Other English renderings include: “If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small” (KJV) and “If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength!” (NIV). The word for “if” does not appear in the Hebrew, but most English Bible translations insert the term because it reflects the likely emphasis in the original text. In other words, the verse illustrates a typical Hebrew proverb with two parts. The first part sets up a scenario, or possible condition. The second part of the proverb then gives insight related to that scenario. Sometimes the relationship of the two parts is cause and effect: if Part 1 is actual, it will result in Part 2. At other times

the relationship is revelatory: if Part 1 is actual, then Part 2 is revealed as actual as well.

I believe that Proverbs 24:10 is best understood in the second sense. That is, a person's failure to act in appropriate ways **in a difficult time** does not cause but rather reveals that the individual's **strength is limited**. Let me illustrate the principle: in August 2005, Hurricane Katrina plowed into the Gulf Coast region of the United States. The hurricane resulted in tremendous wind damage but also in devastating flooding, particularly in the low-lying city of New Orleans where multiple levees were breached. In the days after the storm, two striking kinds of human behavior emerged. One type was lawless and wild; some people resorted to looting, chaos, and violence. A second type of behavior was heroic; some people risked their lives to help others to safety or to preserve order. The hurricane caused neither of those two types of behavior; rather, it revealed what was already in the hearts of people.

Solomon likewise taught that difficult times have a way of revealing a person's true character. Inaction at such times reveals a weak character. Whether the inaction stems from fear, uncertainty, or unconcern, the result remains the same. Thus, God's people are called to act compassionately, even heroically, for righteousness' sake when the culture devalues human life.

## VERSE 12

**If you say, "But we didn't know about this," won't He who weighs hearts consider it? Won't He who protects your life know? Won't He repay a person according to his work?**

In this verse, Solomon addressed a second empty excuse that is offered by God's people at times to justify inaction. Sometimes people say, "**We didn't know about this.**" To be sure, there may be times when God's people are not aware of specific situations that call for action. Acts of discrimination or injustice against vulnerable people may not have been brought to light. Does God hold His people accountable if they fail to act concerning situations they don't know about? The answer, of course, is no. God does not act unjustly.

On the other hand, this verse reminds us that God is all-knowing. He is the One **who weighs hearts**. In ancient Hebrew thought, the heart was the seat of the will—the place where decision-making took place and, thus, the origin of moral (or immoral) action (see Prov. 4:23). God knows our innermost motives for action or inaction. He knows when we simply aren't aware of something. He also knows when we willfully hide our heads in the sand to try to avoid having to deal with an unjust situation.

Further, God is the believer's ultimate source of protection in life (**He who protects your life**). He knows whether His people are trusting Him

in taking a stand for righteousness. Jesus taught His disciples to pray that God’s kingdom would come and that God’s will would be done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Jesus also taught that His followers were to live as “the salt of the earth” (5:13) and “the light of the world” (5:14), bringing His righteousness to bear on the culture in which they live—even when doing so invites persecution for His name’s sake.

Finally, God always rewards His people **according to [their] work**. This is not a reference to salvation from sin. The apostle Paul explained clearly that, in terms of salvation, we are “saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). However, he went on to teach that in Christ we are created anew “for good works” (2:10) and that one day all believers must “appear before the tribunal of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he [or she] has done in the body, whether good or worthless” (2 Cor. 5:10; see also 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

We as Christians can hardly claim to be unaware of the systemic problems in our culture in which human life is increasingly devalued. We may not be aware of what is happening with specific individuals, but even in those cases we can pray for the Lord to open our eyes and ears to the cries of those around us who need Christlike compassion and help. We can trust the Lord to empower and protect us as we take a stand for the value of every human life.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you encountered a difficult situation in which you had to decide quickly whether or not to get involved in trying to help? How did you respond? What factors led to your decision? If you had it to do over again, would you respond differently? If so, how—and why?

## AN EXAMPLE SET (Mark 10:46-49)

Mark 10 relates several events that occurred as Jesus and His disciples traveled toward Jerusalem, where He would be arrested, crucified, and raised from the dead. Although each event’s description has its own elements and nuances of instruction, all the accounts teach the value of human life.

### VERSE 46

**They came to Jericho. And as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd, Bartimaeus (the son of Timaeus), a blind beggar, was sitting by the road.**

Joshua and the Israelites had completely destroyed the Old Testament city of Jericho (see Josh. 6:24-26). Despite a curse that Joshua spoke over the ruins, the city had been rebuilt in New Testament times by Herod the Great. Situated only six miles from the Jordan River at an elevation of 740 feet below sea level, Jericho enjoyed a mild to warm climate year round. Herod appreciated the mild climate and built a winter palace there. The combination of mild climate, rich soil, ample irrigation, and abundant sunshine made the area around Jericho especially attractive for agriculture. Access to several roads, including one winding upward some 3,500 feet to Jerusalem, helped make the city a prosperous trade center. Consequently, Jericho attracted tax collectors (see Luke 19:1-10) as well as beggars such as **Bartimaeus** [BAHR tih MEE uhs], whose name meant **son of Timaeus** [tigh MEE uhs] or “son of one who is highly valued.”

First-century Jewish society often viewed people with infirmities as sinners whom God had punished. If the infirmity had been present from birth, then the individual’s parents might be the ones being punished (see John 9:1-2). In any case, individuals such as Bartimaeus often ended up as beggars, **sitting by the road** and asking passersby for scraps of food, money, and clothing.

While blindness and other infirmities were deemed to be divine punishment, public begging was often viewed as shameful. People went out of their way to avoid contact with beggars, and many learned to tune out the beggars’ cries for help. Thus, Bartimaeus was likely disdained by his community. Privately he may have questioned his own value.

## VERSE 47

**When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out, “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!”**

Bartimaeus no doubt heard the noise of a crowd getting near. Presumably he inquired as to what was happening, and someone told him that **Jesus the Nazarene** (“of Nazareth,” KJV, ESV, NIV) was traveling along the road (compare Luke 18:36). We are not told whether Bartimaeus had previously encountered Jesus, but it seems fairly certain that Jesus’ reputation was well-known in the area. Perhaps Jesus had passed near Bartimaeus at Jericho on His previous trips from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The designation for Jesus as *the Nazarene* appears 11 times in the New Testament; it distinguishes Jesus from other individuals with the same name. Upon hearing that Jesus was walking along the road, Bartimaeus could not contain his excitement. He began to shout, **“Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!”**

The phrase *Son of David* contained messianic overtones. Only in this instance in Mark's Gospel was the title specifically applied to Jesus. For the Gentile readers in the original audience for the Gospel of Mark, this messianic title would have held little meaning. (Luke's Gospel mentions the title only twice. On the other hand, in Matthew's Gospel, where a Jewish background is more predominant, the title appears nine times. The heavy emphasis in Matthew's Gospel on Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy shows the connection between the title and the messianic promises of the Old Testament.)

Bartimaeus likely had overheard many conversations of Jewish pilgrims going to and from Jerusalem through Jericho. The Law of Moses instructed all Jewish males to attend three festivals in Jerusalem each year (Ex. 23:14, 17; 34:23-24; Deut. 16:16). Some travelers going to Jerusalem from Galilee no doubt talked of Jesus' teachings and healings. They may have talked aloud of the possibility that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Bartimaeus, also being a Jew, would have known the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. Thus, when he heard that Jesus was walking by, Bartimaeus readily used the title that specifically connected Jesus and the Messiah.

Bartimaeus asked for help from the only Person who might possibly make him whole. He cried out for Jesus to *have mercy* on him. If he were ever to be healed of his blindness, this was his best opportunity. Bartimaeus had no time to reflect or theorize. He blurted out loudly words that he hoped would gain the attention of the Person traveling by on the road.

Perhaps the request for mercy was among the pleas Bartimaeus commonly used in begging. Over time he might have learned techniques and phrases that proved to be persuasive in prompting travelers to give alms to him. This plea spoke to the heart of faithful Jews, and it echoed the cries of God's people toward God. Devout Jews at some point had begged for mercy from God. Maybe the plea had prompted contributions for Bartimaeus in the past. However, the cry for mercy from Jesus did not entail money. His cry was for something no ordinary traveler could give. Bartimaeus wanted to see.

#### **VERSE 48**

**Many people told him to keep quiet, but he was crying out all the more, "Have mercy on me, Son of David!"**

Bartimaeus's cries rose above the din of the crowd. Often throngs of people accompanied Jesus as He traveled. Many people wanted to hear His teachings. Many others hoped to witness a miracle.

To make his voice heard, Bartimaeus yelled loudly. His shouting disturbed some of the people nearby, and they sought to silence the beggar. Jesus was

an important teacher. They thought He was too busy to be bothered with the plight of a blind beggar. However, Bartimaeus only shouted louder.

#### VERSE 49

**Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called the blind man and said to him, “Have courage! Get up; He’s calling for you.”**

Rather than ignoring the beggar on the side of the road, Jesus did the unexpected thing by stopping. Why would Jesus take time for a beggar, especially since He was heading to Jerusalem to lay down His life on the cross? With so much on His mind, with so much to teach His disciples in the few days before His death, surely Jesus had more important things to consider than a blind beggar! Or, was the treatment of a blind beggar among the lessons Jesus wanted to teach His disciples?

Jesus had taught His disciples to love their neighbor using the parable of the good Samaritan to illustrate the principle (see Luke 10:27-37). That particular parable had been set against the backdrop of the dangerous road from Jericho to Jerusalem. With Bartimaeus, Jesus exemplified the principle of loving one’s neighbor by showing respect and kindness to a blind beggar on that same road from Jericho to Jerusalem. For Jesus, loving one’s neighbor was not an abstract concept to be admired; it was a lifestyle to be practiced. Jesus called for Bartimaeus to be brought to him. The crowd probably was stunned that Jesus acknowledged the beggar. Some among the crowd likely lived in Jericho and had seen Bartimaeus sitting beside the road on many occasions. But had they really seen the man as a person of worth? Or had they learned to ignore the beggar as part of the road’s background scenery? By contrast, Jesus took time to see a man who needed compassion and help. He saw beyond the garments of a beggar to see one for whom He would die on the cross.

Every human being has value because he or she is created in the image of God. Regardless of station in life or economic status, each person is of utmost concern for God. Christians are to embrace the Lord’s concern for all.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Blindness” on pages 224-225 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What individuals with physical or other disabilities have blessed your life recently? How did they do so? What are ways that believers can show Christlike love and honor to individuals with disabilities?

# REBELLION'S CYCLE

God brings righteous judgment on His rebellious people, with the goal of their repentance.

Are you now or have you ever been a parent with children in the home? If your answer to that question is yes, then it is probably true also that you've done some things you might never have considered doing before the children came along. For my wife and me, one of those things we agreed to do because our child begged us was to get a cat. Now, I have no problem with cats that live in other people's houses. I also think cats make wonderful, funny inspirations for cartoon or comic strip characters. However, soon after we welcomed into our home a cute Russian Blue kitty from the local pet adoption agency, Charcoal—our cat's name—reminded me of the reasons we had previously been a feline-free family. I began to find faint paw prints on the kitchen countertops. Mysterious midnight serenades were traced to Charcoal's soft-stepping across the piano keyboard. We also noticed that lots of fine, gray hairs suddenly were “growing” on the living room furniture.

The cat hair on the furniture was the clincher. It led to Charcoal's being banned from the living room. We clearly showed him that he was not to enter that room again, and he stayed out of it for part of one day. When we caught him in the no-cat zone a second time, we reminded him just as firmly that he had violated an important rule. We reinforced the lesson a third time, and then a fourth, fifth, and sixth time. We always doled out consequences for his disobedience, but eventually we stopped counting Charcoal's repeated infractions. Despite his persistent rebellion, we (yes, even I) never quit caring for Charcoal. We never put him out of the house. We did not abandon him.

In a simplistic way, our experiences with Charcoal over the years remind me of God's dealings with the people of Israel during the time of the judges. The Lord established clear rules for the Israelites to follow and warned them of the consequences of disobedience. Even so, the Israelites repeatedly rebelled against the Lord. Each time they disobeyed, the people suffered divine discipline. God's justice required consequences for willful violations of divine law, but God's amazing love meant that He would graciously give the people of Israel help in their hour of need and a new beginning.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JUDGES 1:1–3:6

The turn of events in the Book of Judges may come as a surprise to many Bible readers. This is true especially if one moves directly into the book after reading the Book of Joshua. Joshua ends on an optimistic note. The Israelites under their great commander had conquered their pagan foes and had taken possession of the promised land (Josh. 21:43-45). All the tribes had been awarded their allotted territories. Nearing the end of his days, Joshua had called together the Israelites for a momentous worship service—a renewal of the covenant—at which all the people solemnly promised to fear the Lord and serve only Him (Josh. 24). God’s covenant plan for Israel was proceeding nicely. Or so it seemed.

Then come the opening chapters of the Book of Judges. Chapter 1 reveals that the Israelites had more work to do in taking possession of all the promised land. Some tribes had failed to take key cities in their territories. Consequently, various pagan groups remained fixed in the heartland, presenting a temptation to idolatry for God’s people. Within little more than one generation’s time, the Israelites’ commitment to the Lord descended into a cycle of sin, defeat, oppression, complaint, and rescue (Judg. 2).

Wholehearted obedience to the Lord would have made the Israelites a moral and cultural leader among the nations (see Deut. 28:1-14; Isa. 60:3), but the people frequently forsook their covenant (Judg. 2:2). They preserved forbidden pagan religious objects and made loyalty agreements with the spiritually corrupt people they had been told to expel from the land. Even worse, the Israelites failed to teach their children about the Lord and His ways. As a result, a “generation rose up who did not know the LORD or the works He had done for Israel” (2:10).

To gain a fuller context of Judges 2:11-19, take a quick look at the place of the Book of Judges in the Hebrew Bible, what we as Christians call the Old Testament. In Jewish tradition, the Old Testament books are categorized under three (sometimes four) types of divine revelation: (1) the Torah (or Law), containing the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy; (2) the Prophets, sometimes divided into two groups called the Former Prophets (Joshua through 2 Kings, minus Ruth) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah through Malachi, minus Lamentations and Daniel); and (3) the Writings (books such as Esther and Ruth; poetic works such as Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes; and historical works such as Ezra and Nehemiah).

The Book of Judges is the second book in the Former Prophets, a six-book collection of historical-theological materials that play two important roles

within the Hebrew Bible. First, these materials provide historical information that confirms the accuracy and relevance of God's promises, prophecies, and warnings in the Torah, or Law of Moses. For example, in Genesis 13:14-17 God promised Abram (Abraham) that his descendants one day would possess the land of Canaan. The historical narrative in the Book of Joshua confirms that the Lord kept that promise (Josh. 11:23). On a somber note, God warned in the Law that the Israelites would experience terrible consequences if they ever abandoned Him (Lev. 26:14-39). That abandonment and those consequences surface again and again in the accounts of the Book of Judges. Judges thus plays an important role in showing God's disciplinary actions against the rebellious Israelites. The core passage for this session underscores that truth.

A second role of the six books known as the Former Prophets is theological. That is, these books reveal God's character and expectations for His people. They tell not only what happened to God's people but also why it happened. In other words, these books reveal the purposes of God being worked out in the history of the Israelites. Thus, the Book of Judges makes important contributions to both the historical and theological dimensions of the Old Testament. Historically, it provides us with a record of key events that took place between the end of Joshua's life and the beginning of Samuel's. Theologically, the book confirms the accuracy of two of the Law's greatest teachings—(1) God is just; and (2) God is merciful. Because God is just, He cannot and does not overlook the sins of His people. Because God is merciful, He can be counted on to respond with compassion when His people repent and seek His forgiveness.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **ABANDONMENT** (Judg. 2:11-13)

Judges 2:11-19 can be thought of as a type of executive summary of the Book of Judges. The verses give the synopsis of a recurring pattern of events described in the book's subsequent chapters. Three themes stand out in this section. One theme is abandonment. The Israelites abandoned the Lord and adopted the idolatrous ways of the pagans who lived around them. A second theme is oppression. As judgment against the Israelites' spiritual rebellion, the Lord allowed pagan groups to defeat and oppress His people. A third theme found in these verses is grace. The Lord responded with compassion toward His people when they cried to Him in repentance. He called forth warrior-judges who then delivered the Israelites from their oppressors.

