

The Conquering and Independent Church

The Conquest of Canaan and the Era of the Judges

Written and Preached by Pastor Russell Roberts, May-December 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Joshua Assumes Command	Josh. 1	pg 1
2	Rahab and the Spies	Josh. 2	pg 4
3	Israel Crosses the Jordan	Josh. 3-4	pg 7
4	Camped at Gilgal	Josh. 5	pg 10
5	The Battle of Jericho	Josh. 6	pg 13
6	Ai and Achan	Josh. 7-8	pg 16
7	Deceived By the Gibeonites	Josh. 9	pg 19
8	Defending the Gibeonites	Josh. 10:1-28	pg 22
9	The Remaining Conquest	Josh. 10:29-12:24	pg 25
10	The Division of Canaan	Josh. 13-19	pg 28
11	Special Cities	Josh. 20-21	pg 31
12	A Conflict Arises	Josh. 22	pg 34
13	Joshua's Farewell	Josh. 23-24; Judg. 2:6-9	pg 37
14	Successes and Failures	Judg. 1:1-2:5,10	pg 40
15	Israel's Idolatry	Judg. 2:11-3:6	pg 43
16	Micah & the Danites	Judg. 17-18	pg 46
17	Israel's Civil War (Part 1)	Judg. 19:1-20:17	pg 49
18	Israel's Civil War (Part 2)	Judg. 20:18-21:25	pg 52
19	Othniel, Ehud, Shagmar	Judg. 3:7-31	pg 55
20	Deborah and Barak	Judg. 4-5	pg 58
21	Gideon (Part 1)	Judg. 6	pg 61
22	Gideon (Part 2)	Judg. 7-8	pg 64
23	Abimelech	Judg. 9	pg 67
24	Tola, Jair, and the Ammonite Oppression	Judg. 10	pg 70
25	Jephthah	Judg. 11:1-12:7	pg 73
26	Ibzan & the Story of Ruth (Part 1)	Judg. 12:8-10; Ruth 1-2	pg 76
27	The Story of Ruth (Part 2). Elon, & Abdon	Judg. 12:11-15; Ruth 3-4	pg 79
28	Samson (Part 1)	Judg. 13	pg 82
29	Samson (Part 2)	Judg. 14-15	pg 85
30	Samson (Part 3)	Judg. 16	pg 88
31	Samuel's Birth & Early Childhood	1 Sam. 1; 2:1-11,18-21	pg 91
32	Eli's Sons & Samuel's Calling	1 Sam. 2:12-17,22-36; 3	pg 94
33	The Philistines Capture the Ark	1 Sam. 4-5	pg 97
34	The Ark Returned	1 Sam. 6-7	pg 100
	Timeline of Events		pg 103

Joshua Assumes Command

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Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. - 1 Corinthians 16:13

Good morning! Today we are beginning our new series through the Old Testament books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and the opening chapters of 1st Samuel. We will be discussing the period of Israel's history during which the Hebrews invaded, occupied and settled in the land of Canaan - the Promised Land. This took place over 355 years, from approximately 1405 BC to 1050 BC. It began with the conquest of Joshua, which lasted about 7 years, and ended with the age of the judges, which persisted for almost 3 ½ centuries. In terms of the overall timeline of the Old Testament, this era was immediately preceded by the exodus under Moses and followed by the united monarchy of Israel under kings Saul, David, and Solomon respectively.

I am calling this series "The Conquering and Independent Church". This title highlights both the initial invasion of Canaan and the many years afterward when Israel existed as a confederation of independent tribes. This title also refers to Israel as the Church, though the 2 are distinctly different. Israel consists of a particular ethnic people group, sometimes referred to as the Jews. The Church includes all ethnicities, races, and nationalities - anyone who has accepted Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior of their lives. The reason for equating them is to highlight that both groups were/are chosen by God and both had/have the same purpose of declaring Him to the lost world. The New Testament Church of today can benefit by reading and learning from the experiences of Old Testament Israel.

Over the coming months we will encounter many remarkable men and women including Joshua, Rahab, Deborah, Gideon, Ruth, Sampson, and Samuel. I pray that the stories of their boldness and faith will be an encouraging example to all of us. We will read of several amazing and miraculous victories, such as the iconic Battle of Jericho, but also of much hardship and oppression under the hands of the Mideonites, Philistines, and others. This period of history is characterized by a constant fluctuation of fortunes, from high to low and back again. I trust that we can apply many of its truths to our lives.

Let's set the background... Some 40 years earlier Moses and the children of Israel departed from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and came to Mt. Sinai. After almost 2 years there, they broke camp and moved to the southern edge of the Promised Land. Spies went into the land, surveyed it, and based on their report, the Hebrews decided not to invade. As a result, they wandered about in the wilderness for 38 years as the entire older generation died off. By the end of the exodus, the children of Israel had arrived and camped in the plains of Moab - immediately east of the Jordan River adjacent to the land of Canaan. Moses climbed Mt. Nebo, looked out over the Promised Land, and then died, leaving a new generation of Hebrews to take up where their ancestors had left off...

I. GOD'S CHARGE TO JOSHUA (Joshua 1:1-5)

After Moses' death, Joshua assumed command over the children of Israel. Though his exact age at this time is unknown, he would likely have been somewhere between 60-80 years old. Seeing that all of the older generation had died in the wilderness except for he and Caleb, Joshua would now be among the eldest survivors. Joshua had served faithfully as Moses' second in command throughout the entire 40 year exodus. As a young man, he was 1 of the 12 spies who had been sent into the Promised Land. Joshua had already proven himself to be a man of incredible faith and military genius, and was the perfect leader for the task ahead.

God spoke to Joshua and told him that it was time for Israel to enter into the Promised Land - they had wandered about long enough. He told Joshua to rise up, cross the Jordan River, and lead the sons of Israel in their conquest of Canaan. He assured Joshua that all of the land where he'd set foot would be given to him, just as it had previously been promised to Moses. God further promised to be with Joshua - not to desert or abandon him - all the days of his life so that no one could stand against him.

There comes a time in most peoples' lives when they are called to step up and take charge. Whether it be as the head of the family, in the workplace, or in some other context the day will come when others look to you as the leader. This was Joshua's time. His spiritual mentor and hero was gone, and it was his turn to lead this new generation of Hebrews to finish what God had started. Would they be able to do what their fathers and mothers had failed to do? Would they be able to overcome the Canaanites and finally settle in the Promised Land?

II. BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS (Joshua 1:6-9)

God told Joshua to be strong and very courageous. He would give this land to Israel as a possession just as He'd promised to Moses and their parents. Still, this mission would be dangerous and fraught with violence and warfare. The invasion and occupation of Canaan wouldn't be easy because the inhabitants of the land were a mighty and formidable people. In fact, the first generation of the exodus were so fearful of the Canaanites that they'd cowardly opted not to invade.

Again God commanded Joshua to be strong and courageous. He urged him and the Hebrew children to carefully obey the Law which had been handed down to them during the days of Moses. He told them not to turn from it, but rather to speak it, meditate on it, and practice it. If they faithfully followed the Law, God would make Joshua and the descendants of Jacob prosperous and successful. Then, for a third time, God urged Joshua to be strong and courageous and said that He'd be with him wherever He went.

Dennis Prager is a Jewish radio personality and writer who I respect and listen to regularly. He contends that courage is among the most uncommon human traits, yet it is absolutely critical. What good is love if we don't have the courage to love the unlovable? What good is wisdom if we don't have the courage to speak it in the face of foolishness? What good is a faith that crumbles or cowers under persecution? True goodness demands courage. Joshua would need

strength and courage to succeed, and in much the same way, we need it to overcome the challenges of life,

III. PREPARING THE TROOPS (Joshua 1:10-18)

Joshua summoned his officials and instructed them to go throughout the camp and prepare the people. Within 3 days, they would break camp and cross the Jordan River. This would mark the beginning of the conquest of Canaan. Every family needed to get their possessions in order and ready themselves for the task ahead.

A few years earlier, during the later part of Moses' life, he had given the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh an inheritance on the east side of the Jordan River, outside of the Promised Land. At that time, these 2 ½ tribes committed to assist their brothers in the invasion of Canaan when the appropriate time came. Seeing that that time had now come, Joshua reminded them of their commitment and told them to prepare themselves also. While their wives, children, servants, and so forth were allowed to stay home, these men would join in the invasion and remain until it ended. The Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manassites all agreed to honor their word, to fight alongside their brethren, and to obey and defend Joshua.

Notice that Joshua did not send a team of spies into the land to determine if an invasion attempt would be realistic or advisable. Instead, he immediately obeyed the command of God and prepared to enter. It was up for debate or discussion. God had already given the Promised Land to the children of Israel as an eternal possession. Their parents had squandered their opportunity to take it, and had paid a high price for their cowardly inaction. Joshua would not repeat the same mistake. He would not make obedience to the clearly revealed will of God the subject of a committee's vote...

CONCLUSION

Many prominent voices describe the United States today as a "post-Christian" nation. They cite the precipitous decline of the Christian Church over the past century and the diminishing influence of Christianity upon the culture and society. While many Americans still identify as Christian, a large percentage of them are Biblically illiterate and fail to understand or even acknowledge Christianity's historic role in shaping our country. Morality today is based more on secular popular opinion than on the written Word of God.

Beloved, I don't know if the United States is past the point of rescue or not. Has God's judgment already been determined for us, is it now unavoidable, and has it already begun? Is there any hope of revival or spiritual awakening left for America? Well, if there is, it will only happen when Christian men and women with the character of Joshua begin to step up and lead the way. We must return to a careful obedience of God's commands. We must fearlessly wade into the cultural battle and stand for Biblical truth. We must be strong and courageous.

Rahab and the Spies

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By faith the prostitute Rahab did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace. - Hebrews 11:31

After Moses' death, Joshua assumed command of the children of Israel. They were and had been camped in the plains of Moab for quite some time, just east of Canaan beyond the Jordan River. The Lord spoke to Joshua and instructed him to tarry there no longer, but to arise and lead the Hebrews into the Promised Land. Upon receiving God's command, Joshua immediately sent orders throughout the camp advising the people to prepare for the upcoming invasion. In 3 days time, Joshua planned to cross the Jordan into Canaan.

This morning, as we resume our study of "The Conquering and Independent Church", we will meet a Gentile prostitute named Rahab. As it turns out, she will prove to be a valuable friend to the sons of Israel. Whatsmore, she will exhibit a bold and unflinching faith in God that was heralded by the writer of Hebrews and is still remembered and talked about by Christians today.

I. SPIES IN JERICHO (Joshua 2:1-7)

Having given notice to people, Joshua's next move was to send a pair of spies from their encampment at Shittim ahead into Canaan with instructions to visit and survey the land, especially the stronghold city of Jericho. So the 2 spies made their way to the walled city, entered inconspicuously through its gates, and walked about its streets making careful observations. When the evening came, they entered into the house of a prostitute named Rahab hoping to rest while remaining undetected. However, the spies' presence had been discovered and their whereabouts were reported to the king of Jericho. He immediately dispatched officials to Rehab's house to locate the intruders.

When the king's men arrived, they asked Rahab to turn the spies over to their custody. Rahab answered that the spies had been there earlier, but stated that they'd already left and she did not know where they'd gone. In truth, she had hidden them on the roof of her house concealed under stalks of flax. The king's officials believed her story and departed. Assuming the Hebrew spies were returning to their camp, the king's men pursued them down the road toward the Jordan River and its crossing points. The city gates were shut behind them for the night as soon as they left Jericho.

It is important to remember that Joshua had already announced his intentions to cross the Jordan into the Promised. These spies were not sent to evaluate whether or not an invasion of Canaan would be possible. Rather, they were sent to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Jericho. Joshua had already determined that this city would be the first point of attack, so he sent scouts to search for any vulnerabilities. Joshua would use this information to develop a battle plan. In the same way, whenever we are about to begin a new project or task, it is always

wise to do some research in advance. Gathering information in advance can help us to form a more effective strategy for getting the job done and increase the likelihood of success.

II. RAHAB DEMONSTRATES FAITH (Joshua 2:8-14)

After the king's officials had left, Rahab went up on the roof of her house to speak with the 2 spies. She told them that the Canaanites and citizens of Jericho had heard reports of their remarkable exploits during the exodus. They were aware of the Red Sea crossing and of the Hebrews' military victories over Amorites. The children of Jacob had developed quite a reputation, causing the people of Canaan to be terrified of them. Rahab was convinced that God had given them the land, and acknowledged that Jehovah - the God of Israel, not the gods of Canaan - was the true Lord over heaven and earth.

Rahab asked the spies to swear that they'd spare her and her family whenever the attack against Jericho commenced. She had shown kindness by hiding them from the king, and she asked for their kindness in exchange. The spies agreed to her request and promised to spare Rahab's family when the time came on the condition that she not tell anyone of their plans.

Rahab was a prostitute. Though considered to be a lowly and degrading occupation, prostitution was legal and common in most ancient societies. There is no indication that either of the spies ever chastised Rahab or condemned her for work. Their silence on the issue doesn't justify it, but it does emphasize that Rahab's faith was more important than her deeds. She forsook the false gods of Canaan and trusted in the true and living God of Israel. She placed her faith in the LORD and aligned herself with the people of God. Thus, she would be saved on the basis of her faith, not on the nature of her works...

III. THE SCARLET CORD (Joshua 2:15-24)

Rahab's house was along the city's outer wall. Therefore, she let a rope down from her window so that the spies could escape. It was night time and the gates of Jericho had already been closed. She advised the pair to hide in the hill country for 3 days before making their way back to camp because the king's men were searching for them along the road. The spies instructed Rahab to tie a scarlet cord in her window to serve as a visible marker for the children of Israel. When they attacked the city, this scarlet cord would designate her house as a safe space. Those inside would be protected while those outside would be killed.

After they finished talking, Rahab sent the spies away and tied the scarlet cord in her window. The duo fled to the hill country and hid for 3 days, just as Rahab had suggested. Unable to find them, the king's men had given up their pursuit and returned to Jericho. The spies departed from the hill country, crossed back over the Jordan River, and returned to Joshua at Shittim. They reported everything that they'd seen and heard, including details of their encounter with and promise to Rahab. They told Joshua that the LORD had indeed given them the land and that the citizens of Jericho and inhabitants of Canaan were in great despair because of them.

The scarlet cord described in this passage is reminiscent of the lamb's blood that was smeared on the doorposts during the night of the Passover. On that occasion, the death angel passed through Egypt killing the firstborn son of every unmarked house while sparing those that were marked by blood. In the same way, this scarlet cord would serve as a sign to protect Rahab and her house from harm. It metaphorically pictured and foreshadowed the blood of Christ, which covers and atones for the sin of mankind. Sinners who have been washed in the blood of Jesus are cleansed and made righteous. They are exempted from God's wrathful judgment.

CONCLUSION

According to the genealogy recorded in Matthew, Rahab was a distant ancestor of Jesus Christ. She would eventually marry a man named Salmon and the couple would have a son (or perhaps grandson - sometimes generations were skipped in Biblical genealogies) named Boaz. We will read much more about Boaz later in this series. Nevertheless, in accordance with God's divine providence, Rahab is remembered as much more than a lowly prostitute. On the contrary, she is considered to be a Biblical hero who turned from the empty idolatry and paganism of her people to saving faith in the LORD. Rahab was the first Gentile to be saved and is regarded by some theologians as a precursor to the New Testament Church.

Rahab was a smart young woman. When she heard about the miraculous wonders that God had performed for His people, she didn't deny or dismiss them. She didn't try to belittle them or explain them away. Instead, she opened her heart, believed in the LORD, and was radically saved. Rahab was converted from death to life. This morning you too have heard of the saving power of God demonstrated through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. How will you respond?

Israel Crosses the Jordan River

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In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon Him; and a voice came from the heavens: "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." - Mark 1:9-11

Hello Beloved. Isn't it good to be in God's house this morning? What a tremendous blessing and privilege it is to gather each week for worship. May the LORD our God be exalted and His Name be praised! Today we will discuss chapters 3 & 4 of Joshua. We will read about Israel's crossing of the Jordan River. But before we begin, let's set the stage by looking back at last week's message.

Before leading the children of Israel into Canaan, Joshua sent 2 spies ahead to the city of Jericho to assess its strengths and weaknesses. While they were there, the pair's presence was discovered and the king gave orders to seize them. A local prostitute named Rahab hid them on the roof of her house so that they wouldn't be found. Though she was a Canaanite, Rahab expressed faith in Jehovah - the God of Israel - and rejected the pagan gods of her people. In exchange for her kindness, the spies promised to spare her family whenever the Israelites attacked Jericho. Rahab tied a scarlet cord on her window as a sign of protection and the spies returned safely to their camp beyond the Jordan...

I. THE WATERS ARE CUT OFF (Joshua 3:1-11, 13-17)

Early the next morning, after the spies had returned, Joshua and the Israelites set out from Shittim and came to the edge of the Jordan River. They spent the night there. Joshua sent word through the camp for the people to consecrate themselves in anticipation of their crossing into the Promised Land. He instructed them to follow the Ark of the Covenant at a distance of about 3,000 feet. The priests would go ahead of the people into the river, carrying the Ark. Joshua commanded the priests to stand in the middle of the Jordan, and stated that the waters of the river would be cut off while the people crossed. This miracle would serve as a declaration of God's presence and power among His children and an assurance of their upcoming victory over the Canaanites.

When the time came to cross, the priests led the way carrying the Ark of the Covenant just as they had been instructed. It was early spring, around the time of the barley harvest, and the Jordan River was full and overflowing its banks. This would only serve to amplify the miraculous power of God Almighty. As soon as the priests' feet touched the water, the flow of the Jordan River was cut off. The waters stood in a heap upriver at the city of Adam, near Zarethan. The priests made their way to the middle of the riverbed and stood there until all of the Hebrew children crossed over on dry ground. This crossing took place just opposite of Jericho.

The manifest presence, power, and glory of God dwelt in and upon the Ark of the Covenant. It was a holy vessel that no one was allowed to touch. It went before the people into the Jordan River, just as it would go before them into battle. When the people followed the Ark, they were following God's direction. As such, the LORD miraculously enabled them to overcome obstacles in their path. In the same way, we as Christians are called to follow Jesus. We must be careful not to get ahead of Him. Rather, we should obey His commands, do His will, and follow His lead. As we do so, our mighty LORD will clear our paths and make a way for us.

II. THE MEMORIAL STONES ARE TAKEN (Joshua 3:12; 4:1-10, 12-13)

The entire nation crossed the Jordan River into Canaan, including some 40,000 warriors from the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh who had pledged to assist their brothers in the coming conquest. After everyone had reached the other side, in keeping with God's command, Joshua sent 12 men back into the river - one from each of the 12 tribes. He instructed each of them to pick up a large stone from the riverbed near the place where the priests were standing. They were to carry these stones on their shoulders to the camp where they'd stop for the night. Once there, these stones would be set up as a memorial for generations to come of the day when God cut off the waters of the Jordan before the Ark of the Covenant and Israel crossed over on dry ground.

According to some interpreters, Joshua also set up a memorial of 12 stones in the middle of the Jordan's riverbed to mark the exact spot where the priests stood. If so, this second memorial would have been covered by the waters once they returned to their normal course. It seems rather strange to me that someone would erect a memorial that no one could see or visit. Nevertheless, ambiguity in the translation of the original Hebrew text leaves this possibility open.

