

# JOSHUA, JUDGES, & RUTH Bible Reading Schedule

## 5 Weeks

### WEEK 1

Joshua has a marvelous story of faith and new beginnings. The Israelites had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. They had learned their lesson and were responding to God in faith behind the leadership of Joshua. We will learn about obedience and blessing, Rahab's amazing faith, the power of hidden sin, inheriting the land, holy war, and choosing to serve the Lord no matter what. How's that for a list of interesting subjects from just the Book of Joshua as we take most of January to investigate God's message to us through these three historical books?

#### DAY 1 – Joshua 1 & 2

These two chapters are a great way to begin with the formula for spiritual prosperity and the unlikely heroin named Rahab. I want us to read two chapters a day because this is a narrative account of entering the Promised Land rather than teaching material to study. We are entering into the scene by reading and envisioning the people, the circumstances, and the fresh faith that fills the first 12 chapters of this Book. I am drawn to this text because it has a joyful optimism about what God will do. For me, COVID could represent wandering in the wilderness (thank the Lord it wasn't for 40 years) and 2023 can represent what hopeful eyes of faith can see just around the corner. "Go through the camp and tell the people to get their provisions ready. In three days, you will cross the Jordan River and take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving you." (Verse 11) These are the words of Joshua. God told Joshua what he would do in verses 1-5. Joshua believed him! God also told Joshua he would be with him in verse 9. I have appreciated verse 9 and memorized it to be a reminder of trusting God with courageous faith. "This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Isn't that enough for whatever we face? God's presence makes all the difference. But we can't overlook Rahab. It is the beginning of an amazing story that includes Rahab in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 1:5). Her faith in God and her risky trust with Hebrew spies impresses me, to say the least. Her profession of faith in 2:9-11 is the high point of chapter 2. Here faith in Yahweh will literally save her and many others who know her. But she couldn't know for sure, so her response is all about faith. As a Canaanite woman, Rahab would have practiced the fertility cult of Baal, god of the storm and life-giving rain, along with Asherah, the mother earth goddess. Yet based on reports of Israel's progress toward her land, Rahab recognized that Yahweh is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below. Faith is centered on our vision of God. Who is the God of the Bible? What is your vision and understanding of him? Take a few minutes and write out some of your thoughts about the nature and character of Yahweh, our God. Is your vision of God as strong as Rahab's?

## DAY 2 – Joshua 3 & 4

“For the Lord your God dried up the river right before your eyes, and he kept it dry until you were across, just as he did at the Red Sea when he dried it up until we had all crossed over.” (4:23) This is a summary verse for these two chapters. My thoughts gravitate to how God had worked on behalf of his people in the past. The Lord had shown himself to be strong enough to deliver the Hebrews from the hand of Egypt and not even the Red Sea could get in his way. In the Bible, what God has done in the past is often emphasized as an assurance of what he will do today. Has God been faithful to you? How so? This is meant to give you assurance today that our God is still the same. Obviously, the Hebrews questioned God’s ability and their lack of faith caused them to wander for 40 years even though they had more than enough reason to believe in God. I want to remind you of a crucial point for the Israelites. In Numbers 13 & 14 we read about the scouting report of Canaan that concluded with the assessment that the enemy was too big for God. Listen to what God says to the people, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? Will they never believe me, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them?” (14:11) God marveled that Israel had not yet learned to trust him, even after he had miraculously rescued them and also provided for their needs as they traveled in the wilderness for over a year already. But when faced with the opportunity to enter the Promised Land, they lacked faith. That was the key to their repentance and resurgence of faith. Wouldn’t you know it, the results in Joshua 3 & 4 are similar to what God had done in the past for the Hebrews as he delivered them from Pharaoh. This is a point of application for us as we reflect on how God has taken care of us in the past. We are only a few days into the New Year so looking back over the past year or years can build our faith because God has been faithful, right? Let me add to the inspiration by quoting God’s Word in Lamentations 3:21-24, “Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease, Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself (meditation), ‘The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!’” How’s that for a theme verse in 2023?!

## DAY 3 – Joshua 5 & 6

You have just read the famous OT story about the Fall of Jericho. There is much to say about this story but first, the Lord visits Joshua to bring him encouragement and thus courage (5:13-15). The sum total of why the Lord visited Joshua sounds a lot like Moses at the burning bush and could be how Joshua interpreted it. The Lord was about to deliver his people as this ragtag nation was about to face the military might of Canaan. No wonder the Israelites trembled in fear as the report was received (Numbers 13 & 14) about the strength of these pagan nations in Canaan. But now faith had filled their hearts and God would give them the Promised Land and drive out these pagan, violent people so God’s chosen could flourish and the prophecies about the Messiah could be fulfilled. “Jericho and everything in it must be destroyed as an offering to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute and the others in her house will be spared, for she protected our spies.” (6:17) The topic of “complete destruction” has been raised by many suggesting that God likes to wipe out people. But further study reveals Jericho at a military outpost at the “gate” of the Promised Land and that Rahab was the keeper of the Inn for soldiers and visitors to the military outpost. This is especially likened to David and Goliath as the Canaanite empire stood against the people of faith in Yahweh. The Hebrews were no more than slaves rescued by God

from Egypt. There was no allegiance in Jericho to the One True God except that of a humble and courageous woman named Rahab. This wasn't about God's people fighting against their enemies but rather God fighting for his people. So much was at stake. God is moving on behalf of the weak against the tyranny of the strong who have ignored God and followed the pagan practices of idolizing many gods. The brutality and violence of Canaan had reached an extreme that would no longer be tolerated by our Holy God. The preservation of the promised One would be the Lord's top priority. All of these factors and a few more that I will point out in the days ahead led to God's sovereign plan to drive out the pagan nations of Canaan and he begins by showing them and us that it was the Lord your God who fought and defeated Jericho. As we begin the New Year, I pray for a close encounter for you with the Living God who has revealed himself in his Son and given us his Spirit to lead and guide. May 2023 be a year of close fellowship with God!