## VERSE 11

### **The Israelites did what was evil in the LORD's sight. They worshiped the Baals**

The phrase **the Israelites** literally is “the sons of Israel.” These are the people who were descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with whom the Lord God had formed a covenant (Gen. 12:3; 28:10-15). Jacob later was given the name “Israel” (Gen. 32:28); thus his 12 sons and their descendants became known as the “sons of Israel” (Gen. 49:1-28). In a time of severe famine, Jacob, his sons, and their families had relocated to Egypt to survive. Eventually, however, the Israelites increased in population so much that the Egyptian ruler enslaved them. For around 400 years they languished in bondage until the Lord called Moses to rescue the people out of Egypt and lead them to the promised land (Ex. 3:1-10).

During the journey, Moses brought the Israelites before the Lord at Mount Sinai. There the Lord gave His people the law and set them apart to live as a “holy nation” (Ex. 19:5; see also Lev. 11:45; 19:2; 20:7,26). Almost from the start, however, the Israelites had shown time and time again that they could not and would not stay true to their commitment. They forsook the Lord and disobeyed His commands.

The Hebrew word translated **evil** has a broad range of possible meanings, depending on the context. It can mean anything from “something that causes unhappiness” to “obstinate rebellion against God’s moral law.” The added phrase **in the LORD’s sight** makes clear that in Judges 2:11 the word *evil* refers to direct and willful violations of God’s law. Thus, the Israelites’ wickedness had both outward and inward dimensions. Outwardly, the people participated in pagan activities, religious and otherwise. Inwardly, the people demonstrated they had a serious “heart problem”—that is, they were spiritually rebellious. They broke solemn promises they had made to God—promises to obey His commands and to worship only Him.

The second half of 2:11 reveals the core of the Israelites’ evil: **They worshiped the Baals** [BAY uhlz]. All the pagan people groups and nations that surrounded the Israelites were polytheistic (believing in multiple gods). Baal was regarded as the manifestation of all masculine forces within the universe. As a so-called storm god, Baal was believed to be the giver of fertility to the earth. In time, this false deity also was worshiped as the giver of human fertility. Consequently, the practice developed of worshipers having sexual relations with temple prostitutes at Baal shrines to entice the god to give fertility to the land and the people.

The word rendered *worshiped* describes the service provided by a slave to a master. By extension, the word also can refer to the deep religious devotion adherents give to a deity. In the covenant, the Israelites had pledged to give

their exclusive devotion to the Lord God. In practice, however, they often worshiped at the Baal shrines too. The Israelites' slide into Baal worship sadly showed that while God's people had taken possession of much of the land, Canaanite idolatry had taken possession of their hearts.

### VERSES 12-13

**and abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They went after other gods from the surrounding peoples and bowed down to them. They infuriated the LORD, for they abandoned Him and worshiped Baal and the Ashtoreths.**

The Israelites had foolishly placed themselves under a would-be god who they believed could give them water for their crops and protection from their enemies. By worshiping Baal, the Israelites effectively had **abandoned the LORD**. This change of divine masters might seem surprising. Why would the Israelites abandon the one true God who had created the earth and all that is in it? Moreover, the Lord alone had been the God of the Israelites' ancestors—probably a reference to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and perhaps also to Moses and Joshua. Honor for one's ancestors was a deeply held value for many ancient (and some modern) people groups, including the Israelites (Ex. 20:12). To abandon **the God of their fathers** was to show utter disdain for the Lord and disrespect for Israel's patriarchal forebears.

Perhaps the Israelites were tempted to delve into Canaanite idolatry by the fleshly emphasis of pagan rituals, especially the rituals of temple prostitution. Maybe also they were lured by the tangible nature of idols. Not only could the worshiper see (and perhaps touch) the idols in the sanctuaries, but also they could obtain a small version of the idol for home use. To station a small idol in one's house was believed to help keep the god attentive to the family's welfare. Whatever the motivation, however, for an Israelite to engage in idolatry was to abandon the one true God.

It is important to note that Israel's pagan enemies did not force God's people to worship these false gods. The Israelites actively **went after** ("followed," KJV, NIV) the pagan deities. The people expressed reverence for and wholehearted submission to the idols by bowing down to them. All of this was a recipe for trouble, for the Lord is "a jealous God" (Ex. 20:5) who will not tolerate rival gods (Isa. 42:8). Not surprisingly, therefore, the disobedient actions of His covenant people **infuriated the LORD**.

In Judges 2:11 we learned that the Israelites had left the Lord in order to worship the Canaanite god Baal. In 2:13 we are shown a more complete picture. The Israelites not only had worshiped Baal but also had worshiped

**the Ashtoreths** [ASH tuh reths]. In Canaanite religion, *Ashtoreths* (known in singular form as Asherah [uh SHEE ruh] or Astarte [ass TAHR tee]) referred to a goddess that represented all the feminine forces of the universe and was a counterpart to Baal. Ancient carved images of Asherah were typically in the form of an unclothed female. Another symbol of the goddess, especially at outdoor shrines, was a wooden pole (see Ex. 34:13; Deut. 12:3). The Asherah pole may have been taken from a particular type of tree that was considered sacred and thus believed to be a tangible representation of the source of fertility.

By worshiping such false gods, the Israelites acted like the pagan peoples around them. Israel's neighbors trusted in false deities that supposedly could create prosperity for people by balancing the masculine and feminine aspects of the universe. Worshipers of Baal and Asherah expressed their devotion to these deities by bowing before and kissing the idols, offering gifts and sacrifices to the gods, and participating in sexual rituals with temple prostitutes as a form of imitative magic.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Idol" on pages 804-805 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are possible reasons that idolatry was such a temptation for the Israelites in the time of the judges? What are some forms of idolatry that you see present in today's culture? How can believers resist temptations to worship idols?

## OPPRESSION (Judg. 2:14-15)

As a punishment for Israel's spiritual rebellion, the Lord removed His protection from His covenant people. He allowed them to suffer at the hands of unconquered pagan groups.

### VERSE 14

**The LORD's anger burned against Israel, and He handed them over to marauders who raided them. He sold them to the enemies around them, and they could no longer resist their enemies.**

The Israelites' sinful actions evoked two distinct divine reactions. First, **the LORD's anger burned against Israel**. Human beings can experience a deep, intense passion about certain things. Since God created the human family in His image, we should not be surprised to learn that our Creator also can

express intense passion. The difference is that God's intense passion is never expressed unjustly; it always aims to recover what is right and good.

Translated literally, the phrase *the LORD's anger burned* reads "the nostril of Yahweh glowed." This expression compares to the physical reaction that can occur when a person becomes highly agitated. The nostrils flare, and blood vessels in the nose and other facial areas dilate, allowing additional blood to flow in. The result is a reddening of the face. The point was not that the Lord had a literal red nose but rather that the Israelites' spiritual rebellion evoked an intense, wholehearted response from a holy God.

Second, the Israelites' sinful actions provoked the Lord to act in swift, righteous judgment. The people needed to understand the consequences of their idolatry: a return to oppressive bondage. Thus, the Lord **handed** [the Israelites] **over to marauders who raided them**. The Hebrew words rendered *marauders* and *raided* are from similar Hebrew root words that mean "to plunder" or "to spoil." Both terms describe an act whereby the property of others is seized as spoils of war. Such seizures occurred when the Lord **sold** [the Israelites] **to the enemies around them**. God's people **could no longer resist their enemies**. The Hebrew verb rendered *sold* was a common term for describing a transfer of goods (including slaves) in exchange for something of value. The likely meaning in Judges 2:14 is that the Lord removed His hedge of protection from Israel, thereby permitting outside pagan groups to dominate the people of Israel and to confiscate their resources. The groups also served unwittingly as the Lord's agents of discipline on His people.

## VERSE 15

**Whenever the Israelites went out, the LORD was against them and brought disaster on them, just as He had promised and sworn to them. So they suffered greatly.**

Judges 2:14 introduced the fact that the Lord could use Israel's enemies as instruments of discipline against His wayward people. In 2:15, the biblical writer declared that the Lord, not a pagan enemy, was the One whom the Israelites needed to fear most. Just as the Lord was the source of Israel's blessings when the people were faithful, He was also the source of their troubles when they rebelled (see Deut. 28). Thus, whenever the Israelites marshaled their troops against the invaders, they discovered that **the LORD was against them**. In such a confrontation, Israel could never prevail.

Instead of giving victory to His people, the Lord **brought disaster on them**. The Hebrew word rendered *disaster* literally means "for evil." This did not imply that God committed evil. Rather, it emphasized that the Israelites' abandonment of the Lord to worship idols—a sinful and evil act—resulted

in consequences of the same nature. Evil actions would bring disastrous consequences. Indeed, the Lord had **promised and sworn** to His people that spiritual rebellion would carry dire consequences. The people of Israel thus willfully sinned against the Lord.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Divine Retribution” on pages 434-435 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Take note of the various forms of God’s retribution against evil, as described in the article’s final paragraph. Do you consider events today such as defeat by an enemy, natural disasters, or infectious diseases to be forms of God’s temporal judgment? Why or why not?

## REPENTANCE (Judg. 2:16-19)

### VERSE 16

### **The LORD raised up judges, who saved them from the power of their marauders,**

God’s justice demanded that He hold the Israelites accountable for their unfaithfulness. At the same time, God’s compassion meant that He would respond to His people’s repentance with mercy. In mercy, the Lord would provide deliverance by bringing agents of divine grace into Israel’s situation. Accordingly, **the LORD raised up judges**. These *judges* did not arise on their own initiative. Instead, the Lord called them into service. Two important biblical truths emerge from this fact. First, deliverance from the great trials of life ultimately comes from a great and merciful God. Second, the Lord often works in extraordinary ways through ordinary human beings to accomplish His purposes in the world.

The judge’s tasks in ancient Israelite tribal society included military, political, judicial, and religious activities. Militarily, the judges led the tribal militias to execute God’s judgments against Israel’s enemies. Judicially, the judges settled cases in accordance with God’s law. In the religious realm, judges might carry out the work of a prophet in announcing God’s message to His people. Politically, judges might be looked to as influential civic leaders within their tribal areas. In the Book of Judges, the biblical writer focused primarily on the judge’s task of leading tribal military forces against Israel’s oppressors. If the Israelites were to experience relief from the terror, agony, and financial losses inflicted on them by their enemies, such relief would

come only when God gave His people a champion who led Israel to victory on the battlefield. And that's exactly what the Lord did. The divinely called judges **saved [Israel] from the power of their marauders** (“those that spoiled them,” KJV; “those who plundered them,” ESV). The judges delivered Israel by providing divinely inspired leadership on the battlefield.

The Hebrew term translated *power* literally means “the hand.” Weapons were controlled and deployed by the hands that gripped them. Accordingly, the hand could be described as the power behind a weapon. In Judges 2:14-15, the Lord’s “hand” had brought punishment on His rebellious people by putting them in the “hands” of invaders. Now through His appointed judges, the Lord rescued His repentant people from those same invaders. Ultimately, the power for both judgment and salvation rested solely in the Lord’s hand.

#### VERSE 17

**but they did not listen to their judges. Instead, they prostituted themselves with other gods, bowing down to them. They quickly turned from the way of their fathers, who had walked in obedience to the LORD’s commands. They did not do as their fathers did.**

God’s merciful deliverance of His people from their oppressors should have resulted in an outpouring of gratitude and renewed commitment to worship only the Lord God. If this was the immediate result, it was only a brief revival. All too quickly the Israelites again turned away from the Lord. **They did not listen to their judges.** The Hebrew term rendered *listen* means more than “to hear”; it means “to hear and act accordingly”—that is, “to obey.” The Israelites refused to keep obeying the godly leadership of their judges.

Instead, the people **prostituted themselves with other gods.** The term rendered *prostituted* suggests that the Israelites returned to the sordid rituals of Baal and Asherah worship. By using this comparison, the biblical writer equated the Israelites’ wandering hearts with sexual infidelity. Just as a married person’s intimate relations with a prostitute is a betrayal of the marriage covenant, even so the Israelites’ idol worship was a shameful betrayal of their covenant with the Lord.

The biblical writer reiterated that the Israelites’ rejection of the true God was also a betrayal of their faithful ancestors’ legacy (**the way of their fathers**). Salvation is not an inherited trait. Neither can one generation bequeath a holy lifestyle to the next by means of a written will. Parents can (and should) teach their children, be examples of Christlike living, and provide an environment that promotes spiritual faithfulness. Nevertheless, every member of each new generation must choose to embrace a faithful lifestyle for themselves.

## VERSE 18

**Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for the Israelites, the LORD was with him and saved the people from the power of their enemies while the judge was still alive. The LORD was moved to pity whenever they groaned because of those who were oppressing and afflicting them.**

The Book of Judges includes the names of a number of Israelite judges. Most of them received what might be called “honorably mention,” in that very little was told of their exploits. Four or five of the judges, however, received more extensive accounts of their service. In 2:18, the biblical writer emphasized that in all cases **the LORD raised up a judge for the Israelites**. That is, the judges didn’t do their work in their own strength. Rather, the God of Israel called them to service, **was with** them, and empowered them as they **saved** (“delivered,” KJV) **the people from the power** (“the hand,” KJV, ESV) **of their enemies**.

**The LORD was moved to pity whenever** [the Israelites] **groaned because of those who were oppressing and afflicting them**. Unlike the pagans’ lifeless idols made of stone, wood, and metal, the living God responded passionately and redemptively to the injuries inflicted on His covenant people.

## VERSE 19

**Whenever the judge died, the Israelites would act even more corruptly than their fathers, going after other gods to worship and bow down to them. They did not turn from their evil practices or their obstinate ways.**

Sadly, **whenever the judge died**, the people cycled back to idol worship. They lived in a downward spiral; each succeeding generation brought the nation to a new spiritual low. Sins that were concealed in one generation were celebrated in the next. The people **did not turn from their evil practices or their obstinate ways**. Along with the lower moral standards came an attitude of flinty defiance.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What does the Lord’s response of judgment against His faithless people reveal to you about His character? What does His provision of judge-deliverers reveal to you? What does the Israelites’ repeated breaking of the covenant say about all human beings’ need for a Savior?

# WILLING SERVANTS

God restores His people to freedom using faithful and willing servants.

Call me sentimental. Or call me a tightwad. Probably I have earned both labels. Here is why: some time ago I reached the conclusion that I couldn't bear to part with my 22-year-old lawnmower. A trusty 5-horsepower engine powered it, and 16-inch rear spoke wheels made pushing it around the yard a breeze. During all the years I owned it, my mower never gave up on me. So, I wasn't about to give up on it either.

I didn't give up on it 14 years ago when the handle broke. A quick weld job at the local repair shop put the mower back into operation in no time. (The same solution rendered the same result three subsequent times!) I also didn't give up on my beloved machine when it developed a jagged, 6-inch crack in the mower deck. Another visit to the repair shop was all it needed to roar back to life—and not sound like a giant blender trying to liquefy a bunch of steel bolts.

Sometimes my own attempts to repair the mower probably put it into more serious danger. For example, there was the time I replaced 14 broken spokes in the left rear wheel with pieces of coat-hanger wire. I also substituted a wooden splint with clamps to rejoin the handle after it broke a fifth time. In these cases, self-repair seemed cheaper (at least in the short run) and gave me the satisfaction of providing hands-on healing for my beloved mower.

Perhaps by now you are wondering why I hung on to that lovable, lopsided old lawnmower as long as I did. The reason I did is because the mower faithfully performed its expected task every time I needed it to do so. Year after year for more than two decades, the “little engine that could” cranked to life after a long winter's nap. Its oversized rear wheels—wobbly though they were in later years—rolled continually back and forth across my yard from early spring until late fall, manicuring our lawn evenly and beautifully. In short, I valued my lawnmower's trustworthiness.

If we as humans value the trustworthiness of a machine to this extent, how much more must God value faithfulness from His people! In this session, we will focus on two of the Lord's faithful and willing servants during the

time of the judges. Their names were Deborah and Barak. Each one had a key role to play in delivering the Israelites from a season of bitter oppression by a Canaanite enemy. The Lord valued these two faithful servant-leaders and used them to provide an amazing rescue for His people.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### JUDGES 3:7–5:31

Judges 1–2 introduced a tragic cycle of Israelite spiritual failures after the time of Joshua. Judges 2:20–3:6 reveals that the Lord decided to use the unconquered pagan groups in the promised land to test the Israelites' commitment. These groups would test not only the Israelites' mettle in battle but also their faithfulness to the Lord and to His ways. Ominous signs that Israel would not fare well in these tests soon appeared. The Israelites began to settle among the pagan groups and to intermarry with them. All too soon, God's people were joining in the worship of these groups' false gods.

