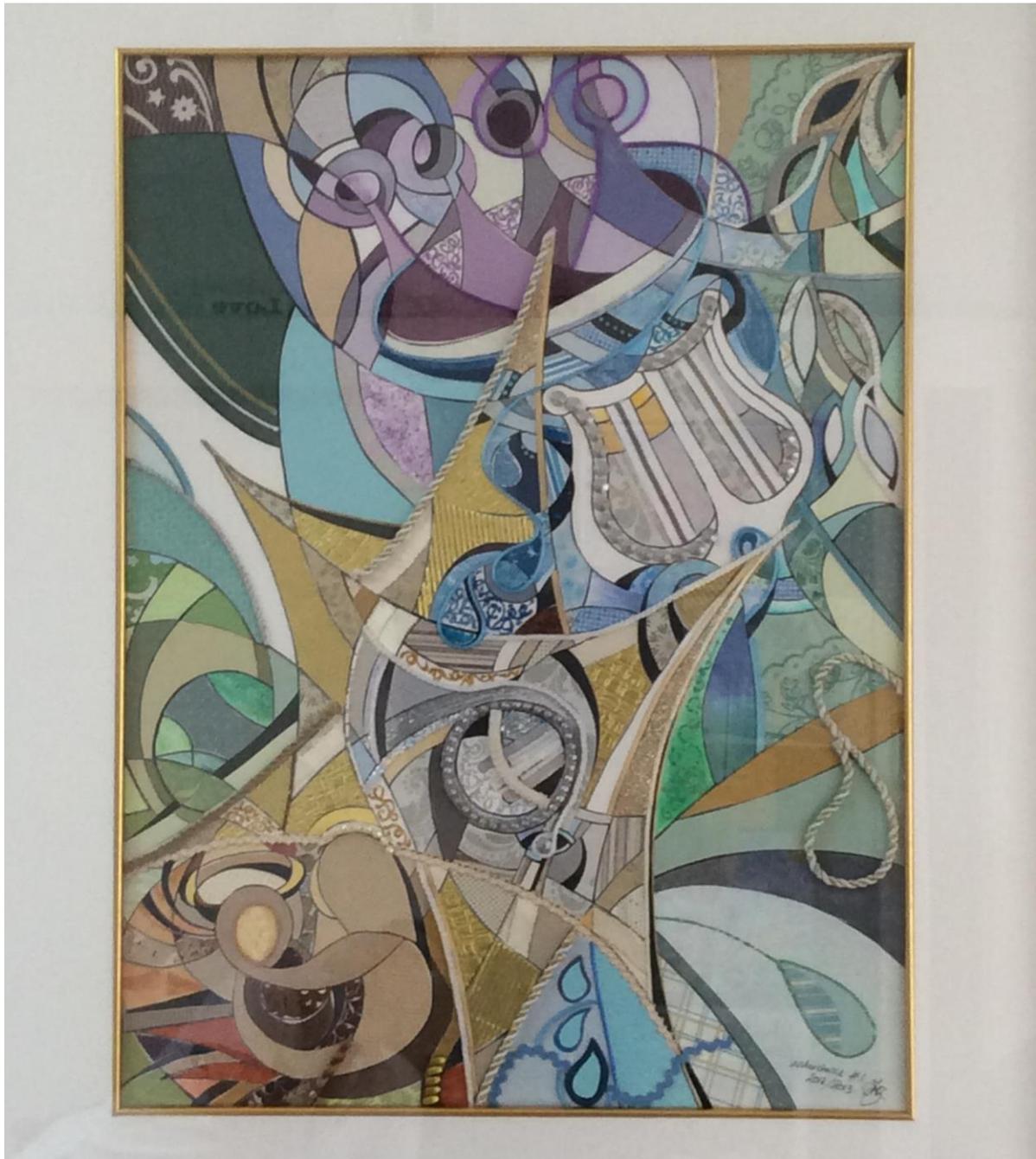


# **JOSHUA - JUDGES - RUTH**

**THE LORD SEEKING FAITHFULNESS**



**A SERIES OF DAILY DEVOTIONS FOR LENT 2016**

## Judges 4:4-15

Deborah the leader of the Israelites said to Barak

“The Lord commands you, go,  
take ten thousand men and lead them.”

For the Lord says “I will lead Sisera  
and give him into your hands.”

Barak said to Deborah

“If you go with me, I will go;  
if you don’t go, I won’t go.”

At Barak’s advance the Lord routed Sisera  
and his 900 chariots.

Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot.

This Lenten Devotion Booklet for 2016 was produced by members of St Stephen’s Lutheran Church Adelaide South Australia. These are the personal words and thoughts of the people in the congregation.

Thanks to Tresma’s artwork for the front cover picture.

Refer to her devotion for Joshua 21.

## INTRODUCTION

Often that which is foreign or strange to us is the most difficult for us to deal with. For many of us the books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth may well fall into that category. I suspect these are not books of the Bible we naturally turn to, despite them containing some very well known characters like Gideon and Samson, and Joshua and Ruth themselves. Our regular lectionary readings in worship are not much help in this regard. Readings from Joshua appears four times in a three year cycle, Ruth twice and Judges just once. Perhaps, for this reason alone, writing and reading devotions based on these books is a valuable exercise. However a better reason is one St Paul reminds us of in his letter to Timothy. 'All Scripture', he says, 'is God-breathed and is useful for teaching and training in righteousness.' (2 Tim. 3:16)

Sometimes that which is strange and foreign causes us to attend more closely, listen more openly and engage more deeply. I pray that is what you will do with these devotions during this time of Lent. May you find many gems and surprises as the Holy Spirit opens your eyes and ears to God at work. One of the threads passing through all three books is the way God continues to use ordinary people to fulfil his purposes. Some things don't change!

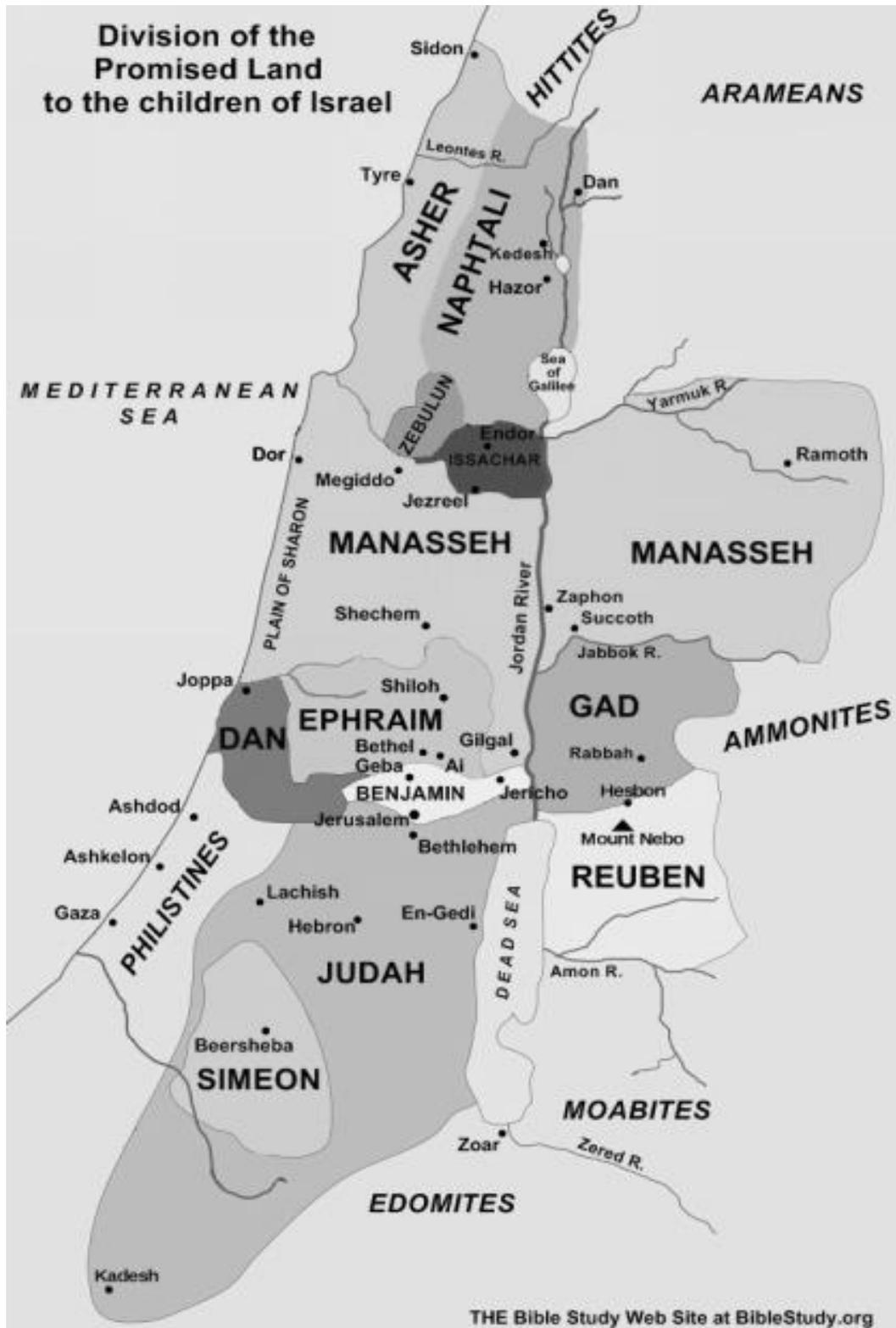
Thank you to Colin and Yvonne who have again initiated and compiled these devotions, and especially to every single one of the devotional writers who allowed the Word of God to do his work on them so that the Word may do his work on us.

God bless you as you use this resource.

Yours in Christ

Pastor John

The following is a map of the Promised Land - 8,000 square miles of land given by the Lord to the 12 tribes of Israel



**A. Many leaders, but One God.**

In this chapter, God called and installed Joshua after the death of Moses. Likewise, many pastors and leaders are called to serve His people one after another for many reasons, not necessary due to deaths, and no matter how great or how small these leaders are, they are just all servants of the LORD. It's all God's bidding. Most important, God's presence and promises will continue, and He is not leaving His beloved people. Change is inevitable, but God's presence is not optional.

