

Getting Into The Promised Land Without Falling Asleep In Leviticus

4. Early Statehood Joshua, Judges, and Ruth

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**A Teaching Commentary
of the Old Testament**

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Table of Contents

1	JOSHUA	5
1.1	PREPARE THE PEOPLE	6
1.2	RAHAB AND THE SPIES.....	6
1.3	ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND	8
1.4	THE CONQUEST OF JERICHO.....	8
1.5	ACHAN BREAKING COVENANT	9
1.6	THE CONQUEST OF AI.....	10
1.7	THE CEREMONY AT MOUNT EBAL AND MOUNT GERIZIM	11
1.8	THE GIBEONITES.....	11
1.9	THE BATTLE WHERE THE SUN STOOD STILL.....	12
1.10	THE SOUTHERN CAMPAIGN.....	13
1.11	THE NORTHERN CAMPAIGN	13
1.12	LAND YET TO BE TAKEN AND LAND DIVISIONS	13
1.13	EASTERN TRIBES GO HOME	14
1.14	JOSHUA'S FINAL WORDS	15
2	JUDGES	17
2.1	CONQUEST AND DISOBEDIENCE	18
2.2	OTHNIEL.....	19
2.3	EHUD	19
2.4	SHAMGAR	19
2.5	DEBORAH	20
2.6	GIDEON	20
2.7	ABIMELECH	22
2.8	TOLA.....	23
2.9	JAIR.....	23
2.10	JEPHTHAH.....	24
2.11	IBZAN, ELON, AND ABDON	26
2.12	SAMSON	26
2.13	THE DANITES AND MICAH'S IDOL.....	28
2.14	THE DESTRUCTION OF BENJAMIN	29
3	RUTH	32
3.1	WIDOWHOOD.....	32
3.2	RUTH GLEANS IN THE FIELDS OF BOAZ	33
3.3	RUTH AND BOAZ	34
3.4	THE CONCLUSION	34
4	INDEX OF SCRIPTURE REFERENCES	36
5	TOPICAL INDEX	38

1 Joshua

Genesis is the book of beginnings. It tells of the call of Abraham and the promise given to him and passed down to his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. It tells of the twelve sons of Jacob. It ends with the family of Jacob living as a distinct race of people in Egypt. The book of Exodus opens around 400 years later. The family of Jacob has gotten quite large and is still living in Egypt, but they are now living as slaves under harsh oppression. Exodus tells of the miraculous way that God led them out of Egypt, taking that first step towards the land that would be their own. The last part of Exodus and most of Leviticus focus on the giving of the Law. God imparted his commandments and instructions to the people. He revealed his nature and his standards to the people so that they would know how he expected them to relate to him and to one another.

In the book of Numbers, God is ready to lead the people into the land. A team of spies is sent into the land, which included Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim and Caleb from the tribe of Judah. When the team returned, all but Joshua and Caleb reported that the inhabitants of the land were too big and too strong and that the Israelites had no chance of taking the land. Joshua and Caleb told the people that nobody was as big as God, and if the people would just follow God's leadership the land would be theirs. The people did not listen to Joshua and Caleb and rejected God. For this, they were forced to wander in the desert for forty years until the rebellious generation had completely died. The only exceptions were Joshua and Caleb, who would be allowed to enter the land. The rest of the book of Numbers talks about the wandering in the desert.

Even Moses had managed to sin and anger God in such a way that he would not be allowed to enter the land. The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell speech. He reminded the people of God's requirements and called them back to the covenant. At the end of Deuteronomy, the leadership was officially transferred to Joshua. Then Moses died.

When the book of Joshua opens, the people are camped east of the Jordan River and are ready to cross the Jordan and take the land that had been promised so long ago to their forefathers. In some skirmishes that occurred towards the end of Numbers, they had already conquered some territory on the east side of the Jordan. An agreement had been made that once the fighting was complete and the Promised Land secure, the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh would settle in the Transjordan (east of the Jordan).

The book of Joshua is the story of God leading his people in triumph. It is the story of the people being willing to let God lead them in triumph. It is the story of a nation acting in faith and doing what God told them to do and reaping the benefits of obedience. The book closes with the people settled into their territories. Joshua dies at the end of the book.

Unfortunately, the people did fail to carry out God's plan completely. Although they conquered most of the Promised Land and drove out most of the current inhabitants, there were some areas that they failed to conquer. There were pockets of idol worshipping Canaanites left in the land. Just as God had predicted, these people would become a constant source of problems for Israel. They caused problems militarily for the nation. They led the people into idolatry. The presence of these people set up many of the conflicts that are described in the book of Judges and beyond.

The name "Joshua" is Hebrew for "The Lord Saves." It is a name that means that God is the source of our salvation. When this name is transliterated into Greek, it comes out "Iesous" and

when that Greek name is transliterated into English, it comes out "Jesus." Jesus' name in Hebrew was Joshua. Joshua was the one who led his people from their lives of bondage and wandering into God's promise. Jesus is the one who leads people from their lives of bondage and their wandering into God's promise.

1.1 Prepare the People

Joshua 1

God told Joshua to ready the people to enter the land. They would cross the Jordan in three days and begin their conquest. God promised Joshua to be with him and told him that nobody would be able to stand against him – BUT he also reminded him that all of this was contingent on the obedience of the people.

Joshua conveyed all of this to the people. They affirmed to him their willingness and readiness to go. They also affirmed him as their leader and asked God to be with Joshua as he had been with Moses. They said that anyone who crossed Joshua's leadership should be put to death.

The stage is set for the conquest.

1.2 Rahab and the Spies

Joshua 2

Joshua sent two spies into the land to look it over – particularly the city of Jericho. While they were there, they stayed in the home of a prostitute named Rahab. Now why in the world would they pick a find upstanding citizen like a prostitute to house them while they were there? Several possibilities exist.

First of all her home was open to them. Secondly and probably more important is that the men did not want to draw attention to themselves. If they had stayed with the mayor of Jericho, he would have asked a lot of questions and other people would have wanted to know everything about the guests of their distinguished townsman. Rahab was insignificant in the social strata. She was probably accustomed to serving clientele who did not want her to know a great deal about their business so she probably did not ask many questions. Furthermore, the people of the town were probably accustomed to ignoring the people who came and went from her home. Thirdly and most importantly is that God led them to this house because they would be protected there. Once again, God had a plan.

While they were there, the king of Jericho did indeed realize that there were spies in their midst and tracked them down to the home of Rahab. He sent soldiers to arrest the men. They came and knocked on Rahab's door. She told the soldiers that men had indeed come but that she did not know they were spies. She said that when the time drew near for the gates of the city to be shut at night, the men left and headed down the road towards the Jordan River. She encouraged the soldiers to go quickly and to find the men. All this time she was hiding the men on the roof of her house.

The soldiers left. Rahab went to the roof to talk to the two men. In Joshua 2:8-13 we read,

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to

Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts sank and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death."

What a contrast to the bad report brought back by the spies in Numbers 13:31-32:

But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people: they are stronger than we are." And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

What is the difference? In Numbers, the people were not faithful to the leadership of God. They were not committed to his plan, and thus they could only see themselves as weak. They felt like grasshoppers when they compared themselves to the residents of Canaan, and they were sure that the residents viewed them the same way. But now we get a report "from the horse's mouth." Rahab gives the insider's view, and she reports that the courage of all of the people in Canaan is melting because they have heard of the miracles that God has performed to deliver his people. They all know they are going to be defeated by this God and that his chosen people will have the land. They would have reacted the same way forty years earlier if the people had just been willing to follow God's lead at that time.

Rahab is giving protection to these two men. In return, she asked for protection for her family once the battle actually starts. She perceives that the inhabitants of the city will be destroyed and wants her family to be protected. The spies tell her to tie a scarlet cord in her window as a sign and they promise to spare the people in her house when the fighting starts.

This seems like a fair trade – safety for safety. The problem is that God had commanded the people to destroy ALL inhabitants of the Promised Land. Did these men go against God's will when they made this deal with Rahab? It is a good question and one that the text does not answer directly. At this stage in Israel's history, God is fairly quick to reprimand people when they violate his instructions. This act seems to have brought no reprimand. It is also interesting to see in Matthew 1:5-6 (the section that gives the genealogy of Jesus) that Rahab became the mother of Boaz (the husband of Ruth), who became the father of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David. Thus Rahab was David's great-great-grandmother and consequently an ancestor of Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that God had told the Israelites to obliterate the residents of Jericho because of their idolatry, she specifically was not an object of God's wrath and she did not lead the nation into idol worship. Back to the question: Did these men violate God's instructions when they agreed to spare the life of Rahab? I think that most likely, God gave them specific permission to let Rahab live in exchange for her belief in God and her willingness to help them take the city.

Rahab's home was actually built in the city wall of Jericho. She had a window that provided an opening in the gate. She let the men out of the window and out of the city, and they escaped and made their way back to Joshua. They brought a good report and told him how the people of Jericho were terrified, and as a result the people had faith that God would lead them to victory.

1.3 Entering the Promised Land

Joshua 3:1-5:12

When Moses led the people out of Egypt, God gave a sign that affirmed Moses' leadership and also confirmed God's intention to lead his people in victory. That sign was the parting of the Red Sea. When it came time to enter the Promised Land, God gave a similar sign to affirm Joshua's leadership and to confirm that he intended to lead them in victory. This sign was the parting of the Jordan River.