In Judges 3:7–5:31, the biblical writer offered the first examples of a pattern that appeared again and again in this tragic period of Israel's history. However, it would be incorrect to think of this repeating pattern of Israelite behavior as flat and circular, like a thin, spinning disc. The pattern instead was more three-dimensional; it was spinning while at the same time descending, similar to a maple tree seed's twirling descent from the tree to the ground. As each cycle of the sin-oppression-cry-deliverance pattern played out, Israelite culture sank deeper into the mire of moral degradation. Even the character and actions of the successive judge-deliverers worsened as the overall culture sank toward the level of outright paganism.

Judges 3:7-11 describes the first example of the Israelites' cycle of rebellion. The people began to worship the Canaanite deities Baal and Asherah [uh SHEE ruh]. As punishment, the Lord allowed a king from an area north of the promised land to dominate and oppress His people for eight years. When the people finally cried out for mercy, the Lord "raised up Othniel [AHTH nih el] ... as a deliverer to save the Israelites" (3:9). Othniel was the nephew and son-in-law of Caleb, an Israelite whose faith was legendary (Judg. 1:13; see also Num. 14:6-9; Josh. 14:6-12). God's Spirit came on Othniel and empowered him to defeat Israel's oppressor. The Israelites then enjoyed 40 years of peace—that is, until Othniel died (Judg. 3:11).

After Othniel's death, the Israelites' downward spiral of unfaithfulness began again. The people "did what was evil in the LORD's sight" (3:12a). God then allowed the king of Moab to defeat and dominate Israel for 18 years

(3:12b-14). When the Israelites cried out to God for mercy, the Lord used Ehud [EE huhd], a Benjaminite, to deliver Israel from the Moabites and to usher in an 80-year period of peace (3:15-30).

Next, a man named Shamgar [SHAM gahr], son of Anath [AY nath], repelled a threat from the Philistines, another of Israel's constant enemies (3:31). Several odd factors revolve around Shamgar: (1) he was not referred to in the text with the Hebrew word for "judge" and was not said to have been raised up by the Lord, yet he was described as a deliverer of Israel; (2) his name was not a typical Hebrew name, and—worse yet—Anath was the name of a Canaanite goddess of war; and (3) the usual descriptions of the Israelites' sin and subsequent crying out for mercy are absent.

Some Bible scholars view Shamgar's mention in 3:31 as a prelude to the events in Judges 4–5 (see 4:6-7). These two chapters tell of a prophetess, Deborah, who was serving in a judicial role in Israel at the time of a serious threat from a powerful Canaanite king. Israelite culture was again slipping into spiritual rebellion (4:1), and Israel's warriors and their commander, Barak, shrank from fear of the Canaanites. Such fear was a measure of Israel's wayward condition, but the Lord worked through the prophetess Deborah and another woman named Jael [JAY uhl] to spur Israel's army to victory. Following the Israelites' victory over the king of Canaan, Deborah and Barak sang a song of praise to the Lord (5:1-31).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### AN UPDATED REQUEST (Judg. 4:4-7)

#### VERSES 4-5

**Deborah, a woman who was a prophetess and the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. It was her custom to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her for judgment.**

The name **Deborah** in Hebrew means "honeybee." The fact that the biblical text specifies this woman's name is significant. In most ancient cultures, women (particularly wives) participated in few activities beyond the contexts of their families and immediate villages. Thus, for Deborah to be specified by name and described as a leader in Israel was noteworthy.

Deborah was first described as **a prophetess**. Prophets and prophetesses played key roles in the history of ancient Israel. Their importance was tied

directly to the two core tasks they performed: (1) receiving key messages from the Lord God, and (2) declaring those precise messages to God's people and to others the Lord might designate. Prophets were conduits of the most powerful force in the universe—the word of God. An authentic word from God spoken by a prophet or prophetess was infused with divine power that guaranteed its fulfillment. A prophetic word from the Lord could create a plague (Ex. 7:19-20) or bring forth water in a desert (2 Kings 3:15-20). The Lord's message might reveal some information about the future (1 Sam. 10:3-8) or some insight into what God wanted a person to do in the present (2 Kings 9:6-7). To this point in Scripture only one other woman, Moses' sister Miriam, had been designated a prophetess (see Ex. 15:20).

Second, Deborah was identified as **the wife of Lappidoth** [LAP ih dahth]. Deborah's husband, whose name means "torches" or "flashes (of lightning)" was not further identified in the biblical text; he evidently did not play a role in Israel's deliverance from the Canaanites. Deborah, on the other hand, would play a pivotal role. In Judges 5:7, she described herself in song as "a mother in Israel." This was a title of respect that emphasized not only her role in her family but also her faithful leadership in Israel at a time when many Israelites were choosing to worship the false gods of Canaan.

Third, Deborah was said to be **judging Israel at that time**. Whether this description means that she is to be identified as one of the judge-deliverers in the Book of Judges is not clear. Recall that the leaders God raised up as judges during this period provided leadership mainly in the area of military activities. That is, they led Israel's troops into battle against their oppressors. Deborah's role, on the other hand, seems to have been more focused on judicial activities and as a prophetess, serving as God's messenger to call out and spur on Israel's military leader to bold action.

The biblical writer described Deborah's judicial activities in 4:5. This verse indicates that Deborah customarily held court under a particular **palm tree** that was located **between Ramah** [RAY muh] **and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim**. While such a practice might seem strange today, the reasons for doing so in ancient times likely were of a practical nature. People living in ancient tribal settings erected very few public buildings. Family houses would not be suitable either. Most were one-story, flat-roofed structures made of mud bricks, rocks, and locally grown wood. Interior lighting was poor at best. Thus, an open, flat, and shaded outdoor area served as a practical alternative to the structures of the day when it came to conducting certain aspects of society's business (see 1 Sam. 14:2; 1 Kings 22:10).

An indicator of the measure of respect the Israelites had for Deborah could be seen in the fact that the people came to her **for judgment** ("to have their disputes decided," NIV). The Law of Moses called for the Israelites to appoint

judges and other officials in every town (Deut. 16:18). Since Deborah held court in a setting between *Ramah* in the territory of Benjamin and *Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim*, she appears to have served as a regional judge, handling cases that crossed tribal borders or that proved too difficult for local judges. As the subsequent verse reveals, however, Deborah's prophetic influence extended at least to the northernmost tribal areas of Israel.

## VERSE 6

**She summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “Hasn’t the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you: ‘Go, deploy the troops on Mount Tabor, and take with you 10,000 men from the Naphtalites and Zebulunites?’**

Here readers are introduced to Israel's military leader at the time Deborah served as judicial officer and prophetess: **Barak** [BAY rak] **son of Abinoam** [uh BIN oh uhm] **from Kedesh** [KEE desh] **in Naphtali** [NAF tuh ligh]. The tribe of Naphtali had taken possession of territory that lay to the west and north of the Sea of Galilee (see map on p. 139). However, the Israelites had failed to drive out all the Canaanites from the region (Judg. 1:33). By the time of Deborah and Barak, a Canaanite king named Jabin had taken over the fortified city of Hazor [HAY zawr], located only about 10 miles from Barak's hometown of *Kedesh*. From Hazor, Jabin dominated the surrounding tribal regions and oppressed the Israelites for 20 years with a deadly 900-chariot strike force (4:2-3). Barak evidently was both wise enough and frightened enough to know that going against Jabin's army would be a suicide mission unless the Lord was fighting on behalf of His people in the battle.

That Deborah **summoned Barak** to her locale to give him that very message from the Lord shows how respected and influential she was among God's people. In most societies in biblical times, women were not permitted to issue commands to men. Wisely, Deborah softened the tone of the command by expressing it as a question rather than as a direct order. Even so, God was issuing an order and a promise to Barak through Deborah.

The Lord's command to Barak was to **deploy the** [Israelite] **troops on Mount Tabor** [TAY bawr]. *Mount Tabor* reached about 1,800 feet in elevation and marked the boundary of three tribal regions—the territories of Naphtali, Issachar [ISS uh KAHHR], and Zebulun [ZEB yoo luhn]. This would be the location of a coming battle, so Israel's soldiers needed to move quickly and establish themselves on the high ground. The question, however, that Barak might have asked was “What troops?” The tribes of Israel had not maintained a standing army following the conquest and settlement period. Barak would need to muster a militia force of **10,000 men from the Naphtalites and**

**Zebulunites** (“men of Naphtali and Zebulun,” NIV). In other words, not only Barak but also his fellow Israelites would need to have confidence that the Lord was with them in this impossible-sounding mission of deliverance.

## VERSE 7

**Then I will lure Sisera commander of Jabin’s forces, his chariots, and his army at the Wadi Kishon to fight against you, and I will hand him over to you.”**

The Lord had chosen His two leaders for rescuing the Israelites from Canaanite oppression. He chose Deborah to speak for Him and to call into action the chosen military deliverer, Barak. The Lord also revealed His battle plan. Indeed, the “God factor” would be the difference maker in the upcoming battle. The Lord would **lure** (“draw unto thee,” KJV; “draw out,” ESV; “lead,” NIV) **Sisera** [SIS uh ruh] **commander of Jabin’s forces, his chariots, and his army** to a battlefield that favored the Israelite troops. The plan was simple yet sure to succeed, because it was from the Lord.

The **Wadi Kishon** [WAH dih-KIGH shahn] was a small river channel running east to west along the valley floor near the base of Mount Tabor. Wadis could be notorious during certain seasons for being completely dry one minute and a few minutes later being inundated by flash flooding. Any military commander leading a chariot force into a valley containing a wadi faced several dangers. One was the wadi’s uneven terrain when dry, making it difficult for horse-drawn chariots to operate efficiently. A second danger was soft and muddy soil alongside a flowing wadi. Chariot wheels could get bogged down in the mud. A third (and most serious) threat was the possibility of flash flooding, which could occur without warning and pose the threat of drowning or being swept away in the swift-flowing water (see Judg. 5:21). By luring the Canaanite army into such a location, the Lord would prove again that He is ultimately sovereign over the enemies of His people (see Prov. 21:1).

The Lord would do more than merely cloud the Canaanite commander’s strategic thinking. The Lord would also be actively present on the battlefield in the midst of the fighting. Moreover, He would guarantee the outcome: the Lord would **hand ... over** the enemy to Barak and the Israelites.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you received wise counsel from a Christian leader concerning a decision you needed to make or a problem you needed to solve? How did the Lord make the difference in your effort to move forward in faith?

## A DEAL STRUCK (Judg. 4:8-10)

### VERSE 8

**Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go. But if you will not go with me, I will not go.”**

What did Barak’s response to Deborah reveal about the commander? First, it may have indicated that Barak was unwilling to obey the Lord’s command unconditionally. If so, it was an example of the Israelites’ generally rebellious spirit at this time; Barak did not trust the Lord to keep His word.

A second possibility is that Barak’s response revealed cowardice. The commander lived in a culture where honor was more important than life, yet he was so afraid of the Canaanite enemy that he insisted on having Deborah by his side in the thick of the battle. Third, Barak’s response may have revealed that the commander was making a desperate plea for divine help. If Deborah was indeed the Lord’s authoritative spokesperson, then her presence on the battlefield would give confidence to Barak and his troops that the Lord was with them too.

### VERSE 9

**“I will go with you,” she said, “but you will receive no honor on the road you are about to take, because the LORD will sell Sisera into a woman’s hand.” So Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh.**

Remarkably, Deborah agreed to Barak’s request. Acting in her role as a prophetess, however, she warned that the commander would **receive no honor on the road** (“will not lead to your glory,” ESV; “the honor will not be yours,” NIV) he was **about to take**. Barak would not gain military glory as the victorious commander whom the Lord used to vanquish Israel’s oppressor. Instead, the Lord would **sell Sisera into a woman’s hand**. The term rendered *sell* in this context refers to a military defeat. The Canaanite commander would be killed by a woman (see 4:21).

As she had agreed to do, Deborah **got up and went with Barak to Kedesh**. She put her family and judicial responsibilities on hold for the time being. If her presence on the battlefield would encourage the Israelite commander to trust in the Lord, then she was willing to put herself in harm’s way.

### VERSE 10

**Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; 10,000 men followed him, and Deborah also went with him.**

Fortified by Deborah's promise to go with him, Barak went forward with the preparations for war. He **summoned ... 10,000 men** from the tribes of **Zebulun and Naphtali** to join him at **Kedesh**, his hometown. The biblical writer did not specify the soldiers' reaction to Deborah's standing alongside their commander. Perhaps they were as encouraged by Deborah's presence as Barak was. In any event, the troops and their leader undoubtedly used this time to collect provisions, devise battle strategies, organize the men into fighting units, practice maneuvers, and prepare their weapons.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Arms and Armor" on pages 115-118 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In Ephesians 6:13-17, Paul spoke of the "full armor of God" that believers have available in their battles against spiritual forces of evil. How have you recently employed spiritual armor in your life?

## THE ORDERS ISSUED (Judg. 4:12-14)

### VERSES 12-13

**It was reported to Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up Mount Tabor. Sisera summoned all his 900 iron chariots and all the people who were with him from Harosheth of the Nations to the Wadi Kishon.**

The movement of 10,000 armed Israelite warriors from Kedesh to a mountain encampment would not go unnoticed by the Canaanite ruler Jabin or by **Sisera**, the commander of Jabin's forces. As soon as Sisera learned that the Israelite troops **had gone up Mount Tabor**, he **summoned all his 900 iron chariots** as well as all of his infantry troops to converge at **the Wadi Kishon**. The phrase **Harosheth** [huh ROH sheth] **of the Nations** appears only in this chapter in the entire Bible (4:2,13,16). It can be translated literally as "carved object of the Gentiles." Thus, the name may be a reference to a pagan-dominated city known for a particular idol erected there. Sisera lived in this city (4:2), and he may have raised a sizable army from there to serve as mercenaries in King Jabin's army.

The careful Bible reader will recall that the Lord had promised to lure Sisera to the *Wadi Kishon* for a decisive battle (4:7). Deborah knew this, and she had in turn revealed the Lord's plan to Barak. The Israelite troops and their leaders must have been greatly encouraged as they watched the Lord's plan come to pass just as promised. Israel would command the high ground

in the battle. Moreover, the tree-covered slopes of Mount Tabor would serve as effective cover for Israelite soldiers as they rained down arrows and spears on their enemies. Finally, the vaunted Canaanite war chariots would be virtually useless on the mountain's winding, unpaved paths.

#### VERSE 14

**Then Deborah said to Barak, “Move on, for this is the day the LORD has handed Sisera over to you. Hasn’t the LORD gone before you?” So Barak came down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him.**

That Deborah had to exhort the Israelite commander to **move on** (“Up!” ESV; “Go!” NIV) may indicate that he was still tentative and fearful. Deborah assured him that this was **the day the LORD has handed Sisera over to** him. Barak and his men would have to leave the relative protection of Mount Tabor’s wooded slopes, but they did not need to be afraid. The Lord had already **gone before** the Israelites. This expression reminded God’s people then and reminds us now as Christians that we are never alone in obeying the Lord’s plan. He goes before us and with us.

Putting feet to his faith, **Barak came down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him**. The enemy was surprised and overwhelmed. God’s people were charging forward in His power!

### EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you received encouragement from another believer to step out in obedience to the Lord? How did you respond to the encouragement? How would you go about encouraging a hesitant believer to trust the Lord in a fearful situation?

### THE VICTORY WON (Judg. 4:15-16)

#### VERSE 15

**The LORD threw Sisera, all his charioteers, and all his army into confusion with the sword before Barak. Sisera left his chariot and fled on foot.**

The surprise appearance of the Israelites rushing down Mount Tabor caught Sisera and his forces off guard. Judges 5:21 suggests there may have been an

additional factor that **threw Sisera, all his charioteers, and all his army into confusion.** The Lord may have sent a storm over the region, creating a flash flood that filled the wadi with raging waters. If so, Sisera's chariot force was quickly disabled. Many of the sturdy war machines were washed away, badly damaged, or rendered immovable because of mud.