The number of memorials that were set up isn't important, but the purpose of the memorial(s) is. God wanted His people to remember this day. He wanted the future generations of Israel to commemorate this miraculous event in their history. It is essential for the people of God to learn about and remember the past. Scripture urges us to do so again and again. As we reflect on our history we are reminded of God's faithfulness, love, and strength. It should be a source of motivation and encouragement. Furthermore, it warns us about the dangers and missteps of those who've gone before us so that we might not repeat the same mistakes.

III. THE PEOPLE MOVE TO GILGAL (Joshua 4:11, 14-24)

Once all the people finished crossing the river and the memorial stones were taken from its midst, the priests who had been standing in the middle of the Jordan carrying the Ark of the Covenant exited as well. As soon as they stepped out of the river onto the opposite side, the waters of the Jordan were released and flowed normally again, spilling over the banks as they had before. The priests resumed their position in front of the procession and led them a short distance away from the river.

Joshua and the children of Israel stopped and set up camp at Gilgal, just east of Jericho. It was the 10th day of Nissan, the first month of the Hebrew year (which roughly equates to April on our modern calendars). Joshua took the 12 stones that had been taken from the Jordan and set them up as a memorial of the day's events. He dedicated the monument and compared the crossing of the Jordan River to the crossing of the Red Sea some 40 years earlier. Both occurrences declared the mighty power of God Almighty and beckoned the people to know and fear Him. On that day, the LORD exalted Joshua and the children of God began to revere him just as they had revered Moses.

CONCLUSION

Many theologians view the imagery of crossing the Jordan River as a picture of the physical death of a believer. As Christians, we are citizens of the kingdom of God. This world is not our home. The Bible refers to us as strangers and pilgrims living in a foreign land. Whenever we die, however, we will metaphorically pass over the Jordan into our Promised Land, the heavenly inheritance that God has reserved for His children. There we will spend eternity with our Savior and King, Jesus Christ.

In closing, Israel's crossing of the Jordan River was and is a hallmark event in Jewish history. It marked the end of the exodus and the beginning of the conquest. It was the start of a new chapter in Israel's remarkable story. As we reflect on this miracle today, we are reminded that God can see His people through any obstacle or circumstance. He is able. Praise Him! May His glorious Name be magnified in all the earth!

Camped at Gilgal

Originally Preached on 5/22/2022

But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; - Romans 2:29a

Hello again! This morning's message is the 4th sermon of our current series called "The Conquering and Independent Church". Today we will be in Joshua chapter 5. I have titled this message "Camped at Gilgal". When we stopped last Sunday the Israelites had just crossed the Jordan River into Canaan. They had set up camp just a few miles from Jericho and erected the memorial stones they'd taken from the river bed. Let's see what happened next...

I. THE ENEMIES' REACTION (Joshua 5:1)

When the Amorites who dwelt west of the Jordan River and the Canaanites who lived east of the Mediterranean Sea heard how God had cut off its waters and allowed Israel to pass over it on dry ground, they were terrified. Their courage to stand against the children of God completely melted away. They recognized that the LORD of Israel was mightier than their pagan gods.

The conquest and settlement of the Promised Land accomplished 2 purposes. First, God gave this land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as an eternal possession where they could live as a distinct people group. From there, they would serve as God's representative people on the earth and make His name known to all the nations. Second, God took this land from the Canaanites as punishment for their centuries of idolatry and wickedness. God used Israel as the instrument of His judgment.

II. ISRAEL IS CIRCUMCISED (Joshua 5:2-9)

While at Gilgal, the day after they had crossed the Jordan, the LORD instructed Joshua to have all of the sons of Israel circumcised. Therefore, Joshua made several flint knives and went about circumcising all of the men. Based upon the numbers, it seems only logical that Joshua enlisted helpers to accomplish this major task. He referred to the place Gibeath-Haaraloth, which means "The Hill of Foreskins". This undertaking was necessary because the practice of circumcision had been neglected during the 40 years of wilderness wanderings. Thus, this new generation of Israelites who had been born during the exodus were all uncircumcised.

After the circumcisions were complete, the Israelites remained at their camp for a few days to recover. The LORD spoke to Joshua saying, "Today I have rolled the shame of Egypt away from you." Now circumcised, the children of Israel were set apart from the Egyptians once and for all. In recognition of this, Joshua officially named the site Gilgal which means "rolling" or "rolling away".

Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 17:10-14). It was a physical mark that identified the children of Israel as God's covenantal people. Beginning with Abraham

and his sons, all Hebrew boys were to be circumcised when they were 8 days old. In addition, any male slaves that were acquired by the Israelites were to be circumcised as well. According to the law of Moses, only those who were circumcised could participate in the Passover celebration (Exodus 12:48-49).

III. ISRAEL CELEBRATES PASSOVER (Joshua 5:10-12)

The Israelites crossed the Jordan River on the 10th day of Nissan, the first month of the year. The males were circumcised the next day on the 11th and then took a few more days to recuperate. Then, on the evening of the 14th day of Nissan, while still camped at Gilgal on the desert plains near Jericho, they observed the Passover (Exodus 12:18). Their circumcision had been a prerequisite for participating in the Passover celebration. This was likely the first Passover to be held by the Hebrews since their encampment at Mt. Sinai 40 years earlier.

On the day following the Passover, when the Feast of Unleavened Bread began, the children of Jacob ate produce from the land. They prepared unleavened cakes and roasted bread. I am sure this was a welcomed and long anticipated occasion. The manna that had sustained them throughout 4 decades of sojourning in the desert ceased and Israel began feeding themselves with the yield of the land. This cessation speaks to the bountiful fruitfulness of Canaan in contrast to the dry barrenness of the surrounding wilderness.

Earlier in this series we spoke about the meaning and significance of the Passover while discussing Rahab the prostitute and the scarlet cord that she hung from her window. This morning I want us to consider the timing of this particular Passover celebration. God commanded Israel to observe the Passover immediately prior to launching their invasion. It was held on the eve of battle. This was yet another example of how God taught His people to put Him first. The battle belongs to the LORD (Proverbs 21:31). If we are to be victorious in this life, the LORD must have priority over all else.

IV. JOSHUA'S ENCOUNTER (Joshua 5:13-15)

Later on, when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing opposite of him with a sword drawn. Joshua approached the man and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" The man answered that he had come as the captain of the army of the LORD. Hearing this, Joshua fell on his face in reverence before the man. The captain of the LORD's army told Joshua to remove his sandals, for he was standing on holy ground. Joshua obeyed.

Theologians are split regarding the identity of this man who met with Joshua. Some believe that he was an angel sent by God while others believe that he was God himself in human form - a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. There are various arguments supporting both views. I tend to think it was Jesus. Either way, whether in person or through His messenger, God conversed with Joshua and laid out His battle plan for attacking Jericho. We will read more about this plan next week.

Joshua was an experienced and highly successful military leader. Just a few days earlier he had sent scouts into Jericho to do reconnaissance. Based on their reports, I am reasonably certain that he had already developed or at least was in the process of developing a strategy for the upcoming siege. It is hard to believe that a person of his character wasn't thinking about it. Furthermore, I trust that he'd devised a good plan. Nevertheless, when the LORD appeared everything suddenly changed. Joshua's plan took the back seat and God's plan took precedent. Sometimes in life the LORD intervenes and alters our plans. Has that ever happened to you? In these moments, it is best to follow His lead.

CONCLUSION

In the last few chapters, we've seen a repeated theme. Take a moment to consider and reflect on these 3 things:

The Ark of the Covenant went before the people into the Jordan River.
The people were circumcised and celebrated the Passover before beginning the conquest.
Joshua received and would prioritize God's battle plans over his own.

So what is the message? Put God first. Allow Him to lead. Revere Him above all others. Never go into battle without first seeking His face. Make His plan the priority for your life. I am not saying that your way is bad, but His is always better. Trust me, I've learned this from personal experience. I urge you, make Jesus the Lord and King of your life.

Next week, the combat begins. We will be talking about the epic battle of Jericho. I am so excited! I have always been a fan of war stories. Until then, may we remember to put the Lord first in everything.

The Battle of Jericho

Originally Preached on 5/29/2022

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich. Zaccheus was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable due to the crowd, because he was short in stature. - Luke 19:1-3

Jericho is believed by many to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Located in the Jordan River Valley, it sits at 800 feet below sea level making it the lowest city in the world. Jericho is lush with palm trees, fed by several natural springs, and is an oasis in the surrounding region. The modern city of Jericho has a population of about 14,000 people, but in Joshua's time it is estimated that around 2,500-3,000 people lived there. It was one of the first cities in history to build a wall around itself for defense.

Jericho appears many times in the Bible, throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Many significant events took place there. Of all of them, perhaps the most well known is the Battle of Jericho. If you grew up in church, you've probably heard this story many times going back to your childhood days in Sunday School. But don't be fooled - this isn't just a tale for kids. The amazing story of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho provides several powerful truths and insights for Christians of all ages.

I. THE BATTLE PLAN (Joshua 6:1-5)

The citizens of Jericho were aware that the Israelites were camped close by, so they closed the city gates and took security measures in preparation for the coming assault. The Lord spoke to Joshua and assured him of victory over Jericho. The Lord gave Joshua a peculiar battle plan. All the men of war, along with priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant and 7 trumpets of ram's horns, were to march around the city once each day for 6 successive days. Then, on the seventh day, they were to march around Jericho 7 times as the priests blew the trumpets. When they completed their final lap around the city, the priests were to sound a long trumpet blast and the people were to shout. At this point, the Lord declared that the walls of Jericho would fall down flat allowing the army of Israel to invade the city.

The opening verses of chapter 6 are considered to be a continuation of the episode that began near the end of chapter 5. As you may recall from last Sunday's message, the Captain of the Army of LORD appeared to Joshua and spoke to him. Joshua took off his sandals and bowed down before the heavenly warrior. Now this same person, thought to be either an angel or perhaps a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ, laid out instructions for Joshua and his army to follow. By obeying these commands, Israel's victory was certain.

II. DAYS 1 THROUGH 6 (Joshua 6:6-14)

After receiving the LORD's commands, Joshua summoned the people and priests together. He carefully relayed all of God's instructions to them. They formed a procession with armed men

leading the way in the front, followed by the 7 priests blowing the 7 trumpets, followed by those carrying the Ark of the Covenant, and finally another armed guard following in the rear. The people were told to be absolutely quiet as they marched around the city so that the only sound would be that of the blaring trumpets. In this manner, the people approached the city of Jericho and marched around it once each day for 6 consecutive days. After circling the city each day, they would return to their camp at Gilgal to spend the night.

This tactic must have seemed odd and perhaps even foolish to the defenders of Jericho. They were expecting Israel to lay siege upon the city - to surround it and seek to overrun its defenses. Yet, for 6 days in a row the Israelites came, marched peacefully around the city's outer wall, and quietly returned to camp. As the people of Jericho watched from atop their mighty wall, surely some thought to themselves, "What are they doing? Is this some type of psychological warfare? Do they really think this will work?" The Bible teaches that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:25, 2:14). They don't, nor can they, understand it. This story serves as a tangible example of this principle.

III. DAY 7 (Joshua 6:15-21)

On the 7th day, the children of Israel arrived at Jericho early in the morning and proceeded to march around the city 7 times. When they completed their final lap, Joshua commanded them to shout. He said that the LORD had given them the city, but warned them not to take any of its spoils. The entire city, all of its possessions, and all of its people were designated by God for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and those in her house were to be spared, as promised by the spies she'd hidden there a few weeks earlier. All gold, silver, and other precious articles would be placed in the treasury of the LORD.

And so, in obedience to these instructions, the Israelites shouted and the walls of Jericho miraculously collapsed. God caused the walls to crumble and fall, except for the limited area around Rahab's house (she lived in the wall). Immediately the Hebrew army rushed into the city and killed all of its inhabitants - men, women, young, old, donkey, ox, sheep, and every living thing. Apart from Rahab and those sheltered with her, it was a complete and total destruction. This was the beginning of God's judgment upon Canaan.

Some nonbelievers see the slaughter of Jericho's citizens as an indication of God's cruelty and ruthlessness. They perceive this event and others like it as reasons to despise God and to keep themselves far from Him. They fail to recognize that, like Rahab, salvation was available to all the people of Jericho. Had they submitted themselves to God, the story would likely be a lot different - like in the case of Nineveh during the days of Jonah. But they did not repent, and thus the LORD's justice was poured out upon them.

IV. AFTER THE BATTLE (Joshua 6:22-27)

After the onslaught was complete the spies went to Rahab's house and escorted her and her family to safety outside of the city. Then the Israelites went through the houses, buildings, and

so forth to collect all of the gold, silver, and other precious articles that were there. Once these were removed to be placed in the LORD's treasury, they set Jericho afire and burned it to the ground. Joshua made the people take an oath saying, "Cursed is the man who rebuilds Jericho. Whoever raises this city up again will suffer the loss of both his oldest and youngest son." With this, the battle and subsequent destruction of Jericho was finished.

Rahab and her descendants continued to live among the Israelites, even after the conquest of Canaan was complete. In the centuries that followed, the once formidable Jericho remained an uninhabited, ruinous heap of rubble. It served as a chilling reminder to both Israel and her enemies of God's incredible strength and power. Over 500 years later, during the reign of King Ahab, a man named Hiel decided to rebuild the city of Jericho. During the construction, Hiel's firstborn son and youngest son died just as the LORD's curse had declared (1 Kings 16:34).

CONCLUSION

As is the case with many other Biblical stories, modern excavations at the site of ancient Jericho support the truthfulness of this account. It is not a made-up myth or legend. Archaeologists have discovered in the layers of the city's ruins that there was in fact a wall around Jericho during this time period. It appears to have been made of mud and stone and it rested upon a smaller retaining wall at ground level. The findings indicate that this wall collapsed outward, forming a sloping siege ramp upon which the Hebrews could invade. Though the Bible was not written primarily to be a history book, the events described in it did actually happen.

One final observation... The Battle of Jericho vividly demonstrates the relationship between faith and works. Scripture teaches us that faith without works is dead (James 2:14-16). When God tells us what to do, we are to do it - even when it may seem odd or unconventional. Faith is belief in action. Belief alone is not enough, nor are works alone. Faith combines both of these, thereby proving our beliefs by and through our deeds. God caused the walls of Jericho to tumble because of Israel's faithful obedience to His commands (Hebrews 11:30). May we exhibit this same level of saving faith in our lives today.

Ai and Achan

Originally Preached on 6/5/2022

For nothing is concealed that will not become evident, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light. - Luke 8:17

Good morning. In today's message, we are going to cover 2 chapters - Joshua 7 & 8. Both of these cover the battle of Ai, which was the second city to be attacked in Israel's conquest of the Promised Land. Due to the length of these chapters and our limited time together, I am going to summarize some of the events that took place. I encourage you to read these chapters in their entirety for yourselves.

I. DEFEAT AT AI (Joshua 7:1-15)

Having soundly destroyed Jericho, Joshua set his sights on the small city of Ai about 10 miles to the northwest. Joshua sent a few scouts ahead to spy out the area. After making their observations, these scouts returned feeling confident that Ai would be a relatively easy target. They suggested that Joshua send only a smaller detachment of troops, rather than the entire Israelite army, to take the city. Following their advice, Joshua deployed around 3,000 men to Ai. However, much to their surprise, when these warriors attacked the city they were driven back by the men of Ai. During the battle and their subsequent retreat 36 Israelites were killed.

Joshua's failure to capture Ai was humiliating and demoralizing. Joshua was not accustomed to losing a battle. He tore his clothes, put ashes on his head, and fell on his face before the Ark of the Covenant in sorrow and disgust. Joshua cried out to God, questioning why the LORD would instruct him to invade Canaan only to suffer defeat. God told Joshua to stand up and pull himself together. The LORD explained that someone in the camp had sinned by taking of the spoils of Jericho in direct violation of His command. God warned Joshua that Israel would be unable to stand before her enemies until this sin was dealt with.

As a result of this person's sin, 3 dozen soldiers died. These children would now grow up without their father, these wives would be forced to move on without their husbands, and these families would suffer the life-long consequences of losing someone in war. This story vividly demonstrates the pervasive nature of sin. The devastating consequences of sin are not limited to only the sinner themselves. Our sins affect others, and their sins affect us. We would be wise to consider this when making life's decisions.

II. ACHAN'S SIN (Joshua 7:16-26)

So, in keeping with the LORD's instructions, Joshua set out to rid the sin from the camp. Early the next morning, Joshua brought the people of Israel before him by tribe. Judah was selected, and so he brought them before him by family. The Zerahites were selected, so he brought them forward by man. Zabdi was selected, so Joshua brought the members of his household forward individually. Achan was chosen and charged with his sin. Having been identified as the culprit,

Achan admitted to taking a robe, some silver, and a gold bar from Jericho and hiding them in his tent. Joshua sent messengers to search for and retrieve these items.

When these men returned, Joshua and the whole assembly of Israel took Achan, the stolen items, Achan's children, his animals, his tent, and all of his possessions to the Valley of Achor, which translates to the Valley of Trouble. When they arrived, Joshua pronounced God's judgment against Achan and his household. Then the people of Israel stoned them, burned their bodies, and erected a large heap of stones over them which stood until the writing of Joshua and after. Once their sin had been purged from Israel, God's fierce anger subsided.

Again we see how Achan's sin impacted others and brought tragedy upon his entire family. Furthermore, we are reminded that sin never remains secret forever. Your sin will be found out eventually. Even if no one else knows about it, God is fully aware of your sin. Trying to conceal or cover it up is never a good idea. Finally, while admitting guilt is necessary to satisfy God's ongoing wrath, it does not absolve someone of sin's earthly consequences.

III. VICTORY AT AI (Joshua 8:1-29)

After Achan's sin was dealt with, God told Joshua to make a second assault against Ai. Joshua sent a large troop of about 30,000 soldiers by night to hide just west of the city. Joshua then led another group to attack the city from the north, as they had on the previous occasion. When the men of Ai saw the Israelites approaching across the plains, they rushed out to meet them as they had done before. Joshua and his band of forces pretended to retreat thereby luring the pursuing men of Ai away from the city. With the city exposed and unguarded, the Israelite soldiers who were hiding in ambush rose up, captured Ai, and set it on fire. When Joshua saw the smoke ascending, he and his soldiers turned to fight the men of Ai. Those who had ambushed the city also came out and attacked them from the other side, trapping the soldiers of Ai in the middle. Israel completely annihilated them leaving no survivors.

When the battle ended, Joshua and the Israelites killed all of the remaining inhabitants of Ai. In total, some 12,000 people died. They also burned the city just as they had done to Jericho. However, this time they were allowed to keep the cattle and spoils of the battle as plunder for themselves. Joshua hanged the King of Ai (who had been taken captive) on a tree until evening, took his body down and laid it at the city's gate, and erected a large heap of stones over it. With this, the destruction of Ai was complete.