#### DAY 4 – Joshua 7 & 8

This is a heart-wrenching story. It reminds me of Acts 5 with Ananias and Sapphira. The Early Church is launched by the Spirit of God with every step being so significant. How could pretense and deception derail God's birthing of his church? The Lord would not allow it. Peter openly says that Satan is behind their deception in Acts 5 and they both drop dead. Well similarly, Achan was led astray by the alluring temptation of the devil and tried to hide his sin. This corruption would not go unnoticed by the Lord. So much was at stake as the Israelites journeyed into the Promised Land. Achan's sin had to be confronted and punished. But most of us would suggest that his punishment was too severe. However, there is another connection in God's Word to recognize how this applies to this situation. I am talking about Adam and Eve. The sins of our first parents brought about consequences and curses on mankind. They declared their independence from God by selfishly choosing to become like God; at least that was their motivation. Their sin was passed on to us; the curse-stained life as we know it. (Genesis 3:14-19) If God hadn't moved toward us through his Son, we would be hopeless. Achan's sin resulted in the loss of lives at Ai. Most believe that Achan's family knew about his deception and seemingly condoned what he was doing. To cleanse the community of this sin meant the loss of lives for those who hid the sin. This might seem harsh but Achan clearly knew of God's commands and instructions for the Israelites. After having Achan and his family stoned to death, Joshua erected a monument in the Valley of Trouble reminding the people that the sin of one person can negatively impact so many. Perhaps each of us should write down when and where we have rebelled against God and how it affected others. If we are to learn from our own sins, we must remember not only the result but also the steps that led to our turning away from God. In what ways might the Holy Spirit be opening your eyes to sin? Why not confess it now rather than hide it?!

#### DAY 5 – Joshua 9 & 10

"So the Israelites examined their food, but they did not consult the Lord." (9:14) This same oversight occurred at Ai when the leaders neglected to consult the Lord. This is a noticeable theme and one worth noting. Romans 8:14 tells us, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." Having God's direction, his guidance is an essential aspect of living for the Lord and having success. This error would cause greater stress and probably the loss of some lives as they have to defend the Gibeonites in chapter 10. But verses 12 to 15, in chapter 10, have my attention. I have been thinking more and more

about the importance and power of prayer. I believe we underestimate the significance. Joshua's prayer was beyond bold. He also prayed it in front of the people. But I am here to say that our God loves to honor outlandish faith. Joshua prayed that God would SUPERNATURALLY provide additional daylight hours to press the battle on to complete victory over the Amorite nation. The Lord answered that prayer as you know. For centuries, unbelievers have tried to explain away this miraculous example of God's divine intervention into the lives of his people. Our human nature presses us to find an explanation outside of God's power. God does not ask us to stick our heads in the sand but we must be careful that we do not allow intellect to rob us of faith. Let me share an interesting insight about the Amorites. In Genesis 15, God tells Abraham that his descendants would be oppressed as slaves for 400 years but that God would punish the oppressors. "After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction." (Verse 16) In another translation it says, "the sins of the Amorites have not reached their full measure." But the violent, corrupt, empire-building nation of the Amorites had become like vomit to the Lord. Their increased posture of injustice would not have the last word. They are God-defying, devouring people who will not give up until God has eliminated them from the face of the earth. This is accomplished in chapter 10. There are several lessons to be learned in these two chapters. How is God speaking to you?

## WEEK 2

This coming week may not be the most inspiring and practical reading in God's Word but it is there for a purpose. I have some ideas about the meaning of these chapters and will obviously share those with you. I also believe that woven into this portion of Joshua are points of application and challenge for us. This week may seem more arduous for us but persevering is a quality that we do well to develop.

### DAY 1 – Joshua 11 thru 13

You might ask why we are tackling three chapters a day this week. Two reasons: first, the material is often merely documentation of conquered cities and allotment of land which isn't as conducive to application for us. But I have found some important points to consider. Secondly, I think we can read through the rest of Joshua by the end of this week. So, please don't skip this week even if you don't read every verse in this section. Chapter 11 has my attention today. After the Lord defeated the military outposts from Jericho and Ai, only the Hivites humbled themselves before the Lord. "No one in this region made peace with the Israelites except the Hivites of Gibeon. All the others were defeated." (11:19) "All the kings came out to fight. Their combined armies formed a vast horde." (11:4) Too much for the Israelites, humanly speaking. But God would punish the sin and arrogance of these pagan nations. The judgment on Canaan was God's, not Israel's. God had extended mercy to the Canaanites for several generations. Now, however, God determined that "the sins of the Amorites" had "reached its full measure." (Genesis 15:16) God used Israel as the instrument and agent of his judgment, just as in later centuries God used other nations to execute judgment upon Israel and Judah for their sins. Judgment is a difficult topic. I am preparing a study on the Lord's second coming for the guys in the jail and I will read Matthew 24:37 to them, "When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day." It took Noah over 100 years to build the ark. Was God patient or what? The people could see what

was happening and repent but they didn't and God judged the world. The Canaanites could see and repent but they didn't and God's judgment was severe. The Lord dispose of many cities and drove out many others. Judgment for sin is a central theme in the Bible. Without connection to Christ, who took on our penalty for sin, we are hopeless. A person either believes that or they don't. We see the end result time and again in God's Word for those who don't. How do you respond to this challenging topic?