When the day came to march into the land, the men carrying the Ark of the Covenant went first. When they walked out into the Jordan River, the flow was held back upstream and the water completely subsided before them (even though the river was at flood stage according to the text). The people were able to walk across because there was no water. The men carrying the Ark stood in the river until all the people had crossed.

Twelve men, one from each tribe, were each instructed to select a rock from the riverbed and to take it with them as a memorial of this miracle. In the future they could look at the twelve rocks and be reminded of the miracle that God performed to bring them into the land.

Once everyone had crossed, the men carrying the Ark walked the rest of the way across the riverbed. When they stepped out, the water resumed its normal flow.

The text says they crossed the river near Jericho. The place where they camped after crossing is at Gilgal, which is a bit north of Jericho.

In Israel, the Jordan River runs in a deep groove that cuts through the land in a north/south direction. There is a sharp drop in elevation as one approaches the Jordan or the Dead Sea. The city of Jericho (which is the first city they would take) is near the river but is also fairly high up relative to the Jordan. From that vantagepoint, one can look down from Jericho and see quite a bit of the river and see it well. The point is that the people of Jericho had front-row seats to witness the miracle that God performed to bring the people into the land. They would have been both amazed and terrified by what was going on, knowing that a force much bigger than them was about to hand them defeat.

The people entered the land on the tenth day of the first month (the fourteenth day of the first month is Passover). When they camped at Gilgal, it was time to take care of some business that had gone neglected while they were wandering in the desert. During the forty years, the practice of circumcision had been neglected. Joshua saw to it that all men in the camp were circumcised as required by the covenant. They remained at Gilgal for a few days while people recovered from the procedure.

On the fourteenth day of the month, they celebrated Passover at Gilgal. The next day, they ate of the fruit of the land and manna ceased to fall.

1.4 The Conquest of Jericho

Joshua 5:13-6:27

Near Jericho, Joshua saw a man holding a sword. He approached the man and asked him if he was for the Israelites or for their enemies. The man replied in Joshua 5:14-15:

"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?"

The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.

This is interesting text. The identity of this man is not known for certain, but it is either an angel of God, a preincarnate appearance of Jesus (Christophany) or an incarnate appearance of God himself (Theophany). The exchange (take off your sandals, etc.) is reminiscent of when God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, so this may well have been God. Whoever it was, he had brought the battle plan to give to Joshua.

The men of Israel were to march around the city walls of Jericho once a day for six days. They would be led by trumpets playing. The Ark of the Covenant would be in their midst. The people were to say nothing. They were just to march.

For six days they did this. They walked around the city, silent except for the trumpets. Then they returned to their camp.

On the seventh day, they were to march around the city walls seven times. The first six times would be just like they had done the previous days. There would be silence except for the trumpets. During the seventh time around at an appointed time, they would all shout a battle cry. Then the fun would start.

They did as instructed. They circled the city quietly once a day for six days. On the seventh day, they walked around six times quietly. On the seventh trip around Joshua gave the signal and the trumpets played and they all shouted. When they shouted, the walls of the city fell down.

The people were told to do several things when the walls fell down. First, the city and the people in the city were to be destroyed. Second, all gold and silver and bronze and iron in the city were to go into the treasury of the Lord (the tabernacle). Third, Rahab and her family were to be spared, but they are the only people to be spared.

So the walls fell down and the people rushed in and began to execute the instructions (and to execute the citizens of Jericho). Rahab and her family were taken out. The text has a note in it that indicates that Rahab was assimilated into the people of Israel.

Jericho was only the first of many battles that the nation fought to take the Promised Land, but it is perhaps the best known. God gave them a miracle to lead them to victory. It is colorful and exciting and the kind of story that inspires good songs and epic movies. God is still in the business of knocking down walls that keep people from his promises. It is no less exciting or dramatic now than it was then. We just have to be willing to march quietly or to shout when told to do so.

1.5 Achan Breaking Covenant

Joshua 7

Among the men involved in the battle of Jericho was a man named Achan. Achan did not follow instructions exactly. While he was in Jericho, he saw some things that he liked. There was a fancy robe from Babylonia and some gold and some silver. He took them and hid them in his

tent. God had said that the gold and silver and bronze and iron went to the treasury of the Lord and everything else in Jericho was to be destroyed.

Soon after the battle of Jericho they came to the next city, which was Ai. Joshua sent some men into the area to assess the effort in taking Ai. Compared to Jericho, it was a small town. They figured that they only needed to take part of the army to fight with Ai and that the other men could rest. So that is what they did.

When they came upon Ai, the men of Ai attacked them and drove them back. Some of the Israelites were hurt. They tasted a bitter defeat. They came back to the Israelite camp to lick their wounds and to wonder what went wrong. Joshua came and threw himself before God and asked what was wrong.

God reminded Joshua of something that he had stated clearly and emphatically over and over again throughout Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy: God's promises were contingent on Israel's obedience. And right now, Israel was disobedient, so God was not with them. God told Joshua that someone among them had taken things from Jericho against God's instructions.

Joshua had the nation present itself before him, one tribe at a time. God revealed that the sinful person was from the tribe of Judah. He had the people of Judah present themselves one clan at a time. God showed Joshua which clan was causing the trouble. The people of that clan had to present themselves one family at a time. God showed Joshua which family was the problem. The men of that family had to show themselves individually and God showed Joshua that it was Achan who had broken the covenant.

Joshua asked Achan to confess, which he did. He showed Joshua what he had taken. Achan and all of his possessions and his family were taken outside the camp. They were stoned and burned. God's anger subsided and the nation was back in his favor.

This is a bitter price to pay for some gold and some silver and a fancy robe. There is always a bitter price to pay for rebellion against God. Yet we never seem to learn. The lesson? No man is an island. My rebellion can bring grief on me, on my family, and on my nation. And God does take it seriously.

There is one other lesson to be learned from the failed attempt to take Ai. The battle of Jericho was a marvelous victory because they were following God's game plan. At Ai, the men sized up the battle themselves and devised their own strategy. As a result, they were soundly defeated. Do not expect to have God give you victory in battle unless you are fighting his fight. He will win his battles.

1.6 The Conquest of Ai

Joshua 8:1-29

Now that he had dealt with the sin of Achan, God was ready to give the city of Ai into the hands of the Israelites. God told them to do to this city just as they had done to Jericho, except that this time they were given permission to take the plunder for themselves. God gave them a battle plan. They took a portion of their army and sent it around to the west side of the city to wait quietly and unnoticed. Then Joshua and the remainder of the army approached the city from the east side, just as the soldiers had done before (the time they were driven back). When the soldiers approached from the east, they did it very conspicuously, wanting to draw the attention of the men of Ai. Sure enough, the men of Ai noticed. Every man came out of the city to meet the men of Israel. The Israelites turned and fled, as if they were afraid of the men of Ai. The

men of Ai pursued them, leaving the city totally defenseless. At some point, Joshua turned and gave a signal. The people who were waiting west of the city ambushed it and set it on fire. The men of Ai noticed the smoke coming up from the city and panicked. At that point, the Israelites from the east quit running. They turned around and attacked from the east while the other Israelite men came out of the city and attacked from the west. The men of Ai were caught in the middle. Every one was killed. The king of Ai was captured and brought to Joshua, who hung him from a tree. The Israelites returned to the city and killed the remaining residents (women and children), took the plunder that they wanted, and burned the city to the ground.

1.7 The Ceremony at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim

Joshua 8:30-35

In Deuteronomy 11 and in Deuteronomy 27, God had told the people of Israel to go to Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim when they entered the Promised Land. They were to have a ceremony of covenant renewal there. This is the time that they carried out this instruction.

Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim are near the city of Shechem. They are about one-half mile apart. Half of the tribes stood at the base of Mount Gerizim and recited the blessings of the law. The other half stood at the base of Mount Ebal and recited the curses. While they were there, Joshua recited the entire law to all the people.

Later in their history, after the Jews returned from Babylonian captivity to rebuild the temple (see Ezra and Nehemiah), the Samaritans wanted to help with the rebuilding. The Jews would not let them. So the Samaritans returned to Samaria (which includes Shechem) and built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. It was destroyed more than a hundred years before Jesus. In the story of the woman at the well in John 4:20, when she says "Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim the place we must worship is in Jerusalem," she was referring to Mount Gerizim.

1.8 The Gibeonites

Joshua 9

Among the residents of the Promised Land was a group of people called the Gibeonites (from the city of Gibeon). They heard what God was doing for the Israelites. They had sense enough to know that they were on the agenda for destruction. They knew that a military defense would be of no use so they decided to scheme their way into safety.

They put on old and dusty clothes. They loaded their animals with dry and moldy bread and old, cracked wineskins. They put on costumes that would make it look like they had traveled a very long journey. Then they made the very short journey to the camp of the Israelites.

When they arrived, they told the men of Israel that they had come from a land far away. They came because they heard of all that God was doing for the Israelites and they wanted to make a treaty with them. The Israelites inspected their clothing and moldy bread and cracked wineskins and figured that they had indeed come from a long way away. Joshua 9:14 says "The men of Israel sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord." By their own reasoning, these men were foreigners and thus not among those who were to be destroyed. Thus without talking to God about it, they made a peace treaty with these men. The Gibeonites returned home.