The Canaanite defeat was so devastating that **Sisera left his chariot and fled on foot.** He sought refuge in the tent of a woman whose husband had made a peace treaty with King Jabin. Ironically, this turned out to be the very woman who Deborah had prophesied would end Sisera's life (4:17-22).

## VERSE 16

**Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth of the Nations, and the whole army of Sisera fell by the sword; not a single man was left.**

Although Barak and his troops were not equipped with chariots or horses, they clearly had the upper hand in the battle. Energized by the prophetic word through Deborah, the Israelites **pursued** Sisera's retreating forces.

The Canaanite soldiers were in serious trouble, and they knew it. Their opponents, the Israelites, had gained the advantage by attacking first and hard. The Canaanites' most terrifying weapons were rendered useless, and their commanding general was gone. Faced with these realities, the Canaanite troops panicked and attempted to return to the protective defenses of their fortress city, **Harosheth of the Nations.**

The Israelite soldiers probably were on foot. However, they managed to overtake the fleeing Canaanites and to kill **the whole army of Sisera.** The Israelite victory was so thorough that **not a single** [Canaanite] **man was left.** That day the Lord won an impressive battle using two unlikely but willing servants: Deborah and Barak. In the days following the great battle at the Wadi Kishon, "the power of the Israelites continued to increase against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him" (Judg. 4:24). The Lord had restored His people to freedom.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Chariots" on pages 278-279 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are some things people today might be tempted to trust in for ultimate security rather than trusting in God? What are one or two takeaways from this Bible study that you have learned about trusting in God and obeying His commands?

# TIMID WARRIOR

God molds His people into mature believers through acts of service to Him.

Baseball was one of my passions as a young boy. I loved baseball in part because my father loved baseball. He played for a number of years on a church softball team in the summertime, and we (his family) attended many games to watch him play. My affection for the national pastime grew by leaps and bounds in 1963 when I received for my birthday a brand new baseball glove with major leaguer Ernie Broglio's signature on it. That glove instantly became one of my prized possessions. First of all, it was a left-handed glove; I happened to be a left-handed player. Second, the glove was made of real leather. I can still recall its distinctive smell. Third, the glove had a pro-style pocket. I didn't know exactly what that meant at the time, but I was sure it had to be good—like an actual professional baseball player's glove!

When I slipped the glove on my hand for the first time, however, I was startled. It was so stiff! I didn't have the hand strength to close the glove. Dad quickly explained that the new glove needed to be worked—rubbed with a special kind of oil, stretched, shaped, and pounded. Only after the glove had been “broken in” could it live up to its pro-style potential. All that summer and the next I worked my glove. Eventually, just as Dad said it would, the glove became limber and formed a pocket that I could open and close around a baseball with ease.

What does my childhood glove have to do with this Bible study? Just this: as the glove needed to be worked and molded to develop its full, pro-style potential, similarly the Lord works to mold His people into the mature spiritual servants He wants them to be. Often that process includes God's stretching believers to do things they don't think they're capable of doing.

The Lord's promise to us as believers is that He will be with us throughout the demanding process of spiritual growth. We can trust Him to supply the power that we need to serve Him and accomplish His purposes. We can trade our fears for greater faith. This truth brings us to consider the biblical account of Gideon, a timid Israelite whose faith the Lord worked and stretched, so that Gideon might become the leader God's people desperately needed.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JUDGES 6:1–12:15

These seven chapters chronicle the Israelites' continuing slide into spiritual chaos, as well as the Lord's repeated raising up of judges to deliver His people from their oppressors. Seven judge-deliverers are included in these chapters. The biblical writer presented two of them—Gideon and Jephthah [JEF tuh]—in extended narrative accounts. The other five deliverers named in these chapters judged Israel for a total of 70 years, yet their stories comprise only 13 of the 230 total verses. For this reason, judges such as Tola [TOH luh] and Jair [JAY uhr] (10:1-5), as well as Ibzan [IB zan], Elon [EE lahn], and Abdon [AB dahn] (12:8-15), are sometimes referred to as “minor” judges. Gideon (6:1–8:35) and Jephthah (11:1–12:7), on the other hand, are sometimes called “major” judges because of the lengthier accounts of them.

Following the account of Gideon's exploits in 6:1–8:35, Judges 9 tells how Gideon's son, Abimelech [uh BIM uh lek], proclaimed himself king over Israel after murdering his brothers. However, the Lord did not allow such an illicit kingship to endure over His people. Abimelech was later killed, along with all the conspirators who helped him ascend to the throne of Israel by force.

This session focuses on two passages, 6:11-16 and 6:25-32, within the extended account of Gideon's judgeship. A brief outline of 6:1–8:35 can help put into perspective Gideon's actions that the biblical writer described in the two focal passages:

- Hordes of Midianite and other marauding groups swarmed into Israelite territory, laying waste to the land, driving the Israelites into poverty, and causing them to cry out to the Lord for help (6:1-10).
- The Lord called a timid, reluctant Gideon to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors (6:11-24).
- Gideon obeyed the Lord in tearing down his father's altar to the pagan god Baal (6:25-32).
- Gideon gained assurance concerning the Lord's help by twice using a piece of fleece as a sign (6:33-40).
- God enabled Gideon and his army of 300 specially selected warriors to rout Israel's oppressors, destroying many retreating enemy soldiers in a pincer movement (7:1–8:21).
- Gideon rejected an effort by grateful Israelites to establish him as king over Israel. Later, however, Gideon erred by creating a golden ephod that in time came to be used as an idol, leading the Israelites to sink back into idolatry after Gideon's death (8:22-35).

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## UNSURE AND UNTESTED (Judg. 6:11-16)

The people of Israel sinned against God by abandoning Him and worshipping other gods. Now they were feeling the pain of His judgment. God's punishment came in the form of a seven-year period of oppression by the Midianites.

The Midianites were distantly kin to the Israelites. Their ancestor, Midian, was Abraham's son by Keturah [keh TYOO ruh] (Gen. 25:1-2). Nevertheless, the Midianites had erratic dealings with the people of Israel throughout the years. Midianite nomads took Joseph off his brothers' hands and sold him as a slave in Egypt (Gen. 37:28,36). Yet Moses found refuge in the territory of Midian and married a daughter of the Midianite priest Reuel (Ex. 2:16-21; also known as Jethro). When Moses later led the Israelites through the territory near Edom on the way to the promised land, the Midianites joined with the Moabites in tempting the people of Israel to worship Baal. This led the Lord to command Moses to destroy the Midianites (Num. 25:16-18). By the time of Gideon, the Midianites along with other groups were sending raiding parties into the land, constantly terrorizing the people of Israel.

### VERSE 11

**The Angel of the LORD came, and He sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash, the Abiezrite. His son Gideon was threshing wheat in the wine vat in order to hide it from the Midianites.**

The people of Israel had abandoned God, but God had not abandoned them. In a merciful response to His people's cries for help, **the Angel of the LORD came to Ophrah** [AHF ruh], a village located in the Jezreel Valley southwest of the Sea of Galilee—thus, in the heartland of Israel. The town and its surrounding area was part of the land allotment given to Abiezer [AY bigh EE zuhr] of the tribe of Manasseh (see Josh. 17:2). **Joash, the Abiezrite** [AY bigh-EZ right], probably was the head of this family at the time. The significance of the Angel's sitting **under the oak** ("terebinth," ESV) was not specified. Trees of similar type were sometimes used as markers for graves (Gen. 35:8), as landmarks (1 Sam. 10:3), or as locations where pagan rituals were conducted (Hos. 4:13).

Who exactly was *the Angel of the LORD*? In Scripture, both the Hebrew and Greek terms rendered "angel" literally mean "messenger." Accordingly, the appearance of angels in Bible times usually involved heavenly creatures sent from God to deliver a message or to execute a decree—whether of judgment,

deliverance, or both. However, many Bible students conclude that appearances of *the Angel of the LORD* (or “the angel of God”) in Old Testament times were examples of a theophany [thee AHF uh nee], the Lord God’s appearing in a generally human-like form. (This conclusion is supported by a follow-up reference to “the LORD” in Judg. 6:14.) A number of Bible translations thus use the capitalized word “Angel” to indicate that this particular messenger was to be associated directly with the Lord God (or the preexistent Christ).

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Theophany” on page 1586 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Since God is omnipresent (present everywhere at all times) in His creation, how is it possible that His people can be more or less aware of His presence at certain times? Since the incarnation of Jesus Christ, what are some ways that God makes His presence known to believers?

The person with whom the Angel intended to talk was Joash’s **son Gideon**. At the moment, Gideon was busy **threshing wheat in the wine vat**. This would have been an unusual scene: grain threshing usually took place on high ground, such as on a hilltop, where workers repeatedly tossed wheat stalks in the air to let the winds separate chaff from grain. Wine vats, on the other hand, were dug in lower areas where streams of juice from trampled grapes could drain into the vat for temporary storage.

Why was Gideon threshing wheat in a wine vat? He was doing so **in order to hide it from the Midianites**. For seven years the Midianites had been herding their cattle and camels into the Israelites’ fields for grazing, leaving the Israelites impoverished and without food (6:4-6). Gideon’s only hope was to get ahead of the pillagers and do his work in the most unlikely place.

### VERSE 12

**Then the Angel of the LORD appeared to him and said: “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”**

The wine vat where Gideon worked probably was not far from the tree where **the Angel of the LORD** had sat down. Gideon evidently did not notice the visitor until *the Angel appeared to him*. After all, Gideon was trying to avoid being seen. The sudden appearance of the unexpected visitor no doubt startled and frightened Gideon. However, the Angel sought to ease Gideon’s fears with the calming affirmation, **“The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”** Many of the great leaders of God’s people received a similar comforting

word of assurance concerning the Lord's favorable presence: Abraham (Gen. 21:22); Isaac (26:3); Jacob (31:3); Moses (Ex. 3:12); Joshua (Josh. 1:5); David (2 Sam. 7:3); and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8).

The phrase *mighty warrior* (“mighty man of valor,” ESV) seemed ironic when applied to Gideon. No one looking at Gideon as he crouched low in the wine vat would have thought he looked like a mighty warrior or a prominent man. However, the Lord saw potential in Gideon that no one else saw—not even Gideon. With God's help, that potential would soon become a reality.

### VERSE 13

**Gideon said to Him, “Please Sir, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened? And where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about? They said, ‘Hasn’t the LORD brought us out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and handed us over to Midian.”**

The words **Please Sir** (“Oh my Lord,” KJV; “Pardon me, my lord,” NIV) reveal that Gideon, while respectful of his visitor, was not truly aware of the Angel's identity. The word rendered *Sir* is the Hebrew term *adonai* [ad oh NIGH], which was occasionally used in Scripture in reference to God (Judg. 13:8), but often was used simply as a respectful form of address concerning other people (see Gen. 18:12; 40:7; 2 Kings 2:5; Neh. 3:5).

Gideon revealed also that he was unable to readily agree with the Angel's assuring declaration. His cynical retort sounds similar to those complaints by some of God's people throughout history who question His presence and help whenever they encounter tough times. Gideon could not “see” the Lord's presence; he could see only Israel's continual suffering (**all this**) at the hands of the Midianites.

Moreover, Gideon began to question the relevance—if not the truthfulness—of God's mighty deeds in the past. God might have miraculously rescued a former generation of Israelites from Egyptian slavery, fed His people with manna in the wilderness, and broken down fortress walls to give Israel the promised land, but **where** [were] **all His wonders** now? The way Gideon saw the situation in his day, the Lord had **abandoned** (“forsaken,” KJV, ESV) His people **to Midian**.

### VERSE 14

**The LORD turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and deliver Israel from the power of Midian. Am I not sending you?”**

Gideon had challenged God; now God responded to Gideon's challenge. Interestingly, the biblical writer revealed explicitly here that the Angel was a representation of **the LORD** Himself. (Compare Abraham's similar experience in Gen. 22:11-12.) To see, hear, and speak to the Angel of the Lord was the equivalent of having as direct a conversation with Almighty God as was safe for a human being (see Ex. 33:18-20).

The response Gideon heard likely was not what he expected. The Angel told him: **“Go in the strength you have and deliver Israel from the power of Midian. Am I not sending you?”** The phrase *in the strength you have* possibly could be understood in the sense that Gideon possessed more power than he thought. More likely, however, the phrase was a call for Gideon to act in faith. That is, the Lord was commissioning Gideon. Therefore, if Gideon would simply step out in obedient faith (*the strength you have*), he could count on the Lord to help him **deliver Israel from the power of Midian**. The Lord would demonstrate His living presence among His people, but it would be done in a most surprising way—by working through timid Gideon!

#### VERSE 15

**He said to Him, “Please, Lord, how can I deliver Israel? Look, my family is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house.”**

Gideon's sense of personal inadequacy ran deep. He did not make a connection between the commission to “go ... and deliver” and the Lord's assurance of victory. Gideon was sure that he didn't have the resources within himself to **deliver Israel**. Moreover, in his eyes at least, Gideon's **family** (“clan,” ESV, NIV) was **the weakest** (“poor,” KJV) **in Manasseh**. This claim may have been an example of exaggerated humility often used in the ancient Near East. Nevertheless, having little influence at the tribal level could make raising an army quite difficult. Finally, Gideon reminded the Angel that he was **the youngest** son in his **father's house**. In a patriarchal society, the family pecking order was firmly established by tradition. For Gideon to assert military leadership could provoke serious backlash from his family.

Humility toward God is an appropriate response when it leads to obedience and greater faith in His ability. Gideon's response, however, showed a lack of faith, not greater faith. Gideon was making excuses, and the Lord knew it.

#### VERSE 16

**“But I will be with you,” the LORD said to him. “You will strike Midian down as if it were one man.”**

The Lord reasserted as a promise—**I will be with you**—the same declaration the Angel had made at the start of the encounter with Gideon (Judg. 6:12). All of the excuses Gideon had raised about his inabilities would be overcome by the Lord's power. The Lord was an infinitely greater resource, and the Lord foretold the certain outcome: Gideon would **strike Midian down as if it were one man** ("leaving none alive," NIV).

### **A FIRST STEP** (Judg. 6:25-27)

Still wanting to be assured, Gideon asked for and received a miraculous sign of God's favor from the Angel of the Lord (6:17-24). He would ask for additional signs before the mission was complete. At this point, however, Gideon was encouraged enough to take a first step of obedient faith.

#### **VERSE 25**

**On that very night the LORD said to him, "Take your father's young bull and a second bull seven years old. Then tear down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.**

The words **that very night** likely referred to the evening following Gideon's call and commissioning. His overall mission was to deliver Israel from Midianite oppression. For that to happen, however, Gideon needed to start by making some changes at home. Idol worship had led to Israel's oppression in the first place, and Gideon's own father operated a pagan shrine on family land! If the Israelites were to be delivered from oppression, repentance had to start with Gideon and his family.

Gideon received a detailed set of instructions. He was to **take [his] father's young bull and a second bull seven years old** ("thy father's young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old," KJV). Bible students have long debated the number of bulls that Gideon was to take, especially because the *young bull* does not appear to be mentioned again in the narrative. The so-called *second bull*, however, played a prominent role later as a sacrifice. One view of 6:25 suggests that Gideon needed two bulls to **tear down the altar of Baal** that belonged to his father, but only the *second bull* would subsequently be used as a sacrifice.

Another view—one represented in the King James Version rendering—concludes there was only one bull. That animal had three characteristics. First, it was a *young bull*, a bullock, that belonged to Gideon's father. Second, the bull was a *second bull*. The Hebrew term rendered *second* may come from a root word that means "exalted, of high rank." Rather than referring to multiple animals, therefore, the phrase referred to the bull's being a prized animal.

Third, it was *seven years old*, an age that coincided precisely with the number of years the Israelites had suffered under Midianite oppression (6:1).

Gideon was commanded to *tear down the altar of Baal* and also to **cut down the Asherah** [uh SHEE ruh] **pole beside it**. These were Canaanite deities, and for Gideon's family to maintain these idols was a breaking of the First and Second Commandments. Israel's judge-deliverer must set the example in turning from idolatry and returning to the Lord.