#### DAY 2 – Joshua 14 thru 16

You would do well to view a map of the Promised Land divided according to God's instructions. I am looking at one right now and it helps me understand the wording in these chapters and what they mean. The major subject in these chapters is the allotment of land. The principle that governed the understanding of God's people was the truth that the land belongs to God. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him." (Psalm 24:1) David declared this truth that had been established since the creation of the world. As the tribes of Israel are allotted their land it is clearly a gift and demands their best stewardship. God evicted the Canaanite peoples from the Promised Land because of their wickedness. He brought Israel into the land because he had promised this inheritance to his people through the patriarchs. This obviously applies to us and all the "things" God gives us. He owns it all, right!? Believing that truth will shape how you view your possessions. It will also allow you to more easily share them since all you have is ultimately God's. Chapter 14 highlights Caleb. Many parents have named their sons Caleb with Caleb's testimony in mind. Caleb reminds Joshua of God's promises to them both. Caleb would receive the city of Hebron which would continue to be a prominent place for God's people. His testimony is recorded in verses 6-12 in this chapter. Caleb's faith did not diminish as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. The facts are Caleb and his family drove out the Anakites who previously terrified the scouts when they spied out the land. Every spy lacked faith except Caleb and Joshua. With incredible vigor, he stood ready to conquer the territory Joshua has assigned to him. Caleb is an example of how God will bless someone who remains faithful, and full of trust in the Lord. How does Caleb's example inspire you?

#### DAY 3 – Joshua 17 thru 19

As we read three chapters a day during this week, each day brings up something worth contemplating. As we begin in chapter 17, there's an interesting principle that is worth recognizing. It also represents the importance of adjusting a tradition that does not seem fair or undermines a bigger principle. In this case, the value of family inheritance, no matter the gender, must be honored. In ancient Israel, inheritance was usually passed from a father to his sons. Without sons, a man's name could pass into oblivion. However, Zelophehad's daughters had petitioned the instruction of Moses (Verse 4). Moses had inquired of God and God had ruled that daughters could be included (Numbers 27:1-11). God's ruling broadened the general principle of inheritance by declaring that no family would be excluded from a portion of God's material blessings. I think this situation falls into the category of "we have never done it that way before." We see Moses and Joshua graciously responding to a situation with justice and wisdom. This approach would help other women in similar circumstances to inherit property as well. You might not expect such a "down to earth" example in these chapters highlighting the allotment of the land but this seems to reflect the heart of God who through Jesus would bring all people together whether Jews or Gentiles, male or female, slave or free... God cares about people. The main topic also

speaks to me about negotiation and making decisions in a collaborative way. Some tribes needed more land because they had more people. Judah would share with Simeon because they had more than enough land. The posture of the people seemed to recognize that the land was God's and however it was divided would be a blessing from God. I appreciate that emphasis as well. Did you notice something that caught your eye in these chapters? How so?

#### DAY 4 – Joshua 20 thru 22

The Cities of Refuge is an interesting topic and is found in Numbers 35:6-34 so that an innocent person might be protected from unjustified revenge. So, Joshua follows the instruction given to Moses to set up these cities. "These cities were set apart for all Israelites as well as foreigners living among them." (20:9) The inclusion of foreigners was unique to other nations. Resident foreigners were to receive every justice offered to native Israelites. This portrayed a gracious stance from God's people. But the topic that caught my eye the most was the misunderstanding of the Eastern Tribes building an altar. At first glance, this was viewed as a rebellious act and stirred up the remaining tribes to go to war over it. According to the law found in Leviticus 17:8-9, any Israelite or foreigner building an isolated altar of sacrifice not connected to the Tabernacle shall be cut off. In Peor (22:17), some Israelite men sacrificed offerings to the gods of the Moabites and had sexual relations with foreign women. They were judged severely by God and 24,000 Israelites died in the plague. The motivation of these Eastern Tribes was completely misunderstood as they were desiring unity and common allegiance to the One True God. The Western Delegation thought they were setting up an altar of sacrifice which would have separated them from the Israelite Tribes west of the Jordan River. Verse 19 clearly explains their deep concern. Verse 24 begins with the words, "The truth is..." These Eastern Tribes wanted to assure continuity for the faith of all the tribes, especially their descendants. "It will remind our descendants that we, too, have the right to worship the Lord at his sanctuary..." (22:27) Simply put, the altar near the bank of the Jordan would stand as a memorial (witness) through the generations that the eastern tribes were also part of Israel. This misunderstanding which was deemed as sin reminds me of Matthew 18. "If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense." The gracious courage to be honest, and full of love, can make an incredible difference. As I have practiced this important principle, I often discovered that I have misunderstood the motivation behind the action and things were quickly corrected/resolved. The best relationships are formed when people are willing to open up and share. The Israelites were strengthened because of this confrontation. God's people weren't unified until the misunderstanding was brought to light. How does this event speak to you?