**B. Multi-direction and paths, but one faith.**

God asked Joshua to set his foot into the promised-land so as to extend the territory ('ministry' in today's concept, to say the least), from desert to river, from strange land (Hittite country) over to the sea, from east to west, what a vast horizon Joshua could ever possibly imagine! And the people take God's word seriously – a life-and-death issue!

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your faithful guidance in all changes, and we ask that you guide us all in our journeys, guard our steps, and strengthen our faith in you. In Jesus name. Amen.

Joshua 2 records the story of how two spies sent by Joshua into Jericho survive because of the ingenuity of Rahab the harlot. The function of the spies was to discover the lay of the land in anticipation of Joshua's invasion of what he believed to be the land promised to Abraham by his God, YHWH.

But whose land is the land of Canaan? If we go back to the Abraham narratives we discover that Abraham is welcomed into Canaan by the Canaanites. They are his friends. He even worships the Canaanite God, El, with the Canaanite priest Melchizedek (Gen. 14.17-22). He also makes a covenant with Abimelech that they will share the land (Gen. 21.25-34).

The Canaanites were the indigenous peoples of Canaan, peoples who, like the indigenous peoples of Australia, had been custodians of the land for centuries. Canaan was their Promised Land, a land where they worshipped El, the Creator Spirit. Later in the Old Testament, El is identified as the same God as YHWH.

Does it seem fair that when Joshua arrives all the prior positive relations with Abraham and with the land itself are ignored? The only people in Joshua 2 who find any mercy at the hands of Joshua are the family of Rahab who sides with Joshua because she sees how scared the people of Jericho are. What about all the innocent children in Jericho; should they be killed because Joshua believes God wants him to take possession of the land?

If you visit Mengler's Hill in the Barossa, you will find a monument recalling 150 years of German settlement. The Biblical text quoted is Joshua 2.9, 'The Lord has given us this land.' The implication is that the Barossa was the Promised Land for these settlers and the indigenous Australians were like the Canaanites and could be removed.

So whose land is the Promised Land, the indigenous Canaanites/Australians or the invaders/settlers? OR, should the land be God's gift to both? What do you think? How would Jesus read this story?

PS. The irony of the text cited on Mengler's Hill is that the text is misquoted. It should read: 'The Lord has given YOU this land.'

**Prayer**

Jesus, show us how to read this prayer. Amen.

What are the signs of God's presence for you? It must have been pretty spectacular for the people of Israel to see the waters of the Jordan River come to a halt and rise up so they could walk through on dry ground (3:16). Obviously they were not only to be amazed, but also to remember that God had done something similar for their parents as they escaped the Egyptian army.

Yes, pretty spectacular, but not for me. I haven't seen God's presence in that way. In fact, this story reminded me of a walk down the mall some months ago where I came across a street magician. He produced a \$50 note from inside an uncut lime. He was good. He really did the impossible. But, it didn't make me want to become his groupie. No, the signs of God's presence for me are much more ordinary, not spectacular at all, really. Like 4 year old Lucy handing me some honey biscuits she'd baked just for me. A gift given in a time of barrenness for me. Or, distributing communion to my fellow saints and being overwhelmed by the ordinariness, yet the enormity, of God's grace.

However God chooses to let you know his presence, whether spectacularly, or in ordinary ways, let us rejoice that he is a God who makes himself known.

### **Prayer**

Loving heavenly Father, thank you for the revelation of yourself, particularly in the person of your Son, Jesus. Open our eyes to your presence in our world. When we need you most reveal yourself to us in loving, caring ways. Amen.

This story is about Israel's first day in the Promised Land, led in solemn procession by 12 priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant through the dry bed of the Jordan River. To mark the spot Joshua ordered the priests to take 12 stones from the middle of the river so he could build a cairn to memorialise the occasion, and so that Israel would know what the Lord had done for them and remain loyal through successive generations.

Among the surrounding nations Israel was small and insignificant. God did not choose them as his special people because of their greater numbers or their surpassing military prowess or their superior moral fibre. They were all too quick to succumb to temptation, especially the temptation to worship the gods of the nations and forget the one and only creator and Lord.

God did not choose Israel because of any admirable character traits, in all too short supply, but simply because he loved them with his whole heart and soul and mind. Nor was God's love an end in itself, to let Israel bask in smug complacency. Rather they were given a world-wide mission, 'that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty' (vs. 24). Ever after, the 12-stone memorial of grace that Israel erected on its entry into the land would stand as a perpetual reminder of their status and their mission. In our baptism likewise, God has led us through the waters to the land of promise, so that our baptism now stands as a constant reminder of who we are, whose we are, and the task to which we have been called.

### **Prayer**

Let us pray: Lord God, when the church seems small and frail, and when our faith falters in the face of this world's attractions, focus our gaze on Christ's work on the cross, signed, sealed and delivered on the day of our baptism. In his dear name we pray. Amen.

**Joshua 5**

**THEY REMAINED IN THEIR PLACES IN THE CAMP  
UNTIL THEY WERE HEALED**

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Finally, after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years the time had come for the children of Israel to cross over the Jordan River, the whole nation passing before the priests and the Ark of the Covenant.

In front of them is the highly fortified city of Jericho. It's a bad place to start a war, so it's time to strike while the iron's hot. Isn't it? Everyone's ready.....GO!

No! Stop.

Build a memorial first. Take rocks from the Jordan. Create a sign with them for future generations to remember the miracles God has done; the river has become miraculously dry (Joshua 3), the crossing easy, the nation has a God-given leader in Joshua, the fear of the native inhabitants is known.

So build this memorial, while Joshua builds another in the river bed of the Jordan which can only be seen in times of drought. (Let's do it quickly).

Then,

Wait! The warriors of Israel must be circumcised. These men crossing into the Promised Land are the children of those who died during the 40 years of wandering, they are uncircumcised.

What!! Flint knives – there! – Now! They know we're here. (You cannot be serious). Don't you remember what happened to these who raped Dinah (Gen 34:24-25)? We'll be just as vulnerable. Military intelligence needs a chance!

How often do we tell God not only what to do, what we want, but also when we want it? Common sense may say one thing, but the Lord knows what he's doing even when it doesn't look like it. It's always going to be necessary to remember him, to trust him and wait for his timing to come about. Then the fruit of that trust will be transformed into a blessing.

**Prayer**

Lord, too often I do things in my time. I don't think through the ramifications of my actions. I don't ask you for the wisdom I all too frequently need. Help me to remember and trust you. Amen.

**Joshua 6**

**THE LORD TAKES THE HARD DECISIONS –  
AND OFFENDS OUR SENSIBILITIES**

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In Genesis the Lord took the decision to kick Adam and Eve out of their specially created environment and their fellowship with him into a new world run by the devious and brutal new nature they had taken on. For the Lord this hard decision was part of his salvation plan to deal with this new devious, dishonest and brutality nature. Adam and Eve's salvation plan was different – it was to cover things up, lie and shift the blame.

Later, Noah's family showed that people still had a capacity to be attracted by the Lord's love rather than their new devious and brutal nature. All the other people rejected both the Lord and their capacity to be attracted by his love. In anger and regret the Lord took the hard decision to seal the ark (and protect Noah and his family) and to drown the rest. The drowning people had a different view on their salvation – to break the seal on the ark, let them in and not deal with their deviousness and brutality.

By Moses' time, the Lord had moved his salvation plan on – he planned to have a people who were attracted to him and loved him. Part of the plan was the hard decision to deal with the dishonesty and brutality of the Egyptian empire by killing their first born and drowning their army in the Red Sea. The Egyptians saw their salvation differently – to recapture and re-enslave the people.

In the book of Joshua the Lord implements the next stage of his plan - to gift land to his people and have them grow into a nation that was attracted to and loved him. The people inside Jericho knew both the Lord and the plan. Their salvation view was to hide behind the walls and hold the Lord at bay. But again, the Lord took the hard decision and demolished the city.

But this time the people did the killing. And we with our 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities take the view that genocide and mass killings for dishonesty and brutality was a step too far.

Later, the Lord sees the total failure of the nation that he planned and he recognised that his Jericho decision was actually a step not far enough. So he took the hard decision and in love sent Jesus so that God himself would do the dying for our deviousness and brutality.

**Prayer**

Lord, we thank you that our 'sensibilities' are not your first priority and that you took the hard decision to send your son Jesus so that we too might fellowship with you. Amen.

In contrast to victorious Chapter 6, full of absolute dependence on God, rescue of outsider Rahab (ancestor of Jesus) and the demand that all in Jericho be 'dedicated' to God, here we see how the greed and failure to trust God by one man can infect the hope of all of Israel.

Chapter 7 begins with 'But'.

Achan from the tribe of Judah used the opportunity of the fall of Jericho to gather for himself and secretly hide some of the spoils of war, items 'devoted' for either destruction or for God's use alone. When Joshua sent two to three thousand men to capture the significant, but not well defended city of Ai, they are routed.

Joshua and the elders plead with God, asking why they had ever been led into this hostile environment by God. God declares that their covenant has been broken by Israel, and that all of Israel is liable to destruction while they have in their midst someone who has taken for himself plunder that had been 'devoted' to God alone.

After a day of cleansing and a process of elimination the lot falls to Achan and he is forced to admit his guilt – that he coveted and took the 'devoted' spoils for himself when he came across them in Jericho. Achan, his family and all of his property meet a fate equal to that of the city of Jericho.

Unlike Rahab and all of her family who are saved because of her faith Achan, soldier of Israel and all of his family die because of his greed and failure to trust his future to God. It is only through Jesus from the tribe of Judah, son of God and descendant of outsider Rahab, that we have been rescued from our own failure to trust the one who alone gives life. Now we can live as the forgiven, loved, liberated and energised children of God, empowered to bring life and hope to those around us.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, it is hard to come to terms with the brutality in stories such as this. Help us to be so carried away by your love and forgiveness that we don't allow either our insecurities or misguided trust to stifle our faith in you, or to hamper our willingness to use our lives and our assets for benefit of our neighbour and those in need. We pray in the name of Jesus, descendant of Rahab. Amen.