A short time after that, the Israelites discovered somehow that these people with whom they had made the treaty were in fact close neighbors. They were angry over having been deceived.

They confronted the Gibeonites and wanted to know why they had tricked them. The Gibeonites were up front with them. They said that they knew that the Israelites would destroy them and they wanted to live. They said that the Israelites could do with them whatever was proper, knowing that the Israelites were not likely to violate their treaty (even though it had been made under false pretenses).

Joshua said that they would let the Gibeonites live, but they would become woodcutters and water carriers for the Israelites. They assumed a servant status in the nation, but their lives were spared.

Because the people of Israel failed to look to God for wisdom before making an alliance with people they did not know, they ended up in a situation where they were unable to fulfill God's command to drive out all of the people of Canaan. Poor judgment led to disobedience. One failure led to another. Not much has changed.

1.9 The Battle Where the Sun Stood Still

Joshua 10:1-28

The king of Jerusalem found out that the Gibeonites had made a treaty with the Israelites and he was mad at them for it. Apparently the Gibeonites had a fairly large army. The king of Jerusalem thought that they should be fighting the Israelites like everyone else was doing rather than make a treaty with them. He talked to the kings of four other cities – Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon. They decided to go together and attack the Gibeonites.

When they did, the Gibeonites appealed to the Israelites for help. Since they had a treaty with them, they had the right to do this. God assured Joshua that he would be with them in battle, so Joshua summoned his army to go to battle against these five Amorite kings. They marched all night and surprised the Amorites in the morning and began to attack them. The Amorites fled and the Israelites pursued them. God sent a large hailstorm and the text says that more of the Amorites were killed by the hail than by Israelite swords.

Joshua prayed that the daylight would last until the enemy had been defeated. The text says that the sun stopped in the middle of the sky for about a day.

Joshua received word that the five Amorite kings were all hiding in a cave near Makkedah and that their soldiers were fleeing back to their cities. The Israelite soldiers pursued the men and killed almost all of them before they could return home. Then the soldiers came back to Joshua, who had gone to the cave near Makkedah.

The five kings were brought out and were forced to lie on the ground. Joshua had the commanders of his army come and put their feet on the necks of the kings and told them that God was going to do the same to all of their enemies. Then he killed the kings and hung their bodies on trees until sunset. At that time they were cut down and buried in the cave where they had hidden.

Then Joshua and his soldiers turned around and took the city of Makkedah and destroyed its people.

The military campaign was in full swing.

1.10 The Southern Campaign

Joshua 10:29-43

From there, Joshua and his men went to the city of Libnah and took it. They conquered it and destroyed it and killed all of the people. From there, they advanced to the cities of Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir. They had already defeated the kings and the soldiers of these cities in the battle described above so these cities fell easily into their hands. They destroyed the cities and their inhabitants. The king of Gezer tried to come and help defend Lachish and in the process he was defeated as well.

In the process of doing all of this, Joshua and his men took the entire southern area of the country. It was all secured for the Israelites. They were faithful in doing as God had commanded – destroying the cities and their inhabitants.

1.11 The Northern Campaign

Joshua 11

The kings in the northern part of the land heard about what had happened to the southern kings and they decided to take action. They banded together to wage war against Joshua and his army. Once again, God came to the aid of his people and led them to totally defeat the kings of the north. Their cities were captured and looted. All of the inhabitants, including the kings, were killed.

1.12 Land Yet to be Taken and Land Divisions

Joshua 12-21

Chapter 12 of Joshua gives a list of kings that had been defeated by the various campaigns to take the Promised Land.

Chapter 13 outlines some territories that were yet to be taken. The Israelites had the core of the Promised Land but they had not yet pushed the land to its ultimate boundaries. Some border areas were still occupied by the original inhabitants. The land in its entirety would not be fully possessed until the time of David.

The text gives no explanation as to why they stopped short of taking the whole land, other than a mention of the fact that Joshua was growing very old. Perhaps his ability to lead them in war was waning. Still, God was their leader and their success did not depend on the prowess of Joshua (not to ignore his effective leadership). The fact is that God chose to give them rest from their fighting. Simply to give them rest may have been the reason that God allowed them to stop. As a people, they had been wandering in the desert for forty years. Now that they were in the Promised Land, they had spent their entire time there waging war (we do not know exactly how long they had been doing this). It seems that God wanted to let them settle down for a time and begin enjoying the land that they had been given. God instructed Joshua to go ahead and allot the occupied areas as territories to the various tribes even though they still had enemies living in them. God promised to drive those enemies out in his own time. The lesson here seems to be that God is wise and his timing is perfect. If he chooses to give us rest even though we are short of achieving one of his goals, we should relish in the rest. That, too, can be his goal for us.

On the other hand, it appears that it was God's plan to wait until David's day to completely take the Promised Land. He knows why. The fact that the people settled into a land still occupied by pagan enemies set up the events that follow in the book of Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel.

Chapter 13 continues by talking about the division of the land on the east side of the Jordan to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. It gives a description of what territory went to which tribe.

Chapters 14-19 tell about the division of the land west of the Jordan to the other nine and one-half tribes. The easiest way to see how the land was divided is to look at a good map showing the division of the land among the twelve tribes, found in the back of most Bibles. Interspersed in these chapters are mentions of pockets of Canaanites that had to be confronted or driven out by the Israelites. Some were driven out; some were submitted to forced labor; others remained and were not addressed until later in the nation's history (e.g. the inhabitants of Jerusalem). Chapter 20 tells about the cities of refuge that were established. These were places where a person could go if he had accidentally killed someone and he would be protected from blood revenge there. They were scattered all over the land. Chapter 21 tells about the allocation of the Levitical cities – the cities where the Levites lived. They, too, were scattered all over the nation.

It is interesting at this point to go back and look at Genesis 49:5-7. This is the section where Jacob is blessing his sons shortly before his death. In doing so, he remembers the time when Simeon and Levi killed the men of Shechem for the rape of Dinah. He says,

Simeon and Levi are brothers –
their swords are weapons of violence.
Let me not enter their council,
let me not join their assembly,
for they have killed men in their anger
and hamstrung men as they pleased.
Cursed be their anger, so fierce,
and their fury, so cruel!
I will scatter them in Jacob
and disperse them in Israel.

Having read that, look again at the map of how the land was distributed among the twelve tribes. Levi has been literally dispersed in the land. The Levites are scattered all over the area and have no territory of their own. Simeon, on the other hand, did receive a share of the land, but his territory is completely engulfed by the territory of Judah, and over time that territory was swallowed up and absorbed by Judah.

1.13 Eastern Tribes Go Home

Joshua 22

Now that the focused military campaign was winding down, Joshua summoned the men of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh and told them that they could go home to their territories across the Jordan. He admonished them to remain faithful to God and to keep his commandments. So the men set out for home.

When they came near the Jordan, they built an altar on the Canaan (west) side of the river. When the other tribes heard about it, they were quite agitated and considered waging war against the two and a half tribes. Although on the surface this seems unimportant, there is a reason for their anger.

Leviticus 17 gave very specific instructions about where sacrifices could be offered, and it was ONLY at the tabernacle (or later the temple). People were not free to build altars wherever they wanted and offer sacrifices there. To do so was considered idolatry or at least rebellion.

The other tribes sent leaders to confront the leaders of the Transjordan tribes. The Transjordan leaders explained that their intentions were honorable and that they had no intentions of offering sacrifices at the altar they had built. The purpose of the altar was to stand as a reminder to the people on the west side of the Jordan that the people on the east side belonged to the nation and worshipped the same God. That was all it was for. They had no intention of offering sacrifices there. They only wanted to drive a stake in the ground on the Canaan side of the river to remind the people there that they were all family and that God had not put the Jordan river between them to cut them off.

Once they had offered this explanation, the leaders were satisfied and they parted in peace.

1.14 Joshua's Final Words

Joshua 23-24

Joshua is very old and he knows that his time is drawing to an end. He summons the nation together to give them final instruction. From this point forward it would be increasingly difficult to summon the nation since they are now scattered all over the Promised Land.

Joshua reminds the people what God has done for them to bring them out of Egypt, provide for them, and lead them into the Promised Land, driving out their enemies before them. He admonishes them to remember the laws of Moses and to refrain from idol worship. They are to put aside the gods of the former inhabitants of the land and the gods that some of their forefathers worshipped in Egypt. God has promised to drive the remaining enemies from the land. If the people begin to get "chummy" with these enemies, however, and begin to do such things as intermarry with them, God will not honor that promise. The people must be faithful, distinct, and pure or else God will leave their enemies there to be a snare to them. All of the good promises of God have come true. They should remember, however, that God has promised some very bad things if they turn to idols. Just as God was telling the truth about the good things, he was telling the truth about the consequences of idolatry as well. They need to keep that in mind.

At the beginning of chapter 24, Joshua assembled the people at Shechem. It is unclear what the significance of Shechem is, but this seems to be an important meeting point for the people. Remember that this is where Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim are. It is where Joshua now summons the people for covenant renewal once more.