#### DAY 5 – Joshua 23 & 24

This is obviously Joshua's wrap-up with his charge to the people in chapter 23 and his history lesson in chapter 24. But the verse that has been highlighted the most over the years is 24:15 about choosing to serve the Lord. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." For many years my family hung a plaque near the entrance to our home that included this verse. Joshua is acknowledging the pull that this world has on every one of us. He does so in both chapters by challenging the allegiance of the people. If they remain true to their spiritual commitment to God and obey him, he will bless them. He has shown himself faithful to bless his people who call on his name. "So be very careful to love the Lord your God." (23:11) Joshua is reminding the people about the Curses and Blessings of Deuteronomy 27 -

29. It is also interesting to me that the writers of the Old Testament will often recite the oral history of the Israelites. I say oral history because that is how it was handed down. It is also a reminder of God's faithfulness. The Lord is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But the Lord often asks for a renewal of the covenant that God shared with Abraham and the Patriarchs. Chapter 24 has this emphasis, "So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day at Shechem, committing them to follow the decrees and regulations of the Lord." (24:27) I think of the importance of renewal to what we care about most. There are many transitions in life that could bring a positive or negative change. The Lord Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as a reminder and a renewal of commitment which we regularly practice at our church. Joshua was giving his farewell speech. There would be new leaders to follow and the need to remain faithful to the covenant. We have a new leader/senior pastor and I think a renewal of support and a faithful pledge of service to God and his new leadership at New Harvest is important. Also, the launch of a New Year can be similar. Is it your desire and commitment to remain faithful to God and to his church called New Harvest? How so?

## WEEK 3

Judges is often thought of as a negative book in the Bible and there are many disappointments, to say the least. But time and again, God raises up a leader and there is peace for 40 years or 80 years, and so on. A godly leader, with a supportive team, can make a huge difference. I find this book interesting, sobering, and challenging. I am glad we will spend the next two weeks reading Judges.

### DAY 1 – Judges 1 & 2

These two chapters are setting the scene for us. Each chapter begins with the death of Joshua (1:1, 2:8). Soon after Joshua dies the people neglect to follow the covenant that God had set up for them in Joshua 23 & 24. Whether it was because of a lack of faith or compliance to live among pagan people with pagan practices, the Israelites did not follow through with occupying the land God had promised. The summary is clearly presented in 2:3, "So now I declare that I will no longer drive out the people living in your land. They will be thorns in your sides, and their gods will be a constant temptation to you." When God's people refused to destroy the pagan altars, the scene was set for an enviable compromise. So, the people in the land would be allowed by God to oppress the Israelites. But it didn't have to be this way. Verse 10 of chapter 2 summarizes why the history of the Judges seems so bleak: "After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel." The rest of this chapter prepares us for our journey through Judges. We will see a pattern. A-B-A can mean forgetfulness/disobedience... repentance/godly leader... the leader dies/forgetfulness. Even in this dark book, I see the grace of God. God turned from his anger so often and quite quickly, in my thinking. The Lord graciously tested the people to obey the covenant and enjoy his promises but they turned from the Lord time after time. I think of James 1:12-15 which tells us that God does not deliberately set his people up to sin. Temptations abound, but the choice to obey God or yield to temptation rests with those who claim to know him. This is still very true today. How do you respond to the many tests that come our way? (Also, realize that the word temptation can be translated test.)

## DAY 2 – Judges 3 & 4

My attention is clearly on the story of Deborah. She was an amazing person. I will use most of this space to highlight her life and how she remains a great example for us. But there is something to notice in verse 3:2. God left some of the pagan people in the land to teach a new generation how to fight and survive. Skills in warfare were necessary for survival in the ancient world. This is a parallel to how trials and hardship can help us endure as James 1:2-4 clearly teaches. Perseverance and faithfulness are not natural gifts; they must be developed. But Deborah is an amazing Biblical character. She displayed both perseverance and faithfulness. She is devoted to the Lord and gifted as a prophet. Chapter 4 begins, as you might expect, with Israel doing evil in the eyes of the Lord. The enemy oppresses Israel for 20 years. God raises up Deborah. Deborah is unique in that she is a prophet and a judge among the people. Through Deborah, God called Barak to fight against Sisera. But Barak did not receive God's call with enthusiasm and courage. Instead, he set a condition: Deborah must go with him. Deborah agreed, but with a cost: The glory for the victory would not go to Barak but to a woman. And so it happened: Barak defeated Sisera and his army, but the glory went to Jael, the woman who killed Sisera and fulfilled Deborah's prophecy. Barak's lack of courage and leadership contrasts with the courage and leadership of these two women. Deborah will quickly acknowledge the Lord as the One who brought victory in her song found in the next chapter. I still think God is looking for courageous people who are willing to take risks for the sake of the Lord and the needs of his people. Deborah's story is rather concise but it is also inspiring, nonetheless. How do you respond to the character of Deborah?