The military strategy was clever, surgical, based on knowledge of the enemy and a good understanding of human nature - and it was lead by the Lord. Chapter 8 gives a gory description of the implementation of one part of the Lord's salvation plan that included conquering the land the Lord originally created. It also reinforces the covenant and the laws the Lord would have with his people.

This chapter seems to be about absolutes - absolute blessings for those who obey the Book of the Law, and absolute curses for those who don't.

The Lord seems to present the Book of the Law as an option – if we obey we have fellowship with him and are be blessed by him. If we don't, our fellowship is terminated and we are cursed. The option seems to imply that we have (or should have) a capacity to obey the Book of the Law - else why would the Lord set this standard?

Prior to Joshua 8, the Israelite's journey through the wilderness was imposed on them because they were not meeting the standard. And even the harshness of the journey through the wilderness did not make any difference. Except for Joshua they all had the curse that they would die before they could enter their promised land.

Chapter 8 reinforces the standard - the Book of the Law is read out to the people - and the gory bits are not left out.

The general congregational comment about writing devotions on the books of Joshua and Judges is the bad feelings reading these books generate - it is much more positive to write devotions on the gospels. Joshua and Judges were chosen so that like Joshua we too don't leave the gory bits out – like the issues of taking land from occupying peoples and mixing with people of other religions - two of the most alive issues faced in this world today.

The personal reassurance I receive from Joshua 8 (and the rest of the Old Testament) is that even though I do not meet the standard it is the Lord who acts and outside of his acts there is no reason to hope.

The Lord's acts recorded in the Old Testament lead to the first coming of Jesus who met the Lord's high standard for me. Consequently, I can enter my heavenly land and I am not told I will die before I get there.

## **Prayer**

We thank you Lord that you had the capacity to deal with the gore and the issues needed to have Jesus come the first time. We pray that we can live in faith as you reveal those same strengths, capabilities and actions to deal with the gore and the issues that will be part of Jesus second coming. Amen.

**9th DAY OF LENT**

Thursday, 18th February 2016

**Joshua 9**

**IS ANYTHING BLACK OR WHITE?**

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Completely good! Absolutely evil! Newspaper headlines may define situations or people in this way, but real life is usually more complicated. Apparently good deeds may be done from the worst motives, while ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions’. The people of Gibeon were faced with a dilemma: should they try to fight an overwhelming force, or should they figure out a way for their community to survive? They chose the latter. Of course it involved trickery, deception. And the end result was not ideal – becoming wood-cutters & water-carriers for the invaders. But we never get to choose perfection. Occasionally we think we are, but reality soon corrects our vision. Hopefully, we can manage to choose slightly better, rather than slightly worse. We may sometimes feel bad about actions we have to take, but the one who chose the cross to save the world understands.

### **Prayer**

Dear God, the world is endlessly complicated. Give us courage to face every new situation & faith to know that you are always with us & wanting good for us. Amen.

Before you read my thoughts on this passage you must read it for yourself. I found it hard to believe that such a slaughter could take place and all sanctioned, approved and supported by God. What conclusions will you come to?

So much killing. So many lives lost. It almost seems senseless.

But what positives can we glean from it!

Joshua's great faith and utter trust in God throughout the whole campaign.

Joshua's absolute obedience to God when God said in verse 8 'Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you.' He didn't doubt God for a minute.

When you have complete faith and trust in God he will listen to your requests just as he did when he responded to Joshua's request to let the 'sun stand still', and 'the moon stopped.' He may not respond immediately as He did on this occasion, but He will respond. We just need to be patient.

God even used nature to help Joshua when large hailstones fell from the sky and 'more of the enemy was killed by hailstones than by the swords of the Israelites.'

That must have been incredible.

When God is on your side you have nothing to fear. What a great comfort that is to all of us who have faith in God.

As you ponder this passage and reflect on the events in the world over the centuries, I am sure you can identify the course of history being determined by the hand of God on many occasions. Don't doubt it. Just believe it as a faithful and beloved member of God's kingdom.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, give us the faith to utterly follow your word, believe it, and be obedient to it, as we live out our lives and witness to those around us.  
Amen.

We are tempted to think of the Israelite army as an invincible juggernaut sweeping through Canaan without a skerrick of resistance. We tend to think of them falling on their hapless victims unawares, laying them low by force of greater numbers and superior military hardware. And when we read of Joshua's brutal despatch of his enemies in this chapter, unsettling questions arise in our minds that don't easily go away.

But first appearances can be misleading. The author suggests that initially Israel had tried to enter into peace treaties with the original inhabitants, rather than conquer them brutally (11:19). It is even hinted that Jericho, the first city to be conquered, initiated the battle against Israel, rather than vice versa (24:11). Israel was only retaliating, not invading. Then, Israel's rag-tag band of foot soldiers hardly posed a serious threat to the seven nations that inhabited Canaan (24:11), with their vast numbers, their crack troops, and their advanced military equipment and cavalry (11:4, 5). Besides, divine intervention is a major part of the story. Repeatedly we read that it was God who had given the land into the hands of Israel, in accordance with the solemn oath he swore long ago to their forebears (1:6, 11; 11:23).

Joshua 11 brings the conquest account to a close. A fresh reading of these chapters reveals that Israel's conquest of the southern regions of the land arose from Israel's admirable determination to protect the defenceless city of Gibeon from a ruthless siege by the five mighty kings of the south (chapter 10). And the rest of the land was conquered by God's gracious intervention after the local kings and their forces, 'in number like the sand on the seashore' (11:4), had first advanced against Israel with murderous intent (11:5). These stories call for serious reflection, hopefully concluding with a renewed sense of the utter futility of warfare. To which could be added a reminder of Jesus' words to Peter: 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (Matt. 26:52).

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord Jesus, source of life and prince of peace, in baptism you have conferred on us the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Lead us ever deeper into your life-giving word, that it may bring joy to our hearts and peace to our souls. In your dear name we pray. Amen.

When I visited England, I saw and heard the history of many old buildings and places: How Dover Castle has never fallen and how Hitler had hoped to defeat the English and crush their spirit by taking it as his own; How churches were built or expanded through the gifts of different protectors who were often then memorialised in the church; How ownership of castles and palaces passed from one person to the next, often through battle or the change of king who wanted to reward his faithful men; How King Henry V conquered much of France .. and I could go on. They are stories like many others from across the globe and tell of the rise of a leader who builds power and falls.

Here in Joshua 12 we read part of the history of Israel and its beginning as a nation. It is a recount of Israel's conquest of the land that would later be divided among the 12 tribes. It's not the most interesting of passages, but history isn't all excitement and thrills. 2 kings are defeated east of the Jordan and 31 kings defeated to the west. At this point we are at the rising of Israel, the fall would come later. We must view this not just as a history lesson but a demonstration of God's power (he was after all behind the conquering) and his fulfilment of his promise to give them this land.

### **Prayer**

We thank you God, that you do fulfil your promises. Help us to trust your word. Amen.

Initially, I found this chapter quite challenging to read, as it felt a bit like a geography lesson. However, with further reading, and researching other biblical interpretations of this chapter, I learnt about the true meaning, and its focus on how we share our vision of God.

This chapter teaches us of how the Israelites learnt to trust in God during their battles, leading to their success.

The focus on how the land is distributed is to teach us not only about how we demonstrate God's will in our lives, but more so, how we share his vision with others. We have achieved more if we can teach future generations God's grand vision, and enable them to continue his work, inspiring vision and passing on this responsibility to younger generations.

This passage also prompts us to consider various questions about ourselves, to reflect on God's vision for our lives, our passion for his mission, and areas of our lives God wants to help us change (Paul J. Bucknell, [www.foundationsforfreedom.net](http://wwwFOUNDATIONSforfreedom.net)).

### **Prayer**

Dear God, I pray for your wisdom and guidance, to help me reflect on my self and how I can apply your vision to help me make changes needed in my life, and to share your great wisdom and knowledge with younger generations, in a meaningful way. Amen.

When Caleb approached Joshua and asked to be given the land that Moses has promised him, he only told Joshua what had happened and what Moses swore to him. Then Joshua has given Hebron as Caleb's inheritance as God promised Caleb. How simple and easy it was! I couldn't believe my eyes, so I read this chapter again to find out why. Again, the reason was very simple, because he followed the LORD wholeheartedly! That's it!

I keep asking myself if I could follow the LORD wholeheartedly. To be honest, I don't know. Even though I have experienced God's miracles many times, I still dare to say I can simply follow wholeheartedly. I think, to be able to follow God wholeheartedly, we need to trust, completely trust. We need to hand the 'power' back to God. But isn't this the issue we have been struggling as human beings? It is so easy to choose not to trust when things have gone wrong or not going to the way we wanted it to, because we feel we are losing our power and losing our own control. I wonder what Caleb had experienced during those 45 years after Moses swore to him. Had he lost his confidence sometimes? If not, what supported him? I think it must be trust, his faith in God. How strong this kind of faith could be!

### **Prayer**

Loving God, please lead us when we lose our confidence in you, please help us strengthen our faith in you! Please teach us and lead us to trust you wholeheartedly! Amen

In 1906 two Wiencke brothers and a sister made a now famous wagon trek from Cambrai in SA to Trungley Hall near Temora in NSW. They took up land and settled there with hundreds of other Lutheran farmers. In 2006, I went to the Wiencke family reunion service in the packed Trungley Hall Lutheran church. On the wall of the church was a map of the district and highlighted on the map was the area of the Wiencke farms. The area was a surprisingly large part of the map and the Wiencke family had prospered from it.

The map set me thinking. Lutherans came to Australia and took up land in Klemzig, Hahndorf, Lobethal, the Barossa, Freeling, Eudunda, Cambrai, the Clare Valley to mention a few areas in S.A. In Victoria it was places like the Wimmera and Hamilton. (My father was raised near Hamilton in the horizon-to-horizon Lutheran community of Tarrington). In NSW they settled a large part of the Walla Walla, Henty and Temora areas and Gilgandra. In Queensland it was the Yandilla, Dalby, Warra, Chinchilla, Nobby, Clifton, Kumbia, Kingaroy, Rosewood, Gatton, Biloela and Mackay areas. (Apologies for the areas not mentioned.)