#### VERSE 26

**Build a well-constructed altar to the LORD your God on the top of this rock. Take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah pole you cut down."**

Gideon needed to tear down the elements of false worship in his life and family. Then, in a positive act of faith, he needed to **build a well-constructed altar** ("a proper kind of altar," NIV) **to the LORD**. The words **your God** indicate that Gideon and his family needed to make a choice like the one Joshua had put to the Israelites at Shechem (Josh. 24:14-15). The phrase **on the top of this rock** probably referred to the place where the Baal altar stood. Thus, Gideon was to replace the false with the true, the perverted with the pure.

Further, Gideon was to use **the wood of the Asherah pole** as fuel for a fire on which to offer his father's prized bull (**the second bull**) as a **burnt offering**. These actions would show outwardly what Gideon had already decided in his heart. He was turning away from pagan idol worship and turning to faithful obedience of the one true God. This was nothing short of a prefiguring of the salvation God would provide ultimately in Jesus Christ—a transformation that the apostle Peter described in this way: "Therefore repent and turn back, so that your sins may be wiped out, that seasons of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

#### VERSE 27

**So Gideon took 10 of his male servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his father's household and the men of the city to do it in the daytime, he did it at night.**

Gideon knew that doing **as the LORD had told him** was bound to provoke hostile reactions from **his father's household and the men of the city**. Demolishing a pagan community shrine would not be politically correct. It could lead to a loss of income for Gideon's family, not to mention the disruption of their idol worship. For these reasons, Gideon **was too afraid** to carry out the Lord's command in broad daylight, so **he did it at night**.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

In what ways did your parents influence your understanding of God and your belief in Jesus Christ as Savior? How did they help you grow in your Christian faith? What could you say to help someone whose family background was non-Christian turn to faith in Christ or grow in faith?

### A FATHER'S DEFENSE (Judg. 6:28-32)

#### VERSES 28-29

**When the men of the city got up in the morning, they found Baal's altar torn down, the Asherah pole beside it cut down, and the second bull offered up on the altar that had been built. They said to each other, "Who did this?" After they made a thorough investigation, they said, "Gideon son of Joash did it."**

The **men of the city** discovered the handiwork of Gideon and his helpers early the next day (**in the morning**). One can imagine that the townspeople were shocked; they considered the act to be something akin to a religious hate crime of the highest degree. Yet this was more than mere vandalism of their pagan altar. A new **altar ... had been built**, and a burnt offering had been sacrificed on it. The burning question was **Who did this?**

The phrase **made a thorough investigation** ("enquired and asked," KJV; "searched and inquired," ESV; "carefully investigated," NIV) represents a combination of two Hebrew verbs for emphasis. The first verb may indicate that the men inquired of their pagan god for information; the second verb probably indicates they searched for clues and interviewed possible witnesses. In any case, they rightly concluded that **Gideon son of Joash did it**.

#### VERSE 30

**Then the men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he tore down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it."**

Having reached a conclusion, **the men of the city** approached Gideon's father, **Joash**, for retribution. The Law of Moses stated that "fathers are not to be put to death for their children or children for their fathers" (Deut. 24:16). Nevertheless, the men demanded that Joash **bring out** [his] **son** so

that Gideon might be executed for his “crimes.” These men failed to see the utter hypocrisy of their verdict. They were breakers of God’s law, yet they demanded the death of one who sought to turn God’s people back to the Lord and to reestablish faithfulness to the Lord’s covenant.

### VERSE 31

**But Joash said to all who stood against him, “Would you plead Baal’s case for him? Would you save him? Whoever pleads his case will be put to death by morning! If he is a god, let him plead his own case because someone tore down his altar.”**

One man stood between Gideon and death; that man was his father, **Joash**. Joash owned the sacred site that had been desecrated, and his valuable bull was the animal Gideon had sacrificed. Amazingly, however, Joash turned out to be Gideon’s strongest defender. Evidently the father had been moved to repentance by his son’s bold action in the Lord’s name.

Joash rebuked the angry townspeople for trying to **plead Baal’s case for him**. A true deity should be able to **plead his own case because someone tore down his altar**. In other words, Joash realized that Baal was not (and had not been) a god after all. Like all idols, Baal was a god only in the minds of those who worshiped him.

### VERSE 32

**That day, Gideon’s father called him Jerubbaal, saying, “Let Baal plead his case with him,” because he tore down his altar.**

To commemorate the removal of idolatry and a return to the Lord in his family, Gideon’s father gave his son the name **Jerubbaal** [JER uhb BAY uh], meaning “let Baal contend.” From that day forward, to speak Gideon’s name was to taunt Baal. Gideon would go forward as the Lord’s mighty warrior to deliver Israel from Midianite oppression. New doubts and challenges would arise, but the Lord would prove His faithfulness to His people.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What is the meaning of your given name (first name)? For what reason did your parents choose this name for you? Read Revelation 3:12 and reflect on Christ’s promise to write “the name of My God and the name of the city of My God ... and My new name” on believers who endure in faith. How can this promise from Christ help you grow in your faith now?

# COMPROMISED POTENTIAL

God keeps both His promises and His warnings.

I have renamed one of the rooms in my split-level house. I call it the Bergen Museum of Unrealized Potential. From a street view, most people would recognize it as the garage. It's a ground-level room with garage doors for the main entry. Inside is plenty of evidence that the room is indeed a garage. Two cars rest quietly in the room at night along with a grass-stained lawnmower, a rack of garden tools that usually bear traces of last year's mud, and shelves stacked with cardboard boxes and plastic containers.

Why do I insist on calling this room something other than my garage? I do so because the room is chock-full of "U.P."—unrealized potential. For example, a dust-covered bag of golf clubs stands motionless in one corner. I last used the clubs about 10 years ago. Sitting on the shelves in a closet are hundreds of unused DVDs that I bought from an online auction site. Also in the closet are a remote weather station I never set up and three jigsaw puzzles still sealed in their original wrapping. Hanging on wall pegs in another area of the room are the reciprocating saw I used for one project about 12 years ago; a 15-year-old tap and dye kit in its original packaging; an electronic stud finder I'm sure to need some day; a powerful but never used spotlight; a like-new, 34-year-old electric ice cream maker; and a 5-year-old box of tulip bulbs still waiting to be planted. I could go on, but the point is made.

The more I look around my garage, the more I wonder if it says more about me than about the many unused items. Similarly, the last judge in the Book of Judges was a man who seemingly had unlimited potential as a deliverer of God's people. Dedicated from birth as a Nazirite, Samson grew to be stronger than a lion and cleverer than a fox. When God's Spirit took control of him, the enemies of Israel quaked in fear. But in the end Samson proved to be a flawed hero. His great potential became infected by spiritual compromise, and he (as well as the people of Israel) paid a terrible price. As believers, we can learn much from Samson's story about the dangers of spiritual compromise.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JUDGES 13:1–21:29

The final nine chapters of the Book of Judges contain three distinct narrative units: the tragic life story of Samson (13:1–16:31); the account of a man of the tribe of Ephraim who hired a Levite as his personal priest, and who then lost the Levite’s services to the tribe of Dan (17:1–18:31); and the sordid story of moral degeneration and near extermination of the tribe of Benjamin (19:1–21:25). The conclusion of the section—and indeed of the entire Book of Judges—points to the moral and spiritual chaos that characterized the time of the judges. It was a time when “everyone did whatever he wanted” (21:25).

In introducing the final section of the Book of Judges, the story of Samson began on a note of hope buried in a dark refrain. The note of hope was that the Lord would enable a formerly childless Israelite couple to give birth to a special son. The dark refrain was that the Israelites yet again were doing “what was evil in the LORD’s sight” (13:1). Consequently, God handed them over to suffer oppression for 40 years at the hands of their enemies. This time the oppressors of Israel were the Philistines.

The Philistines were a pagan, warlike people who migrated across the Mediterranean Sea and settled, among other places, along the western coast of Canaan. By the time Moses led the Israelites on their exodus from Egypt, the Philistines were already established in a strong alliance of city-states. In fact, the presence of Philistine garrisons along the coastal route from Egypt to Canaan was one reason God instructed Moses to lead the Israelites on the longer, more demanding trek through the wilderness (Ex. 13:17-18). The Philistines were a recurring threat to Israel throughout the time of the judges, during the reign of Saul (1 Sam. 13:1-5), and well into the time of King David’s reign (2 Sam. 21:15-22). In Samson’s time, the Lord used the Philistines as an agent of disciplinary punishment against His wayward people.

Another significant feature of Samson’s story was that he lived from birth under a Nazirite [NAZ uh right] vow (Judg. 13:5). Such vows involved following a demanding set of spiritual disciplines as an expression of devotion and, in some cases, serving God by carrying out a special task (see Num. 6:1-21). Samson’s special assignment—revealed even before he was born—was that Samson would “begin to save Israel from the power of the Philistines” (Judg. 13:5).

A brief outline of Judges 13–16 highlights the context of the two passages focused on in this session:

- Samson’s birth as the Lord’s purposeful gift to a childless couple of the Dan tribe (13:1-25);

- Samson's strange yet divinely useful marriage to a Philistine woman of Timnah (14:1-20);
- Samson's further revenge on the Philistines when his wife was given in marriage to another man (15:1-20);
- Samson's dangerous dalliance with a prostitute in the Philistine city of Gaza (16:1-3);
- Samson's love for and betrayal by a woman named Delilah, resulting in Samson's abandonment of his Nazirite vow and loss of strength (16:4-20);
- Samson's bitter defeat, enslavement, and final act of suicide-vengeance against many Philistines in their pagan temple (16:21-30);
- Samson's burial in his father's tomb (16:31).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### PLEASE TELL ME (Judg. 16:4-6)

By this point in the account, Samson was a grown man, and the Spirit of the Lord was energizing him with great physical prowess to create chaos within Philistine society (13:25; 14:5-6,19; 15:14-16). At the same time, Samson also was demonstrating a dangerous moral flaw: an impure passion for Philistine women (14:1-3; 16:1-3). While the Lord continued to work through Samson despite his foolish choices, disaster lay ahead for the young man.

### VERSE 4

**Some time later, he fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived in the Sorek Valley.**

The phrase **some time later** refers to an unspecified period of time after Samson's shameful overnight liaison with a prostitute in Gaza (16:1-3). His presence in that city became known, and a gang of Philistines planned to kill him at the break of dawn. Samson must have suspected the plot, however; he decided to leave Gaza at midnight, ripping away the massive city gate on his way out and taking it with him as a prize to the Israelite city of Hebron.

How long Samson intended to stay in Hebron is unclear. This much was certain: the man who from birth had been dedicated to live under the strict disciplines of a Nazirite vow to the Lord could not long resist the siren calls of Philistine women. This time **he fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived in the Sorek [SOH rek] Valley**. She was the first and only woman in the Samson account to be identified by name (compare 13:24; 14:1; 16:1), yet the name's background and meaning are as mysterious as the woman. Some Bible scholars relate the name *Delilah* to an Arabic word that can

be rendered “flirty girl.” Other scholars suggest that the name relates to a similar-sounding Hebrew word meaning “night.”

Bible scholars also have differing views as to whether Delilah was an Israelite or Philistine woman. The Sorek Valley ran westward from the hill country of Judah near Jerusalem to the coastal plains in Philistine territory. It was a natural, though constantly contested, boundary between the northernmost Philistine cities and the initial area settled by the Israelite tribe of Dan (Samson’s tribe). Zorah [ZOH ruh], Samson’s hometown, lay along the edge of this valley. Yet so did Timnah, the Philistine-held town where Samson first sought to obtain a young Philistine woman as his wife (14:1). That Delilah also lived in the Sorek Valley does not by itself settle the question of her ethnicity. On the other hand, her readiness to conspire with Philistine leaders, plus Samson’s apparent penchant for Philistine women, strongly suggests that she was a Philistine and not an Israelite.

Samson *fell in love with* (“he loved,” KJV, ESV) Delilah. The Hebrew term used here for *love* has a broad range of meanings—from friendship to passionate desire. Interestingly, in the earlier account of Samson’s would-be marriage to an unnamed Philistine woman, this same term appears only in her tearful accusation against Samson: “You hate me and don’t love me!” (14:16). Even less of a case of love was Samson’s visit to the prostitute in Gaza. The text there simply states that Samson “went to bed with her” (16:1; literally, “he went in to her”). Whatever else might have been meant by the phrase *fell in love with*, it showed that Samson had compromised his heart emotionally and spiritually to a partnership with pagan beliefs. He showed that God’s commands meant little to him anymore.

## VERSE 5

**The Philistine leaders went to her and said, “Persuade him to tell you where his great strength comes from, so we can overpower him, tie him up, and make him helpless. Each of us will then give you 1,100 pieces of silver.”**

If Samson was trying to conceal his identity during his visit to the Sorek Valley, his efforts failed. News of his presence in the region soon spread to **the Philistine leaders**. This group made the decision to use Samson’s misguided interest in women as a snare to capture him. The Bible does not state here the number of Philistine leaders involved, but one suggestion is that these leaders were the five rulers of the major Philistine city-states (see Josh 13:3).

At the center of the Philistine leaders’ plot was Delilah. Accordingly, representatives from the group of leaders came to her with a plan and a promise. Delilah’s part in their plan was simple: she was to use her womanly

charm to persuade Samson to tell her **where his great strength comes from**. Once that secret was known, the leaders were confident they could **overpower him, tie him up, and make him helpless**.

For her assistance in capturing Samson, Delilah would be rewarded handsomely. Each of the Philistine rulers promised to give her **1,100 pieces of silver**. Assuming there were five rulers, Delilah stood to receive quite a fortune. According to the table of monetary values for persons in Lev. 27:2-7, Delilah would have gained enough silver to purchase 550 female slaves in their late teens or 110 adult male slaves. As a contrast to Delilah's potential wealth, consider the fact that the Law of Moses assumed many Israelites would be too poor to make an animal sacrifice of even a single year-old lamb or goat (Lev. 5:7,11).

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Wealth and Materialism" on pages 1661-1662 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Then read 1 Timothy 6:10. How does this New Testament verse serve as a commentary on Judges 16:5?

### VERSE 6

**So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me, where does your great strength come from? How could someone tie you up and make you helpless?"**

Delilah was given the opportunity of a lifetime. She knew it and accepted it without hesitation. All Delilah had to do was persuade Samson to give her two small bits of information, details so small and uncomplicated that they could be told to her in less than a minute.

Not surprisingly, the next word in the narrative following the rulers' offer to Delilah is a verb depicting her at work on the challenge: **So Delilah said**. She undoubtedly knew that Samson was in love with her (16:4) and that his favorable emotions would give her leverage to pry out the desired information. Her request was simple, direct, and polite: **Please tell me, where does your great strength come from? How could someone tie you up and make you helpless?** In accordance with the request of the Philistine leaders, Delilah fashioned her questions so as to obtain two vital pieces of information—the source of Samson's strength and the way in which he could be successfully restrained.

Delilah's inclusion of the Hebrew word rendered *please* ("I pray thee," KJV) was not merely a matter of politeness. In most ancient patriarchal

cultures, women were expected to address adult men only in respectful ways. The Hebrew word translated *make ... helpless* could also mean “afflict” or “humiliate.” Thus, although Delilah spoke respectfully to Samson, her second question should have given him great pause. In fact, Samson toyed with Delilah for a time, giving several misleading answers to her second question.

### **IF YOU LOVE ME** (Judg. 16:13-15)

As Delilah pressed Samson for the secret of his strength and a way to successfully bind him, Samson ignored her first question. He focused instead on her second question, suggesting initially that he could be bound with “seven fresh bowstrings” (16:7). Then he claimed—when the bowstrings didn’t work (16:8-9)—that “new ropes that have never been used” (16:11) would render him helpless. All the while, Delilah became more frustrated and demanded that Samson tell her the truth (16:13).

#### **VERSE 13**

**Then Delilah said to Samson, “You have mocked me all along and told me lies! Tell me how you can be tied up.” He told her, “If you weave the seven braids on my head with the web of a loom—”**

Delilah’s determination was as sturdy as Samson’s stubbornness. The gentle, respectful tone of her initial request was replaced with a hard-edged directness. No longer did she use the humble approach that tradition demanded. She issued a cold, blunt command: **Tell me how you can be tied up!**

Frustration was not all that Delilah felt. She felt humiliated, as the sentence that preceded her command made clear. Samson was not taking her seriously; he had **mocked [her] all along and told [her] lies**. It was the height of irony, of course, that Delilah protested to Samson about being mocked and lied to. After all, she was doing all she could to betray him to the Philistine leaders for a promise of great wealth!