Joshua reminded the people of the miraculous things that God had done for them, all the way from the calling of Abraham through the taking of the Promised Land. We read in 24:13-15,

So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.

Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

The people were being asked to renew their commitment to put away idols and serve the Lord and him only. The message here was nothing new and the people had pledged their loyalty before. The people had also proven themselves to be very inconsistent about keeping their commitments, just as we are in keeping ours some of the time. Just as we need to renew our devotion to God from time to time, the people were being asked to renew theirs.

The people responded with devotion to God. They expressed that they wanted to follow God and destroy the idols left behind by the previous occupants of the land. Joshua reminded them one more time about the consequences of failing to keep this promise but they assured him that they would be faithful.

Some time after this, Joshua died and was buried in the territory of Ephraim (since that was his tribe). Verse 24:31 says

Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel.

The period of Joshua's leadership was a very good time for the nation of Israel. Except for the sin of Achan, there were no major outbursts of disobedience. The people seemed to genuinely follow God's leadership and quickly saw the rewards of doing so. They finally possessed the majority of the Promised Land. They finally had rest from their wandering. As the verse above indicates, they were witnesses of God's power and favor and it inspired devotion and obedience for a generation. This was surely one of the nation's highest periods.

There is a footnote at the end of chapter 24 that the people finally got around to burying the bones of Joseph. His remains had been carried out of Egypt at his request. He was buried at Shechem, which is in the territory of Manasseh, his son.

At the end of chapter 24, Eleazar, the high priest, also died. He was buried in Gibeah, in the territory of Ephraim.

2 Judges

After the people moved into the Promised Land, they lived as twelve loosely affiliated tribes. They had an identity as a nation but had nothing that resembled a national government. They were a theocracy of sorts in that their single ruler was God, but it did not take very long after the death of Joshua for them to get to the point that they did not follow God very well. They did not have a king like neighboring nations did. That was by design: God wanted them to look to him for leadership. Unfortunately they were very imperfect listeners (how little things have changed!).

As a nation and as individual tribes, they faced the task of continuing to occupy the Promised Land. When Joshua died, there were sizable areas yet to be taken, as described in Joshua Chapter 13. Thus there was a military challenge of continuing to drive out the pagan enemies. The presence of these people posed a spiritual challenge as well, because (just as God had predicted) their pagan influence began to rub off on the Israelites. Members of the nation of Israel began participating in idol worship, in spite of the volumes of warning that they had received against it in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua.

In order to meet these challenges, the nation needed to organize itself. Organization necessitated human leadership.

When God first put his plan in motion in Genesis, he called Abraham. Abraham was the leader from a human perspective. That leadership was passed on to Isaac and then to Jacob. In Jacob's lifetime, the chosen few migrated to Egypt and lived under the governmental authority of Egypt. When God was ready to draw them out of Egypt, he called Moses and gave them new human leadership. When Moses was ready to die, he passed that leadership on to Joshua. When Joshua died, no successor was appointed. For the first time since Abraham, nobody was really in charge. Still, leadership was needed to deal with the military and spiritual challenges that faced the nation.

To fulfill this need, God called the judges. A judge was a man or a woman who was called into leadership by God for a time to meet a specific challenge. Perhaps the nation was under attack by a neighboring nation. God would bring forth a leader from Israel who would lead the nation into victory. For a time, the nation would look upon this person as the national leader. When that person's leadership faded, perhaps because he or she died, the nation would simply go leaderless again until the next crisis erupted. There was no continual succession of leadership as is typical in a formal government.

We see in the book of Judges that there is a link between spiritual problems and military problems. Over and over again in the book, the nation corporately fell away from God. People would stop following his commandments. Idolatry would be practiced openly. Just as he had promised, God would withdraw his favor from the nation in response to this behavior. He would allow neighboring nations to attack them and remind them of how defenseless they are without God's protection. They would respond to the harassment by crying out to God. The spiritual problems brought about military problems. The cycle in the book seems to be:

- The people fall away from God. The nation as a whole becomes corrupt and rebellious to God.
- God allows them to experience the consequences of their actions. He withdraws his protection. The nation is attacked by enemies.
- The people cry out to God for help. Their attention is turned back on him.

- God raises up a judge – a strong leader to bring the nation out of its crisis. Under God's leadership, the nation experiences victory.
- For a time (often for the rest of the life of the judge) the nation turns back to God and is faithful, and experiences God's favor.
- Eventually the judge's influence is gone. Go back to step 1 and repeat the cycle all over again.

This cycle continued until the time of Samuel, who was the last judge. Samuel ushered in the time of the monarchy, when Israel had a formal government and continuous human leadership in the form of a king.

The judges named in the book of Judges are:

- | | | |
|------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. Othniel | 5. Gideon | 9. Ibzan |
| 2. Ehud | 6. Tola | 10. Elon |
| 3. Shamgar | 7. Jair | 11. Abdon |
| 4. Deborah | 8. Jephthah | 12. Samson |

2.1 Conquest and Disobedience

Judges 1:1-3:6

After the death of Joshua, there was still land yet to be taken. Chapter 1 of Judges describes some of the battles that were fought to drive out the remaining inhabitants of the land. By and large, they had a great deal of military success. There were pockets of people, however, that were harder than others to drive out. In some cases, the Israelites gave up and let the people live there, in some instances placing them into forced labor. One has to wonder that if they had the strength to force them into labor, why didn't they have the strength to drive them out? It may have been more of a matter of lack of will (i.e. obedience) than a lack of ability. This seems to be confirmed by the events in the beginning of Chapter 2. An angel appeared to the people and brought a message from God. We read in 2:1-3:

The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."

God told them not to make covenants with these people. They did anyway. God came and told them that since they violated his instructions, he would not help them drive out the inhabitants. When the people received this news, they were quite distressed.

We see in Chapter 2 the pattern that was discussed in the introduction. The following is taken from 2:11-19:

Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them... In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist... Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders... Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and

afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshipping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

In 2:22, God said that because Israel had been disobedient, he would leave the other nations among them and use them to test Israel and see whether they would keep the way of the Lord. Thus God determined to leave these people there, at least for a time. Therefore the Philistines, Canaanites, Sidonians, Hivites, Amorites, Perizzites, and Jebusites (who still occupied Jerusalem) became their neighbors rather than becoming the former occupants of the land.

2.2 Othniel

Judges 3:7-11

Othniel was the first judge. He was the nephew of Caleb. The land had fallen into Baal worship. God had allowed the king of Aram, Naharaim, to attack the people and harass them for eight years. The people cried out for help. God raised up Othniel, who led them to military victory. The land had forty years of peace under his reign until he died.

Othniel is one of several judges about whom we know very little.

2.3 Ehud

Judges 3:12-30

Time passed and the nation became unfaithful again. God allowed them to be attacked by and subjected to Eglon, king of Moab. They were oppressed by the Moabites for eighteen years. The people cried out to God and he had compassion. He called Ehud, the left-handed judge.

Ehud had a plan that involved a fair amount of personal risk. He strapped a two-sided sword to his leg and then went to see Eglon to bring him tribute. Once he had presented the tribute, he told the king that he had a private message for him from God. Eglon sent away all of his attendants and was alone with Ehud. At that point, Ehud approached him, pulled out his sword, and thrust it into Eglon. The Bible says that Eglon was very fat and that his stomach closed in over the handle of the sword. Ehud slipped out a balcony and left Eglon locked in his room.

Time passed. The servants of Eglon wondered what he was doing in his room for so long, but figured he was relieving himself. When enough time finally passed that they were sure something was wrong, they got a key and went into the room. There they found his body. By this time, Ehud had slipped away to go back to the soldiers of Israel and summon them. They then attacked the Moabites and beat them and made them subject to Israel.

The nation experienced peace for eighty years after this.

2.4 Shamgar

Judges 3:31

All that we really know about Shamgar is that he was the next judge and waged war against the Philistines. The Bible gives him one verse.

2.5 Deborah

Judges 4-5

Once again the nation fell away from God. This time it fell under the oppression of a Canaanite king named Jabin. The head of Jabin's army was a man named Sisera. Sisera's army was powerful because they had 900 iron chariots. They oppressed the Israelites for 20 years. The people cried out to God for help.

At this time, there was a prophetess in the land named Deborah. People would bring disputes to her to be settled. God gave her a vision for how the nation would be delivered. She summoned an Israelite named Barak, who would lead the army. She told him to summon his troops to Mount Tabor and God would give him victory there. He said that he would not go alone, that he would only go if Deborah went with him. She agreed, but said that since he was putting this condition on his participation God would give the credit to someone else. Sisera would, in fact, be killed by a woman.

They went on to Mount Tabor, which is in Galilee, roughly between Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. It is on the edge of the Valley of Jezreel. It is an isolated formation and not simply a particular peak in a mountain range. The chariots of Sisera may have worked quite well in the Valley of Jezreel but they would have been useless on the high and rugged terrain of Mount Tabor.

Barak took his troops to Mount Tabor and waited. Sisera found out they were there and came to do battle. They quickly realized that their chariots were more of a hindrance than a help, and found themselves being pursued on foot. Barak's men defeated all of the troops of Sisera. Sisera himself fled on foot.