Though the reason for Israel's initial failure was Achan's sin, it is still noteworthy that Joshua learned from his previous experience. He used the information he had gathered from the first battle to form an improved strategy. Knowing that the men of Ai would pursue the retreating Israelites as they'd done before, Joshua used their tactics as a ploy to ambush the city. I am not suggesting that Joshua would have won the second battle against Ai without first dealing with Achan's sins, but rather pointing out a secondary point - we should learn from our mistakes.

IV. BLESSINGS AND CURSES (Joshua 8:30-35)

Following their victory at Ai, the people of Israel paused briefly from their military conquest to observe a special ceremony that Moses had commanded before his death (Deuteronomy 11:26-20, 27:1-28:68). They traveled a few miles north to the twin peaks of Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. Joshua built an altar on Mt. Ebal and offered several sacrifices there. He then separated the people so that half of them stood at the base of each mountain, opposite of and facing toward each other. Joshua, the elders, officers, and priests, and the Ark of the Covenant remained in the valley between. There Joshua read the entire Law of Moses, including its blessings and the curses, as all of the people listened carefully.

It is no coincidence that this solemn ceremony came on the heels of Israel's encounter with Ai. Their first attempt to take the city had failed because of unconfessed sin which brought God's curse upon the people. However, their second attempt was successful because their removal of this sin invoked God's blessing. Thus, the battle of Ai serves as a fitting backdrop for the observance of blessings and curses that took place at Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim.

CONCLUSION

The stories of Ai and Achan teach us several important lessons. Let's review a few that we pointed out this morning.

First, the effects of sin are numerous and far-reaching. They not only impact the sinner themselves, but also impact others. Second, while repentance is necessary to satisfy God's wrath and free us from the eternal consequences of sin, it doesn't always absolve us from the sin's earthly consequences. Third, sin cannot be hidden forever - it will be exposed and we will answer for it. Fourth, we as God's people are responsible for dealing with known sin in our midst. If left untouched, it will render us ineffective.

Do you have unconfessed sin in your life today? Turn to Jesus for forgiveness and pardon. He paid the debt of sin so that you wouldn't have to. God frees us from the curse of sin and gives us the blessing of eternal life through the atoning work of His Son, Jesus Christ. Receive Him as your Lord and Savior today.

Deceived By the Gibeonites

Originally Preached on 6/12/2022

If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath to put himself under a binding obligation, he shall not break his word; he shall act in accordance with everything that comes out of his mouth.
- Numbers 30:2

Earlier this year we began a new sermon series titled "The Conquering and Independent Church". We are studying the period of Israel's history following the exodus, starting with their invasion of Canaan. Today's message is the 7th sermon of this exciting series. It is called "Deceived By the Gibeonites" and focuses on Joshua chapter 9.

Let's quickly look back over the events of our series so far. Following Moses' death Joshua assumed command over the children of Israel in Moab. He sent spies ahead into Jericho, who were hidden and protected by Rahab the prostitute. When these spies returned, the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Soon afterwards, they attacked and conquered the city of Jericho because God miraculously caused its walls to collapse. Next, after failing on their first attempt, they successfully defeated Ai. Then they conducted a ceremony of blessings and curses on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. By this point, the conquest of Canaan was in full swing...

I. A FLAWED TREATY (Joshua 9:1-15)

As reports spread about Joshua's military incursion into Canaan, many of the country's kings began aligning themselves together in order to defend their cities against Israel. While these alliances were being formed among most of the Canaanites, the people of Gibeon took a completely different approach. Rather than fighting against Joshua (which would have almost certainly led to their defeat), they devised a crafty plan to avoid conflict.

The Gibeonites gathered provisions for a journey, including worn-out sacks for their donkeys, old wineskins that had been split open and patched, worn-out clothing and sandals to wear, and old, dry, crumbling bread to eat. They made their way to Gilgal, where Joshua and their Israelites were camped. They deceptively presented themselves to Joshua as foreigners from a distant land who had heard about the mighty deeds of the God of Israel and His people and had come to make peace. They humbly submitted themselves to Joshua as servants.

The Israelites were unsure if these people were telling them the truth, questioned where they had come from, and remained hesitant to make a treaty with them. Then these Gibeonites showed them their old, crumbled bread and told them it had dried out during the long journey. They further claimed that their wineskins had broken and their sandals and clothes had worn out along the way. The men of Israel looked at their tattered provisions and believed their story, so Joshua made a covenant with them and swore by the name of the LORD to let them live. In all of this, the Israelites did not seek God's counsel.

Though they did not yet realize it, Joshua and the people of Israel had been tricked into entering a peace treaty with their enemies. They fell for the Gibeonites' lie because they did not seek the LORD's counsel. Instead, they made a misguided covenant following their own initiative and understanding. The Bible teaches us that Satan is "the father of lies" (John 8:44). He uses deceit as his primary weapon against mankind. If we fail to pray and seek God's wisdom, we will surely stumble and fall for his tricks.

II. A PROMISE KEPT (Joshua 9:16-21a)

After they had departed, some 3 days later, Joshua received word that these "foreigners" were in fact inhabitants of Canaan. He was disturbed by these reports and wanted to confirm their truthfulness. Therefore the Israelites set out from Gilgal and came to Gibeon and its surrounding region. When they arrived, they discovered that the Gibeonites were not travelers from a far away land as they had claimed. On the contrary, they were local citizens.

Joshua and the leaders of Israel had been fooled. They had made a terrible and humiliating mistake. Nevertheless, they were now bound by their oath and did not attack the Gibeonites. The people of Israel grumbled against them, but there was nothing they could do. The leaders explained to the congregation that they had sworn by the LORD to let these Gibeonites live and were obligated to keep their promise.

The Bible teaches us not to swear by the name of the LORD except on the most solemn of occasions (Matthew 5:34; James 5:12). When we swear by His name, we connect Him to our promise or commitment - whatever it is. If then we fail to keep the oath, we simultaneously break our word to God. This, in turn, invites His judgment upon us. These Israelites had just experienced God's anger at Ai and were not about to provoke Him again. Thus, as Jesus taught, we should not swear at all, but simply let our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no".

III. A SUBJUGATED PEOPLE (Joshua 9:21b-27)

Joshua summoned the Gibeonites together and asked them why they had lied about their true identity. They explained that they had heard of the LORD's might and Israel's mission to subdue and occupy the Promised Land. They were afraid of having their city destroyed and being killed themselves. They begged Joshua to do right by them. And so, in keeping with the treaty he'd made, Joshua allowed the Gibeonites to live as servants of Israel. They were used as laborers to gather firewood and draw water for both the congregation and the altar of the LORD.

There are some obvious parallels between the stories of Rahab and the Gibeonites. Both had heard about the amazing feats of Israel and acknowledged that Jehovah God was greater than their pagan gods. Both were confident that God had given the land to Israel and that the Canaanites would soon be defeated. As such, both were allowed to live. However, because Rahab acted with honesty and integrity she and her family remained free. On the other hand, because the Gibeonites were dishonest and lied to Joshua and the Israelites, they became slaves. Both professed a degree of faith, but their actions resulted in very different outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Centuries later the Gibeonites were still living among the people of Israel (2 Samuel 21:1-2). King Saul and those of his “bloody household” zealously sought to exterminate them once and for all. While they successfully killed many of the Gibeonites, a remnant of them survived. Later, when David became king, a severe famine struck the land that persisted for 3 years. The LORD told David that this judgment had come upon Israel because Saul and his sons had slain many of the Gibeonites. In other words, Israel's oath not to kill them was still in effect and the nation was suffering the consequences of breaking it. King David took steps to make amends with the remaining Gibeonites. This episode illustrates the seriousness and longevity of vows made in God's name.

In today's message, we have highlighted 3 critical truths. First, we should always seek God's counsel in our decision making in order to uncover deception and avoid missteps. Second, we should be very careful about swearing in the LORD's name and should never do so flippantly or thoughtlessly. If we do make such a promise, we should keep it. Third, professions of faith should be accompanied by sincere and honest behavior.

Next week we will continue our discussion of Israel and their newly formed treaty with the Gibeonites.

Defending the Gibeonites

Originally Preached on 6/19/2022

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place; What is man that You think of him, and a son of man that You are concerned about him? - Psalm 8:3-4

Hello again. I trust you all had a great week. This morning's sermon is titled "Defending the Gibeonites". It is an offshoot of the story we read last Sunday. In case you have forgotten, let's go over what we learned then...

An envoy from the nearby city of Gibeon came to Joshua's headquarters at Gilgal posing as foreigners from a distant land. Without consulting God, Joshua and the leaders of Israel entered into a peace treaty with them, vowing not to kill them in exchange for their servanthood. A few days later, after hearing that these "foreigners" were in fact Canaanites, Joshua led his people to Gibeon to find out the truth. Upon arrival, Israel discovered that they had been tricked into making a peace treaty with their enemies. Nevertheless, because they had sworn the oath on God's Name they were obligated to honor it.

With this in mind, let's now move into chapter 10. Joshua and the Israelites have returned to their camp at Gilgal. The Gibeonites are no longer fearful of being attacked, because they have made a binding peace agreement with Israel...

I. 5 KINGS ATTACK GIBEON (Joshua 10:1-5)

Reports of Israel's conquest continued to spread throughout Canaan. When the king of Jerusalem, Adoni-zedek, heard how Joshua had defeated Jericho and Ai and made peace with Gibeon he became very fearful. Gibeon was a great city, like a royal city, and its alliance with Israel infuriated the king. How could the mighty Gibeonites betray their own countrymen by submitting themselves to Joshua? Adoni-zedek sent messengers to Hoham king of Hebron, Piram king of Jarmuth, Japhia king of Lachish, and Debir king of Eglon asking them to join him in a coalition to attack the traitorous city of Gibeon. So all 5 of these Amorite kings and their armies gathered together and laid siege upon the Gibeonites.

The city of Gibeon was less than 10 miles to the northwest of Jerusalem. Its surrender to the Israelites was cause for great alarm. Joshua and his forces were making steady progress in their military advance through central Canaan. Despite this grave threat, the alliance of Amorite kings seemed more intent on destroying the Gibeonites than on preparing to face Israel. Their behavior exemplifies the bitter and blinding nature of betrayal, even among non-believers.

Another interesting note... the king of Jerusalem, Adoni-zedek, shared a similar name as the former king of Salem, Melchizedek (Genesis 14:8). Salem eventually became known as Jerusalem - both refer to the same city (Psalm 76:2). Adoni-zedek means "lord of righteousness" while Melchizedek means "king of righteousness".

II. ISRAEL DEFENDS GIBEON (Joshua 10:6-14)

The Gibeonites had come under attack and sent word to Joshua desperately calling for help. According to the terms of their treaty, Israel was obligated to defend the Gibeonites. So Joshua and his army marched all night long from Gilgal to Gibeon, a distance of about 20 miles. Along the way God assured Joshua that these 5 kings would not stand before him. Israel arrived in the early morning hours and immediately joined the battle. The LORD brought confusion upon the Canaanite coalition and they were soundly defeated at Gibeon.

These 5 allied armies began to retreat toward the Valley of Aijalon as Israel relentlessly pursued. Along the way, God rained down large hailstones from heaven upon them so that more died from the hailstones than from Israel's sword. Joshua asked God to make the sun and moon stand still in the sky so that his army would have more time to destroy their fleeing enemies and prevent them from escaping. God answered by miraculously causing the sun and moon to stop "for about a whole day". This additional daylight allowed Israel to strike down many more Amorites than otherwise possible and chase them as far south as Azekah and Makkedah.

The account of Israel's victory over the 5 Amorite kings and the sun and moon standing still in the sky was also recorded in the extra-biblical Book of Jashar. Though there are a few modern books with this title, the original text referred to here has been lost. There are also several accounts of a "long day" in the histories of other ancient cultures that may or may not point to this same event. The Canaanites worshiped the sun and moon, but God demonstrated His power over them by temporarily stopping the earth's rotation.

III. VICTORY AT MAKKEDAH (Joshua 10:16-28)

During their retreat, the 5 Amorite kings sought refuge in a cave near Makkedah. The Israelite army found them hiding inside and asked Joshua what to do. Joshua instructed them to roll stones in front of the cave's opening and set a guard there so that they could not escape. After capturing the kings, Israel continued its pursuit. Ultimately, some of the fleeing Canaanites escaped to their fortified cities and survived, but a great number of them were killed. When the chase finally ended, the Israelites returned to Joshua who'd apparently remained at Makkedah.

Joshua ordered that the 5 kings be brought out of the cave to stand before him. He then had all the leaders of Israel's army come forth one by one and put their feet on the necks of these defeated pagan kings as a means of humiliating them. Joshua told his men to be strong and courageous because God was with them. Afterwards, he killed the kings and hung their bodies on 5 trees until evening. At sunset, he ordered their corpses to be taken down and thrown into the very cave where they'd previously hidden. Stones were then rolled over the mouth of the cave where the king's bodies were left.

Joshua then set his sights on the city of Makkedah and struck it down as well. He destroyed all of the city's inhabitants and executed its king also. He left no survivor. Including Makkedah, 6

Canaanite kings were slain in all during this campaign and their armies were largely decimated. Israel had won a great victory.

CONCLUSION

From this point forward, the particular details of individual battles that occurred during the Conquest of Canaan are rather limited. For the most part, the upcoming verses and chapters provide an extensive list that contains all of Joshua's remaining victories and exploits. We will study these next week. So let me close with this...

Though the stories themselves are very different, I can't help thinking of another famous cave in scripture. It was the tomb where Jesus' body was taken after His crucifixion. A stone was rolled in front of it and a guard was posted there also. In sharp contrast, these 5 Amorite kings went into their cave alive but were brought out to their deaths while Jesus was laid dead in His tomb and came out alive!

In today's passage, we saw that God has power of nature and creation. He temporarily made the sun and moon stand still. But let us also remember that He has power over sin and death. Jesus rose from the dead as the firstfruits of all who have or will trust in Him for their salvation. In Christ we have the assurance of resurrection and eternal life. Will you accept Him today?

The Remaining Conquest

Originally Preached on 6/26/2022

He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation. - Acts 17:26

Good morning. I want to warn you at the outset that today's message might be a bit dry. We will be covering 2 ½ chapters that basically list the remaining battles of the conquest. While the Bible contains engaging stories and vivid details about the earlier battles at Jericho, Ai, and Gibeon, little if anything is said about the many other conflicts that followed. Nevertheless, I believe that every word of Scripture is important and has purpose. Therefore, we are going to spend some time examining this text and trust that God will somehow speak to us through it.

I. THE SOUTHERN CAMPAIGN (Joshua 10:29-42; 11:21-23; 12:9-16)

After capturing the city of Makkedah, Joshua and the men of Israel launched their military campaign against southern Canaan. They attacked, defeated, and destroyed the city of Libnah killing its king and all of its inhabitants. Next, they came to Lachish, whose army had previously been decimated during the battle at Gibeon. In an effort to save the city, the king of Gezer came up to help Lachish. Despite his assistance, Joshua struck Lachish and all of its citizens leaving no survivor, including the king of Gezer and his army. Israel then did likewise to Eglon followed by Hebron, who'd both also been severely weakened by their losses during the battle of Gibeon. While in the region, Joshua also attacked, defeated, and destroyed the cities of Geder and Adullam and killed their kings.

Israel advanced southward out of the hill country and into the Negev desert. Along the way they defeated Debir, Hormah, and Arad. Joshua continued as far south as Kadesh-barnea, then traveled west across the region of Goshen to Gaza on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, and finally back north to Gibeon. As he went Joshua captured numerous kings and their lands one by one. In each instance he utterly destroyed all who breathed, just as God had commanded. The LORD fought for Israel. After completing their march through central and southern Canaan, the men of Israel returned to their main camp at Gilgal.

During their conquest of southern Canaan, the Israelites killed the Anakim who lived in Hebron, Debir, and Anab. Only a remnant of the Anakim remained in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod, which would eventually become the principal cities of Philistia. The Anakim were the descendants of Anak. They were a formidable race of giant, warlike people. The most famous of the Anakim was Goliath, the mighty Philistine warrior who fought against David.

II. THE NORTHERN CAMPAIGN (Joshua 11:1-15; 12:17-24)

After an unspecified period of time, presumably to rest and recover, Joshua and his army launched their northern campaign. They journeyed northward from Gilgal through central Canaan and likely attacked, defeated, and destroyed the cities of Tappuah and Tirzah along the

way. By the time they reached the Sea of Chinneroth, which would later be known as the Sea of Galilee, a great alliance of northern cities was being formed.

Jabin, the king of Hazor, knew that Israel was pressing northward. He sent word to the kings of Madon, Shimron, and Achshaph, as well as to many other kings in the northern hill country and region of Mizpeh, to those in the land of Arabah just south of the Sea of Chinneroth, and to those in the west toward the heights of Dor on the Mediterranean coast. All of these kings and their armies joined together as one, possibly including the cities of Kadesh, Goiim, Lasharon, Aphek, and Dor (among others). They were as numerous as the sand on the seashore, equipped with many horses and chariots. This mighty coalition camped at the waters of Merom, which was near Lake Huleh in the extreme northern reaches of Canaan.

Though the enemy had assembled an enormous fighting force, the LORD told Joshua not to be afraid. So Israel fearlessly attacked them at the waters of Merom, defeated them, and pursued those who retreated in various directions until all were struck down. No survivors were left. After the battle ended, Joshua hamstringed their horses and burned their chariots as God had instructed.

Israel then proceeded to Hazor, the leading city of the northern alliance. They killed all of the people there and burned it with fire. Then, Joshua systematically went to all of the other cities which had been part of the alliance and struck their inhabitants also. However, he did not burn these other cities. Rather, the Israelites plundered them and took their cattle and spoils.

Also during their northern campaign, Joshua's army defeated the king and army of Jokneam somewhere near Mt. Carmel. They also attacked and defeated the cities of Meggido, Taanach, and Hephher. Once they had completed their offensive, the men of Israel returned to their camp at Gilgal and the conquest of Canaan was complete.

III. A SUMMARY OF THE CONQUEST (Joshua 11:16-20; 12:1-8)

In the end, Joshua took all of the Promised Land including the northern and southern hill country, the Negev, the regions of Goshen and Arabah, and much, much more. The extent of Israel's victory stretched from Mt. Hermon and the Valley of Lebanon in the north to Mt. Halak and the land of Seir in the south. The conquest lasted almost 7 years. During this time, the only city that made peace with Israel was Gibeon - all the others were destroyed mercilessly. This was God's punishment on Canaan for its idolatry and sin.

Prior to crossing into Canaan, while Moses was still alive, the army of Israel had defeated Sihon, king of the Ammorites, and Og, king of Bashan. The Israelites had taken territorial control over Ammon, Bashan, and Gilead just east of the Jordan River. Moses gave these lands as an inheritance to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Mannassah. These 2 kings (who ruled "beyond the Jordan") may be included with the 31 kings who were defeated within the land of Canaan to form a complete list of those conquered by Israel during the conquest.

The Division of Canaan

Originally Preached on 7/4/2022

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings. - James 1:1

Good morning. Last Sunday we covered 2 ½ chapters in a single message as we summarized all of the remaining battles of the conquest. Israel's invasion of and war against Canaan lasted for almost 7 years. In the end, some 31 kings were defeated by Joshua and the Israelites were victorious.