## DAY 3 – Judges 5 & 6

Deborah's song is specific to their victory but I noticed a few phrases in the song that I could pray that would fit my life today. Do you notice some for yourself? Which ones? Gideon is even more inspiring to me than Deborah because I can more easily identify with him. Gideon, an Israelite judge, was the son of Joash, from the tribe of Manasseh. Gideon described his clan as the least powerful in Manasseh and himself as the least important in the clan. His story tells how God can take a weak person and use him for great purposes. There are 40 verses in chapter 6, so there is much to notice. Most people focus on Gideon's response to the angel of the Lord beginning in verse 13. Gideon is so honest with the Lord's messenger. "Why has all this happened to us?" Gideon responds in strength at first and then reacts with timidity (Verse 16). Gideon was not chosen because of his enormous faith. He seems to doubt whether he or God will be able to push back the Midianites. The cruel Midianites had already oppressed the Israelites for seven years. That can weaken your faith, for sure. But Gideon also did what God told him to do in verses 25 – 27. This took courage to do and God honored his obedience with, "Then the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon with power." (Verse 34) Sometimes we sit back and ask God to bless us but He often waits for our willingness to obey and then gives us what we need to serve him well. I see that truth in Gideon. I told you, I really appreciate the example of Gideon, at least in this chapter. But the last few verses are not ones that I want to emulate. Sometimes I might be tempted to ask God for confirmation like Gideon did with the fleece. I do not see this as a strong point worth following. God was gracious to Gideon and helped the reluctant warrior with a miraculous sign. I do not suggest you



“fleece” God to make sure he will provide for you. Gideon is God’s choice but I think the choices available were slim. The oppression had beaten the people down. Gideon might have been God’s best choice. He definitely was used by God. There is much to glean from this chapter. How might God be speaking to you?

#### DAY 4 – Judges 7 & 8

This is definitely one of the most intriguing stories of the Old Testament. 32,000 soldiers are reduced to 300. Why? “If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to me that they saved themselves by their own strength.” (Verse 2) Right away in this chapter, we read about something very practical. When good things happen to us, we can be tempted to take credit for it. This seems to me to be one of God’s big disappointments with his people. Pride in our hearts and forgetting to recognize that God did it. The Bible is clear about God’s posture toward pride – he opposes it. On the other hand, he esteems those who are humble in heart. This victory had to be an unforgettable event. It says that there was peace in the land for 40 years. 40 years represents a generation. But then this repeated sentence occurs again, “As soon as Gideon died the Israelites prostituted themselves by worshiping the images of Baal, making Baal-berith their god.” (8:33) It’s hard to believe. I have often thought about the first commandment and how big it is to our God. Do you remember it? “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3) The NLT reads, “but me.” I actually think that is what the command means. The Bible never gives us permission to honor other gods even if we put Yahweh first. God is the One and Only God. It is not like a pyramid with God at the top and a bunch of other gods underneath. No other God but me. The last thing that John writes in his first letter is, “Keep yourself from idols.” Are there times in my life that something or someone or even myself takes first place in my life? Unfortunately, yes, it is true sometimes. It would do me no good to lie. That’s why this command seems to be the most important and also the most convicting. Do you agree? The people during the period of Judges continue to be tempted to honor false gods and turn their backs on the One True God. But before I point a finger at them, I do well to examine my own heart. Is Jesus my first love? Do I love the Lord God with all my heart...? Are there any other gods in my life besides God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ? I challenge you to be honest with God. He already knows everything.

#### DAY 5 – Judges 9

Just one chapter today since I think it is the longest chapter in this book, 57 verses. I must admit, I don’t even like this chapter. There is cruelty and violence throughout. I can’t imagine someone being so devilish as to kill all the sons of his father minus one, Jotham. As I understand, the dark period in the history of Judges only gets darker with Abimelech. He will eventually get what he deserves for being a corrupt judge and a devilish criminal. But it is upsetting, nonetheless. It reminds me of a fictional book I am reading right now. My consolation is that it is “make-believe.” John Grisham recently released a book entitled, “The Boys of Biloxi.” I am halfway through the book and hope that a few of the good guys don’t get murdered and justice prevails. But so far, the Dixie Mafia is having their way on the Biloxi strip. But it seems like the author has a person of integrity gaining some ground in order to confront the stronghold of mobsters having their way. It is not surprising that John Grisham chose a lawyer as a possible hero since most of his novels pertain to the courtroom. I mention that because the Book of Judges is not fiction and reading this chapter feels heavy. I also mention the fictional book because there

is not much to highlight in this chapter. It is a picture of “low life.” I read this about the justice of God: First, we must recognize our own tendency to sin and repent; second, we may experience a difficult time of waiting for the wicked to be punished, but in God’s time, all evil will be destroyed. You can trust God with that. He said, “Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, ‘I will revenge; I will pay them back,’ says the Lord.” (Romans 12:19) What does it mean to you to wait on the Lord for his justice to prevail?

## WEEK 4

It is easy to see that there are 4 chapters on Samson this week that are the most well-known and the most interesting. Actually, Samson’s life is rather upsetting to me. He is compelled by his human desires more than his spiritual connection to God. There is a tension between living according to the flesh versus living according to the Spirit. Samson gave into the flesh all the time. I know this is a challenging book in the Bible but I thought we were ready for the effort it might take to glean God’s message for us through Judges. Hang in there!