Samson responded to Delilah’s complaints about his deceitfulness with yet another misleading suggestion. He suggested that he could be bound and rendered helpless by weaving **the seven braids on [his] head with the web of a loom**. In the Septuagint [sep TOO uh jint], an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, these additional words about Samson’s braids appear at the end of verse 13 and the start of verse 14: “and fasten them with a pin into the wall and I will become weak and be like any other man. And while he was sleeping, Delilah wove the seven braids on his head into the loom.”

Interestingly, with this third misleading suggestion Samson actually moved closer to revealing the true secret of his strength. He suggested that his hair was somehow involved. Evidently Samson was beginning to wither

under Delilah's incessant questioning. Because Samson lived under a Nazirite vow from his birth (Judg. 13:5), his hair had never been cut. As a result, Samson's hair must have been exceptionally long. To keep it under control he kept it put up in *seven braids* ("locks," KJV, ESV). He suggested to Delilah that if one were to weave his seven braids together and pin them tight against his head with a weaver's pin, then he would lose his great strength.

#### VERSE 14

**She fastened the braids with a pin and called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are here!" He awoke from his sleep and pulled out the pin, with the loom and the web.**

The series of efforts to betray Samson to the Philistines probably took place over several days if not weeks. Nevertheless, Delilah wasted no time in testing the truthfulness of Samson's latest claim. As soon as he slept at her house again, she followed his instructions to the letter. She wove his hair on the loom and then **fastened the braids with a pin**. Presumably she concluded that the secret had finally been uncovered. The key to rendering Samson helpless was to bind his head and hair, not his hands or feet.

Delilah then went through the same routine as before (16:9,12). She signaled Samson's attackers by shouting, **"Samson, the Philistines are here!"** However, to her (and the Philistines') surprise, the result was no different than before. Samson **awoke from his sleep and pulled out the pin, with the loom and the web**. At that moment Samson must have appeared as an undignified mess, his hair embedded in fabric and still attached to the loom's main beam. Yet his strength had not ebbed away. He was as strong and untamed as ever, and the source of his strength remained shrouded in mystery. Delilah must have felt dumbfounded at being fooled yet again.

#### VERSE 15

**"How can you say, 'I love you,'" she told him, "when your heart is not with me? This is the third time you have mocked me and not told me what makes your strength so great!"**

In her humiliation, Delilah used a highly emotional tactic to shame Samson. She knew that he spoke of being in love with her (16:4). Now she openly questioned that love. Ironically, Delilah's question regarding Samson's love was a haunting indictment of the way many Israelites were treating the Lord. That is, the people said they loved the Lord, but their hearts were not with Him. The dialogue and actions of Samson and Delilah were a sorry portrait of just how perverse Israelite culture had become in the time of the judges.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Love” on pages 1054-1055 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Contrast the actions of Samson and Delilah to the characteristics of love the apostle Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. What does it mean to you not only to say that you love the Lord but also to have your heart with Him?

### THE PHILISTINES ARE HERE (Judg. 16:16-20)

#### VERSE 16

**Because she nagged him day after day and pleaded with him until she wore him out,**

Delilah still was not willing to admit defeat. Instead, she redoubled her efforts to draw the truth out of Samson. She pulled out all the stops. She **nagged him day after day** (“pressed him daily,” KJV; “pressed him hard,” ESV). The Hebrew verb translated *nagged* appears in Job 28:2 to describe the process of smelting ore with intense heat and straining. Delilah turned up the heat on Samson all day, every day. The phrase rendered *day after day* literally means “all the days.” Delilah applied nonstop pressure: she questioned, prodded, needled, demanded, and **pleaded with** (“urged,” KJV) Samson to tell her the secret of his strength.

Eventually Samson’s resistance melted under Delilah’s withering pressure. **She wore him out** (“his soul was vexed to death,” ESV; “he was sick to death of it,” NIV). The Hebrew statement rendered *she wore him out* literally reads “it was short, namely his soul (or life), to death.” Samson could take no more of Delilah’s constant nagging. The man with the world’s strongest body had become the man with the world’s weakest soul.

#### VERSE 17

**he told her the whole truth and said to her, “My hair has never been cut, because I am a Nazirite to God from birth. If I am shaved, my strength will leave me, and I will become weak and be like any other man.”**

Samson finally relented and told Delilah **the whole truth** (“all his heart,” KJV, ESV; “everything,” NIV). Previously he had tricked her by offering

misleading answers to her second question about what could be used to successfully bind him. It was always the first question that pointed to the true secret of his strength. Nothing could possibly keep him bound as long as the answer to the first question remained hidden. Sadly, Samson was about to reveal that answer.

Samson's secret was rooted in three intertwined realities: (1) the reality of the Lord God of Israel; (2) the reality of Samson's spiritual heritage; and (3) the reality of Samson's hair. Delilah could not be expected to understand or appreciate such realities, so Samson began with the most obvious one, his hair. He explained that his hair had **never been cut**. He then proceeded to explain the reason that his hair had attained its extraordinary length. As a sign of spiritual devotion, he had been dedicated as a **Nazirite** [NAZ uh right] **to God from birth**. This reality in turn meant that Samson was called by God to a special task and that he was expected to demonstrate his devotion to God by practicing certain lifelong disciplines—one of which was to leave his hair uncut (see 13:5).

Samson revealed to Delilah that his hair was the key. Shave his head, and his great strength would disappear. He would **become weak and be like any other man**. Samson had previously made this promise, using the same language (16:7,11), but this time he told her the true secret of his strength.

#### VERSE 18

**When Delilah realized that he had told her the whole truth, she sent this message to the Philistine leaders: “Come one more time, for he has told me the whole truth.” The Philistine leaders came to her and brought the money with them.**

Delilah believed that Samson had **told her the whole truth**. Wasting no time, therefore, she sent word to the Philistine rulers to **come one more time** to her house. She may have explained to the **leaders** all that Samson had said, for they did not hesitate to believe her. They not only **came to her**, they also **brought the money** (“the silver,” NIV) **with them**.

#### VERSE 19

**Then she let him fall asleep on her lap and called a man to shave off the seven braids on his head. In this way, she made him helpless, and his strength left him.**

When the Philistine leaders were properly positioned in hiding, Delilah worked her womanly charms on Samson. In the course of their time together, she let him **fall asleep on her lap** (“upon her knees,” KJV). When she was

sure that Samson was fully asleep, she called a man stationed nearby in the building to **shave off the seven braids on his head**. The plan worked exactly as she had hoped, and in this way Delilah made Samson helpless.

Samson's severed braids signified nothing less than his severed vow to God. Not surprisingly, the consequences for him were catastrophic: **his strength left him**.

## VERSE 20

**Then she cried, "Samson, the Philistines are here!" When he awoke from his sleep, he said, "I will escape as I did before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him.**

Delilah had completed the dark deed; now it was time to confirm its results. To do so, she cried out as before, warning Samson that **the Philistines** were in the room, ready to attack him. In response to her outcry, **he awoke from his sleep** and immediately attempted to **escape as [he] did before**.

Judges 16:20 concludes with one of the most tragic statements in all of Scripture: Samson **did not know that the LORD had left him**. This man's greatness in matters of physical strength made him a heroic figure in Israelite history. On the other hand, Samson's dullness in spiritual matters made him one of the most tragic figures in Scripture. Yet even in this dark verse, a ray of hope can be seen. A literal translation of the final phrase reads: "The LORD had turned aside from upon him." What it does not say is that the Lord had abandoned Samson. The Lord's blessing and extraordinary empowerment had been taken away from Samson, but His eternal faithfulness remained. Throughout the Book of Judges the Israelites were described as having abandoned the Lord (see Judg. 2:12-13; 10:6). Not once is it recorded that the Lord forsook His covenant people. Because the Lord was forever present and active among His people, hope remained for Samson too.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Nazirite" on pages 1178-1179 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are some ways that believers today might demonstrate their devotion to Christ? How do these ways compare and contrast to the actions associated with a Nazirite vow? What are some takeaways from this study that help you understand the importance of Christian disciplines?

# FAITH THROUGH TRIALS

God can use life's tragedies to bring about His purposes.

I spent my boyhood in the majestic mountain region around Los Alamos, New Mexico. For almost three decades now, I have lived in northeast Missouri near the Mississippi River. These two regions contrast sharply in many ways. Northeast Missouri is a land of low hills and cool-weather color. In various seasons, visitors can witness vast fields of swaying, nine-foot corn stalks; herds of loping deer; and gaggles of honking geese flying in formation. Or they can sit on a green-carpeted overlook and watch as the waltzing waters of the Mississippi River slide past, while sharp-eyed eagles circle overhead, ready in an instant to dive for a meal of fresh fish.

The natural feature that captures my attention in relation to this Bible study is northeast Missouri's buff-colored limestone cliffs. A long time ago, the limestone in this region formed from underwater pressure on sediment piling up year after year and eventually petrifying. What makes the limestone valuable is that it is used to make some of the world's best cement. Over the years, northeast Missouri's limestone-based cement has been used in hundreds of mammoth construction projects, including the Empire State Building in New York City and the Panama Canal.

Imagine for a moment a conversation that might occur between a field reporter and a polished statue made of northeast Missouri limestone cement (if such a statue could speak). The dialogue might go something like this:

Reporter: *What happened that made you into the famous cement-based statue that you are today?*

Statue: *It began when explosives experts and heavy equipment operators came to the cliffs and shattered our bedrock communities. Big rocks were smashed into small rocks. We were then hauled away to a machine that crushed small rocks into a fine powder. Finally, we were mixed together with a few other elements to form cement.*

Reporter: *What did you learn from this dreadful experience?*

Statue: *One curious but powerful truth: uninvited pain sometimes paves the*

*surest path to unexpected blessing. Our sufferings helped transform us limestone rocks into one of the world's strongest and most useful resources.*

In a similar way, the Book of Ruth shows that even in the tumult and suffering that characterized the time of the judges, God was working to refine the lives and secure the futures of those who trusted in Him. God's grace even reached beyond the borders of Israel to touch the heart of a young Moabite widow. That young woman would come to play a role not only in the lineage of Israel's most beloved king but also in the coming of the Messiah and King of kings, Jesus Christ. Ruth's story declares forcefully that the Sovereign Lord can use even life's bitterest tragedies to bless His people and bring about His eternal purposes.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **RUTH 1:1-22**

The Book of Ruth is sometimes viewed as a love story, and in one sense it is a love story. At its heart, however, the book is an eloquent testimony to the power of two different types of loving family commitments. One type involves an intergenerational relationship—a commitment between a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law. Ruth, a young Moabite widow who had been married to an Israelite man, proved to be a loyal helper in a time of desperate need to her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi. As a result, Ruth not only helped rescue Naomi but also enriched the woman's older years beyond measure. Ruth experienced unforeseen blessings in the process.

The second type of loving family commitment was on the community, or tribal, level. God had made provisions in the law that called for tribal families to take care of those among them who were needy, especially widows and orphans. In the case of the two widows Ruth and Naomi, a distant relative named Boaz stepped forward and committed to marry Ruth. The couple eventually gave birth to a child who restored the family name and property to the line of Naomi's dead husband and sons.

Ruth 1:1-5 sets the stage by summarizing more than a decade of events in a succinct way. Naomi, her husband, and their two sons were forced by a severe famine to leave their home in Bethlehem of Judah and to settle on the eastern side of the Jordan River in Moab. In time, Naomi's husband died, and her two sons married Moabite women, one of whom was Ruth. After 10 years the two sons also died, leaving all three women as widows.

In 1:6-22, the account reveals how Naomi—now destitute—returned to her dead husband's tribal area, with her equally destitute and widowed

daughter-in-law Ruth accompanying her. Naomi initially urged her two widowed daughters-in-law to return to the care of their Moabite families (1:8-9). One of the two young women eventually agreed to Naomi's plea, but Ruth made a remarkable commitment that nothing except death would separate her from her beloved mother-in-law (1:10-17). The two widows received an excited welcome in Bethlehem. Naomi quickly admitted, however, that she had returned home as a bitter, empty, afflicted woman (1:19-22).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### A DESPERATE RETURN (Ruth 1:6-10)

Bereft of her husband and their two sons, all of whom had died, Naomi decided to return to her tribal home in Bethlehem of Judah. Naomi's two Moabite daughters-in-law, also suffering the trauma of widowhood, accompanied Naomi as she began her journey home.

#### VERSE 6

**She and her daughters-in-law prepared to leave the land of Moab, because she had heard in Moab that the LORD had paid attention to His people's need by providing them food.**

Naomi realized that she was now in a desperate situation. Neither she nor her two daughters-in-law had husbands to provide food and protection for the family. To make matters worse, Naomi was an Israelite widow living among a non-Israelite people. No government safety nets existed for the three widows. They were on their own without much hope for the future.

In the midst of those dismal circumstances, however, Naomi heard some news that gave her a tiny ember of hope. She heard that **the LORD had paid attention to His people's need by providing them food** ("in giving them bread," KJV). In other words, the hard famine that drove her family to seek refuge in Moab years earlier had finally subsided. Precious rains had returned; grain crops flourished again; the harvests were plentiful. By returning to Bethlehem, Naomi believed that she could come under the care of One who was greater even than a husband—the Lord Himself. Motivated by that glimmer of hope, Naomi **and her daughters-in-law prepared to leave the land of Moab.**

The decision by Orpah [AWR puh] and Ruth, Naomi's two daughters-in-law, to leave Moab alongside Naomi suggests a couple of important conclusions. First, the young Moabite women had accepted Naomi as an

authority figure in their lives. Even though Naomi was an Israelite, she had earned the two young women's trust. Second, the two Moabite daughters-in-law were willing to put themselves at the mercy of God's people in Israel. They would essentially swap situations with Naomi, becoming strangers in a land not their own just as Naomi had been in Moab.

#### VERSE 7

**She left the place where she had been living, accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, and traveled along the road leading back to the land of Judah.**

Having made preparations for the journey back to Bethlehem, Naomi **left the place where she had been living**. The biblical writer never provided the name of the location in Moab where Naomi and her family had resided. The tribal territory of Reuben lay east of the Jordan River from Bethlehem, and that tribe's lands stretched south as far as the Arnon River, which formed the border with Moab. Some Bible students suggest that Naomi and her family lived more as sojourners in the rural regions of northern Moab—perhaps in a small countryside community consisting of only a few families.

The **road leading back to the land of Judah** probably ran along the eastern coastline of the Dead Sea. It ran northward through the tribal territory of Reuben and intersected with a river crossing near the ruins of Jericho. This portion of the road would have been used by the Israelites as they entered the promised land under Joshua (see Josh. 3:16-17).

#### VERSE 8

**She said to them, “Each of you go back to your mother’s home. May the LORD show faithful love to you as you have shown to the dead and to me.**

Perhaps as the three women reached the northern border of Moab and were about to cross into Israelite territory, Naomi made an important proposal. She proposed that Orpah and Ruth **go back to** their Moabite families. Given the patriarchal culture of the day, one might have expected Naomi to recommend that each one return to her father's home rather than to the **mother's home**. One view concerning Naomi's choice of words was that it formally released the two young women from the responsibility of caring for their mother-in-law and encouraged them to find new husbands (see Ruth 1:9).

From Naomi's standpoint, the proposal meant that the older widow would have to travel alone and unprotected for the remainder of her journey. Evidently her thoughts about the future had turned to the Lord and His

promise of protection, for she proclaimed a blessing over the two young women as part of her goodbye. She knew they had been faithful to her sons as their husbands and to her as their mother-in-law. Accordingly, Naomi prayed for **the LORD** [to] **show** [them] **faithful love** in like measure to their sincere family commitment.

The Hebrew term translated *faithful love* is significant; it is covenant language. That is, *faithful love* was a relationship quality that originated in the Lord's own character and was expected in God's people through the Spirit's empowerment. When the Lord described Himself to Moses at Mount Sinai (see Ex. 34:6-7), He used this term twice in the self-description. Bible translators have used a variety of English terms to try to capture the essence of the word: mercy, kindness, loving-kindness, favor, goodness, good, goodliness, pity, as well as the phrases *faithful love* and steadfast love.