Sisera came to a place where he thought he would be safe. He came to the tent of Jael, the wife of a man named Heber who was friends with Jabin, Sisera's king. He asked if he could hide out in her tent, and she agreed. Sisera was very tired from the events of the day and fell asleep. Jael quietly took a tent peg and drove it through his skull, killing him while he slept. Thus Sisera was delivered into the hands of a woman.

Shortly after that, Barak came along and Jael showed him what she had done. There was great rejoicing among the Israelites, led by Barak and Deborah.

This story offers an interesting commentary to today's technology-oriented society. In that day and age, chariots were state-of-the-art military technology. Logic would tell us that the army with the best machines and the strongest men would win. In reality, God knows how to render our machines useless, and the strongest of men can be defeated by the frailest of women. 1 Corinthians 1:27 says "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." The story of Deborah and Barak is a great example of this truth.

2.6 Gideon

Judges 6-8

Once again the nation fell into idol worship and God allowed the Midianites to oppress the nation. Whenever the crops of the Israelites would be ready for harvest, the Midianites would ride through the land taking all of the food. The nation endured this for seven years and became quite impoverished. They cried out to God for help. God sent a prophet who reminded them

that they had been sternly warned about the consequences of idol worship and that they were reaping the results of their own actions.

Gideon was a man from the tribe of Manasseh. One day he was threshing wheat in a winepress. One would not normally thresh wheat in a winepress. Gideon was not a courageous person by nature and was hiding from the Midianites. An angel appeared to him and told him that he would deliver the nation from Midianite oppression. Gideon explained that he was from the least family of the least clan of Manasseh. How could he deliver the nation? The angel explained that God would be with him and would deliver Midian into his hands.

Gideon needed a bit of convincing and asked for a sign. He asked the angel to wait while he prepared an offering. Gideon prepared a goat and some bread and brought it back to the angel. The angel touched it with his staff and fire consumed it. Then the angel disappeared.

After that, God spoke to Gideon and confirmed what the angel had said. He also instructed Gideon to tear down his father's altar to Baal and his Asherah pole (Asherah was a goddess). He told him to use the wood of the Asherah pole and to make a burnt offering of a young bull. Gideon did as instructed, but he took ten servants and sneaked out at night because he was afraid. Again, Gideon was not courageous by nature. The next morning people saw that the idols had been destroyed and figured out that Gideon was the one who had done it. They wanted to kill him. His father encouraged people to leave Gideon alone, saying that if Baal is really a god he can avenge himself. Gideon was given the name Jerub-Baal, which means, "He contends with Baal".

Before going to battle, Gideon still needed a bit of convincing. He asked God for a sign. He said that he would put fleece on the ground at night. The next morning, if there were dew on the fleece but not on the ground, he would know that this was a sign from God. It happened, but he was still not 100% sure. He asked God for one more sign. This time he said he would put the fleece out at night and if there were dew on the ground but not on the fleece, he would take it as a sign from God. It happened.

Gideon summoned an army from among his countrymen and thirty-two thousand men turned out. God did not want to win this battle with military might. He wanted people to see that it was his hand turning the events. He told Gideon to reduce the size of the army. Gideon told the troops that anyone who was afraid should go home. Twenty-two thousand men turned back. The army was reduced to ten thousand men, but this was still too many. God wanted to scale back the troops even more. He told Gideon to take the men to a river for a drink. Anyone who scooped up the water in his hands and brought it to his face would be retained, while anyone who knelt down to drink would be sent away. Once this was done, the army was reduced to three hundred men, down from thirty-two thousand.

God encouraged Gideon to sneak down to the Midianite camp to listen to what they were saying because it would give Gideon motivation to proceed. There at the camp, he heard one man telling of a dream where a barley loaf tumbled into the Midianite camp, crashing into a tent and knocking it over. Another man interpreted the dream and said that it could only mean that the Midianites were being given into the hands of Gideon's army because God had promised to lead Gideon in defeating the Midianites.

Gideon came away from this highly charged and ready for battle. It was night, and he gave each of the three hundred men a trumpet, a clay jar, and a torch. They were to place themselves around the camp, with the torch concealed by the clay jar. On signal, each was to break the clay jar (showing the torch) and sound the trumpet. Normally, when an army approached, it would be led by a man bearing a torch and a man sounding a trumpet. The sudden appearance of three hundred torches and the sound of three hundred trumpets would appear to the Midianites that

three hundred armies of men (three hundred thousand men or so) were about to descend upon them. When the signal came, the jars were broken, and the trumpets were sounded, terror and confusion broke out in the Midianite camp. The men there began turning on one another and killing each other. Gideon and his men just stood and watched. After the Midianites did massive damage to one another, eventually the survivors fled and were pursued and destroyed by the Israelites. The kings were captured and killed by Gideon.

Gideon became judge of the land. He did make one major mistake, however. From the plunder that they took from the Midianites, he made a golden statue that the people began worshipping. He allowed that to go on during his time of leadership. The land did enjoy peace during his time, however. He had many wives and seventy sons, including a son named Abimelech by a concubine (we'll see more of him in the next section).

After Gideon died, the nation quickly fell back into massive Baal worship.

2.7 Abimelech

Judges 9

Abimelech is the next person of significance in the book of Judges but he is not really a judge in the sense that the term has been defined. A judge was a person that God raised up to lead his people in military victory and in obedience. Abimelech was an evil man who put himself in a place of leadership and led the people in wrongdoing.

Jerub-Baal (Gideon) had around 70 sons by his many wives and concubines. Abimelech was one of these sons and his mother was one of Jerub-Baal's concubines from Shechem. After Jerub-Baal's death, it was logical to assume that one of his sons would follow him in leadership. Abimelech went to Shechem and rallied the people, telling them that one of their kinsmen – Abimelech – could be the next leader rather than one of Jerub-Baal's sons by a "full" wife. The men of Shechem felt it would be good if one of their own was in charge, so they lent him their support. They went to the home of Jerub-Baal and murdered the other sons of Jerub-Baal. One of them named Jotham escaped the massacre, however.

The men of Shechem now prepared to make Abimelech their king. When the ceremony was beginning, Jotham appeared and shouted out to them in Judges 9:8-20:

One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, "Be our king."

But the olive tree answered, "Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to go waving over the trees?"

Next the trees said to the fig tree, "Come and be our king."

But the fig tree replied, "Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to go waving over the trees?"

Then the trees said to the vine, "Come and be our king."

But the vine answered, "Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men, to go waving over the trees?"

Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, "Come and be our king."

The thornbush said to the trees, "If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!"

Now if you have acted honorably and in good faith when you made Abimelech king, and if you have been fair to Jerub-Baal and his family, and if you have treated him as he deserves – and to think that my father fought for you, risked his life to rescue you from the hand of Midian (but today you have revolted against my father's family, murdered his seventy sons on a single stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his slave girl, king over the citizens of Shechem because he is your brother) – if then you have acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal and his family today, may Abimelech be your joy, and may you be his, too! But if you have not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelech!"

The implications? The people had selected the least desirable person (the thornbush) to be their king. Since they had not acted in good faith in doing so, a curse was pronounced on them that fire should come out of Abimelech to consume them and that fire should come out of them to consume Abimelech.

After pronouncing his curse, Jotham fled.

After Abimelech had ruled for three years, God sent an evil spirit to divide the people of Shechem from Abimelech to punish both parties for what they had done to the sons of Jerub-Baal. The people who once followed Abimelech were now in revolt against him and a civil war broke out. Abimelech went to war against his own people and killed many of them. The people fled into a pagan temple for refuge and locked themselves inside, thinking they were safe. Abimelech (and those who were still loyal to him) cut down trees, surrounded the temple with the timber and set it afire, burning it down along with the people inside. Literally there was fire coming out of Abimelech and consuming the people. After that, he went to the next town and tried to capture it. The people found refuge in a strong tower in the city. As Abimelech tried to storm it, a woman dropped an upper millstone from the tower, hitting Abimelech in the head and cracking his skull. He did not want it said that a woman killed him so he had one of his own men run him through with a sword.

Jotham's curse had been fulfilled. God had avenged both Abimelech and the people for what they had done to the sons of Jerub-Baal.

2.8 Tola

Judges 10:1-2

After the time of Abimelech, a man by the name of Tola, from the tribe of Issachar, rose up and led the nation for twenty-three years.

2.9 Jair

Judges 10:3-5

Tola was succeeded by Jair, who led the people for twenty-two years.

2.10 Jephthah

Judges 10:6-12:7

The Israelites began serving false gods once again, and God turned them over to be harassed by the Philistines and the Ammonites. The people were oppressed and cried out to God for help. God replied in Judges 10:11-16:

"When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!"

But the Israelites said to the Lord, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now." Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. And he could bear Israel's misery no longer.

There was a man from Gilead named Jephthah, who was the son of a prostitute. His father had other sons by wives. His brothers had driven him from his home so that he would not receive part of his father's inheritance. Jephthah thus became a wanderer. He had a band of followers. They spent their time roaming about looking for adventure. He was obviously a strong man and a leader.

The elders of Gilead sent for Jephthah and asked him to lead the defense against the enemies who were harassing them. They promised to make Jephthah their leader if he would do so. He pointed out that they had a bit of nerve coming to him now in their time of need, as they were the ones who had driven him from his home. Despite that fact, he was willing to help.