### DAY 1 – Judges 10 & 11

This section begins with the title, “The Period of Decline.” You might have anticipated improvement during Samson’s days as a judge, but not so. The stark statement of apostasy jumps off the page in 10:6, “They abandoned the Lord and no longer served him at all.” That’s heavy! After 18 years of oppression, the Israelites again cry out to God for help. But this time God responds to their plea for help by saying, “Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen! Let them rescue you.” (10:14) It reminds me of Noah’s day. There comes a point when God’s patience runs out. But the story does not end with a flood. In fact, God noticed their misery (10:16) and raised up a mighty warrior named Jephthah. His story fills chapter 11. It is a fascinating story but the way it ends is unthinkable. Bargaining with God wasn’t advised in the Old Testament and definitely not in the New Testament. He made an impulsive vow to God that would haunt him for the rest of his life. After a close examination of God’s Word (Lev 27:1-8), Jephthah could have made a substitute. Human sacrifice was forbidden in God’s law. Jephthah’s folly demonstrates just how far Israel’s society had descended into lawlessness and apostasy. Even in the craziness of this book, we still see God’s love being more powerful than his anger. His compassion exceeds his indignation. God’s love does not negate his justice, however, “for he himself is fair and just, and he makes sinners right in his sight when they believe in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). But making human beings right in his sight meant that Jesus had to pay the penalty for sin as a sacrifice and at the same time, people could receive mercy only by turning to God in faith. Justice could not be ignored and it wasn’t, of course. How does Israel’s sinfulness get your attention? Is there something in Jephthah’s story that speaks to you?

### DAY 2 – Judges 12 & 13

Samson seems like the story to follow from chapter 13, but I have a few thoughts about Jephthah. From the time we met him yesterday, in our reading, I have been suspicious of him. He is described as a mighty warrior (hero), a real celebrity in his day. After reading the rest of his story today, I see him as a

manipulator, how about you? He told the people of Ephraim that he had summoned their help but they refused to come. However, there is no record of him doing so. The result of his lying brought about a civil war. He defeated the Ephraimites severely. (Sidenote – often when we read about large numbers of soldiers killed in battle, the translation could be something more reasonable; like 42,000 Ephraimites could actually be translated as 42 troops. The Hebrew word for “thousand” might be confused with the word “troop.” A troop would number more like 100 soldiers. I have wanted to share that with you several times during our readings but it finally came to mind as I was thinking about the setting and 42,000 people pronouncing the name word “Shibboleth” wrong.) Nonetheless, Jephthah’s legacy is nothing to admire. Another mighty warrior will be raised up but his character and integrity leave much to be desired. His name is Samson and we learn about how God visited his parents with specific instructions on how to raise him. Samson’s arrival was filled with anticipation. But, even so, each individual must respond to God; no one can do it for you or me. Samson’s choices would lead to a dead end. My thoughts are drawn to Samson’s parents. His father seems especially concerned and engaged to do the right thing. But I see the mother being more trusting of the words of the angel. Both of them realize that God had visited them and that they were privileged to be Samson’s parents. But it wouldn’t be long before their son would cause them heartache and disappointment. We don’t know much about their parenting of him as he grew up but I am sure they envisioned a far different life for their son than actually happened. Something to think about as a parent or grandparent, right!?

#### DAY 3 – Judges 14 & 15

How is this for an introduction to Samson: Samson, Israel’s best-known judge, is a prime illustration of God’s using a person for good in spite of that person’s indifference and sin. Samson was a rescuer of Israel without even trying or caring. He did not care about his people, his family, or his God. All he cared about was himself. In this first chapter, we read about Samson wanting a Philistine bride and taking honey from a dead body (lion carcass). Joshua 23:12-13, tells us that the Israelites were commanded not to intermarry with the people of the land, but Samson did so anyway. In Numbers 6:1-21, we read about God’s call and restrictions for a Nazirite which was God’s intent for Samson. Nazirites were absolutely forbidden from touching a dead body, but Samson didn’t care as he enjoyed honey from the dead lion. His willingness to be revengeful was a repeated behavior that is never affirmed in the Bible. And even though Samson attacks the Philistines time and again, they continue to dominate the land (15:20). I have to admit that when it says, the Spirit came powerfully upon him (14:6, 19, 15:14), this is not impressive to me. Maybe I am missing something but power without character seems flawed and dishonoring to God. Sometimes a modern-day Christian leader/preacher will seemingly be anointed by God but their choices and lack of humility discredit their ministry in my eyes. That’s how I feel about Samson. He is a “loose cannon,” so to speak. Did anything catch your eye in these two chapters? How so?

#### DAY 4 – Judges 16

I want us to glean whatever message the Lord has for us through the life of Samson. This chapter is longer and it closes with the death of Samson. It is an especially sad chapter that reveals Samson’s flawed character so clearly. He will suffer for it. At least his final breath was one of sacrifice for the Lord and punishment for the pagan Philistine leaders and people. But I am not sure Samson even thought of it that way. As 16:28 records, “pay back the Philistines for the loss of (his) two eyes.” One commentary I

was reading portrayed Samson as an addict. He was powerless over women and yet he seems unaware of his vulnerability. Can you believe that Delilah begged him three times to reveal his secret? His self-deception is clearly on display as he thinks he can escape no matter what. His real slavery was not the bondage of the Philistines, but his pride and lustful desires for beautiful foreign women. Unknowingly he inched closer and closer to the edge of a cliff which would lead him over the edge to an untimely death. Even though my primary emotion for Samson's story is sadness, I see his prayer as pointing to genuine faith and surrender to the Lord at the very end. He admitted his helplessness and committed himself to God's hands. And despite Samson's serious flaws, he was remembered as a man of faith (Hebrews 11:32). Matthew 5:3 says, "God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs." He does realize his need for God's help and cries out to him in his final moments on earth. The Lord answered Samson's final prayer and accomplished more at that moment than in all of Samson's previous escapades. How might you respond to Samson's story? Why?