Since the Weincke reunion, I have wondered how much land did Australian Lutherans actually take-up. If there were 8,000 Lutheran families (not an improbable figure) who took up 640 acres (one square mile) in Australia then the amount of land received by Australian Lutherans would be equal to:

- 100% of the 8,000 sq miles of modern day Israel (the Promised Land) and
- 5% of the 137,000 sq miles of modern day Germany – (the land they abandoned)
- Both the Israelites and the Australian Lutherans were fabulously blessed.

However, there is a difficulty. As an Australian Lutheran, my blessing comes with what people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century call a 'dark side' - the Australian Lutheran (and the Israelite) land had been occupied and was taken from the occupants of the time. This issue of people taking land and people losing land stands front and centre in the book of Joshua.

In Genesis the Lord is the creator, the original owner and original occupier of the land. On the land the Lord fellowshiped with his people - Adam and Eve. In Joshua, the Lord is re-asserting the use for which the land was originally intended. For the Lord the 'dark side' was that the people were fellowshiping on his land with the non-gods they had invented for themselves. He had been kicked off his land.

In turn, the Israelites lost the land the Lord had given them because they too rejected the Lord and his way of running things and had taken up their neighbours invented non-gods.

### **Prayer**

Lord, before we judge the Israelites harshly for the loss of their land, we pray as massively blessed Australian Lutherans, that each of us learns both from the book of Joshua and from Jesus' new testament reminder to 'seek ye first the kingdom of the Lord and his righteousness – and all these things will be added to (*and retained by*) you'. Amen.

This chapter of 10 verses outlines the allocation of lands to the descendants of Joseph, (Manasseh and Ephraim), following conquering the Promised Land.

Verse 10 states: "they did not drive the Canaanites out of the town of Gezer as instructed by God, so the people lived as slaves among the people of Ephraim."

Why did this happen? The people of Israel were told to drive out all Canaanites from their lands. This is another example of how the Israelites, even in this time of great triumph, did not follow the instructions that were given by God. While the Canaanites were allowed to stay in Gezer, they were treated as slaves. This happened in several other areas in the Promised Land as well. This meant that the idols and religions of the Canaanites were also retained within the new Israel, and led to many future problems.

God wants the best for us. Often we think we know better, especially for ourselves, maybe not everyone else. It is only by asking, and then trying to follow as well as we can His plan for us, that we will be truly happy and fulfilled, with our Heavenly Home to follow.

### **Prayer**

Dear God, please help us to ask, to listen and to follow, so that we may eventually join you in our Promised Land. Amen.

This chapter is interesting. The Lord has a plan to give a gift and his people respond.

In Joshua 17:16 the Israelites respond to the Lord's decision to give them the hill country by saying 'The hill country is not enough - for us AND all the Canaanites.'

In this case the Israelites deviously misinterpret the purpose of the Lord's gift – they specifically included the Canaanites who the Lord had specifically excluded. Their need for reinterpretation of the purpose of the gift sprang from their feelings of inadequacy for the task the Lord wanted them to do – to force the Canaanites out of the hill country.

We too play games and make devious excuses for not receiving gifts the Lord wants us because we too don't want to do what the Lord's gift implies we could do.

Joshua 18:3 'How long will you wait before you begin to take possession of the land that the Lord has given you?' A second response is 'We will have the gift when we are good and ready – not now.'

In this case the timing of the Lord's gift is most inconvenient. They knew if they moved to take the gift now they would lose the comforts and control that their status quo life was providing.

We too omit to take gifts the Lord wants us to have because taking the gift would put our comfortable lives and our built in controls at risk.

Joshua 17:13 'When the Israelites grew stronger, they subjected the Canaanites who were living with them in the land to forced labour but did not drive them out completely.'

A third response is 'OK. We will take the gift but we will use it the way we want.'

We too take gifts from the Lord and use them for things other than what the Lord intended.

### **Prayer**

Lord, teach us to see the Israelites as the human beings you constantly judged to be worthy to receive your gifts. Lord, teach us also to see ourselves and others with the eyes of love that you use when you look to give us the gifts you want us to have. Amen.

Names of places in Canaan, one after the other, all of them the homes of people — young and old, strong or weak, men and women, their animals, the places of their houses, fields and creeks and wells, and their livelihood. I can hear the wailing of the women, the cries of the wounded, the burning of the land, groaning of the animals: Their land has been destroyed and occupied by strangers. The technical terms used today are ‘*Landnahme*’ (in German), land grab, conquest, colonisation, settlement — words used by conquerors.

In the ancient credos of Israel, this story reflects the granting of the land as the last of the saving acts of YAHWE (Gerhard von Rad).

Joshua’s story, set sometime around 1210 BC, continues today. The conflict between the people of Palestine and the people of Israel has never been solved: Who is the owner of the land? Earlier in the book, the conquering of this country is being summarised by two clandestine scouts: ‘The Lord really has given the entire land into our control. The inhabitants of the land have melted away right in front of us!’ (2: 24 ISV).

Lutherans in South Australia may know this sentiment all too well. It is ingrained in their DNA since 1838 and engraved on the memorial monument on the Menglers Hill lookout above the Barossa Valley: ‘The Lord has given *us* this land!’ quoting Joshua 2:9. But the tragedy behind this line is for the First Australians the same as from where it was quoted: Rahab, a woman running a hostel in the centre of Jericho, hosting the two Jewish spies and protecting them, explains her act with the words, ‘I’m really convinced that the Lord has given *you* the land, because we’re overwhelmed with fear of you. All the other inhabitants of the land are demoralized at your presence’ (2, 9).

In this story, there is no happy ending for those dispossessed. As Rahab recognizes, it was YAHWE himself who allocated her land to the people of Israel. And thus Joshua, the prophet of YAHWE, exhorts his people and reminds them: ‘I [YAHWE] gave *you* a land for which you never worked, you have eaten from vineyards you did not plant. “Now you must fear the Lord and serve him in faithfulness and truth. Throw away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt. *Instead, serve the Lord.*”’ (24, 13-14).

## **Prayer**

Lord, never let us forget that all our inheritance comes from this earth, and with us it will return to the soil. We may be victorious over other peoples and their lands, because for the moment we are stronger than them. But this land is yours, not ours, not our own property. You have granted it us so that we, like Joshua, will serve you. Lord, be with us. Amen.

(Reference: Norman C Habel, The Land is Mine, 1995)

As suggested by Moses (Nu 35:9ff, Dt 19) the cities of refuge are chosen. Three cities on the east of the Jordan River and three cities on the west in the land of Canaan - all can be reached within a half day walk from any part of the country. These cities are all Levite cities.

The law at the time said that if a person dies at the hand of another, this person's nearest relative has the responsibility to avenge the death of their relative by putting the murderer to death.

If a person accidentally killed a person, they had the opportunity to flee for refuge, and be safe from anyone seeking revenge against them. They were under the protection of the city and of the High Priest until they had the opportunity to stand before a public trial to be judged.

Throughout history it has been traditional for criminals and political offenders all over the world to seek refuge or sanctuary in holy places.

Today, there are a few churches that still may offer sanctuary from certain criminal activity. It is not necessarily legal to offer sanctuary. The person is still quite likely to be arrested in the church because of the danger that is posed to the community.

More often today, sanctuary is offered to people who are refugees and are in danger of being deported.

Last year, a congregation in the UK, rallied behind a family, who were refugees from Kosovo. They had made friends in the community who had helped them settle in. Their children spoke perfect English and both parents had jobs. When their bid for asylum was rejected, the congregation, believing the family would be in real danger if they were sent back to their homeland, moved them, into their church in a bid to protect them.

God has promised us that he is our refuge. We know that we can go to him when we are in trouble, especially if we are the ones who have caused the trouble. We know that he will give us his strength to help us to work through the issues. He hears us, he understands us, and he cares about us.

Confession and forgiveness are all a part of our relationship with God, and of our relationships with other people.

## **Prayer**

Merciful Father, we confess to you that we have sinned: in our words and in our thoughts, in our actions and in our failure to act. Have mercy on us for Jesus sake, and forgive us all our sins. Be our refuge and our strength. Amen.

Refer to front cover.

At my home on the wall I have a heavily sequinned collage with the Star of David super imposed over a figure of Mary holding the infant Jesus. Crafted over the textured shapes are three symbolic droplets (representing the Trinity). These are heavily outlined in blue rope (waters of baptism). It is dripping & ripping through the preciously placed mounds of green, (Gods provision in earthly things). The droplets fall through the star collecting at Mary's corner. Their presence emerging from heaven & stopping at the grave, reminds me of the price that was paid (Jesus' blood) for my everlasting nourishment. Intertwined with a crown (Kingship & Glory) are randomly dispersed rich earthy shades as hills and valleys (good & bad times). The nature background tells me of the provision on Gods earth from the beginning of time.

This is a visual reminder to me that what I call spiritual inheritance was there from the beginning of time, master planned by God, for all time for all people. Woven through the finished art is the olive branch with its leaves scattered through all. Again a reminder to me that God always has a plan.

The knowledge that my life has been planned from the beginning of time as much as Moses & Joshua gives great buoyancy to my decisions.

While we wait to enter our promised land God gives us a portion and He deals graciously with us.

### **Prayer**

Lord in this solemn time let me pass over those things which distract me from you. You have tenancy in my heart! As I reflect on the stories of the Hebrews arriving in Canaan, help me to continually see that you do provide for me, though the wait at times seems long.

Let me not fill the precious real-estate of my heart with the deadwood of envy, greed or arrogance.

Soak me with reverence for you. Amen.

Hannah Schulz is working in Papua New Guinea as a Bible translator supported by Lutheran Bible Translators Australia. In her Christmas letter she writes, 'Bible translation both makes the work easier to understand, and harder.' She goes on to explain: 'Easier because it is the language that people best understand, harder because now people need to grapple with it and the challenge it brings.'