This week we are going to make an even larger leap... Today's sermon will cover 7 chapters! We will do a quick overview of chapters 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, & 19. These chapters describe the division of Canaan among the 12 tribes after the conquest ended. These chapters include lengthy and detailed descriptions of tribal boundaries, cities, and so forth. We will not dive deeply into these issues. Nevertheless, it is important for us to have a basic understanding of how the Promised Land was apportioned.

I. THE TRANS-JORDAN TRIBES & LEVI (Joshua 13)

Under Joshua's leadership, the united army of Israel made up of men from all 12 tribes conquered the land of Canaan. However, once the conquest was complete, large portions of the land were still yet to be possessed. Regions such as Philistia in the southwest along the Mediterranean coast and Lebanon in the far north were still populated with various Canaanite people groups. Nevertheless, God instructed Joshua to go ahead and divide the land among the remaining 9 ½ tribes of Israel. Each tribe would be individually responsible for driving out any Canaanites or other occupants remaining in their allotted territory.

As for the 2 ½ tribes who settled beyond the Jordan River, their inheritance had already been assigned by Moses prior to the conquest. Just as in Canaan, there were still remnants of adversarial people groups living in these regions. The trans-Jordan tribes never completely drove them out, but allowed some to remain and live in their midst including the Geshurites and Maacathites.

The tribe of Reuben settled in an area that had formerly been held by the Ammonites northeast of the Dead Sea. The tribe of Gad dwelt north of Reuben in the lands of Gilead and those formerly held by the Amorites, along the eastern shore of the Jordan River. The half-tribe of Manasseh resided north of Gad, in the land that had formerly been known as Bashan to the east of the Sea of Chinnereth and Lake Hulah.

As for the tribe of Levi, it was not given a specific territory to possess. The Levites had been chosen as the priestly tribe that was responsible for the tabernacle of God. Due to its special designation and religious role, the tribe of Levi would be spread out among all of the other tribes.

II. CALEB'S REQUEST & JUDAH (Joshua 14 & 15)

Caleb approached Joshua to remind him of a promise that Moses had made during the exodus some 45 years earlier. Caleb and Joshua (both much younger at the time) were among the 12 spies that Moses originally sent from Kadesh-barnea to spy out the Promised Land. They were the only 2 of the 12 that believed that Israel could defeat the Canaanites. Although they were outvoted, God allowed them to survive the wilderness wanderings while everyone else of their generation died. Moses promised to give Caleb an inheritance of his own in the hill country of southern Canaan (where the spies had traveled). Now, all these years later, Caleb asked Joshua to keep Moses' promise.

Caleb's request was made at Gilgal, either during or after the conquest of Canaan. Joshua had already destroyed Hebron and Debir and killed all of their inhabitants during Israel's southern campaign. It seems logical to me that the mighty Anakim living in these cities would have been annihilated at the same time, not spared to be eliminated later. However, the Bible seems to suggest that the removal of the Anakim took place after the conquest ended. Ultimately, Caleb was given the city of Hebron as his inheritance and was accredited for driving out the Anakim there (notably Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi,). Othniel, Caleb's nephew, was accredited for capturing the nearby city of Debir and driving out the Anakim there. As the result of his heroism, Caleb gave his daughter Achsah to Othniel as a wife.

Joshua, Eleazar the high priest, and other prominent leaders began to apportion the Promised Land among the remaining 9 ½ tribes. Judah was the first to receive its inheritance. The tribe of Judah was the most prominent of the Hebrew tribes and was given the largest area of land. It stretched north-to-south from Jerusalem to Kadesh-barnea and east-to-west from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea. The Bible lists 115 cities that were located in Judah (including Hebron and Debir, which were associated with Caleb and Othniel). However, the tribe of Judah was unable to expel the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem.

III. THE REMAINING TRIBES (Joshua 16-19)

Following Judah, the sons of Joseph were the next to receive their inheritance. The tribe of Ephraim was given the land immediately north of Judah and the remaining ½ tribe of Manassah was given land immediately north of Ephraim. Together, these 2 allotments covered most of central Canaan stretching from the Sea of Chinnereth to the Dead Sea. Neither Ephraim or Manassah drove out all of the remaining Canaanites in their territories, but rather subjected them to forced labor. They complained that their allotments were too small. Joshua advised them to drive out the Canaanites in the forests of the hill country, to clear the area of trees, and to settle there also.

The whole congregation of Israel assembled at Shiloh, a city within the borders of Ephraim. The tabernacle was set up in Shiloh, where it would remain for over 350 years throughout the era of the judges. Joshua formed a team of men from the remaining 7 tribes and sent them out to

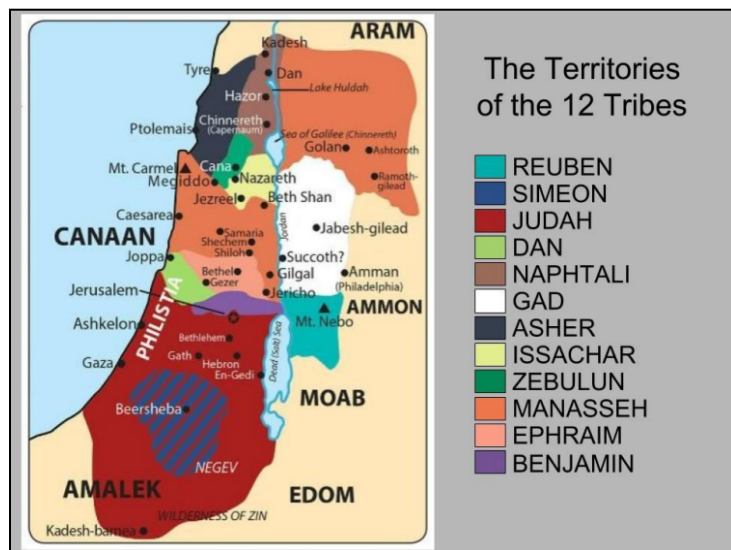
survey the land that had yet to be apportioned. When they returned, lots were cast and the land was divided based upon the descriptions these surveyors had recorded.

The first lot fell to Benjamin, who received an inheritance that was carved out between Judah and Ephraim. It contained 26 named cities, most notably Jerusalem which sat on the border between it and Judah and was considered a city of both tribes. Second was Simeon, whose inheritance was taken from the excessive southern desert lands previously given to Judah. It contained 19 named cities. Third was Zebulun with 12 cities, fourth was Issachar with 16 cities, fifth was Asher with 22 cities, and sixth was Naphtali with 19 cities. These 4 tribal allotments bordered each other and were located in northern Canaan, west of the Sea of Chinneroth and Lake Hulah.

The seventh and final lot fell to the tribe of Dan. They were given an area on the Mediterranean coastline overlapping the borders of Philistia. The Danites were woefully unable to drive out the Philistines and felt squeezed in the small portion of their allotment that remained. For this reason, the tribe of Dan began seeking another territory for itself and eventually relocated in the extreme north of Israel toward Sidon. We will read about their move northward later in this series. As for Joshua, he settled in Timnath-serah in the hill country of Ephraim. Thus, the land was divided.

CONCLUSION

Every tribe was given its own inheritance - a place just for them. These territorial allotments were to become their eternal homeland. As we wrap up this morning, I am reminded of Jesus' promise to give each of us our own dwelling place. Jesus spoke about the many rooms in his Father's house that He was going to prepare just for us (John 14:2-3). These are to be our inheritance - our eternal homes in the glorious Promised Land of heaven. Have you reserved your inheritance yet? Have you trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins and the salvation of your soul?



Special Cities

Originally Preached on 7/10/2022

Now the Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab, by the Jordan opposite Jericho, saying, "Command the sons of Israel that they give to the Levites from the inheritance of their possession cities to live in; and you shall give to the Levites pasture lands around the cities. - Numbers 35:1-2

Good morning. In last week's message we studied about how the Promised Land was divided among the 12 tribes of Israel after the conquest of Canaan was complete. Every tribe, with the exception of Levi, was given a portion of the land as an inheritance in which to settle. Each tribal allotment contained numerous cities. Unlike their brethren, the Levites had been chosen to be the priests of God and caretakers of the tabernacle for all of Israel. They would also serve as teachers and religious leaders in local synagogues from town to town. They would therefore need to be dispersed among each of the other tribes. This morning we will discuss the tribe of Levi's unique inheritance...

I. CITIES OF REFUGE (Joshua 20)

Moses had previously commanded the children of Israel to designate 6 cities of refuge within the Promised Land after they'd taken possession of it. These cities were to be spread abroad in various regions so as to be accessible to all parts of the land. They would serve as safe places where those who committed manslaughter could flee (Numbers 35:9-14). Manslaughter was defined as killing a person unintentionally or accidentally, without malice or premeditation.

According to the Law of Moses, whenever a person was murdered the family of the victim was entitled to appoint from among its members an "avenger". This avenger was legally permitted to find and kill the person who had murdered their relative. This practice was based upon God's requirement of a life for a life (Genesis 9:5-6). However, manslaughter is not the same as premeditated murder and there were provisions in the law for it.

Any person who killed someone could flee to a city of refuge where they would be safe from the avenger until a trial could be conducted by the congregation. If they were determined to be guilty of murder, they would be handed over to the avenger to be executed. If they were determined to have committed manslaughter they could remain in the city of refuge until the death of the current high priest as the sentence for their crime. After the high priest died, they were free to leave the city and the avenger had no legal standing against them. If, however, they left the city prematurely while the current high priest was still living the avenger was still justified to find and execute them.

In keeping with Moses' earlier command, Joshua, Eleazar, and the tribal leaders designated 6 cities of refuge - 3 to the east of the Jordan River and 3 to the west. On the east, the first city was Kedesh, located in the inheritance of Naphtali, north of the Sea of Chinneroth. The second was Shechem, located in the hill country of Ephraim, in central Canaan. The third was Hebron,

in the hill country of Judah, to the south. On the west of Jordan, the first city was Bezer, located on the wilderness plains of Reuben. The second was Ramoth, located in Gilead from the tribe of Gad. The third was Golan, in the land of Bashan that had been given to Manassah.

II. LEVITICAL CITIES (Joshua 21:1-42)

While still gathered at Shiloh (Joshua 18:1), the sons of Levi asked Joshua to appoint cities with corresponding pasture lands in which they could live and work (Numbers 35:4-5). So Joshua cast lots, as he had done earlier when dividing the land among the final 7 tribes, in order to determine the order of these appointments. The clans of Levi were named for his 3 sons: Kohath, Gershon, and Merari (Genesis 46:11).

The first lot fell to the Kohathites. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were of the line of Kohath. Thus, the Levitical, or more specially the Aaronic, priesthood was a subset of the Kohathites. The sons of Aaron were given 13 cities within the lands of Judah, Benjamin, and Simeon. The remaining Kohathites, not of the line of Aaron, were given 10 cities within the lands of Dan, Ephraim, and the ½ tribe of Manasseh.

The second lot fell to the Gersonites. They were given 13 cities. These were located within the lands of Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and the ½ tribe of Manasseh beyond the Jordan River. The third lot fell to the Merarites. They were given 12 cities located among the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Zebulun.

The 6 cities of refuge, which we discussed earlier in this message, were included in the 48 cities given to the tribe of Levi discussed above ($13+10+13+12=48$). This means that there were 42 Levitical cities not also designated as cities of refuge. The Levitical cities can be broken down specifically by tribe(s) as follows, with the cities of refuge underlined:

Judah and Simeon: Hebron (which was shared with Caleb), Libnah, Jattir, Eshtemoa, Holon, Debir, Ain, Juttah, and Beth-shemesh - 9 cities.

Benjamin: Gibeon, Geba, Anathoth, and Almon - 4 cities.

Ephraim: Shechem, Gezer, Kibzaim, and Beth-horon - 4 cities.

Dan: Elteke, Gibbethon, Aijalon, and Gath-rimmon - 4 cities.

½ Manasseh (East): Taanach and Gath-rimmon (Ibleam) - 2 cities.

½ Manasseh (West): Golan and Be-eshterah - 2 cities.

Issachar: Kishion, Daberath, Jarmuth, and En-gannim - 4 cities.

Asher: Mishal, Abdon, Helkath, and Rehob - 4 cities.

Naphtali: Kedesh, Hammoth-dor, and Kartan - 3 cities.

Zebulun: Jokneam, Kartah, Dimnah, and Nahalal - 4 cities.

Reuben: Bezer, Jahaz, Kedemoth, and Mephaath - 4 cities.

Gad: Ramoth, Mahanaim, Heshbon, and Jazer - 4 cities.

A second, partial listing of these cities is recorded in 1 Chronicles 6:54-81. There are some slight discrepancies in the 2 complementary lists of Levitical cities, including the use of alternate

names for some of these cities. Nevertheless, these minor differences in no way invalidate the main truth of either passage.

III. ISRAEL'S REST (Joshua 21:43-45)

Through the leadership of Moses and Joshua, God gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers. They were released from Shiloh to take possession of and settle in their respective territories. The LORD had enabled them to defeat all of their enemies and had fulfilled all of the good promises that He'd made to them. After the long conquest, which was filled with bloodshed and war, God gave the Israelites rest on every side.

CONCLUSION

As we close this morning's message, I want to make 2 observations and applications. First, everyone has sinned against God. As such, we are all guilty and deserving of death. The avenger is seeking each of us, and given enough time he will find us. But Jesus is our city of refuge! We can run to Him for security and protection from the evil one. He will forgive our sins and give us salvation. Have you trusted in Jesus as the Lord and Savior of your life?

Second, the Christian Church has been called to spread the message of Jesus throughout this lost world and to shine His light everywhere. Like the Levites, we are not to be isolated or confined to a particular place. He has dispersed us among the nations and is calling us to go and make disciples. How can we be more effective?



A Conflict Arises

Originally Preached on 7/17/2022

One who gives an answer before he hears, it is foolishness and shame to him. - Proverbs 18:13

Good morning my beloved! What a joy it is to be here in God's house with you today. We have come to worship the LORD and to hear His word proclaimed. It is my prayer that He will speak to us profoundly through today's message.

We find ourselves in Joshua chapter 22, nearing the end of this great book. In this chapter, we will read about a conflict that arose between the tribes. Having just defeated the Canaanites, would the tribes of Israel now turn on one another?

I. THE TRANSJORDAN TRIBES RETURN (Joshua 22:1-9)

After several long years of war, the conquest of Canaan was ended and the land was finally at rest. The fighting men of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh (also called the Eastern tribes or the Transjordan tribes) had fulfilled their commitment to fight alongside their brothers until the Promised Land was secured. When Joshua finished dividing the land among the remaining 9 ½ tribes and designating the special cities for the Levites, he summoned the Reubenites, Gadites, and ½ tribe of Manasseh. He urged them to remain obedient to the LORD's commandments, to love God and walk in His ways, and to serve Him wholeheartedly. Joshua thanked them for their valiant military service, blessed them, and released them to return to their homes beyond the Jordan River.

Apparently the tribe of Manasseh had fought together in unity during the conquest. They, like the other tribes, had accumulated a great amount of spoil taken from the many battles they'd won. This included riches such as livestock, gold, silver, iron, bronze, and clothes. However, because their inheritance was split into 2 parts, the tribe of Manasseh had to further divide these spoils amongst themselves so that each of the ½ tribes (those on the East and those on the West) got their own share. After this had been done, the Transjordan tribes departed from Shiloh and returned to their homes in the land of Gilead.

The Reubenites, Gadites, and ½ tribe of Manasseh should be recognized for keeping their promise. In exchange for receiving their inheritance on the east side of the Jordan, they had sworn to fight alongside their brothers on the west side of the Jordan during the conquest of Canaan (Numbers 32:16-22). When the time came, they bravely honored their commitment. In this respect, the Transjordan tribes set an example that we should follow.

II. THE OFFENSIVE ALTAR (Joshua 22:10-20)

On their journey home, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh stopped near the Jordan River and built a large altar. Its exact location is unknown and disputed. When the Western tribes (called "the sons of Israel") found out about it, they reassembled at Shiloh and prepared to

go up against their brethren in battle. The Law of Moses strictly prohibited the use of any altars for making offerings to God other than the altar in the tabernacle (Deuteronomy 12:10-14). The Western tribes feared that perhaps the Eastern tribes had erected this altar to practice idolatry, so they began readying themselves for civil war.

The Western tribes sent a delegation of their leaders led by Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, to investigate the situation. This approach was plainly set forth in the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 13:12-16). The delegation came to the Transjordan tribes in Gilead and spoke with them. They asked the Reubenites, Gadites, and ½ tribe of Manassah why they had sinned against God by building an unsanctioned altar as an alternative to the true altar at Shiloh. They expressed concern that God's wrath would fall upon all of the 12 tribes (including them) as the result of this grave sin, just as it had done previously at both Peor and Ai (Numbers 25 and Joshua 7). The delegation kindly invited the Eastern tribes to join them on the west side of Jordan River (rather than rebelling against God) if they believed their land was unclean.

The children of Israel perceived that a blatant, egregious sin had taken place within their own ranks. They reasoned that the entire congregation would suffer under God's judgment if the sin was left unchecked. Therefore, they took immediate action to deal with it. In much the same way, we as the New Testament believers are instructed to enforce church discipline within the body of Christ (Matthew 18:15-20) when serious sin arises in our midst. Church discipline is often unpleasant and uncomfortable, yet is absolutely critical to maintain the purity and health of the congregation. It should always be administered with the intent to protect the church while also restoring the sinner(s).

III. A SIMPLE MISUNDERSTANDING (Joshua 22:21-34)

The sons of Reuben, Gad, and the ½ tribe of Manasseh explained that the altar they'd built wasn't for making offerings to the LORD or to any other gods. In fact, they had no intention of using it as a functional altar at all. Rather, it was built as a monument from generations to come of their solidarity with their brethren in Canaan. It was fashioned to look like the altar at Shiloh to reflect their allegiance to the same God. It was built to bear witness of the ongoing unity between the Eastern and Western tribes.

When Phinehas the priest and the rest of the delegation heard this explanation, they were greatly relieved and satisfied. Phinehas actually commended the Transjordan tribes for not acting unfaithfully against God. He now recognized that their motives for building the altar had been pure and righteous all along. They had no intention of sinning against the LORD or alienating their brothers. In fact, they were trying to do just the opposite!

Thus, Phinehas and his companions returned to Shiloh. They explained to the tribes of Canaan why the Transjordan tribes had built the altar. Upon hearing this report, the sons of Israel rejoiced and their hostility subsided. Each tribe returned peacefully to their own inheritance and a major crisis was averted. For many years thereafter the Eastern tribes referred to the altar, which was actually a symbolic monument, simply as "Witness".

CONCLUSION

This story highlights the importance of determining someone's true intentions before acting out against them. The Western tribes initially presumed that the Eastern tribes were behaving in a sinful and potentially harmful manner. Based on these presumptions, they began preparing themselves for war. Fortunately, they took time to investigate the situation before resorting to bitterness and violence. Lo and behold, it turned out that the Eastern tribes had no sinful or ill intentions at all! It was all a big misunderstanding.

Many people have the tendency of jumping to conclusions without knowing all the facts. We are often quick to criticize and condemn others, without giving them an opportunity to explain or defend themselves. In some cases, this causes unnecessary strife and conflict. Perhaps if we'd take a moment to discover their intentions or motivations we'd think differently about their behaviors. We should be careful about making rash and impulsive judgments.