#### DAY 5 – Judges 17 & 18

Our final readings in Judges will portray the social chaos that had been building during this era of neglecting the covenant of God. I have asked myself why I chose to have us read Judges besides the fact that it is God's Word and preserved for God's purposes. You may have had a hard time finding examples to follow these last two weeks. But there is value in seeing how NOT to do it, right?! In this first chapter, we read the theme of the Book: "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." (Verse 6) This is saying something about the period of the Judges, realizing that this verse is a summary of the times. The prevalence of idols goes right along with the spiritual depravity of the people. Micah's story seems rather convoluted with the sense he is doing something good by admitting he stole his mother's money. So, Micah thought he could turn that curse (Verse 2) around with a shine highlighting an idol that his mother gave him. He preferred superstition more than obedience to God. He probably thought that God would bless him, especially having his own Levitical priest. But his abandonment of God's commands (no idols) and God's covenant (obedience) would bring a curse on him any way that no unemployed Levite could ward off. The house that Micah built had a foundation of sand and it crumbled so easily as we read in chapter 18. Micah's private idolatry would become the apostasy of the entire tribe of Dan by the close of chapter 18. The pattern of judges is discontinued after Samson for whatever reason. But the inspired leadership of chapters 3 through 16 did not endure. Something was clearly missing. Our reading tomorrow, as we begin a new week, will not give us any solutions either. But the beautiful story of Ruth provides some hope. After we wrap up Judges on the first day of next week, you can anticipate four days of reading through the ordinary journey of a woman with great faith and genuine kindness. I am sure you will be ready for that. What does Micah's story teach us? How might his choices help us to make better choices?

## WEEK 5

We have one more reading in Judges as we go from "R" rated to "PG" with Ruth. "In those days Israel had no king, all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." (21:25) This is not only the last verse in Judges but it is the summary as well. This gives us the reason for the godless disorder of the time. The only glimpse of hope for the people was found in some of the judges that ruled. But they were a far cry from what the people really needed. They began to long for a godly king which was just on the

horizon. This king would point to a messianic King who would one day rule forever. This is referring to David but before that God would work through a woman who would be the Great Grandmother of David. She will be our focus this week. It is truly a beautiful story full of pain, love, and sacrifice.

#### DAY 1 – Judges 19 thru 21

Can you think of a more morbid way to end the Book of Judges than this story? On Day 5, the reading in Judges last week focused on an individual named Micah. But this story deals with the whole nation and the decimation of a whole tribe. This had to be the low point in Israel's own remembered history. This episode is referred to as the "days of Gibeah" that Hosea points to in Hosea 9:9 & 10:9, 400 years later. Sometimes things have to become so dark and so deep that the only way is up. Would the people of God repent and see a better day? They are primed to follow a covenant-anointed King who would be revealed in the near future and point to the hope of the Messiah. Isn't it surprising and especially disappointing to read about a situation that mirrors Sodom and Gomorrah? It is unthinkable that people would do such devilish things to another human being. The depravity of man is in full view. The stain of sin seeps into our lives also. Without the hope of the Gospel, we would be as equally hopeless as life appeared to be in those days. That's why I am getting ready to outline the Book of Romans for us after we conclude with the beauty of our next book, Ruth. We will be lifted in spirit as we read Ruth over the next 4 days and anticipate Romans after that. Might I suggest that there is a thread of hope in the last chapter of Judges? Instead of the elimination of the tribe of Benjamin, the people have a small amount of mercy to restore this tribe. "The people felt sorry for Benjamin because the Lord had made this gap among the tribes of Israel." (21:15) Thus, the tribes and families were intact; Israel and all its tribes would survive. (21:24) We must be alert to our propensity to live like the final statement in the book: "All the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." We are independent westernized people who believe that we have a right to live our own lives the way we want but does that always prove to be for our best? What do you think? How has God spoken to you through the Book of Judges?

#### DAY 2 – Ruth 1

You are probably familiar with the story of Ruth. Because you may know what happens in these next 4 chapters, I think it is best for us to slow down our reading pace and contemplate what this story means to each of us. If you remember some of the high points in this book, you might have forgotten that the first chapter is fairly heavy. In fact, Naomi is downright depressed because of grief and poverty. She even wants to change her name to Mara which means "bitter." Ironically, Naomi means "pleasant." If you didn't know how the story ends, you would easily agree with her. She has experienced one tragedy after another. Her grief clouded her ability to even appreciate the commitment and sacrifice of Ruth. "When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more." (Verse 18) Now, she might have thanked Ruth but the text does not give us that sense. Ruth wasn't necessarily received by Naomi with much encouragement. I think that makes Ruth's gesture of love and support even more impressive. Her monumental pledge has inspired many others to offer themselves with serving love and heartfelt support. Wendy and I utilized Ruth's words in our wedding vows: "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." (Verse 16) This is not only a pledge to Naomi but also a profession of faith in the Living God. This is significant because we get the impression that Naomi thought that Ruth

would continue to worship the Moabite gods. But she reveals her conversion and backs it up with allegiance to the God of the Israelites. How will this story unfold? Might I suggest that the theme of Ruth is summarized in Romans 8:28, “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” Get ready for this truth to be seen in a beautiful way. How do you respond to this introductory chapter?