Hannah's letter came when I was grappling with Joshua 22. Does this chapter have anything to say to us today? I read it 4 to 5 times. The last verse really stood out for me. 'This altar is a witness to all of us that the Lord is God.' And so they named it 'Witness'.

We've got to go back to Joshua's day, but we've also got to come forward to our day.

We've got to go back to Egypt and see thousands of refugees leaving Egypt and move into a new land promised by God. We've got to keep watching our TV's, and see the thousands of refugees seeking a new land, a new home – some of them thinking that 'Joshua land' may give more security.

Back there in Joshua's day (his name means 'one who saves', 'Jesus') tribes and clans were given land. More still, each tribe or clan was to have at least one town for Levites who were to be evangelists, teachers, and mentors.

The reading tells of people from the right side of the Jordan River doing 'church work' among people on the left side of the Jordan River. They have finished the assigned work. 'General' Joshua, very much a 'Spiritual man', not afraid to let his faith be seen and heard, blesses his people, and that back home they will continue to share God's blessings. vs 6-9.

Yes, these people were very conscious of God's blessing. They wanted their children to remember. And so on the banks of the River Jordan they built magnificent altar vs. 10.

And now comes an example of the 'hard' bit. Back there on the east bank of the Jordan there were those, who would have received so many blessings, took exception. 'What's the matter with the place of prayer that we already have?' The 'grape vine' was really being used. What next is going to happen? Who gave them permission?

How come 'believers' can be so suspicious, so fearful? vs 12-20

How are we to grapple with this or similar problem?

WISDOM is needed in situations where we are 'charged'. Read verses 21 – 29 to find out how Reuben, Gad, and East Manasseh faced the situation vs. 26 – 29.

Don't miss out on the 'reconciliation' that took place. There is Wisdom at work in both parties. Wisdom and Love overcoming threats and anger. Yes, look again at verse 34 'Reuben and Gad said, "This altar is a witness to all of us that the Lord is God." ' And so we named it 'Witness'.

Is Paul's testimony also our testimony to the Wisdom that has blessed us? Read 1 Corinthians 1:30. And read James 3:17, 18 on how it (wisdom) will show.

Feeling a little uneasy? Then read James 1:5 'If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you' and let this message guide you into prayer, it's all part of experiencing how great and relevant is God's wisdom that we find in Jesus Christ.

### **Prayer**

We thank you for your reconciliation. Amen.

Joshua, by now very old at 110 years, gathers and speaks to the leaders of the nation (the elders, leaders, judges and officials). He would expect them to pass his message on to the entire nation. In his speech, Joshua gives God the glory for all of their victories and reminds the people that God did it for them, as He had promised.

After the Israelite army conquered the Canaanite army, the land was divided by lot and Joshua reminded the people that they had to fully possess what God had given them. In the same way, we as believers have been given an inheritance by God. We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing, through Christ and will eventually obtain our place with God.

Joshua tells them to be courageous and follow what God has written in the Book of the Law of Moses and not to turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left. Satan doesn't care which extreme we are tempted by, either legalism or licentiousness, as long as it leads us away from God.

Joshua goes on to tell the people not to associate with the enemy or have anything to do with their gods. God has blessed the Israelites because they held fast to Him but if they start to be involved with the locals and their gods, they can slowly be lured away and this can lead to their destruction. Ungodly influences present themselves as innocuous, but as we all know it doesn't take long before they are drawing us away from God. Joshua finishes by reminding the leaders that as God has kept all of his promises to bless them if they remained faithful to Him, He would also keep His promise to curse them if they were disobedient. This was the old covenant.

We now come under a different covenant by which Jesus has redeemed us from the curse of the law. Even so we do experience our loving God correcting us at times and bringing us back to Him.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, thank you for giving us the guidance of the law but even more thank you for sending your Son to redeem us from our failure to keep it. Amen.

**Joshua 24**

AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE,  
WE WILL SERVE THE LORD

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This verse is certainly one of the best known in the book of Joshua. It was with these words Joshua declared his allegiance to God. Having said this he confronted the tribes of Israel to also commit themselves, but not in a half-hearted, careless way. Joshua goes so far as to warn them, in no uncertain terms, that anything less than total allegiance would bring down the wrath of God on them all. He sounds almost as if he would rather them *not* worship God unless such service was total.

Why is this so important to him? Obviously, as leader of Israel, he wants the best for the nation's welfare, but he also knew of the ramifications of making choices and not living by them.

On the one hand adhering to one's word can and does have a positive influence on life. It gives purpose and direction; it defines our life and the sort of people we become. On the other hand however, a blasé attitude to our choices invariably produces the things we don't want. As an obvious example, how many of us have made New Year's resolutions? How many of us have broken them, despite knowing they would be good and right for us?

On a far more important level, when we walk away from God because we're angry at him, at his 'injustices', his 'uncaring' attitude, ad nauseum – in short, circumvent our choice to be his child, we become unhappy, cynical, and often quite nasty. It's pretty awful. It's the result of what it's like when we exhibit a shallow commitment to our Lord, who stands there, also unhappy, waiting to resume his relationship with us, to love, help and bless us through all the circumstances of life.

**Prayer**

Lord, strengthen us to become deeply committed to you, irrespective of how we may feel. Deepen our faith in your love for us. Amen.

In these chapters the developing nation of Israel faces two issues – the successor to Joshua and the need to bed down the Lord's salvation plan to gift the land, that would be the home of Israel, the place where Israel would fellowship with the Lord and serve him as he wanted them to.

The appointment of Judah was a moment of profound change. It's 'set in stone' the idea that the people would connect with the Lord and the Lord would connect with the people through the heads of the tribes. So bedding down the Lord's plan to gift the land to the Israelites would depend on the heads of tribes. In this chapter even with the active help of the Lord some heads of tribes said in obedience 'Yes. We can do it with the help of the Lord' while other heads of tribes were not obedient and said 'No. It can't be done.'

This chapter marked the beginning of 800 years of the Lord nurturing some 13 major and minor Judges followed by three batches of 14 Kings to bed down the work Joshua had begun to establish the nation as part of the Lord's salvation plan. It was 800 years of extreme disobedience, deep spiritual lows followed by the Lords nurturing intervention and the people getting their lives and the nation back on track because they follow the Lord and his commands.

Comment from a number of St Stephen's members was that the books of Joshua and Judges record things that are too bad and too negative to contemplate and dwell on. A key purpose of the writers of these books is to highlight that the bad and the negative things people do are followed by the Lord's wonderful nurturing love.

### **Prayer**

Lord, the bad and negative things that we produce in our lives are also uncomfortably mirrored in the chapters of the Old Testament. We pray that you will keep up your patience, your nurturing and your love for the three score and ten years of our lives too. Amen.

The reality of ancient violence present in the Middle East is brought vividly to us in Judges 3. Our current disquiet over Middle Eastern sectarian violence and random assassinations by people professing to serve God is shown here to be nothing new. Reading this chapter is disturbing. Yet this is the Word of the Lord.

As much as we like to think of the gentle Jesus and turning the other cheek, God sent him to die a brutal death through crucifixion. There are many violent deaths in Judges 3. How can we hear the message as we live with fear of similar religious hostilities in our own times?

God was testing the faithfulness of the Israelites to see how well they kept his commandments and was often saddened when they didn't. God sent leaders as judges who for a time would bring their communities into stability and peace but when they were gone, the Israelites fell back into bad habits.

During Lent, we reflect on our faithfulness when tested by God's challenges. We walk humbly with Jesus in his time of trial knowing our own brokenness and fears.

### **Prayer**

Dear God. We know you can see into our hearts. Your test of us during Lent shows us you continue to love us and want us to grow. Shine your mercy and compassion on us. Help us to learn from your dear Son Jesus Christ who met each test, even death on a cross, bringing us new hope and new life. Amen.

**Judges 4****DEBORAH AROSE AS A MOTHER IN ISRAEL**

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Early in its history Israel didn't have a monarchy and depended on a succession of judges both for its judicial system and to defend its borders against foreign invaders. Israel also had to clear the land from the territorial control of local Canaanite kings who weren't defeated and expelled during the conquest under Joshua. The greatest of these judges was a woman called Deborah, whose story is told in Judges 4 and retold in poetry in chapter 5.

Deborah was not simply a judge; she was also a prophet closely attuned to the word of God. The commander of Israel's army, Barak, looked to her for inspiration, courage and strategic advice. She compelled him to enlist and gather the troops needed to overcome the Canaanites under the command of Sisera. As a prophet, Deborah could assure Barak that God had 'given Sisera into [his] hand' because God was fighting for Israel, and that Sisera would come to grief at the hands of a woman, in this case Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite.

As with other stories in the books of Joshua and Judges, this story is not for the faint-hearted. Has it been embellished in the course of transmission? Does it reveal pro-Israelite tendencies that make us slightly uneasy? Were the Canaanites so wicked that they deserved the ruthless extermination that these chapters describe? Is this story told to remind us of God's equally high regard for women? Certainly Deborah is among the most prestigious female leaders in the Old Testament and her exemplary leadership provides encouragement to lay and ordained female leaders in the church today. The ode in her honour says: 'Deborah arose as a mother in Israel' (5:7). Or is her story told, together with other troubling stories, simply with an eye on our good and gracious God who delivers his chosen people from whatever threatens to diminish and destroy, and who ultimately does so through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

**Prayer**

Gracious God, thank you for the story of Deborah, sterling role model for women in positions of leadership, to whom you gave victory over Israel's enemy, foreshadowing Christ's ultimate victory over all evil. In his dear name we pray. Amen.

What do you do when you celebrate a victory? Do you laugh? Shout? High five the person next to you? What about writing a song or writing a poem?

In the Bible reading for today, Deborah (a prophetess, leader and song writer) and Barak (military leader) are celebrating their victory over Sisera and the Canaanites. Deborah's song is one of praise and thankfulness for God's protection and help as they overcame the enemy. Once again the Israelites had deserted God and were going through a tough time. They cried out for help, God heard their cries and answered their prayers. He chose Deborah and Barak, not because of their good looks or charisma but because he looked into their hearts and saw their faith.