Next week we will discuss Joshua's farewell address to the children of Israel. It will likely be our final message in the book of Joshua. Until then, may God bless and keep you. And may we all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and extremely careful about making assumptions...

Joshua's Farewell

Originally Preached on 7/24/2022

Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will also help you, I will also uphold you with My righteous right hand. - Isaiah 41:10

Good morning! Today we will wrap up the book of Joshua and touch on a few verses in the second chapter of Judges. But before we get started, let's take a quick look back and talk about the timing of events in today's message...

The confusion over the offensive altar, which we discussed last Sunday, took place immediately after the land had been divided and the Transjordan tribes had returned to their inheritance. Most scholars estimate that Joshua was around 70-80 years old when this took place. However, the discourses recorded in the final chapters of Joshua were given near to the time of his death, at age 110. Thus, it is reasonable to estimate that some 30-40 years passed between the events of Joshua 22 and 23. This gap is longer than the entire conquest itself. During this extended span, the Israelites rebuilt cities that had been ravished during the conquest and settled in the land of Canaan.

I. A MESSAGE TO THE LEADERS (Joshua 23:1-16)

Throughout Joshua's entire life, the children of Israel as a whole faithfully served the LORD. As time went by, they became more and more comfortable in their new homes and surroundings. When he was very old, Joshua gathered the leaders of Israel together to give them some parting wisdom and counsel.

He reminded these men of everything that God had done for Israel and how the LORD had fought on their behalf during the exodus and the conquest. He reminisced about dividing the land among the tribes and issuing their charge to take possession of it. He urged them to carefully obey the Law of Moses and not follow after the idols and false gods of Canaan. He warned Israel that if they intermarried and intermingled with the remaining heathen peoples living among them that they would suffer God's judgment and perish from the land they'd been given.

Joshua knew that his remaining days were few. He emphasized to the leaders of Israel that God had not failed to keep any of His good promises. However, this same God who had kept His promises to bless would also keep His promises to curse if the people turned away from Him by violating His covenant. As he spoke, Joshua felt led to address the entire congregation - not just its leaders. He was deeply concerned for their continued spiritual well being.

II. A CHALLENGE TO THE PEOPLE (Joshua 24:1-28; Judges 2:5-7)

Therefore Joshua summoned all of the tribes of Israel to Shechem, which was located between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal - the very place where they had pledged to serve God during the

conquest many years earlier (Joshua 8:30-35). Joshua began his farewell address by summarizing the history of Israel up until this point. He spoke of how God had chosen Abraham out of Ur and brought him to Canaan. He spoke of Isaac and Jacob, and the slavery of the Hebrew children in Egypt. He talked about the exodus under Moses and Aaron and the wilderness wanderings. He talked about Israel's victories east of the Jordan over the Amorites and Moabites. Finally he spoke of the conquest itself, and how God had given His people the Promised Land.

In light of the LORD's past faithfulness, Joshua challenged the people to fear God alone. He called for the people to make a choice - either to serve the true God of Israel or the false gods of Egypt and Canaan, but not to tarry between them. It was during this speech that Joshua made the famous statement, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." The people vowed to follow Joshua's example, and renewed their commitment to serve the LORD and keep His covenant.

However, Joshua was concerned that the people of Israel would not keep their commitment. He warned them, as he had already done to their leaders, that if they abandoned God and disobeyed Him there would be severe consequences. Again the people declared their allegiance to the LORD. Joshua urged them to do away with foreign and false gods, and for a third time the people collectively committed to serving the LORD alone. In response, Joshua set up a large stone to serve as a witness and memorial to their renewed covenant with God. He also recorded their commitment in the Book of the Law of God.

Joshua dismissed the tribes to their respective inheritances one last time. They obediently served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua - those who had personally seen and experienced the great work which God had done for Israel. Unfortunately, once this generation died off the people began to wander from the LORD...

III. JOSHUA'S DEATH (Joshua 24:29-33; Judges 2:8-9)

After living a long and heroic life, Joshua died at the age of 110. He was buried in the city of his inheritance, Timnath-serah in the hill country of Ephraim. He was and is remembered as 1 of the greatest and most valiant leaders in Israel's history.

Also around this time Eleazar the son of Aaron died. Eleazar had served many years as high priest alongside Joshua just as his father Aaron had served alongside Moses a generation earlier. Eleazar was buried at Gibeah, also in the hill country of Ephraim. His son Phinehas took his place as high priest.

Another interesting fact is mentioned in the final verses of Joshua. After the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan, they buried the bones of Joseph at Shechem. Joseph had been the prince of Egypt centuries before. The Hebrew children had removed his bones from his tomb in Egypt, carried them throughout the exodus and conquest, and finally laid them to rest in the Promised

Land (Genesis 50:25; Exodus 13:19). It was Joseph's dying request to be buried in the land of Israel and, though it took almost 450 years, his wish was finally granted.

CONCLUSION

The last act of Joshua recorded in scripture was his calling of the people of Israel to renew their covenant with God. Joshua wanted to die knowing that his people's relationship with and devotion to the LORD was strong and healthy. Just as his mentor Moses had done near the end of his life (Deuteronomy 30:19), so also Joshua challenged the congregation to choose and follow God. And, at least for a while after his death, the people did so.

People tend to follow the example of their leaders. Unfortunately, brave and godly leaders like Joshua are few and far between. He was the right man at the right time, and under his supervision the Hebrew children finally took possession of the Promised Land. He presided over Israel during a season of incredible triumph and victory. Joshua exhibited a fearless faith, and trusted wholeheartedly in God to give him success.

In the opening chapter of Joshua, the LORD urged him to be "strong and courageous". Joshua listened and obeyed. He was a true warrior of the faith. May we follow his example.

Successes and Failures

Originally Preached on 7/31/2022

You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you are going to dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains, on the hills, and under every leafy tree. And you shall tear down their altars and smash their memorial stones to pieces, and burn their Asherim in the fire, and cut to pieces the carved images of their gods; and you shall eliminate their name from that place. - Deuteronomy 12:2-3

Good morning. Last week we wrapped up the book of Joshua and touched on a few verses in Judges. This morning we will officially begin our study of Judges and review a few scenes we've already discussed in Joshua. There is notable overlap in the closing and opening chapters of these 2 books. According to Jewish tradition the book of Judges was written primarily by Samuel with various additions and edits made by others, but this isn't for certain.

Due to the overlap, the timing of events described in Judges 1 is difficult to nail down precisely. A careful study reveals seemingly identical occurrences taking place both before and after Joshua died. Either way, it's not a big deal. Suffice it to say that for a few decades following the conquest while Joshua was still living and for a few more decades after his death, the various tribes of Israel struggled to drive the lingering Canaanites out of the Promised Land. While successful to some extent, they ultimately failed in their efforts to remove or destroy them all. Their inability to do so would ultimately lead to some serious consequences...

I. EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS (Judges 1:1-26)

After Joshua's death, the people of Israel asked God which tribe would go up first in their ongoing hostilities against the persistent Canaanites. The LORD selected Judah, stating that He had handed the land over to him. So the tribe of Judah, along with the Simeonites, went out to battle the Canaanites and Perizzites who remained. They defeated 10,000 men at Bezek, causing its king to flee. When the Israelites caught him, they cut off his thumbs and big toes, as he had done to 70 kings previously. What goes around comes around I suppose! The king of Bezek was taken to Jerusalem where he later died.

Most likely prior to this, while Joshua was still alive, the sons of Judah had captured the city of Jerusalem, though many Jebusites continued living there - especially in the portion of the city allotted to Benjamin. It was during this time that Judah had gone down to fight against the Canaanites remaining in the hill country, the Negev, and the lowland. This is when Caleb was credited for defeating the 3 sons of Anak - namely Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai - and was given the city of Hebron as an inheritance (Joshua 14:13-15; 15:13-14). This was also when Caleb gave his daughter Achsah to be the wife of Othniel, his nephew, as a reward for capturing the nearby city of Debir (Joshua 15:15-19).

After winning at Bezek, the combined forces of Judah and Simeon defeated the Canaanites at Zephath and renamed it Hormah. They also took control of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron with

their respective territories. The descendents of Jethro who had joined Moses and the Hebrew children during the exodus (Numbers 10:29-32) went along with the tribe of Judah and settled in the wilderness south of Arad.

In addition to these victories, the house of Joseph (the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh) sent spies to the city of Bethel. It had formerly been called Luz, many years earlier. A man there told them of an entrance into the city which made it possible to bypass the outer walls. Using his intel, they captured the city and struck its citizens. However, they allowed the man who'd helped them to go free and he went to the land of the Hittites and founded a new city called Luz.

II. EXAMPLES OF FAILURE (Judges 1:27-36; 2:10)

The Benjaminites didn't drive out the Jebusites living in Jerusalem. The ½ tribe of Manasseh in Canaan never took possession of Beth-shean, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam, or Meggido with their respective villages despite the fact that most of these cities had been defeated during the conquest. As a result, many Canaanites persisted among them and were eventually subjected to forced labor.

Ephraim didn't drive out the inhabitants of Gezer. Zebulun didn't drive out the Canaanites in Kitron or Nahalol. Asher didn't drive out the inhabitants of Acco, Sidon, Ahlab, Achzib, Helbah, Aphik, or Rehob. Instead, the Asherites just lived among them. Nephtali didn't drive out the people of Beth-shemesh or Beth-anath, but rather allow them to remain. In some cases these lingering Canaanites became forced labor for Israel, but in others they lived freely among them.

The Amorites (aka Canaanites) forced the tribe of Dan into the hill country where they were pinched for space. This would lead some of the Danites to seek a new territory for themselves - a story which we will study in an upcoming sermon. The Amorites also persisted in living on Mount Heres, in Aijalon and Shaalbim. Though many eventually became servants for Israel, they nevertheless maintained a significant presence in the land.

In some instances, the Canaanites proved too formidable and strong for the Israelites to drive out. In other instances, there was little or no effort made to drive them out. Perhaps some of the tribes were content with allowing these pagan peoples to remain or had become intrigued by them to the extent that they actually wanted them to stay. It wasn't that God was unable to drive them out, but rather that Israel's faith was waning. This new generation didn't know the LORD as closely as their parents had.

III. THE LORD'S REBUKE (Judges 2:1-5)

God had commanded the Israelites to utterly destroy all of the Canaanites when they took possession of the Promised Land. This was to be done as an act of judgment against them for centuries of wicked idolatry, but also to eliminate their pagan influence. Unfortunately, the tribes of Israel failed to follow-through with the LORD's command. They allowed many Canaanites to remain in the land and to continue their religious practices.

The angel of the LORD, whose last appearance had been to Joshua at Gilgal just before the battle of Jericho (Joshua 5:13-15), visited the people of Israel at Bochim (which many scholars believe to be Bethel or somewhere near to it). There are various opinions regarding the identity of this “angel”, but I believe Him to be a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. His words indicate that he was not merely an angel, but rather God appearing in the form of an angel.

The angel rebuked Israel for not fully driving out the Canaanites or destroying their altars. He regarded their partial obedience as disobedience. He warned that these lingering Canaanites would become a thorn in the side of Israel and their pagan gods would become a snare. When the Israelites heard these words they raised their voices and wept. They offered sacrifices there as well. The name Bochim means “weeping”.

CONCLUSION

God’s command was that the children of Israel completely rid themselves of the Canaanites and their sinful influence. God knew that if they were allowed to stay, even to a limited extent, their pagan worship of false gods would inevitably become a hindrance to and a temptation for the Israelites. Yet, the tribes of Jacob disobeyed the LORD by permitting many of the Canaanites to remain in the land.

In much the same way, God’s desire for His children is that they be holy (1 Peter 1:14-16). Holiness requires that we put away all imperfections and sinful practices. We are called to walk in spiritual purity and to purge our lives of all wickedness and iniquity. But, like the sons of Israel, we are often content with allowing some of our sinful thoughts and ways to remain. If we aren’t careful, these “pet” sins will become our downfall...

Israel's Idolatry

Originally Preached on 8/7/2022

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. - 1 Corinthians 10:14

God's instructions to Israel were clear: When you enter the Promised Land, kill or drive out all of the Canaanites and destroy all of their idols, altars, and religious articles. However, as we have discussed over the previous few weeks, the Israelites did not follow through with the LORD's command. For whatever reason, they allowed many of the Canaanites to remain in the land and continue their idolatrous practices. God warned Israel about the bad influence and potential dangers that these people posed, but nobody listened...

Why is it that we often resent being told what to do? This seems especially true when God gives us a command. Do we not realize that He is trying to keep us from temptation and sin? Do we not understand that His instructions are for our own benefit and well-being? Why are we so stubborn? God foreknew exactly what would happen to Israel, and it did.

This morning's message is titled, "Israel's Idolatry". It is the 15th sermon of our ongoing series. We are currently about halfway through it. May God open our hearts, minds, and ears to the proclamation of His Word.

I. ISRAEL SERVES BAAL (Judges 2:11-15)

The sons of Israel abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Instead, they worshiped and bowed down to the pagan gods of the Canaanites who lived among them. They did evil in the sight of the LORD by serving the Baals and the Ashtaroth.

Baal was considered the highest and most powerful god of the Canaanites. Generally speaking, he was a fertility god who was thought to increase man's ability to bear children and the earth's ability to produce crops. Beyond this, however, Baal had many different attributes which were emphasized and worshiped in a variety of ways. Several adaptations of Baal were developed and adopted by individual localities, which explains the assorted Baals found in scripture. The word Baal means "lord".

Ashtaroth, or Asherah, was the leading female deity of the Canaanites. She was a consort of Baal, the sun-god, and was considered to be the moon-goddess. She was also regarded as the goddess of love and war. Worshiping her involved sensuality and ritual prostitution. Asherah was represented by a limbless tree trunk planted in the ground and typically carved in her image. As such, the places where she was worshiped became known as groves.

Due to their wicked idolatry, the LORD's anger burned against the children of Israel. The LORD gave them over to their enemies all around who plundered the Israelites until they were too weak to stand against them. Wherever they went, God's hand was against Israel for the evil

things they were doing. Just as God had forewarned, so it happened - the Israelites failure to fully eradicate the Canannites led to their descent into idolatry.

II. THE LORD USES JUDGES (Judges 2:16-23)

Over the next few centuries a familiar pattern developed. The people of Israel would rebel against God and wander away into sin. As a consequence for their disobedience, God would allow a neighboring nation to dominate, plunder, and oppress them. Eventually, when the persecution became unbearable, the affected tribes would cry out in desperation and repentance. The LORD would compassionately hear their pleas and raise up a judge to deliver them. After being liberated, the Israelites would enjoy a season of revival and rest from their enemies (typically until the judge died). Then they'd slowly fall back into their former sinful and idolatrous habits thereby starting the cycle all over again.

It is important to remember that during the era of the judges the 12 tribes of Israel were independent from one another and governed themselves. They formed a confederation of sorts aligned around a common heritage and faith. They shared the tabernacle of God at Shiloh. Sometimes these tribes would cooperate with each other and other times they were at odds with each other. That said, the judges that arose during this era were regional leaders who were specific to a particular tribe or group of tribes. It is therefore possible and even likely that some of these judges served simultaneously in different areas of Israel (that is, their years of service overlapped one another).

There are 12 judges named in the book of Judges. They are Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. Some have 1 or more chapters dedicated to them, while others only a single paragraph or sentence. Over the next few months we will study the Biblical account of each of these judges and, along the way, we'll encounter several other interesting characters.

III. THE REMAINING NATIONS (Judges 3:1-6)

God permitted certain pagan nations and ethnic groups to remain in and around Canaan in order to test Israel's faith and obedience. The generations that followed the conquest would learn war by combating against these (and other) antagonizers. These enemies included the Philistines in Philistia, the Sidonians in Phoenicia, and the various clans of Canaanites still living amongst the Israelites - the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Over time, the children of Israel began worshiping their false gods and idols as well as marrying their daughters and sons. The anger of the LORD burned against His people.

In the same way, God has chosen to leave lost and unrepentant sinners in the world. They live, work, and play alongside the Christians. Like the tares among the wheat, both will remain and grow together until the end-time harvest (Matthew 13:24-30). Until then, God will not remove them and we as believers are commanded to leave them be. Their presence presents us with

the same test that the ancient Israelites faced... will we succumb to their wicked influences or will we be a light that draws them out of the darkness and to the Lord?

CONCLUSION

For me, it's a bit frightening to see how quickly Israel turned from their faithful obedience to God (which allowed their parents to conquer the Promised Land) and instead embraced idolatry and pagan worship. Within a single generation, the children of Jacob largely abandoned the LORD and openly rebelled against Him. They brazenly invoked His wrath, completely forgetting the godly example set by Joshua, Caleb, and many others.

Before we launch into our study of the individual judges a few weeks from now, we are going to spend the next couple of Sundays reading a pair of stories that together reveal the depths of depravity to which Israel fell during this time. The upcoming messages will provide us with insight into the state of affairs among God's people during the early judges period, and show just how bad things really were. As you will see, these stories are very graphic and quite disturbing.

In closing, idolatry is "the worship of someone or something other than God as though it were God." In modern times, especially in the more developed parts of the world, very few people actually worship carved or molten images or statues. That said, we still practice idolatry through the worship of money, material possessions, fame, success, nature, science, sex, pleasure, politics, self, and so on. Many people allow these pursuits and/or lusts to take the rightful place of God. May the LORD forgive us for our reckless and rampant idolatry.

Micah & the Danites

Originally Preached on 8/14/2022

But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it, either. - 1 Timothy 6:6-7

Good morning. As stated last week, before we move into our study of the individual judges we are going to spend a few Sundays discussing the backslidden state of God's children following the conquest of Canaan. To be specific, we are going to read and discuss the final 5 chapters of Judges (chapters 17-21). These chapters serve as an appendix to the book of Judges. When considered chronologically, they should be near the beginning rather than at the end.

I. MICAH'S PERSONAL PRIEST (Judges 17:1-13)

There was a man named Micah who lived in the hill country of Ephraim. He had stolen 1,100 pieces of silver from his mother without her knowledge. Initially she pronounced a curse on the thief, but when Micah later confessed and returned the silver, she reversed course and blessed her son. Then she gave a portion of the silver to a silversmith who crafted a carved and cast metal image for her family. Micah took these images, along with some household idols he'd made, and set up his own private shrine. He even made an ephod (a priestly garment) to wear. He consecrated 1 of his sons to serve as his own personal priest.

About this same time there was a young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah who decided to move elsewhere. He left in search of a new place to stay and along the way happened upon Micah's house. When the 2 met and Micah learned that this young traveler was a Levite, he offered to hire him to replace his son. The unscrupulous Levite accepted the position, moved into Micah's house, and served as his own personal priest propagating his false religion. Micah falsely believed that God would prosper him because he'd acquired a Levite as his priest.

This corrupt young Levite was named Jonathan. He was the son of Gershom and the grandson of Moses (Judges 18:30). In many of the earliest Biblical manuscripts the name Moses is actually used in this passage, but over time it was replaced with Mannaseh. The 2 names are spelled almost identically in Hebrew, differing by just a single letter. According to Jewish tradition, Moses' name was altered in order to spare him the shame of being associated with such an immoral grandson. Based upon this genealogy, these events must have taken place in the generation immediately following Joshua (in the early stages of the judges).