### DAY 3 – Ruth 2

Ruth’s character is clearly seen in this chapter. She displayed humility and gratitude but also determination and courage. It was her idea to venture into the unknown of gleaning the fields. This had to be risky for a single woman. Not every farm owner is going to be sympathetic to her situation. But they needed food and she would pursue this opportunity even if it didn’t work out smoothly. Gleaning was a form of harvesting that would provide for the poor. They got the leftovers. Ruth and Naomi were in a difficult place as two women without a means to provide for themselves. Naomi was too old to work the fields so Ruth did it without complaining. Obviously, this shows us that Ruth was an amazing woman and that God would bless her because of it. But Ruth is not the only person highlighted in this chapter. Boaz is introduced as he meets the harvest crew and greets them in this way: “The Lord be with you.” (Verse 4) The idea of acknowledging God during the menial task of harvesting seems unique but inspiring as well. It isn’t long before Boaz acknowledges the Lord again as he addresses Ruth in verse 12: “May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done.” The generosity and kindness of Boaz jump off the page as God is using him to bless Ruth and Naomi, and his willingness to help them is only beginning. There are two other thoughts that surface for me in this chapter: 1) “She happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz...” (Verse 3, ESV) The word “happened” portrays the idea of happenstance. But it is clearly highlighting God’s mysterious providence affirming the truth of Romans 8:28. 2) The family redeemer is not an idea that we readily understand. It seems like it is a good thing but how should we understand it? The first time it is mentioned is found in verse 20. Simply put, the nearest male kinsman, was to help a relative who fell into economic difficulty. If this meant saving them from slavery, then the kinsman redeemer would purchase the right to have the relative work for them. In our story, Boaz is willing to be a kinsman redeemer and take on the responsibilities of a brother-in-law to provide an heir for a deceased brother. You will notice this aspect of the story in chapter 4. What quality in Ruth; in Boaz, would you want more of in your life?

### DAY 4 – Ruth 3

As I am reading Ruth this time, I am looking for new thoughts and insights into the story. I often read the chapter twice and I suggest you do the same. Throughout these first two chapters, I have been impressed with Ruth’s courage, of course. This chapter is no exception. She follows the unique instructions of her mother-in-law. You can tell that her gesture to sleep at the feet of Boaz is unexpected and could possibly be misunderstood with plenty of opportunity to be discovered and turn into an object of gossip. Plus, she asks him to spread the corner of the blanket over her. I understand this to be a way of asking Boaz to marry her. Wow! But I think I notice something that suggests Ruth was a “catch.” She is not only a courageous woman of virtue but also a real “looker.” (I hope I haven’t offended anyone with that thought.) Boaz is saying that she could get married to anyone she wanted.

“...you have not gone after a younger man, whether rich or poor.” (Verse 10) Ruth was as concerned about Naomi as she was for herself because she knew Boaz would also redeem Naomi with her. Boaz seems to be a great choice for a husband but he is most likely much older than her. She is not primarily thinking of herself. Philippians 2:3-4 says, “Don’t be selfish, don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.” To me, that matches Ruth’s motivation. The chapter ends with uncertainty and some drama. Will another man marry Ruth; someone she doesn’t even know? We will have to wait until tomorrow to get the answer. I hope you are enjoying this journey through the short story of Ruth’s life. You won’t want to miss tomorrow. I thought there were over a dozen things to notice in this chapter. What stood out to you? Why?

#### DAY 5 – Ruth 4

This chapter fulfills the promise of Romans 8:28 that I mentioned earlier. “Then the women of the town said to Naomi, ‘Praise the Lord, who has now provided a redeemer for your family! May this child be famous in Israel.’” (Verse 14) In chapter 1, Naomi wanted to be called “Mara” because her life was filled with bitterness but now there is great joy. Her life is pleasant like the meaning of her name because God has taken care of her. We can easily apply this to our lives as we go through difficulty and hardship. God’s story is not finished for you. Take courage from Naomi and Ruth’s lives. Something less obvious but interesting to me is the willingness of the closest family redeemer to purchase the land from Naomi when Boaz offered him the opportunity. There was no male heir with no apparent one entering the picture, so he could add this land to his own estate and also fulfill his social duty to the family. It was a win-win for him. But the inclusion of Ruth as a bride became a deal breaker. Boaz seemingly took some liberty to tie redeeming the land and providing an heir as part of the obligation for a kinsman redeemer. The laws of Deuteronomy do not necessarily make them one and the same. But culturally it appears that what Boaz presents was accepted as valid. Some commentaries have suggested that Boaz maneuvered his desire to marry Ruth by stretching the requirement to include marriage. I am drawn to this idea because I sense Boaz’s love for Ruth along with his admiration for her. This new marriage would mean the furtherance of God’s plan for a special King and a continuation of the messianic line. Ruth would be David’s Great-Grandmother and an ancestor of Jesus. The prophetic words of verses 11 & 12 are quite profound as they liken Ruth to the unique providence of God who utilizes Tamar and Judah as ancestral parents to Jesus as well. This beautiful story is purposefully included in God’s Word for inspiration, application, and clear evidence of God’s providence. How has God spoken to you through it?