The theme throughout the book of Judges, and in this verse, is relevant to my life as a Christian. I ignore God, I ask for help and I am reassured by God's constant love and concern for me. This makes me want to celebrate and share the good news with those around me. I am reassured of God's control in my life especially through dark and uncertain times.

### **Prayer**

Father God, Thank you for the celebrations and victories that occur in our life. We know you are with us during these victorious times as well as the not-so-victorious times. Give us peace and confidence that you are in control at all times. Amen.

In the past 5 years, what have been 2 sure signs of God's presence with you? Today's reading focuses on Gideon and his quest to prove God's presence in his life.

Once again the Israelites 'did evil in the eyes of the Lord' and for 7 years they were oppressed and bullied by the Midianites, Amalekites and others. The Israelites cried out for help and once again God was there to hear their cries. Gideon was a man of great faith and he was chosen to lead the people although he resisted whenever he could!

Gideon's faith journey goes from cautious to confident. He swings between sure and unsure of God's request, weak and strong in his own ability. He builds an altar and then tears it down and asks for signs from God to prove God is 'for real'. He really struggles with his faith, his confidence and his ability. God's continual patience and acceptance of Gideon's faith comes through strongly and clearly saying 'I have chosen you because of your faith- I will help you with the rest.'

### **Prayer**

Dear Jesus, Like Gideon I swing between weak and strong, certain and uncertain of your presence in my life. At times I want to shout out with praise and at other times I want to hide the fact that you exist in my life. Reassure me of your continual presence and help my faith in you to grow. Amen.

In today's chapter, after Gideon has destroyed the altar of Baal, God's next command to him is to sort out the Midianites. Gideon follows God's commands to the letter, and the army is reduced from 32,000 to 300.

Gideon's army triumphs against impossible odds. The glory can only be God's. It is from this story that the Gideon Society that distributes Bibles in hotel rooms and other institutions around the world takes their logo.

But what is the lesson for you and for me? Who are our Midianites? Who or what does God want us to fight for? What are the things that we should be opposing? Are there injustices that we should speak out against? Should we be doing more for the environment? What about those who live on the margins and who do not have the comforts and privileges that we enjoy?

Let's move forward in faith together and unleash God's power in our world – who knows what could happen?

### **Prayer**

All powerful God: please help me to see where you want me to stand up for you. Grant me the faith to know that with you on my side, I can make a difference. Amen.

Judges 8, could be one of a series of movies based around the heroes of Israel, with the latest heartthrob (Chris or Liam Hemsworth, Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise both being a little old to play the part) playing Gideon.

Gideon comes charging in with his small army, pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian. When he comes to the city of Sukkoth he demands food, 'we're hungry, give us some food'. No they say (they don't really think Gideon can win and want to stay in Zebah and Zalmunna's good books).

So Gideon moves on and the same thing happens again at the next city. When he finally catches Zebah and Zalmunna, he returns to destroy those who refused to help him. He returns an all conquering hero. After this success and while declining to be king, we see Gideon living it up, as if he was a king. As the story ends with Gideon's death we see Israel sliding back to its old ways.

And if this was the movie, these closing pictures would set the scenes for the sequel and continuation of the story, who would be Israel's next hero?

### **Prayer**

We pray for strength and faithfulness in our pastors and leaders. May their lives reflect God's power and love and mercy for his people. Amen.

In the midst of a story of war, horrors, chaos, murder of opponents and kin, and deceit in the course of ancient Israel conquering the Promised Land — like an island of peace — we find Jotham's fable. Appalled by the carnage around him, Jotham, the youngest brother of the self-declared King of Shechem, Abimelech, challenges his people with a parable: The trees want to crown a king amongst themselves. However, the trees most popular in Northern Israel, olive, fig and grapevine, are too selfish to take responsibility knowing their fruit gains them lots of attention. The lowest of them, the thorn bush, however, accepts the call — knowing well the powers this new position will give him over all and everybody around.

A parable warns of the hazards at the horizon: 'the bramble has no useful function to perform in any case. It is a tree that bears no fruit. At best, it seems useless. At worst, its thorns make it very unfriendly, and when it is dry it is easily flammable. So here we have a value judgment on Abimelech and the foreign idea of centralized rule.' (Michael Livni, 2001:3)

This fable, hardly known in the Christian world, is a clear message, even to us today: You don't want to take responsibility but hide behind an authority — you pay the price: The bramble can offer you little or no refuge, low to the ground and with thorns protecting only itself. Jotham, and the composers of the Book of Judges, could not have more adequately revealed their contempt of monarchy.

Martin Buber, the German-Jewish bible scholar and philosopher, considers this passage the most anti-monarchic in the entire ancient world. It is YHWH, the God of Israel, He who has brought His People to the Promised Land, — HE the only one — who is Lord. Every other human being, 'all are potentially equal [to each other] and can be imbued with the Holy Spirit. It is a pre-democratic idea.' (ibid).

In the midst of this carnage, it was the youngest survivor of a dynasty power struggle who shone a light into the darkness.

**Footnotes:**

Michael Livoni, The Parable of Jotham: The Question of Authority in Judaism (2001)  
<[http://jbq.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/304/304\\_jotham30.pdf](http://jbq.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/304/304_jotham30.pdf)>

## Prayer

Lord, let us always remember — YOU are Lord, over all and everybody. Without YOU, we are nothing or nobody, but you hold us in your hands and give us a name. You bless us and nurture us. Give us the strength and courage to go out and take responsibility for those around us. Teach us how to care for those amongst us who are weak and insecure. Help us to restrain those who want to acquire power for their own gains or who think they are better than others. Let us respect the voices and the gifts the Holy Spirit gives us. Let us prevent the carnage of war through living the vision of your world of Shalom: 'We shall overcome'. Amen.

### Further Reading:

Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, What did Jotham talk about? Metaphorical Rhetoric in Judge 9:7-20 <[https://www.academia.edu/4210157/What\\_did\\_Jotham\\_talk\\_about\\_Metaphorical\\_Rhetoric\\_in\\_Judg\\_9\\_7-20\\_p.\\_31-45\\_](https://www.academia.edu/4210157/What_did_Jotham_talk_about_Metaphorical_Rhetoric_in_Judg_9_7-20_p._31-45_)>

Daniel Scott Diffey, Gideon's Response and Jotham's Fable: Two Anti-Monarchical Texts in a Pro-Monarchical Book (Thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013)

< [https://www.academia.edu/5459918/Gideons\\_Response\\_and\\_Jothams\\_Fable\\_Two\\_Anti-Monarchical\\_Texts\\_in\\_a\\_Pro-Monarchical\\_Book](https://www.academia.edu/5459918/Gideons_Response_and_Jothams_Fable_Two_Anti-Monarchical_Texts_in_a_Pro-Monarchical_Book)>

Video in *German*:

Siegfried Zimmer, Die einzige Fabel der Bibel – Systemkritik par excellence (Richter 9, 8-15) | 3.7.3, Worthaus@Freakstock 2013 – Borgentreich: 3. August 2013

<<http://worthaus.org/mediathek/die-einzige-fabel-der-bibel-systemkritik-par-excellence-richter-9-8-15-3-7-3/>>

One tongue-in-cheek definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. Reading this passage makes me think there must be a touch of insanity about God. He rescues his chosen people from slavery in Egypt. What's their response? They complain! He provides for them in the wilderness. Their response? They grumble! He settles them in the Promised Land. Their response? They start to worship other gods! He provides leaders (judges) to protect them. Their response? They 'do evil in the eyes of the Lord' (10:6). Finally, he gets angry and they came crawling back, sounding all sincere. 'We'll never do it again', they say. But, they will! We know they will. They know they will. Surely God knows they will! But, God's response? He forgives them! He just can't help himself! He can't stand to see Israel suffer (10:16). So, he forgives them and rescues them again and again. If you ask me, that's kind of crazy. Or, is it love? Crazy love? Thank God for his crazy love! I am like those people of Israel. Always failing to put God first, and yet, he forgives me again and again. I am a recipient of his crazy love.

**Prayer**

Loving Father, I need your crazy love every day. Pour it out on me. Don't give up on me. And, as I receive your love, as flawed as I am, may I, in some little way, show that same crazy love to others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

It seems to me that those people around the world negotiating for peace have very well founded intentions, which are continually being rejected in the name of a cause which is usually based on a religious belief system.

Here we have southern Israel caught between the Philistines on the west and the Ammonites on the east. And to negotiate, we have Jephthah presenting the history of the region to indicate that the Israelites had taken only the land that the God of Israel had given them. God had previously forbidden them from taking any territory from Ammon (see Deut 2:18-19).

But the king of Ammon was not interested in negotiating and he paid no attention to this message. So with the spirit of the Lord, Jephthah leads the Israelites to battle against the Ammonites, and they have a resounding victory.

In the process, as well as being the leader of the campaign, he becomes a judge in Israel for the next six years.

But also in the process, he makes a vow to the Lord – a sacrificial promise that must be honoured. He had made the vow in good faith and he kept it, though it cost him his only child, his daughter. She, in her response seems to understand the implications of such a vow. ‘If you have made a promise to the Lord, do what you said you would do to me’ (vs. 36).

But unlike the pagan gods, God was not to be worshiped by human sacrifice – this was not a negotiation to please him.

In Exodus 13:12ff God says ‘Give me your firstborn sons.’ This was not a call for killing first-born sons in ritual child sacrifice. Firstborn animals – yes, with exceptions of donkeys which may be redeemed with a sheep or a goat, and sons which must be redeemed by an animal sacrifice, namely the Pascal lamb. Offering the eldest, the firstborn, or the first fruits was all about putting God first in their lives. This was shown clearly in 1 Samuel 1 when Hannah dedicated Samuel her firstborn son to the Lord in his service.

Mary and Joseph took their baby to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord: ‘Every firstborn male is to be dedicated to

the Lord'. They also went to offer a sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons, as required by the law of the Lord (Luke 2:22, 23).