At its heart the word conveys the concept of commitment-based love. It's the kind of love that says to another person, "I commit my life to you; for the rest of my life I will use any resource at my disposal and take any risk needed to help you in your time of need." It's the kind of love that motivates an exhausted working mother to willingly get up at 3 a.m. practically every day for six months to calm and care for a fussy baby. It's the kind of love that motivates an elderly husband to tenderly attend to his homebound, bedridden wife for as long as needed. It was the kind of love Naomi asked God to shower down upon the two young Moabite women.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the articles titled "Kindness" on page 984 and "Loving-kindness" on page 1056 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What were the two Moabite women willing to sacrifice to stay with Naomi? What sacrifices have you made in order to help your family? What sacrifices have you made for the sake of the Christian community in your church?

### VERSE 9

**May the LORD enable each of you to find security in the house of your new husband." She kissed them, and they wept loudly.**

Naomi extended her prayerful blessing concerning Orpah and Ruth to ask **the LORD**, in effect, to give them new husbands. The term translated **security** can also be rendered "resting place." Naomi was praying that the Lord would give the two young women a peaceful, positive future so that they would not have to suffer in grief and poverty for the rest of their lives.

Two interesting features of Naomi's two-pronged blessing was that first it assumed the God of Israel also cared about vulnerable people in nations besides Israel. Secondly, it underscored that the Sovereign Lord was quite capable of working out His desired purposes anywhere in His creation.

Having pronounced the blessing over the young women, Naomi **kissed them**. In most cultures of the ancient Near East, kissing close relatives at moments of greeting or departing signified endearment and acceptance. It was a sign of love, respect, and reverence. In response to Naomi's embraces, the two young women were overcome with emotion; they **wept loudly** ("lifted up their voices and wept," ESV). Their tears provided a glimmering testimony of mutual love for their mother-in-law.

#### VERSE 10

**"No," they said to her. "We will go with you to your people."**

Orpah and Ruth's words to Naomi confirmed the depth of their love and commitment to their mother-in-law. Orpah and Ruth's love for their Israelite mother-in-law was so genuine that for her sake they were willing to leave their birth families, walk away from the familiar cultural surroundings of Moab, and live among a people who might well treat them as unwelcome outsiders. The women's response to Naomi served as an eloquent testimony to the loving nature and selfless character of both women.

#### A BITTER PLEA (Ruth 1:11-14)

#### VERSE 11

**But Naomi replied, "Return home, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands?"**

If Naomi was flattered or moved by the loving words and actions of her daughters-in-law, it didn't show in her response to them. For a second time, she directed Orpah and Ruth to **return home**. Years of struggle, pain, and grief had left thick calluses on Naomi's soul. Mere words—even ones spoken through tears—could not touch her. She would face her pain alone.

Naomi probably was thinking of other considerations as well. She knew, for example, both the customs and the people of her hometown in Judah. Ancient customs, reinforced by the Law of Moses (see Deut. 25:5-10), dictated that these two widows would have to marry members of their late husbands' clan. Naomi may have concluded that her dead husband's male relatives in Judah would never agree to marry her sons' widows, especially in light of the fact that the two widows were Moabite women.

Further, Naomi realized how farfetched the idea was that she might remarry and give birth to two more sons, who would then grow into manhood and take these two widows as their wives. Barring a miracle from the Lord, Naomi simply could not provide two new sons who could become Orpah's and Ruth's husbands.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Kinsman" on page 994 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Why do you think the Lord placed such responsibilities on Israelite families to redeem (rescue) their relatives who had suffered great loss? Read 1 Peter 1:17-21 and reflect on how Jesus fulfilled the role of Kinsman Redeemer for all believers of every tribe, family, or ethnicity.

### VERSES 12-13

**Return home, my daughters. Go on, for I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me to have a husband tonight and to bear sons, would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the LORD's hand has turned against me."**

For the third time in four verses (see 1:8,11) Naomi insisted that her daughters-in-law should **return home** to their Moabite families. The combination of the two verbs rendered *return* and **go on** were emphatic. In effect, Naomi was ordering these two young women to leave her and return to Moab.

To emphasize the command, Naomi provided a more detailed explanation of the reasons why sticking with her was both pointless and useless. First, Naomi was **too old to have another husband**. Bible students have speculated that Naomi may have been at least fifty years old and thus most likely past childbearing age. Second, even if **there was still hope** that by some miracle she could remarry that very day (**tonight**) and begin **to bear sons**, there were other obstacles that would face the two young women.

Naomi asked Orpah and Ruth two simple, interrelated questions. First, would these two young women actually **be willing to wait for** Naomi's two new sons **to grow up**? Consider the strange scenario: if the daughters-in-law stayed with Naomi for twenty or so years, they would have helped raise their future husbands from infancy to adulthood. They would have watched the

two boys pass through childhood and adolescence. In all likelihood, at some point during those years the two women surely would revisit the emotion-driven decision they had made while accompanying Naomi to her homeland. By then they would have thrown away years of their lives as well as the possibility of having found new husbands in Moab.

Naomi's second question linked to the previous one yet also went beyond it. When all the emotional energy had drained out of their decision, would they **restrain** their God-given desires for the blessings associated with remarrying—companionship, intimacy, and the possibility of motherhood? Naomi didn't think it was wise for Orpah and Ruth to even try.

Orpah and Ruth had certainly experienced bitter grief thus far in their lives. Going to Bethlehem with Naomi, however, likely would add to, not soothe, their grief. Naomi predicted that the remainder of her life would be **much too bitter for [them] to share**. She was convinced that **the LORD's hand [had] turned against** (“gone out against,” KJV, ESV) her. Perhaps she concluded that her bitter situation was punishment for her family's fateful decision years earlier to leave the promised land and find refuge in Moab. In Naomi's mind, that divine punishment would continue the rest of her days.

#### VERSE 14

### **Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.**

Naomi had renewed her insistence on parting with her daughters-in-law. The two young women again were overcome with emotion: **they wept loudly**. Naomi would not change her mind, so **Orpah kissed her mother-in-law**. Previously, Naomi had kissed the two young women (1:9). This time, Orpah initiated the kiss, indicating that she was now prepared to obey Naomi's directive.

Unwritten cultural rules older than any of the women on the road that day dictated what should have happened next. If Orpah had bowed to Naomi's wishes, then Ruth could be expected to comply as well. But that's not what happened. Ruth's commitment to Naomi would not be broken. **Ruth clung to her** (“clave unto her,” KJV).

The Hebrew verb rendered *clung to* also can be translated “cleave to,” “bond to,” “hold fast to,” or “keep close to.” The verb first appears in Scripture in Genesis 2:24, where it describes the marriage relationship in terms of a man's leaving his parents and cleaving to his wife. The verb also appears multiple times in Deuteronomy to describe the commitment that God's people are to demonstrate to the Lord (Deut. 10:20; 11:22; 13:5; 30:20). Ruth decided that she would devote herself to care for Naomi no matter what the future brought.

## A LIFELONG PROMISE (Ruth 1:15-18)

### VERSE 15

**Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god. Follow your sister-in-law.”**

The unstoppable force had met an immovable object: Ruth’s unswerving commitment had collided head-on with Naomi’s wall of bitter sorrow. Naomi mounted one last attempt to convince Ruth to return to Moab. The attempt consisted of a concise narrative argument followed by a command. The narrative was short and direct: **your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god**. Naomi’s argument was that Ruth should leave because Orpah did. Both young women had two powerful incentives to return—family and religion. Ruth’s biological family and the idol-god she worshiped in her youth, probably Chemosh [KEE mahsh] (see Judg. 11:24; 1 Kings 11:7), were waiting for her in Moab. In light of these realities, Naomi directed Ruth to **follow** [her] **sister-in-law**.

### VERSE 16

**But Ruth replied: Do not persuade me to leave you or go back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.**

In response to Naomi’s command, Ruth uttered what many Bible students point to as one of the finest statements of loving commitment found in Scripture. Indeed, countless couples in modern times have stood at the marriage altar and have used Ruth’s words in their vows to each other as husband and wife. In their original biblical context, the words were Ruth’s final effort to get Naomi to stop trying to **persuade** [her] **to leave** and return to Moab.

Ruth burst into a series of six short promises that express the very soul of lifelong commitment. The first two promises highlighted the need for social closeness: **wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live**. The third promise addressed the need for shared relationships with others, especially relationships involving the other person’s family members: **your people will be my people**.

The fourth promise touched on the need for a deeply shared faith-commitment: **your God will be my God**. While Ruth’s sister-in-law Orpah might revert back to the idolatrous religion of her childhood and marry someone who worshiped that same false god, Ruth would worship the one true God—Yahweh.

## VERSE 17

**Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yahweh punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.**

Ruth's final two promises to Naomi dealt with the length of the commitment she would keep with her mother-in-law: **Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.** The relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law would come to an end by one means only—death. Yet this remarkable commitment would live beyond the grave through the enduring testimony of a shared final resting place.

Ruth concluded her promises to Naomi with a solemn oath: **May Yahweh punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.** The first part of Ruth's oath literally reads: "Thus may Yahweh do to me, and thus may He add." This word-for-word translation of the Hebrew text may have been accompanied by some sort of hand motions that emphasized the spoken words.

The second part of Ruth's oath literally reads: "if the death causes separation between me and you." The words *anything but* were added to provide clarity and smoothness in the translation. In effect, Ruth was promising that nothing would cause her to forsake Naomi.

## VERSE 18

**When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped trying to persuade her.**

Naomi finally realized that **Ruth was determined to go with her.** No warnings or arguments would change Ruth's mind. Thus Naomi **stopped trying to persuade her.** The two women would face the future together, establishing themselves among the covenant people of Israel and trusting in the Lord to show mercy and to provide for them.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

In what contexts have you heard Ruth's words in 1:16 used to express commitment? How would you paraphrase Ruth's words into a prayer to express your deepest devotion to Jesus Christ?

# REDEEMED AND SECURE

God can surprise us with those whom He chooses to bring about His purposes.

It was a Tuesday evening at my high school in the spring of 1970. Ken, a senior and president of the Key Club, gaveled the weekly meeting to order. After dispensing with the usual agenda items such as reviewing the minutes of the previous meeting, the group entered into the main business of the evening: electing officers and making committee assignments for the next school year. As an ambitious sophomore, I wanted to be elected to one of the top positions. Instead I was appointed as the director of the club's Topper Christian Fellowship, a position almost no student wanted.

Why did that appointment create a queasy feeling in my stomach? It did because it meant that for an entire year I would be in charge of planning and presiding over the club's voluntary chapel event before the school day began. I would have to attend all of those early morning meetings unless I was ill. Moreover, I would have to line up local church leaders to speak or occasionally present the devotional message myself. To be honest, although I was a believer and an active church member, I wasn't excited about wearing the unofficial label of "most religious student" at my high school.

Today, I have a different view of my junior-year experiences. I look back on that time and see how God used all the events and people to help prepare me for the work I've been doing now for more than 40 years. Being appointed as the Key Club's Topper Christian Fellowship director was a significant turning point in my life. It forced me to take my Christian life more seriously than I had taken it before. Further, it gave me the opportunity to prepare for a leadership role in God's kingdom. Hearing my name nominated and elected by classmates on that Tuesday evening long ago was a surprise—yes, an unwelcome surprise at the time. But remembering that event today fills me with gratitude, because God has graciously used it (and me) in carrying forward His purposes.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## RUTH 2:1–4:22

The final three chapters of the Book of Ruth transform the tragic events described in chapter one into a joyous account of redemption and hope. As the second chapter opens, harvest time had come to the promised land. God had provided His people with food, just as the report Naomi had heard in the land of Moab indicated (1:6). The first grain harvest of the agricultural year, the barley harvest, was in full swing. An abundant food supply was available for the nation. However, there was still a problem for Naomi and Ruth: they had no money to purchase any of it. Thankfully, in the Law of Moses God had provided a remedy for their situation. The law prohibited farmers from harvesting all the crops in their fields, vineyards, and orchards. The edges of grain fields, as well as any grain dropped by the harvesters, had to be left for needy people to gather, a practice called gleaning (see Lev. 19:9-10).

Even though Ruth was from Moab and had not been raised in the ways of Israel's God, she had become a follower of the Lord and perhaps had learned from Naomi of God's gracious provision for the poor. Since Naomi was apparently too old or disabled to gather grain, Ruth would go and gather leftover or dropped grain for both of them. For an unmarried and unprotected young woman from a foreign nation to go alone into the Israelite countryside—especially during the days of the judges—could invite trouble into her life. Field owners, farm hands, and even other gleaners who were Israelites might easily overpower her and treat her badly.

Ruth might well have been subjected to that kind of abuse, except for one thing: God sovereignly watched over Ruth and caused her to gather grain in the field of Boaz [BOH az], "a prominent man of noble character" (2:1). Boaz stood out in Scripture as a man of character for several reasons. First, his father, an Israelite named Salmon, had married a non-Israelite woman from Jericho named Rahab [RAY hab]. Rahab had assisted the Israelites in their conquest of Jericho; for her help, Rahab had been spared from destruction along with her family (see Josh. 6:25). Second, Boaz treated his employees with respect and kindness (see Ruth 2:4). Third, Boaz's treatment of the non-Israelite woman Ruth represents the fullest account in Scripture of a man fulfilling divinely mandated laws regarding the proper treatment of a childless widow within a clan.

Boaz's acts of kindness toward Ruth began when the young Moabite widow needed it most—on her first day of working alone to gather leftover grain in Boaz's field. Boaz had gone out from Bethlehem to check on the workers harvesting his barley. He noticed a stranger resting in a temporary

hut at the side of his field and tried to find out who she was. When he learned that she was a Moabite who had left her country to help Naomi, the destitute widow in his clan, Boaz took a special interest in her and blessed her for her efforts (2:12). As an expression of kindness and generosity, he allowed Ruth to drink the water and eat the food normally reserved for his workers. Furthermore, he provided her with protection and gave her some of the grain harvested by his workers (2:9-15). Beyond all that, Boaz told Ruth to work only in his fields throughout the harvest season (2:21), thus assuring her that she would be protected from any mistreatment at the hands of others.

Through these actions Boaz was living out the ideals that were expressed in the Law of Moses. In the most practical ways he was demonstrating what it meant to love one's neighbor as oneself (see Lev. 19:18), especially in the matter of caring for the most vulnerable members of society (see Ex. 22:22; Deut. 24:19-21; 26:12; 27:19).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **INQUIRY** (Ruth 3:8-9)

Ruth's first encounter with Boaz had taken place in his grain field as Ruth gleaned around the edges of the field (2:8-14). When Ruth reported the encounter to Naomi and told of Boaz's kind actions, Naomi realized that Boaz was a close relative of her deceased husband and thus a potential family redeemer (2:19-20). She formulated a bold plan for Ruth to meet again with Boaz and to ask him to fulfill the role of family redeemer on behalf of Ruth and Naomi. That plan involved Ruth's making herself clean and attractive as a woman and then approaching Boaz late in the evening for a private conversation as he slept in his field shelter (3:1-7).

### **VERSE 8**

**At midnight, Boaz was startled, turned over, and there lying at his feet was a woman!**

The place where Ruth went to meet Boaz was near his threshing floor located in the countryside outside Bethlehem. Threshing floors usually were located on hillsides or hilltops. Ideally, the threshing floor consisted of a large, flat surface of stone on which grain stalks would be piled and then pitched repeatedly in the air. Seasonal winds blew the chaff and stalks to the side, allowing the heavier kernels of grain to fall back to the stone surface. Eventually the grain was swept into piles and put into sacks or containers. The work was long and arduous, and a farmer dared not leave the threshing

floor unattended overnight. The grain was as valuable as money and had to be protected from animals and thieves until it could be moved to a safe storage site.

Nights spent out in the grain fields during harvest time were filled with a range of emotions. On the one hand was a sense of joyous celebration. A good harvest meant that God had given His people a bountiful provision of food for the upcoming months. On the other hand was a sense of anxiety. The time of the judges was all too often characterized by marauding bands sweeping into the land during harvest times to oppress the Israelites and steal their grain (see Judg. 6:3-6). Nevertheless, the time of Ruth and Boaz appears to have been a more peaceful time, in that the Book of Ruth mentions none of the troubles with marauders described in the Book of Judges.