II. DAN'S SEARCH FOR NEW LAND (Judges 18:1-13)

Meanwhile, the tribe of Dan had been unable to drive out the Philistines living in their allotted inheritance and many of them decided to relocate. A small group of 5 valiant men from among the Danites were sent out to explore the land and find an alternative place to live. Along the way they too came upon the house of Micah. They asked the young Levite to inquire of God whether

or not they'd be successful in the quest and the priest assured them that the LORD approved of their efforts.

So the spies continued northward and came to the Phoenician city of Laish. It was a quiet, peaceful city that was far from the stronghold of Sidon and rather isolated and remote. After observing it, they returned to their brethren at Zorah and Eshtaol in the land of Dan. They reported what they'd seen and what the young priest had told them. The Danites decided that Laish and the surrounding countryside would be an ideal place to resettle.

So an army of 600 men from the tribe of Dan set out to attack the unsuspecting city of Laish. They took their families and possessions with them. Their first stop was just west of Kiriath-jearim, where they camped in an area that became known as Mahaneh-dan. From there they continued northward into the hill country of Ephraim toward Micah's house - where the spies had stopped previously.

III. DAN TAKES MICAH'S IDOLS (Judges 18:14-31)

The 5 men who'd already been there on their earlier journey told the others about Micah's silver images, household idols, and ephod. So the Danites turned aside and came to Micah's house. The 600 armed men met and spoke with the young Levite who greeted them at the entrance of the gate. Meanwhile the spies snuck into Micah's house and took both the cast metal and carved images, the household idols, and the ephod. When they came out of the house, the Levite asked them what they were doing. The Danites invited him to join them and serve as their tribal priest rather than merely Micah's household priest. Seeing this as a promotion, the Levite happily agreed.

The people of Dan continued onward, placing their women, children, animals and so forth in front of their procession. When Micah discovered that his items had been stolen, he summoned his neighbors and together they pursued and overtook the Danites. Micah charged them of stealing his idols, ephod, and priest. The men of Dan warned him to be silent or else they'd attack and kill him and his family. Micah was greatly outnumbered and realized there was nothing he could do to get his things back. He returned to his house empty-handed and dejected.

When the Danites reached their destination, they conquered the quiet city of Laish and settled there. They renamed the city Dan, in honor of their tribal father - the 5th son of Jacob. Located in a valley near Beth-rehob, it was the northernmost territory of Israel. They set up the idols they'd stolen from Micah and consecrated Jonathan and his sons to serve as their tribal priests. This arrangement continued for hundreds of years, during the era of both the judges and kings, until the land was defeated by the Assyrians.

CONCLUSION

The tribe of Dan is known as the most wicked and idolatrous of the 12 tribes of Israel. As a consequence of their sin, none of their descendants will be sealed with the LORD's protection during the tribulation of the last days (Revelation 7:4-8). This story describes how the Danites embraced the worship of idols and enlisted their own tainted, corrupt priests. It also explains how this tribe divided into 2 parts - some in the north and others in the south. Ultimately it reveals that some were dissatisfied with the original inheritance they'd been given by Joshua under God's direction and sought to find something "better". Isn't it sad that we do the same types of things today?

In similar fashion, the young Levite was also discontent with his humble service to the LORD. He left Bethlehem in search of something more profitable. Setting aside his allegiance to God alone, he endorsed idolatry by agreeing to become Micah's household priest. Later, he voluntarily abandoned Micah for what he perceived to be a more prestigious position with the tribe of Dan. All of this was done for personal gain, not in accordance with the calling of God. Again, heartbreakingly, this same compromising behavior and self-serving attitude persists among some in the ministry today.

Finally Micah himself, an unethical man who'd stolen silver from his own mother, led his entire family to worship images and idols. He wasn't content with the role of traditional Levites who served all of Israel, but felt entitled to have his own personal priest. In the end his priest and religious relics were stolen, yet Micah is no victim. He got exactly what he deserved.

This is the first of 2 stories that depict just how morally bankrupt the people of Israel had become. They had forsaken the LORD and fallen into spiritual despair. Remarkably, next week's message is even more disturbing than this one...

Israel's Civil War (Part 1)

Originally Preached on 8/21/2022

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; - 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5

Hello. Last week we read the first of 2 stories recorded in an appendix attached to the end of the book of Judges. Both describe how immoral and spiritually depraved the people had become following Joshua's death. We learned about a corrupt Levite who chose financial gain and notoriety rather than humble obedience and service to the LORD. He endorsed and promoted idolatry while serving as Micah's household priest and later while serving as Dan's tribal priest.

In this morning's message, we will read about another despicable Levite. His actions will drive a wedge between the 12 tribes of Israel and pave the way for civil war. Today's sermon will be the first of a 2-part message covering chapters 19-21. Before we begin, let me point out that both of these "supplementary" stories intentionally feature a Levite. God had chosen the Levites to serve as the priests and ministers of Israel. They had been called to exemplify godliness and righteousness before and among the remaining tribes, but they had become corrupt and sinful. Is it any wonder that the nation had fallen into spiritual decline?

I. THE LEVITE'S CONCUBINE (Judges 19:1-15)

There was a Levite who lived in a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim. He had a concubine who found him to be repugnant, so she fled to her father's house in Bethlehem of Judah. After waiting 4 months, the Levite traveled to Bethlehem to retrieve his runaway concubine. His father-in-law was delighted to see him and the Levite stayed in his house for 3 days. On the fourth day, as the Levite was preparing to return home with his concubine, his father-in-law urged him to stay another night - so he did. On the fifth day the father-in-law again urged the Levite to stay, but this time he refused. However, his departure was delayed.

By the time he, his servant, and his concubine left, it was already late in the day. When they came to the nearby city of Jebus (aka, Jerusalem) his servant suggested that they stop for the night. But the Levite did not want to stay in a "city of foreigners" - the Jebusites were still living there (Judges 1:21) - and insisted they press on to Gibeah or Ramah. The sun had already set when they arrived at Gibeah in the land of Benjamin. They entered the city and prepared to spend the night outside in the public square.

Apparently, this Levite was such a vile person that his concubine ran away. Unfortunately, her father wasn't much better. She fled to her father's house seeking refuge, but when the Levite showed up looking for her he welcomed him in. The Levite's father-in-law thoroughly enjoyed his company, so much that he wanted him to stay. He gladly returned his daughter to the Levite, with no indication of reservation or remorse. This poor girl had nowhere to turn...

II. THE SIN OF GIBEAH (Judges 19:16-30)

An old man from the hill country of Ephraim who happened to be staying in Gibeah at the time came in that evening from his work in the fields. He noticed the Levite and his company camped out in the public square. The old man invited them to come spend the night in his house. He promised to feed the Levite's donkeys, as well as the Levite, his servant, and his concubine (who he called a "slave"). The Levite accepted his offer and they went to the old man's house, where he took them in and showed them hospitality.

Later that evening, several worthless men from Gibeah surrounded the house, banged on the door, and demanded that the old man turn the Levite who was lodging there over to them so that they might have homosexual relations with him. The old man refused to give them his guest, but instead offered to give them his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine to ravish and rape as they pleased. Then the Levite seized his concubine and handed her over to the men of Gibeah. They took her away, brutally raped and abused her all night long, and released her at the approach of dawn. Near death, she made her way back to the old man's house, fell at his doorway, and laid there until the sun had risen.

When the Levite got up that morning to leave and opened the door, she was lying there with her hands on the threshold. Without any sign of compassion, he said, "Get up and let's go." The woman didn't answer, which suggests that she had probably died. So the Levite placed her lifeless body on his donkey and returned to his home in Ephraim. When he arrived, he took a knife and divided her corpse into 12 pieces. He sent her body parts to the various tribes of Israel. When they received their "packages", each tribe was appalled and disgusted. They determined that something must be done.

III. PREPARING FOR WAR (Judges 20:1-17)

So, the sons of Israel assembled together at Mizpah - including the Transjordan tribes from Gilead. In total, there were 400,000 armed men. They asked the Levite to tell them what had happened. He recounted how he and his concubine had stopped in Gibeah for the night, how the wicked men of the city surrounded the house and threatened him, and how they took his concubine and repeatedly raped her so that she died. The Levite conveniently failed to mention that he had personally handed her over to them, against her will. He went on to explain that he'd cut her body apart and sent pieces of it to the 12 tribes to stir their attention and demand action.

After listening to the Levite's story, the tribes of Israel were united in their resolve to punish the city of Gibeah. They decided to go up against it by lot - that is, 1 tribe at a time - rather than all at once. They also made plans to supply and feed their army while it was camped at Gibeah.

The sons of Israel sent a delegation to the leaders of the tribe of Benjamin asking them to hand over the wicked men of Gibeah to be executed for their heinous crime. However, the Benjaminites refused to relinquish them to Israel. Instead, the men of Benjamin gathered together to defend Gibeah. They quickly raised up an army of 26,000 soldiers, not including the

700 warriors who lived in Gibeah. Of these, some 700 were marksmen who could use a sling left handed and not miss.

The stage was set for civil war. The tribe of Benjamin would stand alone against all of his brothers - the men of Israel. We will stop here this morning and continue this story next week...

CONCLUSION

Before we dismiss this morning, I want to point out the similarities between today's message and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). In the days of Abraham, God determined to destroy the pagan cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their vile sin and wanton sexual immorality (especially homosexuality). When 2 men arrived to rescue Lot and his family from the looming destruction, the men of Sodom surrounded Lot's house and demanded to have sex with his guests. Fortunately these were no ordinary men, but rather angels, and they struck men of Sodom with blindness.

However, in the passage we read today, it wasn't heathen Sodomites acting shamefully and immorally - it was the men of Gibeah. They were Israelites! And the entire tribe of Benjamin rallied to their defense. How does someone defend such sinful behavior? Not to mention the callous and heartless conduct of the Levite, his father-in-law, and even the old man who offered up his own virgin daughter to be raped. Were there any God-fearing, virtuous people left in Israel? These were certainly dark days...

Israel's Civil War (Part 2)

Originally Preached on 8/28/2022

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it? - Jeremiah 17:9

A Levite from the hill country of Ephraim went to Bethlehem in Judah to find and retrieve his runaway concubine. On their way home, they stopped in Gibeah in the land of Benjamin to spend the night. Some vile men surrounded the house where they were staying and demanded to have sexual relations with the Levite, but instead he handed his concubine over to them. These worthless men violently raped her all night long, so that she died. The next morning the Levite carried her body to his home, cut it into pieces, and sent her parts to the scattered tribes with a call to action. The tribes gathered together intent on punishing the men of Gibeah, but the other Benjaminites came to Gibeah's defense. Both sides mustered up an army and prepared for civil war. It would be the tribe of Benjamin (approximately 27,000 soldiers) versus all of the other 11 tribes, referred to as the sons of Israel (approximately 400,000 soldiers)...

Before we delve into the text this morning, I want to make an observation. Not to minimize the sinful and criminal behavior of the men of Gibeah who definitely deserved to be punished, nor to overlook the concubine's death which was brutal, shameful, and tragic, but did this atrocity justify civil war? As we will read this morning, literally thousands of people are going to die! By dividing and sending pieces of the concubine's body to the tribes in such a macabre and sensational manner, the Levite actually incited and stirred up conflict. His actions were the primary catalyst for the combat that occurred. We as God's children are called to live at peace with one another, not to agitate and/or provoke (Romans 12:18).

Turn with me in your Bibles to Judges chapter 20 and we will continue our discussion of the story we began last week with a message titled "Israel's Civil War (Part 2)".

I. WAR BETWEEN THE TRIBES (Judges 20:18-48)

The sons of Israel had already determined to go up against Gibeah by lot, so they inquired of God at Bethel and the tribe of Judah was selected to go first. They arose in the morning and camped against Gibeah. On the first day of battle, the outnumbered Benjaminites successfully defended Gibeah and killed 22,000 men of Israel. The Israelites wept over their losses, but God told them to try again. On the second day, the tribe of Benjamin drove Israel back again and killed another 18,000 of their men. The sons of Israel retreated to Bethel, where Phinehas the high priest ministered before the Ark of the Covenant, to ask God if they should continue fighting. The LORD told them to go up a third time.

Prior to advancing upon Gibeah the third day, the sons of Israel set up an ambush around the city. When a portion of Israel's army approached in the conventional manner, the men of Benjamin came out to fight as they had before. Feigning retreat, the Israelites drew the Benjaminites away from the city which allowed those lying in wait to ambush Gibeah while it was

defenseless. When the men of Benjamin realized what was going on, they turned back but were surrounded by Israelites on all sides. Ultimately, the sons of Israel soundly defeated the tribe of Benjamin killing over 25,000 men. They first destroyed the city of Gibeah, and then went about burning all of the other cities in Benjamin and killing their inhabitants too (men, women, and children). In the end, only 600 men of Benjamin remained - soldiers who had escaped and fled to the rock of Rimmon in the wilderness. They were the only surviving Benjaminites.

II. MOURNING THE LOST TRIBE (Judges 21:1-7)

After the war was over, the sons of Israel returned to Bethel. They had allowed their anger to get the best of them and had egregiously overreacted. As a result, the tribe of Benjamin had been virtually annihilated. The Israelites mourned deeply over what they had done. In sorrow, they built an altar and offered sacrifices to the LORD. What's more, they had sworn an oath not to give their daughters over to the Benjaminites in marriage. Thus, the 600 surviving men of Benjamin had no women to be their wives, and therefore no way to sustain their tribe from total extinction.

This is a great example of what happens when we act out hastily based on how we feel. Quite often we regret what we've done afterwards. Decisions and actions driven primarily by emotion can cause great damage and have lasting consequences. The Bible warns us against the dangers of emotional decision-making, and teaches us to act rationally and wisely in obedience to the LORD's commands.

III. WIVES FOR THE BENJAMINITES (Judges 21:8-25)

The Israelites devised a plan to provide wives for the remaining Benjaminites. They realized that no one from Jabesh-gilead had come to assist Israel in the civil war. Thus, Jabesh-gilead had not taken the vow to withhold their daughters from Benjamin. So the men of Israel sent an army of 12,000 men to Jabesh-gilead. They attacked it and killed all of its inhabitants except for 400 young virgins who had never been with a man. The sons of Israel made peace with the surviving soldiers of Benjamin, allowed them to return safely to their homes, and then gave these virgins to them. Unfortunately, there were not enough women for them all.

So the elders of Israel came up with another disturbing plan to address the shortage. Each year there was a feast held just east of Shiloh, where the tabernacle had been set up. Young virgins, among others, would come from Shiloh to take part in the dances that were being held there. The Israelites told the Benjaminites to lie in wait in the vineyards alongside the road and to abduct a sufficient number of the daughters of Shiloh to become wives for their remaining men. The sons of Israel promised not to exact any retribution against Benjamin for kidnapping these young women and taking them as wives. So this is what the Benjaminites did, and all of Israel departed and returned to their tribal territories.

Think about it for a minute... in order to prevent the tribe of Benjamin from disappearing (an issue which they themselves had created), the men of Israel needlessly annihilated an entire city and forcibly took their young women. When that was not enough, they sanctioned the

abduction of even more young women, reasoning that if the Benjaminites “stole” these virgins then technically they had not violated their vow not to give their daughters away. What a disturbing and disgraceful way of acquiring wives! They purposefully created and exploited a “loophole” that allowed them to keep their vows and maintain an appearance of righteousness. But would you honestly describe their behavior as pleasing to God? Both the Israelites and the Benjaminites who went along with them were morally corrupt and far from the LORD.

CONCLUSION

The final verse of Judges states, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” This same sentence is found in the story of Micah and the Danites which we studied a few weeks ago (Judges 17:6). Its wording suggests that these chapters were written by someone who lived during the era of the kings. Scholars believe that much of the book of Judges was written during the reign of King David to provide a historic record of events that took place during the time of the judges.

The writer was clearly suggesting that the people who lived during the early judges period used their freedom to make ill-advised and immoral choices. It is the natural tendency of fallen, corrupt men to think and act sinfully. There is no question that, following the conquest and the death of Joshua, the tribes of Israel became idolatrous, rebellious, and spiritually depraved. This is why it was necessary for God to raise up judges to deliver His people.

That said, this verse is sometimes mischaracterized and stretched to imply that a monarchy or strong centralized government is preferable and even necessary to make people act morally. Israel’s own history clearly demonstrates that this isn’t the case. Apart from King David and a few select others, most of Israel’s kings were “bad” and led the nation and its subsequent kingdoms astray. In fact, kings like Ahab in the north and Manasseh in the south caused Israel and Judah to commit great evils against God to the extent that both were eventually conquered. From a spiritual standpoint, it is unfair to disparage the era of the judges and refer to it as “the dark ages of Israel” when the years of the monarchy were substantially the same. In fact, I would argue that the independence Israel’s tribes enjoyed under the judges was more desirable than that the united nation of Israel experienced under most of her kings.

Here is my point. Freedom is a good thing and the ability to make one’s own choices without domineering interference from higher authorities is a blessing. We should remember that God prescribed the less restrictive regional leadership of the judges, while the more powerful kings were man’s idea - an approach that God strongly sought to discourage (1 Samuel 8). The problem during the era of the judges wasn’t that men had the right to make their own choices, but rather that they didn’t make the right choices. The one didn’t cause the other.

Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar

Originally Preached on 9/4/2022

The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. - Psalm 18:2

For the past 3 weeks we have been reading and discussing a pair of stories found in the appendix at the end of the book of Judges (chapters 17-21). The first told about Micah, the tribe of Dan, and an opportunistic Levite. The second described a heartless Levite, his runaway concubine, and a brief civil war between the 12 tribes. Chronologically speaking, both of these narratives took place in the early judges period. Together they provide supplementary evidence that supports the general description of Israel given in chapter 2. The children of God had become idolatrous, immoral, and immersed in sin.

As I stated a few weeks ago, there is a familiar pattern in the book of Judges. Israel would behave wickedly and invoke God's judgment. This in turn would lead to suffering and a cry of repentance. Then the LORD would hear His people's plea for mercy and would raise up a deliverer to rescue them. Once they had been liberated, they would gradually return to their sinful ways and the cycle would start over again. These deliverers were known as judges, and over the next several weeks we are going to learn a lot about them.

In this morning's message we are going to read about the first 3 judges of Israel. They were Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. Their stories are found in chapter 3. Let's take a look...

I. OTHNIEL (Judges 3:7-11)

The sons of Israel sinned against the LORD by serving the false gods of the Canaanites - the Baals and the Asheroth. God's anger burned hot against them and He turned them over to Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. Israel served under him for 8 long years.

Finally, when their persecution became severe, the Israelites cried out for help. God raised up Othniel, Caleb's nephew, to deliver them. This was the same Othniel who had earlier driven the Canaanites and the mighty sons of Anak out of the city of Debir (Joshua 15:16-17; Judges 1:12-13). The Spirit of God came upon Othniel, and he waged war against and prevailed over the king of Mesopotamia. As a result of his victory, the land was freed from oppression and enjoyed peace for 40 years until Othniel died.