But their son, God's only and firstborn son was sacrificed on an altar. He was the Pascal lamb. He offered the sacrifice as a once and for all offering for all of our sins, so that we too can be redeemed. Jesus is the ultimate negotiator interceding with God and pleading for us for forgiveness, and for the promises of life eternal.

### **Prayer**

Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us and grant us your peace. Amen.

**Judges 12**

**WHY SHOULD WE BE SO BLEST?**

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Recently we have been watching the popular and seemingly never-ending TV series 'Game of Thrones'. One wonders if the popularity of this series lies in the graphic violence portrayed with copious quantities of blood dripping from swords, severed heads or other ingenious ways of disposing of the enemy. The book of Judges could easily be the script for a few episodes of 'Game of Thrones'!

Judges seems to celebrate the gruesome victories of tribal chiefs, either warring with each other or the indigenous people as Israel (with Gods help) takes over the Promised Land. Whenever the people of Israel 'did what was evil in the sight of the Lord' disaster reigns. Only loyalty to God ensures peace in the land and obviously Israel's loyalties are far from constant.

In Chapter 12 the culture of war and violence continues as Jephthah, who has just sacrificed his only child carries on to annihilate 4,200 at the fords of Jordan. The carnage continues.

We cannot begin to imagine the horror contained in this book as we live in a culture relatively free of such things. Why then this almost morbid focus on violence in Film, TV and the daily news? Are our values any 'better' than those of the people in ancient times?

**Prayer**

Thankyou Lord for giving us lives in a time and place untouched by the violence of war. Give us hearts to appreciate the sufferings of the victims of wars and terror today and the will to be engaged in bringing peace where ever it is needed. Keep us in mind of the sufferings of your Son so that we may bring His peace to others.

The Lord steps into the lives of the (un-named) wife of Manoah and Manoah and asks if they would be an active part of the Lord's plan to rid oppression from the lives of their fellow people.

For each of us there is the question 'Is this something that happens only in Old Testament stories or does the Lord come to you and ask you to do things that are way outside the square of your life and relieve oppression from the lives of the people the Lord loves?'

For me the answer is an emphatic 'Yes'. As a 70 year old, I look back on my life as this kid from the country who went back to high school at 23 and subsequently was placed by the Lord to live a life that was instrumental in developing emergency housing services in South Australia - which helps around 12,000 households a year to find and get into rented housing. I was this kid from the country who went back to school and was placed by the Lord to live a life that was one of a three person team that established the South Australian community housing sector - which now houses over 5,000 households in affordable community run social housing. I was this kid from the country who went back to school and was placed by the Lord to live a life that was a key part of the team that established Home Start Finance - which has provided housing loans to over 70,000 South Australian households who would otherwise not be home owners.

How does this happen? It is fairly simply really. It happens when people like the wife of Manoah (whose social status is so low that her name is not even mentioned) accepts the opportunity and the challenge placed on her heart by the Lord. After that, you do hardly more than stand-by and watch in awe as the Lord generates the results he wants.

### **Prayer**

Lord, help me say 'Yes' to you as the wife of Manoah did. Amen.

Sunday School stories about the mighty Samson delivering Israel from the Philistines could not be further from the truth. Samson is the prize jerk and the ultimate jock. He is a braggart, a womaniser, and a monster of cruelty who wreaks horrible vengeance on those who stand in his way. He has the bare-faced audacity to insist that his father give him a beautiful Philistine woman as his wife, even though his God-fearing parents have raised him with a mission to free Israel from the ever-threatening Philistines, and God has endowed him with the Spirit's strength to do so. Did God hope that Samson's marriage to a Philistine might act as a Trojan horse to infiltrate and overthrow the enemy? (vs.4).

There follows in chapters 14–16 a series of stories about a man who was called as judge to deliver his people from foreign domination but only succeeded in jeopardising their security through his wanton lust, egotism, and brutality. He was always spoiling for a fight. And he loved nothing more than posing riddles (what is sweet and comes from the strong?), and teasing people with secrets (what will strip me of my strength?), to stir up anger and conflict.

This story is remarkably honest about the seamy side of Israel's early history. The book of Judges shows what happens when authority falls into the hands of the weak-minded and power-mad. It points to the importance of stable governments that can ensure the protection and welfare of their people. Israel was greatly weakened by this man of super-human strength; whereas God's true strength is perfected in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9), the weakness of the gentle answer in the face of anger, and ultimately the weakness of the cross of Christ.

### **Prayer**

Loving God, we thank you for disturbing our set ideas about your word. Help us to grapple honestly with the Bible's difficult stories. Continue to raise up leaders committed to the common good, and bring to justice those who exploit their authority for personal gain. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

A prevalent genre on free to air TV is murder mysteries. Two common motives for murder are disappointment in love relationships, and coveting another's property. Sometimes both come into play as they do in this story of Samson, the one-man army.

At the close of the chapter we are told that Samson 'judged Israel in the days of the Philistines for twenty years.' This gives us another perspective on Samson's actions. It wasn't just the man Samson but the whole of Israel who sought justice. It also implies a different perspective on Samson's marriage, as one designed to cement peaceful relations between the two nations. He was robbed of his wife by his father-in-law, and his 'companion'.

Samson's response was to 'do mischief to the Philistines': torch-bearing pairs of foxes burning up crops. That was his judgement in response to the slight. But he didn't approve of the Philistines killing his wife and her father when they worked out what the burning exercise was about. He took their legs from under them: 'struck them down hip and thigh with great slaughter'.

The relationship between Israel/Samson and the Philistines grew increasingly destructive. Israel sought to repair the situation by handing Samson over to the Philistines who ruled over them. The 'spirit of the LORD' was recognised when the ropes melted off Samson; he picked up the jawbone of a donkey and killed a thousand men. Israelite story-tellers would have pointed out the site of the battle: Ramath-lehi (the Hill of the Jawbone).

The conclusion to this story removes doubt that God was essential to Samson's as well as Israel's survival. Samson acknowledged God's victory through him, and begged to have his thirst quenched. 'The Spring of the One Who Called' was the result: water from rock.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, I pray I'm never called upon to be a super-warrior. But please help me to discern your strength enabling me to work for justice in my lifetime. Thank you for providing me with water and food, good health, good government, a home, family and peace. Help to work for the advance of your kingdom, honouring your name. Amen.

In these passages we read of Samson coming to Gaza where he forms a relationship with Delilah. He had previously slaughtered many of the Philistines who now grasped the opportunity to take their revenge on him by bribing Delilah to discover the secret of his great strength. Under duress he tells her that his strength resulted from his long hair but did not reveal to her that, as a Nazirite, his uncut hair was a symbol of his consecration and was a pledge of God's favour to him. Having lost his hair and therefore his strength, he was taken to prison, blinded and put to heavy work.

Samson was truly repentant and although he had lost his strength and eyesight, he had not lost his faith and willingness to serve God. Over time, his hair regrew and so did his strength and his resolve to overcome the Philistines. With his restored God-given strength he was able to bring down the temple destroying a great number of Philistines. He was prepared to lose his own life in the process.

Samson did not give up his own life voluntarily but he saw this as the only way to ensure the deliverance of the Israelites from the blasphemers and enemies of God. He could not have carried out this destruction without his own sincere repentance together with God's answer to his prayers.

### **Prayer**

Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ, who was prepared to suffer and give up His own life to overturn the foundation of Satan's Kingdom provide the deliverance of His people. Amen.

**Judges 17**

**THE BEGINNING OF IDOLATRY IN ISRAEL**

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The commentary by Matthew Henry tells us that in this Chapter we see the beginning of Idolatry in Israel. It tells of the time after Judges when there was no one to lead the people, so they made their own rules and did whatever felt right to them, but it was inevitably evil in the sight of God.

Micah loved money so much that he stole from his mother. His mother loved her money so much that she cursed her son, which seems to point to the fact that the money was their God long before it was made into an idol.

I wonder how many 'gods' we have today that displease our Lord. What sort of things do we unconsciously worship? Is it the love of money, our status in society, sport, drugs, alcohol or.....? What rules do we make to our benefit and to the detriment of others?

In this Lenten season as we follow the journey of Jesus to the cross, may we examine our hearts, and focus on Jesus who suffered and died for us, and cast out our idols forever.

**Prayer**

Dear Lord, please help us to keep our hearts and minds fixed only on Jesus, and not be distracted by the idols of this world. In Jesus name we pray.  
Amen.

Could it really be true that the tribe of Dan still hadn't managed to secure land that was allocated to them in the book of Joshua? If so, you can't really blame them for taking extreme measures to get what they doubtless believed they were entitled to. But the story is horrific.

The tactics they use are nothing short of bullying. Theft of sacred objects under military threat. Coercion of a priest to abscond and swap loyalties. Death threats to those who might oppose them. The brutal attack on the peaceful, quiet town of Laish, killing all the inhabitants and burning it down.

But like a thread running through this story, I sense a feeling of 'lost-ness' in this tribe, a separation from the things of God, and a misguided idea they can connect to God and to their identity by force. I wonder if they found it hard to worship an invisible, intangible God, when the various cultures around them have physical images of gods that seem so much more believable and appealing. It's like they're grasping for handles.

Is our culture so different? When I'm feeling lost, there's nothing better than having tangible reminders of who I am, whose I am, and where I belong; my family and friends, my home, the personal things I treasure.

God knows these needs. For us in AD times, God provides Jesus - God 'in the flesh' - a real, historic human being; a loyal priest who can't be bribed or enticed. God provides us with the promise of a home with him forever - better than land that can be disputed, raided and stolen. God provides tangible sacred things, like water, bread and wine to connect us with Him - better than home-made idols that can be stolen (or accidentally worshipped!). Yet even these physical connections are only 'real' because of faith.

Let's take a strong hold of the many 'handles' God gives us to connect with him so we won't lose our way or feel separated from him.

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, thank you for connecting with us through visible as well as invisible means. Open our eyes and hearts to see and appreciate the many ways you reach out to touch us. Amen.