Boaz had eaten a good meal and was in a good mood on the evening Ruth came to see him. He had already fallen asleep in his shelter when Ruth quietly entered and lay down at his feet (Ruth 3:7). Her intent must have been not to disturb Boaz but to lie near him until he awoke on his own. That happened **at midnight** (“in the middle of the night,” NIV). Understandably, Boaz initially was **startled** (“was afraid,” KJV). The word translated *startled* can also mean “to tremble” or “be terrified.” It was frightening to awaken and suddenly realize that another person was present where no one had been when he fell asleep. How long had this person been there? What did the person want? The Hebrew term rendered **turned over** can also mean “to twist,” “to grasp with a twisting motion,” and by extension “to bend forward.” In the darkness and his grogginess, Boaz tried to make sense of the situation. Perhaps he smelled the aroma of Ruth’s perfume. In any case, he quickly deciphered that the person **lying at his feet was a woman.**

## VERSE 9

**So he asked, “Who are you?” “I am Ruth, your slave,” she replied. “Spread your cloak over me, for you are a family redeemer.”**

In the darkness, Boaz still did not know the identity of his female visitor. So he asked, “**Who are you?**” This was the opening Ruth needed, so she identified herself as **Ruth, your slave** (“thine handmaid,” KJV; “your servant,” ESV, NIV). The term rendered *slave* was one that expressed both humility and submission. Ruth declared that her life and future were in the hands of Boaz.

Ruth went to explain the basis of her humble submission to Boaz. The words **spread your cloak over me** literally read “spread your wing over your female servant.” The word-picture is that of a bird spreading its wings over its young to give them protection and comfort. To be “under the wing of”

someone (including God) was to be under that person's protective care (see Ruth 2:12; Pss. 17:8; 61:4; 91:4). Ruth was boldly asking Boaz to be the answer to his own prayer-blessing that he had spoken at their first encounter (Ruth 2:12). She asked him to take her into his family as he would a maidservant and thus to commit to care for her for the rest of her life.

How could Ruth be so bold as to ask for a lifetime commitment from Boaz? Naomi had given her the additional crucial words to say: **you are a family redeemer** ("near kinsman," KJV; "guardian-redeemer," NIV). The concept of the *family redeemer* (Hebrew, *goel* [goh ELL]) was etched deeply into God's law for Israel. It sought to provide continuity of family and future for God's people in situations of loss of family land (Lev. 25:23-28), loss of freedom (Lev. 25:47-49), or loss of a male heir (Deut. 25:5-10). Centuries later, New Testament writers described Jesus Christ as our ultimate Kinsman Redeemer, because He rescues from sin and restores to God's family all who come to Him in faith and put their hearts, hopes, and futures into His saving hands (Gal. 4:4-7; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Rev. 5:9).

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Redeem, Redemption, Redeemer" on pages 1370-1371 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What does it mean to you that Jesus is our ultimate Kinsman Redeemer? What evidence in your daily life demonstrates that you have been rescued and restored to God's family?

## INTEREST (Ruth 3:10-13)

### VERSE 10

**Then he said, "May the LORD bless you, my daughter. You have shown more kindness now than before, because you have not pursued younger men, whether rich or poor."**

The biblical writer early on had identified Boaz as a "man of noble character" (Ruth 2:1). Boaz demonstrated his noble character by responding immediately to Ruth's unusual request with another spoken blessing for Ruth (see also 2:12). His blessing indicated that he knew **the LORD** was involved in the moment and that this young Moabite woman, the widow of an Israelite man, had forsaken the false gods of her homeland and had embraced the one true God of Israel (1:16).

Boaz was truly impressed with Ruth. She had **shown more kindness now than before**. With the word *before*, Boaz likely was referring to Ruth's

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decision to stay with Naomi and care for her despite having to leave her homeland and birth family to do so. Boaz was further impressed with Ruth for not pursuing a husband among the **younger men** of Israel. Boaz understood Ruth's request to be married to him as a demonstration of *kindness*. This was the same Hebrew term used in 1:8 that can also mean "faithful love," "mercy," "loving-kindness," or "favor." It was a covenant word that characterized the ideal relationship between the Lord and His people.

#### VERSE 11

**Now don't be afraid, my daughter. I will do for you whatever you say, since all the people in my town know that you are a woman of noble character.**

Boaz rightly understood that Ruth was taking a risk by initiating the encounter to ask him to serve as a family redeemer. He urged her not to **be afraid**. Further, he addressed Ruth as his **daughter**, suggesting that he already thought of her as family. The word rendered *daughter* was a term of endearment that conveyed a sense of connectedness and inclusion.

Boaz assured Ruth that he would **do for** [her] **whatever** she requested. Since coming into the land of Israel, she had impressed not only Boaz but also **all the people in** [his] **town**. The people of Bethlehem recognized that Ruth was **a woman of noble character**—a reputation that matched Boaz's own (2:1)! This perfect match of character and faith served as a foreshadowing of an ideal married couple.

#### VERSE 12

**Yes, it is true that I am a family redeemer, but there is a redeemer closer than I am.**

Being a man of integrity, Boaz quickly acknowledged a factor that could thwart the couple's plan. He was indeed a kinsman of Naomi's deceased husband (and thus also of Ruth's deceased husband), but he also knew there was **a redeemer closer than** him. Boaz used the term *closer* not in a geographical sense but in relational sense.

Israelite tradition concerning family redemption demanded that a deceased man's brothers be given first opportunity to redeem their sibling's property or family. If surviving brothers could not or would not serve as a family redeemer, then an uncle or close cousin might step in to take on the responsibility. The biblical text doesn't reveal the exact relationship of Boaz to Naomi's deceased husband, but clearly he was not a brother. An unnamed but *closer* relative must be given the first right of redemption.

## VERSE 13

**Stay here tonight, and in the morning, if he wants to redeem you, that's good. Let him redeem you. But if he doesn't want to redeem you, as the LORD lives, I will. Now lie down until morning."**

In the darkness and isolation of the threshing floor, Boaz could have easily taken advantage of Ruth. Because he was a man of integrity, Boaz continued to treat Ruth with the utmost respect. She did not need to put herself in danger by trying to return to Naomi in the night. Thus, Boaz instructed Ruth to **stay** in his shelter for the remainder of the night. He promised to act the next day to settle the question of family redemption. Boaz knew that Ruth's (and Naomi's) need for a family redeemer was real and urgent. Consequently, he would take the necessary steps to make certain that she had someone to provide for her needs as soon as possible.

Those who romanticize the story of Ruth sometimes question Boaz's proposal. They wonder about his matter-of-fact, this-way-or-that description of the possible outcome of the meeting with the closer relative. Such speculation, however, misses the real point of the narrative. In Scripture, real relationships, especially marriage relationships, stand on far more than romantic feelings. Boaz's concern was that Ruth and Naomi be cared for and given a blessed future. He was more than willing to provide this himself (**as the LORD lives, I will**). However, if a closer relative with equal commitment would do so, Boaz was willing to do whatever was best for Ruth and Naomi.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Boaz showed himself to be a man of integrity in his dealings with Ruth at the threshing floor. Examine Boaz's words and actions in Ruth 3:10-13. What other admirable qualities does Boaz display? In what current situations do you need to be a person of "noble character"?

## INHERITANCE (Ruth 4:13-17)

The man of noble character lived up to his reputation. The morning after the encounter, Boaz gathered some town elders and met with the closer relative, laid out the situation, and pressed for a decision (4:1-8). When the relative discovered that the right of redemption included the responsibility to marry Ruth and raise up an heir, he passed the right of redemption to Boaz. Boaz officially accepted the responsibility of family redemption before the witnesses, who then spoke blessings on both Ruth and Boaz (4:9-12).

### VERSE 13

**Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he was intimate with her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.**

We are never told in the Book of Ruth whether Boaz, like the closer relative, already had a wife and children. For a “prominent” (2:1) Israelite landowner of Boaz’s character to be unmarried might be unusual but not unheard of. The Lord later instructed the prophet Jeremiah to remain unmarried as a statement of judgment against His people (Jer. 16:1-4). Nehemiah and John the Baptist may also have been among the ranks of single men in the Bible.

In any case, Boaz now **took Ruth and she became his wife**. The Lord was truly at work redemptively in the situation, for He soon **enabled [Ruth] to conceive** and give **birth to a son**.

### VERSE 14

**Then the women said to Naomi, “Praise the LORD, who has not left you without a family redeemer today. May his name become well known in Israel.**

**The women** of Bethlehem recognized that the birth of Ruth and Boaz’s son was as much a triumph for **Naomi** as it was for Ruth. The women praised **the LORD** because He had not left Naomi **without a family redeemer**. Interestingly, the women’s celebratory statement acknowledged that the newborn son, not just Boaz, was Naomi’s *family redeemer*. The Lord had provided Ruth with Boaz as a family redeemer. The child would grow up to fulfill the role as well for Naomi. Thus, the women prayed that the child’s **name** [would] **become well known in Israel**. Indeed, the child would continue a lineage that in two generations produced David, Israel’s most beloved king (Ruth 4:21-22), and twenty-eight generations after David led to the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah and King of kings (Matt. 1:17).

### VERSE 15

**He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. Indeed, your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.”**

As most grandparents today would attest, the birth of a newborn child in the family can spark a time of renewal and hope. There were even deeper reasons in ancient Israel for a grandparent to rejoice over the birth of a male child. In a world with few economic safety nets, family meant everything to aging

grandparents, especially grandmothers. Sons and grandsons were expected to lovingly provide resources and care for their elderly family members.

Sadly, death had robbed Naomi of the three males in her immediate family—her husband and their two sons. Now the Lord had given Naomi an unforeseen rescue: a daughter-in-law who loved her selflessly and who had proven to be **better to [her] than seven sons.**

#### VERSE 16

**Naomi took the child, placed him on her lap, and took care of him.**

While **the child** would one day grow up to provide much-needed care for Naomi, for the present it was Naomi who **took care of him.** The phrase **placed him on her lap** may refer to an ancient act of formal adoption, or it may simply describe the loving action of a proud grandmother. Either way, the point of the verse is clear: the woman who had returned empty and bitter from Moab now had much to live for and rejoice over.

#### VERSE 17

**The neighbor women said, “A son has been born to Naomi,” and they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.**

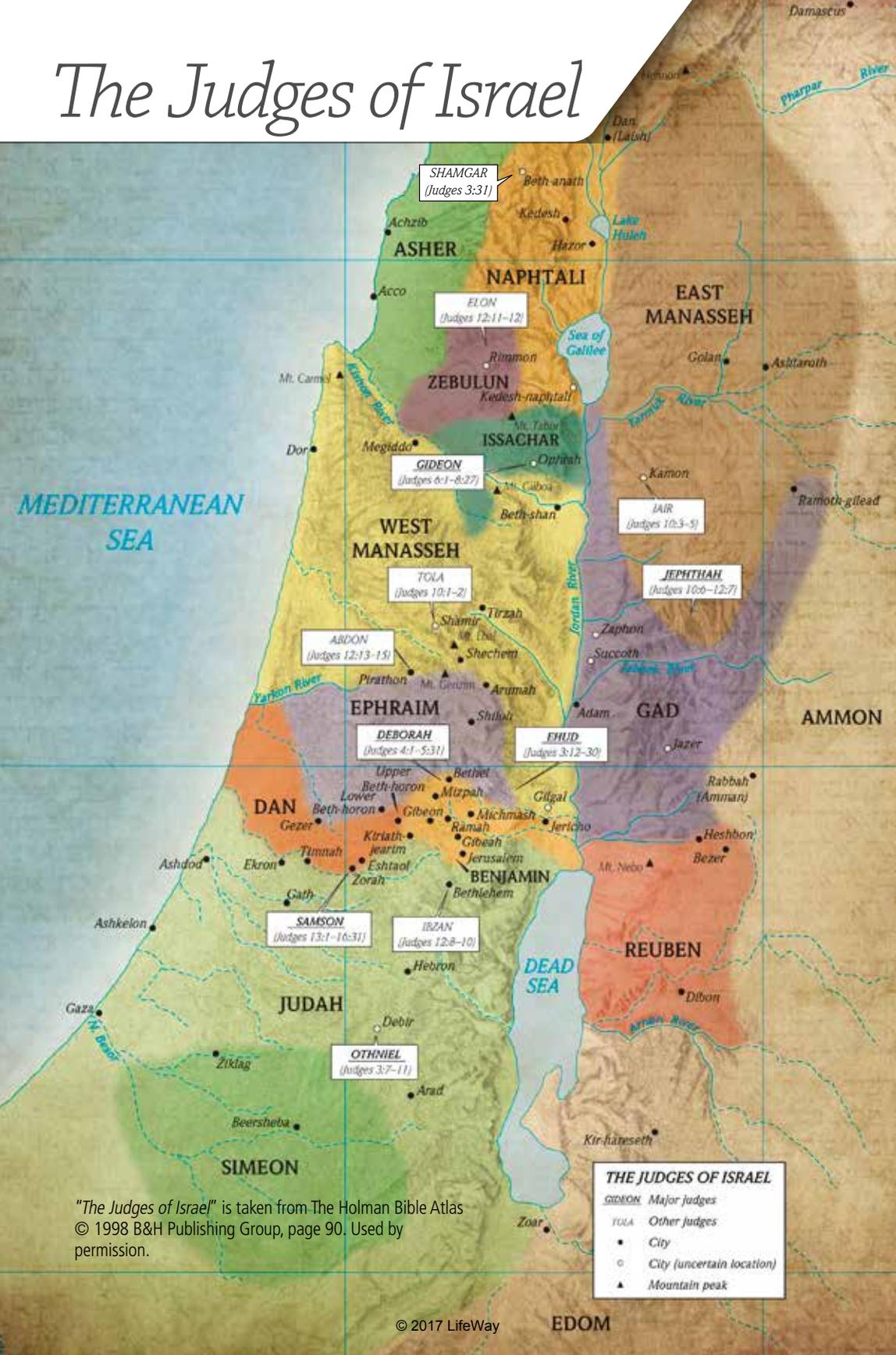
In the Hebrew language, the word for “son” could refer to one’s immediate son, a grandson, or even a more distant descendant in the direct lineage. Thus, the **neighbor women** spread the news that **a son [had] been born to Naomi.** The biblical writer’s purpose here also was to show that the entire account in the Book of Ruth pointed to the coming transition in Israel from judges to kings.

The *neighbor women* performed one last task; they announced the young child’s name, **Obed.** This name means “one who serves.” Throughout his life, *Obed* would be cast in the role of a servant to the Lord. An important aspect of his service would be to continue the messianic lineage to **Jesse,** to **David,** and ultimately to Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5-6,16-17).

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Think about your family heritage and ancestry. Whom would you characterize as a servant of the Lord? How did he or she serve the Lord? In what areas of life might you pass down to descendants an example of service and godly character?

# The Judges of Israel



SHAMGAR  
(Judges 3:31)

ELON  
(Judges 12:11-12)

GIDEON  
(Judges 6:1-8:27)

TOLA  
(Judges 10:1-2)

ARDON  
(Judges 12:13-15)

DEBORAH  
(Judges 4:1-5:31)

SAMSON  
(Judges 13:1-16:31)

IRZAN  
(Judges 12:8-10)

OTHNIEL  
(Judges 3:7-11)

IAIR  
(Judges 10:3-5)

JEPHTHAH  
(Judges 10:6-12:7)

EHUD  
(Judges 3:12-30)

**THE JUDGES OF ISRAEL**

GIDEON Major judges

TOLA Other judges

- City
- City (uncertain location)
- ▲ Mountain peak

"The Judges of Israel" is taken from The Holman Bible Atlas  
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# Joshua; Judges; Ruth

God is moving. It is undeniable when we look into the Old Testament books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. Any thoughts that God is a disconnected deity floating aimlessly somewhere in the heavens is simply not what the Bible teaches.

Instead, these books of the Bible tell us that God is active. He is involved in the lives of His people. In this study, you will see that God has a plan and He fulfills His promises. You will learn that God uses the most unexpected of people to do extraordinary feats of power and grace. You will be encouraged that even in your darkest hour, God is moving on your behalf.

You will be inspired to follow Him in faith.



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