He communicated with the king of the Ammonites and asked him why they were attacking the Israelites. It seems that the Ammonites had decided that the Israelites should give back the Transjordan land – the land taken from Sihon and Og during the Exodus. Jephthah basically told them "No way."

Jephthah prepared for battle. We read part of this preparation in Judges 11:30-31:

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

They went to war and defeated the Ammonites. The story continues in 11:34-39:

When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break."

"My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry."

"You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and the girls went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. After two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.

What do you do with this passage? Did Jephthah, God's leader, really participate in child sacrifice? Would God hold him to such a vow? Couldn't God have ordered events such that the first thing that rushed out of the house to meet Jephthah was a goat or a chicken?

This is a bit of a sticky passage. Students of the Bible are divided on whether or not Jephthah actually offered his daughter as a burnt offering. Why do some people think that he actually burned his daughter? The text says that he did to her as he had vowed. Why do some people think that he did not kill his daughter? Because (1) the wording of the passage is a bit vague, and (2) Leviticus and Deuteronomy prohibit human sacrifice. Since this is clearly contrary to God's word, it would not be pleasing to him nor would it be something he would require of Jephthah.

Leviticus 27 gives instructions on redeeming people that were dedicated to the Lord. After the Passover, God decreed that all of the firstborn belonged to him but he also gave provisions in Leviticus as to how those people should be redeemed: An offering of money would be made to redeem their lives. He did not want the people to be literally killed. Furthermore, Leviticus 18:21, Leviticus 20:2-5, Deuteronomy 12:31, and Deuteronomy 18:10 all contain prohibitions against child sacrifice. There is absolutely nothing in the nature of God that would condone such a practice.

When Jephthah's daughter found out that she was the object of a vow, she agreed to go along with it but went to the hills to grieve with her friends that she would never marry – not that she would die. Furthermore, this passage concludes with, "She was a virgin," not "She died." It seems plausible that to fulfill the vow, Jephthah paid the monetary offering necessary to redeem his daughter and in addition she went into a life of celibacy in devotion to God. Remember that in that day and time, a woman was valued largely for the sons that she bore, and carrying on the family line was of utmost importance. By remaining celibate, Jephthah's daughter gave up the opportunity to bear sons and to carry on the family line of Jephthah (she was an only child). Thus this was indeed a major sacrifice and something about which they would have wanted to spend a period in mourning.

So what is the answer? Unfortunately the text is not totally clear and we are forced to draw certain conclusions rather than have everything explained completely.

Following this event, some men from Ephraim came to Jephthah and were upset with him because he had gone to war with the Ammonites without them. Their complaint seems motivated out of jealousy: Jephthah had scored a major military success and they did not get to share his glory. Jephthah told them that he had looked for their help but because they were not forthcoming with it he went to battle without them. They were still mad and wanted to fight Jephthah and his followers. A battle ensued in Gilead and the men of Gilead fought the men of Ephraim. The men of Gilead won, and the Ephraimites were left scattered and trying (individually) to get home. The men of Gilead then secured a place on the Jordan where the Ephraimites needed to cross to get back to Ephraim. Each time a man would come to cross the river, they told him to say the word "Shibboleth." Apparently the Ephraimites spoke in a dialect that did not use the "sh" sound. If the word came out "Sibboleth," they would kill the man. A great number of the men of Ephraim (42,000) were killed in this battle.

Jephthah led the nation for six years and then died.

2.11 Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon

Judges 12:8-15

Ibzan from Bethlehem was the next judge and led for seven years. Elon from the tribe of Zebulun was the next judge and led for ten years. Abdon was next and led for eight years.

2.12 Samson

Judges 13-16

Once again, the nation fell into idolatry. God delivered them into the hands of the Philistines, who then ruled over them. The people cried out for relief.

There was a married couple among the Danites who were childless. An angel appeared to them and told them that they would have a son, and that he was to be raised as a Nazirite. A Nazirite vow was a special vow that a person would normally take for a period of time. The person would spend that time in special devotion to God. The behaviors associated with the Nazirite vow were:

- The person would stay away from alcoholic beverages or any product of the vine (e.g. grapes).
- The person would remain ceremonially clean, particularly by avoiding contact with dead bodies.
- The person would not cut his hair during the time the vow was in effect.

Samson was to be a Nazirite for life and was to observe these conditions from the time that the angel delivered the message to his parents (i.e. effective immediately, his mother should not eat grapes or drink wine until after he was born and weaned).

As the angel had promised, Samson was born. He began his life observing the conditions of the vow. The Spirit of God was with him and he grew to be strong.

Starting in chapter 14, his life took a turn away from holy. He met and fell in love with a Philistine girl from the town of Timnah. He wanted to marry her, even though the Israelites were not supposed to intermarry with the foreigners among them. But Samson wanted this Philistine girl, so he coaxed his parents into arranging a wedding.

Sometime during the period of preparation for the wedding while he was going to Timnah, Samson saw a lion. He killed it with his bare hands and left it there. When the time came for the wedding feast, he was on the way back to Timnah and saw the carcass of the lion. It now had a bee hive in it full of honey, of which he took and ate. Note that in the process of doing so, he had contact with a dead body, breaking one of the conditions of his Nazirite vow.

In those days, a wedding feast was a seven-day event. When they arrived, the father of the bride had arranged for thirty male attendants for Samson. Presumably these were men that he did not know – friends of the bride's family. Samson lacked a certain amount of social grace and decided to try to trick these men (his guests) into providing him with a new wardrobe. He said he would tell them a riddle, and if they could guess the answer, he would provide each of them with a new set of clothes. If they could not, they each had to provide him with a new set of clothes. The riddle was, "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet." He was referring to the honey he had found in the lion. The men had no idea what the riddle meant.

They also realized that each of them were about to have to buy Samson a new set of clothes. They came to the bride and said that they did not appreciate that her new husband was taking advantage of them. They told her that if she did not find out the answer to the riddle and tell them, they would do her family harm. She whined and complained and wept so that by the seventh day of the feast Samson could not stand it. He told her the meaning of the riddle. She quickly told the other men who then came to Samson and gave him the answer. He knew how they had gotten their answer and was mad about it. In order to fulfill his commitment of providing thirty new sets of clothes for these men, he went to Ashkelon, killed thirty men, and took their clothes (nice guy!). He brought them back to Timnah and gave them to the thirty men. Afterwards he stormed away from the city, mad about what had happened. Note again that by killing these men he was coming into contact with dead bodies, violating his Nazirite vow. Although the text does not say so, it is likely that Samson drank wine during the days of the wedding feast, which would have been a violation of another condition of the Nazirite vow.

The father of the bride figured that he had seen the last of Samson, so he gave the bride to another man. Sometime later, Samson returned and wanted to sleep with his wife. Her father would not let him do so since she was now married to someone else. Samson was really mad. He went out and found three hundred foxes. He tied their tails together, tied torches to their tails, and set them loose in the wheat fields of the Philistines, burning their crops. The Philistines found out what he had done and why he had done it. They went to the home of the bride and her father and burned it down, killing the occupants in the process. This made Samson even madder. He attacked those who had killed the woman and slaughtered many of them. Then he came back to rest in the territory of Judah.

A band of Philistines came into Judah to find Samson and punish him for what he had done. Some Judahites asked them why they had come and they told him they wanted Samson. They came to Samson and said that they did not need trouble with the Philistines and wanted to hand him over. He agreed to let them bind him and deliver him to the Philistines. When he was handed over, the Spirit of God came on him in strength and he broke out of the ropes that bound him. He picked up the jawbone of a donkey and killed a thousand men. Samson provided deliverance from Philistine oppression for his countrymen, and he led them in this capacity for around twenty years.

After a short interlude with a prostitute in Gaza, Samson fell in love with another woman named Delilah. The Philistines figured that they could use Samson's relationship with her to discover the secret of his strength and how they might subdue him. They came to Delilah and offered to pay her a great deal of money if she could tell them the secret of Samson's strength.

She got him into a position where his defenses were down and asked him for the secret of his strength. He told her that if he were bound with seven fresh thongs (or bowstrings) that he would be as weak as any other men. Presumably she waited until he was asleep and then bound him as he had said. She then shouted, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He woke up and snapped out of them.

Delilah acted wounded. She whined that Samson had made her look foolish. Samson should have had enough sense to realize that she was trying to hand him over to the Philistines. Why else would she have done to him exactly what she believed would rend him powerless? Afterwards she once again whined for Samson to tell her the secret of his strength. He told her that if he were bound with new ropes he would lose his strength. The same thing happened again. He fell asleep. She tied him with new ropes and then called to wake him up. He snapped out of them. She whined that she had been made to look foolish. He paid no attention to what was going on.

Once again, he told her that if his hair were woven in a loom he would lose his strength. He fell asleep. She wove his hair in a loom and shouted. He pulled his hair out of the loom. She whined, etc.

She nagged him until he had no resistance left. He should have just walked away from the situation. Instead, he told her that his hair had never been cut and if it were cut he would lose his strength. He fell asleep. She had his hair cut. She shouted. He awoke but had no strength. The Philistines captured him, put out his eyes, and turned him into a slave laborer.