This story includes a donkey, virgin, husband, and Bethlehem in Judah. But it's no cutesy Christmas story. There is no God come in human flesh, but increasing Lenten darkness. If, in a human way, we look for the person to blame in this story, it's the man of the priestly Levite tribe whose concern to maintain social status led him down ever darker paths. But the story also mirrors injustices of 2016 for which it seems impossible to atone.

The relationship between the girl and the man seems suspect from the first. Something isn't right. Girls are sold into, often polygamous, marriages today. When they try to leave they can be beaten, imprisoned, or executed. At least the Levite chose a gentler approach in this case, although his power to collect the girl, again, from her father's house is unquestioned. We do discern the reluctance of the girl's father to allow her to go.

Something went badly wrong with the choice of where to stay the night. It's a pity they didn't stay in Bethlehem. Jerusalem, which we know as central to Jewish worship, was rejected as being the city of Jebusites, non-Israelites. But instead of these strangers, it was relatives whom they needed to fear.

In Gibeah, one old man played gracious host, but local Benjaminites pounded on his door demanding to gang-rape his guest. How could such a tasteless story have been included in the Bible? Why does the old man try to convince the gang to use his daughter and the concubine instead? How could these people live with themselves after acting in this vile manner? Was the violence deliberately aimed at degrading a close rival region or tribe? Was it their idea of a fun night out? With 'no king in Israel' these were lawless times? Some tourists act as if they are not accountable for their behaviour. And why do we make and watch films depicting horrifying violence?

At the beginning of the story, the girl was a runaway concubine. Her husband confirmed his ownership by collecting her from her father, and then pushed her into the midst of a threatening mob, for his own protection. The mob degraded and killed her. She died with her hands on the threshold of the house, the house into which they'd been invited for safety.

The girl was betrayed by her husband to whom her body was entrusted. When she was back home with him, he divided her body into twelve parts to be sent throughout the territory of Israel. I guess this really is a Lenten story. The crucifixion and its interpretation in the Last Supper. It's enough to make one give up on reading the Bible. Or enough to bring one to the foot of the cross.

## Prayer

Dear Lord, I'm sorry for the times I'm more interested in asserting my power over another person than in understanding their perspective. I'm sorry for the times I objectify others for the sake of my own ideas. Please show me how to work for safety and justice for people entangled in difficult situations. Thank you for your sacrifice and guiding hand upon my life. Amen.

## Judges 19

## LORD OF THE FLIES V1

Surely this passage is one of the most vile in the entire scriptures and one in which it is hard to imagine being read out in Church, particularly if it is followed by: *thanks be to God!* It is almost too unpalatable to even admit that the passage is the word of God: inerrant, and the source and norm for our lives. But if we believe that the Bible is inerrant, there must be a reason that this story is included. One suggestion is that the stories that don't support the primary message of the Bible are included to add some credibility to the narrative – the Bible is a warts and all explanation of the story of God's people.

This story is a low point for the nation of Israel. Such is the point of lawlessness that even hospitality of fellow countrymen is disregarded from all sides. The subject of the story rejects the hospitality of his overenthusiastic father-in-law; he rejects the hospitality of the Jebusites owing to a misguided notion that the Israelite town of Gibeah will be safer; the people of Gibeah, violated the strong principle of hospitality by wanting to abuse the subject; the subject's host was prepared to have his daughter abused rather than be a bad host; the subject was willing to have his concubine abused, despite the hospitality of his father-in-law etc.

So, what's the point? The nation of Israel was broken and were in need of a wake-up call. Maybe the wake up came when they received 8.3% of a human; but what they were really in need of was a saviour. A saviour who would make things right: *Thanks be to God.*

## Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, our Saviour. Horrible things happen in the world and we do horrible things in the world. Now more than ever we need a saviour to make things right. Thank you that you are our saviour. Thank you that the world can be made right through you. Amen.

This is a story of justice for a violent crime committed against the wife of a Levite man.

This happened soon after the settlement of Israel in the Promised Land. The Levite man's cause was heard in the convention of the tribes. It was resolved unanimously by the tribes to avenge the Levite's honour on the men of Gibeah – the Benjamites also standing with the Gibeon criminals.

Israel was defeated in the first two battles, but after humbling themselves before God they were victorious in the final battle.

God in His mercy still cared for His people and, except for His aid in the time of crisis, Israel could have been exterminated.

Today God is still calling ordinary people like us to do His work and assuring us He will be with us as we do.

### **Prayer**

Dear God. Please guide us as we walk through this life. Remind us of your great sacrifice in sending your dear Son to die for our sins, and let us rest in your loving care. Amen.

A. The practice of self-less giving is commendable.

The family heads of the Levites asked the priest, Joshua, and the heads of the other tribal families of Israel to remember the practice of giving as it was in Moses' day. Today, tithing and giving is no longer a law, perhaps, yet still it is a good way to remember and practise it. The towns allotted to the Levites are thoughtful and generous – more than 80 towns.

B. Having the cities of refuge in our lives is comforting.

People need the cities of refuge when they are in need. We kill others, and we are killed by others as well. Indeed, the hatred oftentimes has become a killing spree all over the places and organizations. City of refuge is indeed a place where we can find rescue, saving grace, healing, strength, faith, love and hope. Jesus Christ is our refuge.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for your self-less love. As we come to you each time in confession, grant us faith and the knowledge that you have become our Refuge. Amen.

This account of love and devotion is one of the best known stories of the Old Testament.

We in Australia are well aware of the dire effects of drought. Israelites Elimelech and wife Naomi seek relief from their drought conditions around Bethlehem by relocating to the unaffected region of Moab, temporarily at peace with Israel. The marriage has been blessed with two sons, but tragedy strikes the family. First Elimelech dies. Naomi's sons marry local Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah. Tragedy strikes again and both sons die, leaving Naomi destitute.

On learning that the drought in Israel is over Naomi resolves to return to her homeland. Her loving daughters-in-law decide to accompany her. Naomi, realising that there are no prospects for them without husbands, insists that they remain in Moab. After some convincing, Orpah accepts Naomi's advice that she remain behind.

Ruth, raised as a Moabite worshipping other gods, however insists on continuing on with her mother-in-law, with the well-known statement of selfless devotion to her.

*Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (vv16,17)*

Clearly Ruth has now embraced the faith of her dearly loved mother-in-law. Although being raised as a Moabite, 'on the wrong side of the tracks', she reflects God's love so clearly.

I suspect that there will be members within our St Stephen's congregation who have similar stories to tell of special relationships that have developed when families have been blessed through the arrival of new partners from very different backgrounds (and faiths, in some cases).

God has amazing plans. He has chosen Ruth, from a non-Israelite upbringing, to become the great-grandmother of King David, and an ancestress of Jesus. In this way He foreshadows that His Son is to be the saviour of all peoples, regardless of their heritage or upbringing.

### **Prayer**

Dear Father God, we give thanks for your unconditional love for us. By your Spirit help us to share this love with those around us. Amen.

This is a wonderful story about caring and sharing, showing kindness and generosity to foreigners and strangers (Ruth). All three characters in this chapter of Ruth, demonstrated these attributes.

Naomi was grateful to Ruth for firstly accompanying her back to Bethlehem, after leaving her home and family, and secondly for Ruth's willingness to seek and supply food for both for them.

Was it coincidence that Ruth 'just happened' to go to the field belonging to kind and generous Boaz, and that field 'just happened' to belong to a relative.

I think not - throughout this uplifting story, God's guidance is very much in evidence, even though the characters in the story may not have recognised the fact.

Ruth's job of gleaning the left over grain was menial, and perhaps even degrading, but she did it with a happy and grateful heart.

Sometimes we may feel our role in this life is below what we think it should be, or we feel we are unappreciated for what we do. If we always remember to ask for God's guidance in our daily lives, we may then feel fulfilled in whatever we do and be able to relax and know that everything is in God's hands.

### **Prayer**

Please Jesus, guide us in asking for, and then relying on You for all our daily needs. Amen.

In this chapter God is not directly mentioned, yet it is always evident that He is involved. Because Ruth trusted Him and listened to Naomi things ended up pretty good.

Ruth trusting so fully after so much has gone wrong for her is amazing. Trusting in God - something that we can't see - is so hard! It would have been so much easier to fly the white flag and hunker down, not making any plans for the future. When things go pear-shaped it can really feel like God has abandoned you. Don't we all feel better with something tangible and loud, instead of God's still, small voice?

But trusting is vital, and Ruth trusted her mother-in-law so whole heartedly. Naomi's plan must have come from God, because everything ended so very well. When Ruth crept into bed with a relative, Boaz is surprised to find a woman there, but he doesn't freak out. God must have calmed him. Better yet, after Ruth said that he's obliged to marry her he doesn't say 'Woman, what right have you to tell me this!' Instead he politely says no, and proceeds to give her 20 kg of barley.

God helps us through the voices of others. We need to trust God and open our ears and hearts to Him.

**Prayer**

Dear Lord, Please help me to trust in you. And open my ears to the people who bring your Word. Amen.

The account of Ruth and Boaz is often regarded as a love story – but we are told that Ruth became Boaz's wife through a commercial land deal with correct cultural negotiations and ten witnesses to the transaction. For me the 'real' love story is the relationship of the beloved mother-in-law Naomi, with Ruth and Boaz's child Obed. In Obed, Naomi had a 'son', a wonderful blessing from God, restoring her life and guaranteeing her future. Obed became the father of Jesse and grandfather to David.

At the very end of our Lenten devotions we are presented with the genealogy of David for 8 generations on the male line. No mention here of the women who became the messianic ancestors: Amazingly among those God chose were women who had intriguing pasts. From TAMAR (Genesis Chapter 38) who in her liaison with father-in-law Judah, came Perez the first born twin and first named on the list. Then there is RAHAB (Joshua Chapters 2 and 6) the prostitute who saved the Israelite spies in Jericho. She is purported to be the wife of Salmon mother of Boaz. Then RUTH (widow and Moabitess), who with Boaz became great-grandparents to David whose line to Jesus is through the adulteress BATHSHEBA. This was all in God's plan for our salvation. His plans for us as we live out each day can be surprising too!

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, thank you for having a plan for us, and thank you for sending your son Jesus, for our salvation. Amen.



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