Othniel was the first judge. He was a member of the tribe of Judah and lived in Judah. It is probable that the Mesopotamian dominance spoken of here only affected the tribe of Judah, and perhaps to a degree Simeon, as they were the southernmost tribes. Remember, these judges were regional and tribal leaders - Israel had not yet become a united nation with a single king.

II. EHUD (Judges 3:12-30)

Over time Israel reverted back to her old, sinful ways. Therefore God allowed Eglon, the king of neighboring Moab, to grow strong. Eglon allied himself with the Ammonites and the Amalekites. Together they defeated Israel and took possession of Jericho, aka “the city of palm trees”. It is believed that King Eglon resided there during certain seasons of the year. The Israelites served Eglon and paid tribute to him for 18 years.

After years of affliction, the sons of Israel cried out for deliverance and God raised up Ehud, the son of Gera. He was a Benjaminite who was left-handed. In the story we read about Israel’s civil war, the Bible stated that Benjamin’s army included 700 expert marksmen who could use a sling left-handed (Judges 20:16). Maybe Ehud was one of them and had survived the war... It’s something to think about.

Ehud made a 2-edged sword, about 18 inches long, and concealed it under his cloak by tying it to his right thigh. Then he and several others carried Israel’s recurring tribute payment to King Eglon and presented it. Afterward, Ehud sent his assistants away. They returned home by way of Gilgal, where apparently several idols had been set up. Meanwhile, Ehud stayed behind and told King Eglon that he had a secret message for him. The 2 men went upstairs to the cool, roof chamber where they could speak privately. When they were alone, Ehud quietly loosed his sword, leaned in to share his “secret”, and then thrust it into the king’s belly. Eglon was such an obese man that the entire blade and its handle were covered by his fat. Ehud left the sword inside the king’s body, shut and locked the doors, and quickly fled the scene.

Some time later the king’s servants went up to check on him. When they found the chamber’s doors were locked, they assumed that Eglon was cooling himself on the roof and didn’t want to be disturbed. However, after a while they became worried and knocked on the door. When he didn’t answer they unlocked the door, rushed in, and found King Eglon dead on the floor.

By this time Ehud had escaped to Seirah, bypassing the idols at Gilgal. When he arrived, Ehud blew a trumpet to summon the men of Ephraim. They came out from the hill country and gathered before him. He gave a stirring rally cry and led them into battle against the Moabites. Israel seized the fords of the Jordan River so that the fleeing enemy could not cross over it. With God’s backing the sons of Israel struck down around 10,000 Moabites and none of them escaped. Thus, Moab’s oppression over Israel ended and the land was at peace for 80 years.

Ehud was the second judge of Israel. His story pertains primarily to the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin. He was a brave and crafty man, who used deception and intrigue to assassinate the Moabite king and rescue his beleaguered people.

III. SHAMGAR (Judges 3:31)

After Ehud came Shamgar, the son of Anath. He was the third judge of Israel. He is the least well-known of the judges, as there is only 1 sentence dedicated to him in this chapter. He is also briefly mentioned in the song of Deborah (Judges 5:6), who we will study about next week. Apparently, during Shamgar’s lifetime the sons of Israel were terrorized by the Philistines - so

much so that they didn't travel openly on the highways, but rather stuck to the winding backgrounds for fear of them. Shamgar rose up and single-handedly killed 600 Philistines with an oxgoad, a pointed stick used for prodding oxen, thereby ending their threat to his people. Though not stated specifically, it would seem geographically that Shamgar was likely a judge over the tribes of Dan or Judah, seeing that the Philistines were the oppressors.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the first 3 judges of Israel were Othniel, Ehud, and Shangar. God used each of these men to deliver their respective tribes from the cruel hands of the enemy. They were strong and courageous men, just as the ancestors had been.

In a broad sense, the judges collectively point to Jesus Christ. Jesus came to deliver sinners from the grip of Satan and the chains of death. He is our ultimate Savior and Deliverer! So also, Jesus will someday be our judge. Every person will stand before His throne. Those who have received His forgiveness and been covered by His righteous will be pardoned, but those who haven't trusted in Him will be judged based on their works and be condemned by them.

There is only One who can deliver a person from the eternal consequences of sin. His name is Jesus. Have you accepted Him as the Lord and Savior of your life?

Deborah & Barak

Originally Preached on 9/11/2022

Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised. - Proverbs 31:30

In today's message we will meet Deborah, the 4th judge of Israel. She is regarded as one of the greatest female heroes in the Bible. As we will discover, God used Deborah in a mighty way to deliver His people from the cruel hand of the Canaanites. In addition to Deborah, we will also read about another brave and courageous woman named Jael. This morning's sermon highlights the important role that women play in God's kingdom.

I. KING JABIN RULES OVER ISRAEL (Judges 4:1-10)

After Ehud died, the children of Israel began practicing idolatry and acts of iniquity once again. Therefore God sold them over to Jabin, the king of Canaan. He reigned from Hazor, an Israelite city north of the Sea of Chinnereth, in the territory of Naphtali. His military commander, Sisera, and formidable army were stationed to the south at Harosheth-hagoyim. These locations suggest that Jabin had subdued and was ruling over several of the northern tribes, including Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali, and perhaps Asher. The Canaanites had 900 iron chariots and oppressed Israel for 20 agonizing years.

In those days, Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging in Israel. She was a prophetess who ministered in the hill country of Ephraim, between Ramah and Bethel, where she sat under a palm tree and rendered judgments to those who came for her counsel. The LORD spoke to Deborah concerning His plan to rescue the northern tribes, so she summoned Barak, the son of Abinoam. When he arrived, Deborah told Barak to muster up an army of 10,000 troops from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali to wage war with Sisera's Canaanite forces. Barak was unsure about Deborah's suggestion and asked her to go with him, so the 2 of them returned together to Kadesh and assembled an army.

II. BATTLE AT THE KISHON RIVER (Judges 4:12-16)

When Sisera received a report that the Israelites had come down to Mount Tabor, he led his soldiers and their 900 iron chariots out to meet them at the Kishon River. Deborah assured Barak that the LORD would deliver the Canaanites into Israel's hand. Feeling confident, Barak and the men of Israel hurried from Mount Tabor to the flowing Kishon and attacked Sisera's troops. God sent torrential rainfall which caused the waters of the river to suddenly flood, thereby crippling the Canaanite chariots (Judges 5:4,20-21). Canaan was soundly defeated and tried to retreat, but the Israelites pursued them as far as Harosheth-hagoyim and killed them all. Somehow Sisera managed to escape on foot.

III. Jael Kills Sisera (Judges 4:11,17-22)

Sisera fled from the battle to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. The Kenites were descendants of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who had migrated to the Promised Land years earlier with the Hebrews during the exodus. The house of Heber was at peace with King Jabin and the Canaanites, so the tent of Jael would seem to be a safe place for Sisera to rest and hide. However, unbeknownst to the fleeing commander, Jael was apparently sympathetic toward Israel.

Jael met Sisera outside, kindly invited him in, hid him under a cover, gave him some milk to drink, and even stood watch in the doorway of the tent. However, when the exhausted Sisera fell asleep, Jael quietly took a hammer and drove a tent peg through his temple and into the ground. Thus, Sisera died at the hands of a woman just as Deborah had prophesied (Judges 4:9). Sometime later, when Barak arrived in pursuit, Jael brought him into her tent and showed him what she'd done.

IV. DEBORAH'S SONG OF VICTORY (Judges 4:23-24;5:1-31)

After securing the victory, Deborah and Barak sang a song of celebration and praise. It was a song of thanksgiving to God and to the men of Israel who had volunteered to fight against the Canaanites. Its lyrics described the condition of Israel prior to the battle, detailed how Deborah and Barak assembled an army of Israelites from among the tribes, and even depicted God's supernatural intervention during the battle itself. The song cheered Jael for her bravery and described the mother of Sisera's deep sorrow. In the end, Deborah's song called for God's enemies to perish and for His children to rise up mightily.

After his military was decimated, King Jabin could no longer keep a firm grip on the northern tribes of Israel. They were soon able to free themselves from his dominance. The land enjoyed peace for 40 years.

CONCLUSION

Deborah's faith and courage inspired Barak and the men of Israel to rebel against King Jabin, Sisera, and the 900 chariots of Canaan. At first, Barak was doubtful and afraid. He was uncertain that he and the Israelites could defeat their enemy. He asked Deborah to walk alongside him and serve with him in the revolt. Over time, her unwavering strength and trust in the LORD rubbed off on him. Barak bravely led Israel into battle and God gave them the victory. But none of this would have happened apart from Deborah's leadership. Her godly example made it possible.

Some progressive Christians have tried to use the story of Deborah to argue that women should be allowed to serve as pastors. Southern Baptists have historically opposed this view. Let's be clear... This story doesn't have anything to do with pastors. In fact, the New Testament church did not yet exist nor would it for over 1,000 years and neither did the office of pastor. Deborah was a judge in ancient Israel - not the pastor of a post-Pentecost, Christian church. The 2 positions are not the same and have no direct relevance to each other.

Consider this... I am certain that there were men outside of the tribe of Levi who could have ministered in the temple just as well as the Levites. I am confident that there were godly men not of the line of Aaron that could have been dynamic high priests. But they were excluded from these positions - not because of their ability or lack thereof - but because it was contrary to God's design. The LORD ordained that particular responsibilities and roles be filled by particular people. That said, in accordance with God's creative design, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture (1 Timothy 2:11-12;3:1-7).

Beloved, there is no doubt that women can serve as leaders in the kingdom of God just as effectively as men - in some cases, more effectively. And I am extremely thankful for the godly women in my life who have helped me grow in Christ. To both of my grandmothers, my mother, and my wife especially I say thank you. I am grateful for the many righteous women in churches where I have attended and/or pastored over the years who have made a positive impact on my life, including many of you. Like Deborah, you have been a source of strength and inspiration for me and, I trust, many, many others. May God richly bless you.

Gideon (Part 1)

Originally Preached on 9/18/2022

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, - 1 Corinthians 1:26-27

Let's begin this morning with a quick review. We are going to play, "Name That Judge". Ready? Which judge single handedly killed 600 Philistines with an oxgoad? Which left-handed judge rescued Israel by assassinating an overweight Moabite king? Which female judge inspired the men of Israel to rise up and defeat the Canaanites? Who was the first of the judges, who delivered Israel from the king of Mesopotamia? The answers are: Shamgar, Ehud, Deborah, and Othniel. How did you do?

This morning and next Sunday we will learn about the 5th judge of Israel. He is one of the most well known of the judges. His name is Gideon. There are 3 chapters devoted to him in the book of Judges - chapters 6 through 8. In today's message we will concentrate on chapter 6 and save the other 2 chapters for next week. Here we go!

I. OPPRESSED BY MIDIAN (Judges 6:1-10)

Once again the sons of Israel turned from God and did evil in His sight. Thus, the LORD turned them over to Midian. For 7 years the Midianites prevailed over Israel. Things were so bad that the Israelites made dens for themselves in mountain caves to escape the oppression. The men of Midian, along with the Amalekites and other sons of the east, would come up each season and destroy the agricultural produce and crops of Israel leaving them without any sustenance. Furthermore, the Midianites would bring their own animals and livestock to graze what little was left, leaving the land utterly devastated.

The people of Israel were suffering greatly and they cried out to the LORD. So God sent a prophet to speak to them. The prophet reminded the Israelites that the LORD had delivered their forefathers from Egyptian slavery and had given them the Promised Land. He further stated that God had commanded Israel not to fear the gods of the Amorites, though they obviously didn't listen.

Those who don't learn from their past are destined to repeat it. Every time God rescued His people, they would inevitably drift back into their sin. God sent messengers to confront them about their waywardness and disbelief, but the people never seemed to learn their lesson. Sound familiar?

II. GIDEON'S CALLING (Judges 6:11-24)

The angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, the son of Joash, in Ophrah, while he was beating out wheat in a wine press to keep from being seen by the Midianites. Ironically, the angel called Gideon a "valiant warrior" and told him that the LORD was with Israel. Gideon questioned how the LORD could be with his people in light of the persecution that they were enduring. Then the angel, who was actually the LORD Himself in the form of an angel (I believe Him to be another preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ), called Gideon to deliver Israel from the heavy hand of Midian.

Upon hearing the LORD's call, Gideon openly doubted that someone of his lowly standing (he was the youngest member of an obscure family from Manasseh) could rescue Israel from anyone. But God promised to be with Gideon and assured him that he would defeat Midian. Still skeptical, Gideon asked the LORD to wait there under the oak tree until he returned to offer a sacrifice. The LORD agreed and Gideon hurried away to prepare a young goat and some unleavened bread. When he returned, Gideon presented his offering in accordance with the angel's instructions, it was supernaturally consumed by fire, and the angel vanished. Gideon was convinced that he'd seen the LORD and God told him not to fear. To commemorate what had happened, Gideon built an altar there in Ophrah and named it "The LORD is Peace".

III. THE ALTAR OF BAAL (Judges 6:25-35)

That same night, God commanded Gideon to pull down his father's altar to Baal and topple the Asherah tree beside it. In its place, Gideon was to build an altar to the LORD and offer a bull as a burnt offering on it using the very wood from the Asherah tree he'd cut down. Gideon was afraid to do this during the daylight for fear of what his father's household and the men of the city might do. He obeyed God's command, but he did it secretly during the dark of night.

The next morning, it was discovered that the altar of Baal and the Asherah had been destroyed. The men of the city were furious and came out to seize Gideon and execute him. Somewhat surprisingly, Gideon's idol-worshipping father Joash came to his son's defense. Joash reasoned that if Baal was truly god he could contend for himself and that their contention on his behalf was uncalled for. The men of the city dispersed. Joash gave Gideon a new name - Jerubbaal, meaning "Baal will contend".

Meanwhile, the Midianites, Amalekites, and other sons of the east assembled their forces, crossed over into Israel, and camped in the valley of Jezreel. The Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, he blew a trumpet, and gathered the fighting men of his clan - the Abiezrites - together. He also sent messengers to the rest of Manasseh, as well as the tribes of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. They came up to join him and the army of the LORD.

IV. THE SIGN OF THE FLEECE (Judges 6:36-40)

Even with his large army, Gideon remained uncertain that God would deliver Israel through him. He asked the LORD to show him a sign. Gideon laid a fleece out on the threshing floor and asked God to put dew on it only, but none on the ground around it, to indicate that Israel would

be victorious. The next morning, the fleece was soaking wet with dew and the ground was dry. But Gideon was still not convinced, so he asked the LORD for another sign. This time he asked that the fleece remain dry and the ground become wet with dew. The next morning, it was so.

CONCLUSION

When God approached Gideon, he was literally hiding from the Midianites in a wine press. When the LORD called him to deliver Israel, Gideon wondered how God could use someone as insignificant and inept as he was. Gideon even asked for the angel to stick around while he presented an offering to prove that He was actually the LORD. Gideon feared his own father and the men of the city so much that he decided to tear down the altar of Baal at night. On top of this, he used a fleece to seek God's reassurance again - not once, but twice!

Let's face it... Gideon was a nervous wreck. He was timid, cowardly, and very unsure of himself. He would seem like the last person you'd choose to lead the men of Israel in battle against Midian. Yet God referred to him as a valiant warrior. Amazing! God saw Gideon for what he could be - what he'd become - rather than for what he was. The LORD uses those which the world overlooks to accomplish great things.

Do you feel unworthy? Afraid? Unsure of yourself? Are you unqualified? Uneducated? Unimportant? A nobody? Weak? Broken? Beaten down? Scared? Trying just not to be noticed? If so, you are just the type of person God is looking for. Perhaps you think of yourself as a chump, but God sees you as a champion. Would you trust Him today?

Gideon (Part 2)

Originally Preached on 9/25/2022

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. - Luke 12:32

Gideon was an unlikely hero. He was easily frightened and always nervous. In part 1 of our message last week, we discovered that Gideon repeatedly asked God for signs of His presence and approval. Though he needed constant reassurance, to his credit Gideon was obedient to the LORD's calling. He faithfully amassed a large army of men to fight against the Midianite alliance that had been persecuting Israel for the past 7 years.

This morning we will conclude our study of Gideon, the 5th judge of Israel. We will learn how God used Gideon to deliver His people. Today's sermon is called "Gideon, Part 2".

I. GIDEON'S ARMY (Judges 7:1-8)

Gideon and his army camped near the spring of Harod in the southern Jezreel Valley. To their north (approximately 4 or 5 miles), the Midianites were positioned at the hill of Moreh on the opposite side of the valley. Then the LORD spoke to Gideon, telling him that his Israelite army was too large. With such a sizable force, God warned that Israel would - after their upcoming victory - boast that they'd delivered themselves. So God instructed Gideon to reduce the size of the army. Gideon made an announcement allowing anyone who was afraid to be dismissed immediately (I'm surprised that he didn't go). Some 22,000 people departed, leaving an army of only 10,000 soldiers.

However, God told Gideon that this was still too many. He instructed Gideon to take his remaining troops down to the spring and to drink of its waters. He was to separate those who lapped the water like a dog from their cupped hands from those knelt down to drink. After they had drunk, God ordered Gideon to release everyone who had knelt and to keep only those who had lapped the water. Gideon obeyed the LORD and his army was reduced to only 300 men. He gave each of them provisions and a trumpet in anticipation of the coming battle.

II. MIDIAN'S CONFUSION (Judges 7:9-23)

The LORD commanded Gideon to attack Midian, but offered to show him a final sign if he was still anxious. Needing a bit more assurance, Gideon and his servant Purah snuck down to the outpost of the Midianite camp during the night. Apparently the Midianites were approaching and were now located in the central Jezreel Valley. They were a vast army, as numerous as locusts, with many camels. Gideon overheard one of the Midianite soldiers relaying a dream he'd had to his friend. He'd dreamt of a barley bread loaf rolling down into the Midianite camp and knocking over a tent. His friend feared that this loaf represented the sword of Gideon and the dream indicated that God had given Midian over to Israel.

Upon overhearing this conversation, Gideon was once again reassured of the coming victory. He worshiped the LORD and hurriedly returned to his small army of 300 men. He confidently proclaimed that God had given them the victory. He divided his forces into 3 companies of 100 troops and gave each of them a trumpet and an earthen pitcher with a torch inside. He spread the 3 companies out around the Midianite camp on all sides and ordered them to follow his lead. When everyone was in position, during the middle of the night, Gideon loudly blew his trumpet and smashed his pot, revealing the light of the blazing torch concealed inside. All 300 of his men did likewise and cried out simultaneously, "A sword for the LORD and a sword for Gideon!"

The Midianites thought that they were surrounded by thousands of Israelite soldiers. The LORD sent confusion among their camp and they were overcome with terror, so much so that they began striking each other down in the darkness. In complete disarray, the army of Midian hastily retreated eastward. Gideon quickly summoned volunteers from the tribes of Manasseh, Naphtali, Asher, and Ephraim to chase them down.

III. ISRAEL'S PURSUIT (Judges 7:24-8:21)

The men of Ephraim captured 2 of the Midianite commanders as they fled through their territory - Oreb and Zeeb. The Ephraimites killed them both, cut off their heads, and brought them to Gideon. They contended with Gideon for not inviting them earlier to join his army. But rather than arguing with them, Gideon lauded the greatness of Ephraim and praised them for catching Oreb and Zeeb. By stroking their egos, Gideon appeased their anger and the men of Ephraim were satisfied.