We know he had violated one condition of his Nazirite vow – to avoid contact with dead bodies. There is a strong possibility that he violated the condition of avoiding grape products. Now he has violated the final condition of the vow (i.e. not cutting his hair) and the Spirit of God has finally left him – and left him powerless.

One assumes that while he was in chains working as a slave, he had time to search his heart and repent. We also know from the text that during this time his hair grew back.

The day came when the Philistines were having a festival at the temple of their god, Dagon. They decided to have a bit of sport with Samson. They brought in the mighty warrior who was now in chains to make fun of him. While he was in the temple, he asked a servant to position him next to one of the columns of the temple so that he might lean against it. After locating the column, he prayed to God that his strength might return one last time. Then he pushed out the column of the temple, destroying all that were in it (including himself). He killed more Philistines in this one act than he had done in the entire rest of his life.

The story of Samson makes a great adventure story. It is the stuff that inspires movies and operas. At the same time, it is tragic and must be seen as such. It is the story of a gifted individual who has thrown away his gifts. It is the story of a person with a special calling from God who turned his back on his calling and reaped the consequences. It is the story of a man who was hanging around with prostitutes when he should have been hanging around the tabernacle. It is also a story that reflects the heart and nature of God toward Samson. He was patient and stayed with Samson, allowing him to break portions of his vow until there was nothing left to break. And it is the story of God, who returned to Samson when Samson returned to him. Because it is all of these things, it is the story of most of us.

Each of us has been given gifts by God that we have failed to explore or (worse yet) thrown away like Samson did. Most of us have experienced times when God called us to a task and we have failed to fulfill the calling. We, too, reap the consequences of such acts although they are typically less severe and dramatic as those of Samson. Most of us have spent time hanging around in compromising places when we should have been hanging around God's people. God is patient with us but will eventually turn us over to our own choices. He is faithful to return to us when we return to him.

We are all "Samson" in moderation. Hopefully our lives will never reach the kinds of highs and lows that will result in an opera being written about us.

2.13 The Danites and Micah's Idol

Judges 17-18

There was a man by the name of Micah from the tribe of Ephraim. He took a great deal of silver and fashioned a household idol, which he set up in a shrine in his house. Subsequent to that, he happened to meet a Levite whom he hired to become his personal priest. Since the Levites had

been designated by God to be the tribe of priests, Micah felt that he would be in very good standing before God if he had his own personal Levite.

The book of Judges reports these events. It does not condone these events. Verse 17:6 is commentary on this fact. It says, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."

When the land had been allocated to the twelve tribes, the Danites had been given an area by the coast of the Mediterranean (an area that includes the modern day city of Tel Aviv). This territory was still solidly occupied by the Philistines and the Danites had never really come to rest in a land that they could call their own. They decided to spy out another area and to try to take it by force. They sent spies up into the upper regions bordering the territory of Naphtali, near Mount Hermon. They found a city there that they felt would be easy to take. Thus they mustered an army and headed in that direction.

On the way, they passed through Ephraim. Somehow they learned that there was a man there with a big silver idol and his own personal Levite. They sent an army to the home of Micah and took his idol. They convinced the Levite to go with them. They told him that it would be better to be priest to a whole tribe than to one man's house. They went up and attacked and obliterated the city of Laish. They moved into the city, renamed it Dan, and settled there. They set up a shrine with the silver idol, ignoring everything that God had said about idols and graven images. They also ignored the fact that they were to worship at the tabernacle rather than at the place of their own choosing.

These stories are included to show:

- How the Danites ended up in far north Israel rather than on the coast, where their allocation of land was originally. Their city became the northernmost inhabited city in Israel. Often the territory of Israel is referred to as "from Dan to Beersheba" because Dan was the northernmost population center and Beersheba was the southernmost population center.
- How corrupt the people had become and how they ignored God's commandments.
- There is a repeated theme of "In those days Israel had no king." The people were not looking to God for leadership and they had no fixed human leadership. The people were in need of someone (preferably someone righteous) who would govern them. This sets the stage for the monarchy that follows.

2.14 The Destruction of Benjamin

Judges 19-21

The book of Judges concludes with the very disturbing story of the atrocities by and against the tribe of Benjamin.

There was a Levite who was traveling from Bethlehem (in Judah) to a remote part of Ephraim. He was traveling with his concubine. They spent the night in Gibeah in Benjamin. At first they were simply going to spend the night in the town square, but an elderly man encouraged them not to sleep there and put them up for the night.

The events that follow are similar to what happened to the angels visiting the home of Lot in Sodom. Soon some evil men from the city gathered around the house and demanded that the Levite be brought out because the men wanted to rape him. To placate them, they threw the concubine out of the house and told them they could do whatever they wanted to do to her. They offered the virgin daughter of the host as well, but apparently she was not actually given over to the men.

How does one react to that? It was a terrible act of cowardice. It is obvious that very little value was placed on women in those days.

The men abused the concubine all night, finally letting her go at dawn. She staggered back to the threshold of the house and collapsed. When the men got up the next morning and went outside, they found her lifeless body there.

The Levite took her body back home with him, cut it into twelve pieces, and sent a piece to each of the twelve tribes as a hideous call to arms. He wanted vengeance for what had been done and felt like this grotesque message would get a response.

He was right. Armies from the other eleven tribes (all but Benjamin) assembled and agreed to take action. They made a vow not to let their daughters marry Benjamites. They sent a message to the people of Benjamin demanding that the evil men from Gibeah be turned over to them so that they could be punished. The men of Benjamin refused to cooperate and mustered an army of their own.

War raged for several days. When it was all over, the people of Benjamin had been reduced almost (but not completely) to the point of non-existence.

When the fighting had subsided, the men from the other eleven tribes began to sincerely grieve over the damage that had been done to their brother Benjamin. They grieved that one of the twelve tribes was near extinction. They wanted to help rebuild Benjamin. One of the first orders of business was to help the few remaining Benjamite men find wives so that their family lines could continue. The trouble was that they had taken a vow not to let their daughters marry Benjamites.

They thought about it and realized that when they had held their council and made these vows, nobody from Jabesh Gilead had come to participate. So they did the next terrible thing. They sent men down to Jabesh Gilead and killed everyone there except the virgin women. They took these women and gave them to the Benjamites as wives. Again, how does one explain this? We can suppose that the people of Jabesh Gilead were being punished for not participating in the call to arms against Benjamin, but it is hard to justify wiping out the people for this. Once again the book of Judges points out how corrupt the people had become.

The women from Jabesh Gilead were not enough to supply wives for all of the remaining Benjamites. The leaders of the other eleven tribes arranged to have the Benjamites kidnap girls from Shiloh and take them as wives. This way, their fathers and brothers would not be guilty of breaking any vows as a result of their daughters and sisters marrying Benjamites.

Thus the tribe of Benjamin was not completely eradicated.

The book of Judges concludes with a sad epitaph. Judges 21:25 says

In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

We see a nation permeated by idolatry. We see people caught up in sexual sin. We see people who flagrantly ignore God's commandments. We see people at war with one another. We see leaders, like Samson, who have great potential and a great call on their lives who throw it away for the pursuit of fleshly pleasures. We see people in desperate need of righteous leadership.

It kind of sounds like us!

We also see people with whom God is still patient. We see people through whom God will reconcile the world to himself. We see the chosen people, the people of promise, as imperfect as they may be. As we understand how God dealt with them we will see how he may choose to deal with us. We can learn from their mistakes and avoid some of their tragedies.

3 Ruth

The book of Ruth is a love story. It is the story of a woman's love for her mother-in-law. It is the story of a man's love for a woman. Ruth is also a story of faith, of a woman's willingness to leave her family and her home to go to a new land. She did so because of her devotion to her mother-in-law and her faith in her mother-in-law's God.

Ruth is a book of history. This woman from Moab planted herself among the Israelites in Bethlehem. She married and became a mother. In fact, she became the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Because of her lineage she is important.

This story is situated here in the flow of the Bible because the events of the life of Ruth took place during the time of Judges. We know this because the book opens with the words "In the days when the judges ruled..." We could also surmise this timeline from the fact that Ruth was David's great-grandmother. He was a young man when the monarchy began, so his great-grandmother would have been alive during the latter days of the times of the judges.

3.1 *Widowhood*

Ruth 1

There was a man from Judah and the city of Bethlehem, named Elimelech, who was married to a woman named Naomi. They had two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. There was a famine in Israel so Elimelech moved his family to the land of Moab. (Moab is across the lower end of the Dead Sea from Israel, in a portion of the current nation of Jordan.)

While they were there, the sons of Elimelech and Naomi married Moabite women. Mahlon (who appears to be the older son) married Ruth.

Time passed and Elimelech, Mahlon, and Kilion all died. There was also word that the famine had subsided in Israel. Naomi wanted to go home, and she made preparations to leave. Both of her daughters-in-law prepared to go with her.

Women in those days did not have the options that they do now. When a woman married, her identity really did become that of her husband. It was the obligation of the husband's family to care for his widow more than it was the obligation of her own family. The daughters-in-law could have been motivated out of pure concern for their own well being. Naomi was the only remnant of their husbands' family that they had left. If she went away without them, what security would they have?

Naomi encouraged the girls to remain in Moab and to start a new life. She had nothing to offer them. She had no other sons to give them as husbands. Apparently they were still young. Naomi felt that they had a better chance of starting over and perhaps finding new husbands if they stayed in Moab. One of the daughters-in-law elected to remain behind. Ruth was determined to stay with Naomi, indicating that she was motivated by love and devotion and not by concern for her own well being. Ruth 1:16 says:

Don't urge me to leave you or to 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.

This is a well-known line of Scripture and it is often used in weddings, with the bride reciting this to the groom or vice-versa. It is a touching statement of love for a spouse to say to a spouse.

But in fact, this was not a man-woman pledge when it was originally delivered. This was Ruth-to-Naomi. Ruth recognized that Naomi was getting along in age and needed family to care for her. Even though she might have a better chance of starting a new life if she remained in Moab, Ruth wanted to go with Naomi so she could take care of her. There was a great bond of love between these two women. Ruth wanted Naomi's people to be her people. She had also seen enough of Naomi's God that she wanted him to be her God as well.

Oh that we could all live a life that would inspire other people to want our God to be their God.

So Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem.

3.2 Ruth Gleans in the Fields of Boaz

Ruth 2

Leviticus 19:9-10 says:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien.

This law was a provision that God made for the poor. When people who had fields harvested those fields, they were to leave something behind for the poor to take.

When Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem, they were poor. In order to get food, Ruth went out to do some gleaning. She happened upon the fields of a man named Boaz. She did not know who he was, but he turned out to be a very close relative of the family. Boaz noticed her and asked who she was and found out that it was Ruth. He was aware that Naomi had returned with a daughter-in-law who was self-sacrificing and caring for Naomi. Boaz told his harvesters to treat Ruth well and to give her free roam of the fields. He spoke to Ruth and told her that he knew about her. He said she was welcome in his fields and that she should not glean any place else. He gave her food and drink and cared for her.

She returned home that night and Naomi asked where she had gleaned. She told her that it had been in the field of Boaz and told her how nice he had been. Naomi informed her that Boaz was a close relative and was, in fact, a kinsman-redeemer.

Now what is a kinsman-redeemer? This goes back to Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Normally if a man died leaving a childless widow, the man's brother would marry the widow. Hopefully he would give her a son, who would carry on the name and family line (and receive the inheritance) of the dead brother. If there were no brother to fulfill this duty, it would pass to a close relative within certain guidelines. The one who married the widow was called the kinsman-redeemer because he was redeeming the family line of the dead man.

There were times when a man might refuse the duty of being kinsman-redeemer. If the dead brother had no heir, then he would have no inheritance. By refusing to propagate the family line of a brother, a man would increase his own share of the inheritance. Thus refusing to become a kinsman-redeemer might be motivated out of greed. There could be other reasons, however. If the kinsman were already married, bringing another wife into the home could be quite disruptive. He might refuse out of a desire to preserve the sanity of his own home.

For Ruth, Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer. And Naomi started planning...

3.3 Ruth and Boaz

Ruth 3

Just as Ruth loved and cared for Naomi, Naomi loved and cared for Ruth. She wanted to find a permanent home for Ruth, someone who would care for and provide for her. This implied finding her a husband. Boaz seemed to be the perfect candidate.

Naomi knew that Boaz would be at the threshing floor that night. This would have been a place a bit out of the city, probably near his fields. He would probably work there into the evening and then spend the night. Naomi told Ruth to go there and to wait until Boaz went to sleep. After he fell asleep, Ruth went to him and uncovered his feet and lay down next to him. At some point, Boaz woke up and realized that his feet were uncovered and that a woman was lying at his feet. He asked who it was. Ruth replied in 3:9,

I am your servant, Ruth. ... Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.

The significance of all of this is a bit lost on us, but Ruth had just proposed marriage to Boaz. She had asked him to assume the role of kinsman-redeemer and take her for his wife.

Boaz was quite excited. He responded that this is even a greater kindness than the kindness she had shown to Naomi because she was not chasing after younger men but coming to Boaz. This remark leads us to believe that he was somewhat older than Ruth.

He informed her that he would be delighted to marry her but that there was a closer kinsman-redeemer who should have first choice in the matter. If that man did not want to take Ruth, then Boaz would take her for certain. He promised Ruth to resolve the issue the next day.

Boaz was a gentleman to Ruth. By her presence there at night, she was in a vulnerable position but he did not take advantage of her. She trusted him not to do so. She remained there until daybreak and at Boaz's urging left quietly. Boaz did not want anyone to know that she had been there for the night because it might start rumors. He sent her home with a great deal of barley to take to Naomi.

3.4 The Conclusion

Ruth 4

Boaz had promised that the next day he would resolve the issue of which kinsman-redeemer would marry Ruth. He went to the city gate (which was the "central business district") and waited for the closer kinsman-redeemer to pass by. When he saw the man, he called him over and began to negotiate.

Boaz told this unnamed relative that Naomi had a field that she needed to sell. As the closest kinsman-redeemer, this man had the first right to buy the field (this stems from Leviticus 25). He asked the man if he would be interested. The man said that he would be glad to buy it. Then Boaz said that if this man assumed the role of kinsman-redeemer for the field, that he also needed to marry Ruth and give Mahlon (Ruth's dead husband) a son. This man was not too keen on that part of the deal. He knew that if Mahlon had a son it would jeopardize his own inheritance. Thus he declined. Boaz had him voice his refusal before ten elders of the city so that there would be no question about whether or not Boaz had the right to marry Ruth.

So he took her as his wife. She conceived and gave birth to a son named Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David.

The lineage from Judah to David is given in chapter 4: Judah -> Perez -> Hezron -> Ram -> Amminadab -> Nahshon -> Salmon -> Boaz -> Obed -> Jesse -> David. This corresponds to the genealogy of Jesus given both in Matthew 1 and in Luke 3.

What can we learn from the story of Ruth?

- God shows favor on people who are not self-serving but care for the needs of others (as Ruth did for Naomi).
- It is better to work through the "system" and rely on God to give you the desires of your heart rather than try to manipulate them yourself. (Boaz went through proper channels and gave the other kinsman-redeemer his rightful option to take Ruth. He left the outcome to God.)
- We should care for the needy. We may be caring for someone whom God intends to use in a very important way.

4 Index of Scripture References

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

1 Corinthians 1:27-----	20
Deuteronomy 12:31-----	25
Deuteronomy 18:10-----	25
Deuteronomy 25:5-10-----	32
Genesis 49:5-7-----	14
John 4:20-----	11
Joshua 1-----	6
Joshua 10:1-28-----	12
Joshua 10:29-43-----	12
Joshua 11-----	13
Joshua 12-21-----	13
Joshua 2-----	6
Joshua 22-----	14
Joshua 23-24-----	15
Joshua 3:1-5:12-----	7
Joshua 5:13-6:27-----	8
Joshua 7-----	9
Joshua 8:1-29-----	10
Joshua 8:30-35-----	11
Joshua 9-----	11
Judges 1:1-3:6-----	18
Judges 10:1-2-----	23
Judges 10:3-5-----	23
Judges 10:6-12:7-----	24
Judges 12:8-15-----	26
Judges 13-16-----	26
Judges 17-18-----	28
Judges 19-21-----	29
Judges 21:25-----	30
Judges 3:12-30-----	19
Judges 3:31-----	19
Judges 3:7-11-----	19
Judges 4-5-----	20
Judges 6-8-----	20
Judges 9-----	22
Leviticus 17-----	14
Leviticus 18:21-----	25
Leviticus 19:9-10-----	32
Leviticus 20:2-5-----	25
Leviticus 25-----	33
Leviticus 27-----	25
Matthew 1:5-6-----	7
Numbers 13:31-32-----	7
Ruth 1-----	31
Ruth 1:16-----	31
Ruth 2-----	32

Ruth 3-----	33
Ruth 4-----	33

5 Topical Index

Abdon	26
Abimelech	22
Achan	9
Ai.....	9, 10
Ark of the Covenant	8, 9
Barak	20
Battle Where The Sun Stood Still	12
Benjamin.....	29
Bethlehem.....	31, 32
Boaz.....	32
Caleb.....	19
Canaan	
Exploration	6
Dan	29
David	33
Deborah	20
Delilah	27
Ehud	19
Elon	26
Ephraim	25
Gad.....	14
Gibeonites.....	11
Gideon	21
Hail.....	12
Ibzan	26
Jair.....	23
Jephthah.....	24
Jericho, Battle of	8
Jerub-Baal.....	21
Jerusalem.....	12
Jesse.....	33
Jordan River, The Parting of.....	8
Joshua	
Death	15
Northern Campaign.....	13
Southern Campaign.....	12
Jotham	22
Judges	17
Kinsman Redeemer	32
Levi.....	14
Manasseh.....	14
Midian	20
Moab.....	19, 31
Mount Ebal	11
Mount Gerizim.....	11
Mount Tabor	20
Naomi	31
Nazirite.....	26, 28

Obed	33
Othniel.....	19
Rahab.....	6
Reuben.....	14
Ruth.....	31
Samson.....	26
Shamgar.....	19
Shechem.....	11, 15
Simeon.....	14
Sisera.....	20
Sodom.....	29
Spies, In Jericho.....	6
Timnah.....	26
Tola.....	23