Gideon and his army crossed the Jordan River and continued pursuing the surviving Midianites. Along the way, he stopped at both Succoth and Penuel seeking provisions from the people to refresh his hungry and exhausted men. Neither the citizens of Succoth or Penuel were willing to help Gideon, so he vowed to return to both cities and discipline them severely once his pursuit of Midian was complete.

Gideon eventually caught up with the remaining 15,000 Midianites at Karkor. He attacked them unexpectedly, routed them, and captured their 2 kings Zeba and Zalmunna. On his return home, Gideon stopped in Succoth and punished their 77 elders with briars and thorns for their earlier behavior. He also tore down the tower of Penuel and killed their leaders. Finally, Gideon charged Zeba and Zalmunna for killing his brothers at Tabor and asked his oldest son, Jether, to execute them. However, Jether was afraid because he was just a youth, so Gideon killed the 2 kings himself and took the ornaments from their camels.

IV. THE LAND'S PEACE (Judges 8:22-35)

After the Midianites had been soundly defeated, the men of Israel asked Gideon and his son to become rulers over them. Gideon refused, stating that only the LORD should rule over them. However, Gideon did request that each of them give him an earring from the spoil they had taken. When all of the earrings were collected, their combined weight was 1,700 shekels of gold.

(worth approximately \$1,000,000 today). In addition to these, numerous other crescent ornaments, pendants, and other valuables were taken from the Midianites. Gideon used a portion of these to make a priestly ephod so that offerings could be made from the altar he'd built in his hometown of Ophrah in the land of Manassah. Unfortunately, Israel would soon use this altar to commit idolatry.

Following the demise of the Midianites, Israel enjoyed prosperity and peace for 40 years. During this time, Gideon married many wives and had 70 sons who were his direct descendants. He also had a son from his concubine in Shechem named Abimelech. Gideon died at an old age and was buried in a family tomb in Ophrah. After his death, the Israelites began worshiping Baal once again and quickly forgot how the LORD had used Gideon to deliver them from the hand of Midian.

CONCLUSION

I want to make 2 points as we close today. First, I find it truly amazing that God used Gideon's "weakness" as a means to secure the victory. Let me explain... Remember last week when we read that Gideon destroyed his father's altar to Baal at night because he was afraid of being seen? Gideon was good at hiding. So God allowed Gideon and his army to use stealth and deception, under the dark of night, as their battle plan. He didn't ask Gideon to courageously charge into battle in broad daylight, but rather considered Gideon's limitations and used them to Israel's advantage.

Second, as the pastor of a small church (2 of them actually), I absolutely love this passage. It proves that God doesn't need large congregations to accomplish great things. He used 300 men to defeat thousands of Midianites. He used a few fish and bread loaves to feed 5,000 men and their families. He used 12 apostles to establish the Church and carry the gospel to the nations. We may be small, but our God isn't. Imagine the remarkable things that He can do through us!

Abimelech

Originally Preached on 10/2/2022

'Who struck down Abimelech, the son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?'—then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.' - 2 Samuel 11:21

This morning we will be discussing Abimelech. Unlike others we've highlighted in recent weeks, Abimelech was not a judge. The Bible never refers to him as one. The judges were called and/or used by God to deliver His people from the hands of their enemies (either militarily or diplomatically). As we will see in today's message, Abimelech was never chosen by God nor did he deliver the Israelites from anyone. On the contrary, he caused them great harm.

Though Abimelech was not a judge, his story is included in the book of Judges. It is an addendum to the account of Gideon, which we've covered over the past 2 weeks. Abimelech was Gideon's son, born of a concubine in Shechem, and he had 70 brothers (Judges 8:30-31). Abimelech has been dubbed the "anti-judge" by some commentators because of his vile and destructive behavior.

I. ABIMELECH BECOMES KING (Judges 9:1-21)

After Gideon's death, Abimelech went to speak with his mother's family in Shechem. He asked them whether they would prefer having the 70 sons of Gideon rule over them or have 1 man - a relative - rule over them. He was, of course, referring to himself. The men of Shechem naturally chose Abimelech to be their ruler and gave him 70 pieces of silver from the house of Baal-berith, a Canaanite god. Abimelech used the money to hire a band of ruthless killers and they went to his hometown of Ophrah. There he rounded up his 70 brothers and murdered them all except for Jotham, the youngest, who somehow managed to escape. Then the men of Shechem and Beth-millo assembled together and crowned Abimelech as their king.

Upon hearing this, Jotham came out from hiding and climbed up to the top of Mt. Gerizim. He cried out using an analogy of various trees to illustrate how the men of Shechem had rejected the more honorable, noble sons of Gideon and had instead selected a wicked, worthless son to be their king. Jotham pronounced a curse upon the men of Shechem and Beth-millo and their newly anointed king Abimelech, that they might consume each other. Then Jotham fled to Beer where he would be safe from his evil brother.

It is important to point out that, several years earlier, when the sons of Israel asked Gideon to rule over them he outright refused, stating that only God should rule over them (Judges 8:22-23). In contrast, Gideon's son Abimelech was eager to rule over Shechem and even killed his own brothers to prevent any possible challenges to his authority. This story is an early indication that portions of Israel were already desiring to replace tribal judges with kings.

II. ABIMELECH DESTROYS SHECHEM (Judges 9:22-49)

Abimelech ruled over the Israelites in and around Shechem for 3 years. Then God sent a divisive spirit between him and the men of the city, so that they began to conspire against him. The men of Shechem met with Gaal, the son of Ebed, and threw their support behind him in hopes of overthrowing Abimelech. When Abimelech's lieutenant Zebul learned of their conniving intentions, he notified the king.

So Abimelech set an ambush around the city and when morning came he attacked Gaal's forces. At first Gaal didn't realize what was happening, and by the time he did it was too late. Abimelech's men soundly defeated Gaal's followers and crushed their attempted coup. Gaal and his relatives were driven out of Shechem. The next day, Abimelech also struck the people of Shechem who had sympathized with Gaal's failed conspiracy. He captured the city, killed its citizens, burned it with fire, and sowed its ruins with salt.

Abimelech learned that the leading families of Shechem - those who had supported Gaal's attempted rebellion - had taken refuge in the inner chamber of the temple of El-berith. He and his followers went to the wooded area of nearby Mount Zalmon to cut branches and limbs from the trees. They returned to the temple of El-Berith, placed the wood over it, and set it afire. The blaze killed all of those who had gathered inside the chamber - about 1,000 men and women. Thus, all of the men of Shechem were destroyed.

III. ABIMELECH IS KILLED (Judges 9:50-57)

Apparently Abimelech was still concerned that other rebels, besides the men of Shechem, were still out there plotting against him. So the enraged king set his sights on the neighboring city of Thebez. He and his men camped against it and captured it. When they came into Thebez, they discovered that its citizens had retreated into the city's tower. Abimelech decided to burn the tower of Thebez down, which would kill all those trapped inside, as he had done previously to the temple in Shechem.

However, when Abimelech approached the entrance of the tower to light the fire, a woman threw an upper millstone from the top of the tower at him. It struck Abimelech on the head and crushed his skull. Not wanting to be killed by a woman, the dying king ordered his armor bearer to pierce him with a sword. The young man did so, and Abimelech died. Upon his death, Abimelech's followers disbanded and everyone returned to their homes.

Thus, God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech. He had disparaged the good name of his father Gideon and had murdered all of his brothers except Jotham. So also, God repaid the wickedness of the men of Shechem who had initially supported Abimelech's violent rampage. In the end, God's prophetic warning as declared by Jotham came to pass - the king and his supporters were all consumed (Judges 9:20).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me reiterate that Abimelech was not a judge. He was not called or used by God to deliver Israel from her enemies. On the contrary, he convinced his relatives to make him king and was violent and cruel towards his own people. He killed the citizens of Shechem and almost killed those of Thebez as well. Abimelech was an evil, wicked man who had a lust for power and control.

Remember, at this point Israel was not a united nation. Abimelech was only king over Shechem and the surrounding area, not over all of Israel or even over a single tribe. His dominion was limited and localized. Nevertheless, it foreshadowed the coming era of the monarchy in which kings would rule over the nation of Israel rather than judges over the various tribes. Abimelech's brief and disastrous reign should have served as a warning about the dangers of having a human king, but ultimately the people would demand one anyway (often to their own detriment). Gideon was right when he said that only "the LORD shall rule over you." (Judges 8:23)

Tola, Jair, and the Ammonite Oppression

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When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. - Proverbs 16:7

Last Sunday we spoke about Abimelech - the "anti-judge". Though some Bible students do, I side with those who do not accept him as 1 of the 12 judges listed in the book of Judges. He was not called or empowered by God to deliver any Israelites from the hands of their enemies. On the contrary, Abimelech was an evil king who reigned over the city and vicinity of Shechem.

Therefore, the 5 actual judges we've discussed thus far are: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, and Gideon. In today's message, we will introduce the next 2 judges - Tola and Jair. Both were minor judges, again meaning that we don't have many details about their lives. Nevertheless, we do know a few things about them so let's take a look...

I. TOLA (Judges 10:1-2)

After Abimelech was killed, Tola became the 6th judge in Israel. He was the son of Puah and the grandson of Dodo. Tola was from the tribe of Issachar, but lived in Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. God raised him up to save Israel, though the Bible doesn't say from what or from whom. Tola judged Israel 23 years before his death and burial in his hometown Shamir.

Tola was a member of the tribe of Issachar, yet he lived in Shamir. Shamir was located in the northern region of Ephraim, near the borders of Manassah and Issachar. Tola lived outside of his tribal region, an indication that the tribes were becoming less distinct and more blended in their relations with one another. This trend would eventually lead to the coalescence of the tribes into a single nation with a unified identity.

The Bible doesn't tell us specifically who Tola delivered Israel from or how he did so. Various theories have arisen pertaining to this question. Personally, I think that his residence in the city of Shamir might be a clue. Shamir was not far from Shechem, the city that Abimelech destroyed after his 3 year reign. It is quite possible that Tola delivered Israel from the chaotic aftermath of Abimelech's murderous kingship by leading the rebuilding and restoration of Shechem, as well as revival and renewal in the hearts of the people who'd been affected.

II. JAIR (Judges 10:3-5)

After Tola, Jair arose and judged Israel for 22 years. He was from Gilead, just beyond the Jordan River on the eastern side. Israelites who lived in Gilead were members of the half-tribe of Manasseh. Jair had 30 sons who rode on 30 donkeys and each ruled over their own city - 30 cities. Together, these cities became known as Havvoth-jair, which means the settlements of Jair. He died and was buried in Kamon in Gilead.

Jair was the 7th judge of Israel. He and his sons ruled over a network of cities. Some scholars have suggested that these were not necessarily his literal biological sons, but rather were simply young men who looked up to Jair like a father. It seems likely that Jair was wealthy and bountifully blessed by God. His time was apparently marked by calmness and order, as donkeys aren't suited for warfare, but rather for peace. This foreshadows the coming of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, who rode into Jerusalem triumphantly on a donkey (Matthew 21:1–11, Mark 11:1–11, Luke 19:28–44, John 12:12–19).

III. AMMONITE OPPRESSION (Judges 10:6-18)

Following Jair's death, the children of Israel returned to their evil and idolatrous practices. They served the Baals, the Ashtarothe, and the various pagan gods of the surrounding nations. The fury of the LORD burned against them and He sold them over to the Philistines and the Ammonites. The Israelites in Gilead, because of their proximity to the land of Ammon, suffered greatly. In addition, the sons of Ammon also crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land and oppressed the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim. This affliction and distress persisted for 18 years.

Finally the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD and confessed their sins. God answered by reminding them of His past faithfulness. He pointedly questioned why they had not relied on Him for deliverance and sarcastically challenged them to look to the pagan gods they'd been worshiping for salvation. The Israelites cried out all the more, until God couldn't bear their misery any longer. In accordance with His compassionate mercy, the LORD prepared to rescue His imperfect people yet again.

The adversarial Ammonites gathered their forces and camped somewhere in the region of Gilead. Meanwhile, the Israelites gathered an army together at Mizpah, also in Gilead. However, the men of Israel did not have anyone to lead them into battle. They declared that whoever would fill this position would be given leadership over all of the inhabitants of Gilead. Their statement set the stage for the sudden rise of the next judge... who we will introduce and discuss next week.

CONCLUSION

The judges can be classified into 2 categories based upon the circumstances and nature of their leadership. The first 5 judges delivered their tribes from the persecution of a specific, named enemy. Othniel rescued Israel from the king of Mesopotamia, Ehud saved them from the Moabites, Shamgar from the Philistines, Deborah from the Canaanites (with Barak's help), and Gideon from the Midianites. They were used by God to save His people militarily.

However, there is no indication that either Tola or Jair faced such external persecution from an outside enemy. They judged over their respective tribes more diplomatically, focusing on the internal issues specific to Israel. They fostered an environment of righteousness and prosperity during a season of peace. Tola and Jair appeared to be more focus on domestic issues, such as

infrastructure and the economy. You could say that, for almost 50 years, through godly leadership they delivered Israel from herself - from her own sin tendencies and habits that invariably led to God's judgment.

As we continue our series together and highlight the remaining judges, consider for yourself if each was primarily a militaristic judge or a diplomatic judge. In fact, most of them displayed both characteristics. They may have begun by leading an army of God, but afterward they oversaw the people of God. It kind of reminds me of the contrast between King David and his son King Solomon.

Anywho... next Sunday we will continue this story. Who will Israel find to lead them into battle against the mighty Ammonites? Who will God provide as the next judge? Be here next week to find out. Until then, may the LORD bless and keep you.

Jephthah

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Then the Lord sent Jerubbaal and Bedan and Jephthah and Samuel, and delivered you from the hands of your enemies all around, so that you lived in security. - 1 Samuel 12:11

Greetings. Thank you for joining us in worship this morning! This year we have been studying the Conquest and Judicial era of Israelite history. We began in the book of Joshua and are now working our way through Judges. Thus far, we have introduced the first 7 judges: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, and Jair.

After Jair's death, Israel drifted into idolatry and the LORD allowed the Ammonites to oppress the people of Israel - namely the Manassites living in Gilead, the Judahites, the Benjaminites, and the Ephraimites. This heavy persecution went on for 18 years. Finally the men of Israel put together an army to mount a rebellion against Ammon, but they needed a leader. Who would the LORD provide?

I. JEPHTHAH IS CHOSEN (Judges 11:1-11)

Jephthah, the son of Gilead, was known as a valiant warrior, and thus suitable candidate to lead the soldiers of Israel. There was just 1 problem... he was the son of a harlot. Gilead's wife had bore him several sons who collectively despised their half-brother Jephthah because he had a different mother. When they were grown, these brothers drove Jephthah out and withheld his inheritance. So Jephthah fled to the land of Tob where he befriended and associated with an unscrupulous crowd.

In light of their dire circumstances, the leaders of Gilead set aside their biases and went to find Jephthah. They asked him to be the leader of their army. Jephthah was surprised by their request, seeing how they had mistreated him in the past, and was hesitant to accept their offer. But the elders of Gilead urged him, so Jephthah ultimately agreed to serve as their leader. Though he had surrounded himself with worthless men, his speech indicates that Jephthah knew the LORD. He returned to Mizpah to prepare Israel for the coming battle.

II. GILEAD BELONGS TO ISRAEL (Judges 11:12-28)

Jephthah sent messengers to the king of Ammon to ask why they had come to fight against Israel. The king answered that, from his perspective, Israel had stolen Ammonite land during the exodus many years before and they had come to take it back. Jephthah strongly refuted this outrageous claim and offered a few counter arguments.

First, he recounted how the Israelites had asked permission to travel through both Edom and Moab during the exodus, but were peacefully denied passage - so they went around. But when they asked if they might travel through the land of the Amorites, they were met with force and hostility. Israel did not initiate the conflict, but fought back and defeated the Amorites. Having

been victorious, they occupied and possessed the conquered territory. Thus, God gave Israel the land - they didn't take it as alleged. The Ammonites had done the exact same thing when their god gave them the land of the Amorites.

Second, Jephthah noted that king Balak of Moab never engaged in war with the Israelites even when they settled adjacent to his territory. Third, he wondered why the Ammonites had quietly allowed Israel to live in this "disputed area" for hundreds of years and were just now claiming it had been stolen. In short, Jephthah rejected the ridiculous notion that Gilead belonged to Ammon and he intended to defend it.

III. JEPHTHAH'S TRAGIC VOW (Judges 11:29-40)

The Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah and he boldly led the sons of Israel out to face the Ammonites. Prior to leaving for the battle, Jephthah made a vow to the LORD that if God would give Israel the victory he'd offer up as a burnt offering the first thing that came out of the door of his house upon his return. Jephthah and the Israelites fought against and soundly defeated the sons of Ammon, so that their oppression of God's people ended.

When Jephthah came home after the battle, his only child - a daughter - came out of the house to meet him joyfully playing a tambourine and dancing. Jephthah was devastated because of the vow he'd made, which compelled him now to sacrifice his daughter. Jephthah's daughter agreed with her father that he couldn't take back his vow and voluntarily consented to be offered as a burnt offering. However, she requested to go away for 2 months to mourn her virginity with her female friends. Jephthah allowed it, and after the 2 months ended, he carried through with the vow he'd made. Mourning over the fate of Jephthah's daughter became a custom in Israel.

Scholars dispute whether Jephthah actually killed his daughter or instead committed her to the tabernacle as an alternative way of fulfilling his vow. Either way, she was lost to him and never bore him grandchildren. The Bible is clear that God does not accept or condone child sacrifice.

IV. EPHRAIM'S PRETENTIOUS DISGUST (Judges 12:1-7)

The men of Ephraim were furious that they had not been asked to participate in the conflict with Ammon. Remember this same attitude back in the days of Gideon (Judges 8:1)? They hastily came to Jephthah at Zaphon in Gilead and threatened to kill him. Jephthah answered that he had, in fact, invited them to join Israel in the battle, but they didn't come. Therefore, he'd gone ahead without Ephraim's support and the LORD gave Israel the victory despite their absence. Apparently the Ephraimites took offense to Jephthah's answer. They slandered the Gileadites and started fighting against them.

The Gileadites defeated the antagonizing Ephraimites and killed 42,000 of their men. They seized the fords of the Jordan River and wouldn't allow the men of Ephraim to cross over it to get back home. The Gileadites would ask those who came to the river to say "Shibboleth" as a means of identifying the fleeing fugitives of Ephraim, because the Ephraimites pronounced it

differently. If an Ephriamite was discovered, they were immediately killed. Today, the Shibboleth test can be applied to Christians in this way - do the words you say and the things you do confirm who you claim to be or do they reveal you to be a fraud?

Jephthah was the 8th judge of Israel. He lived and ministered in Gilead, beyond the Jordan River. He served for 6 years. Upon his death, Jephthah was buried somewhere in Gilead - some Bible translations say it was in his hometown of Mizpah.

CONCLUSION

Jephthah was an imperfect character. He made a rash, ill-conceived, and foolish vow to the LORD that ended up costing him dearly. He possibly offered his own daughter as a burnt offering to God, a vile and disgusting act which would have been vigorously rejected by the LORD. He also killed many of his own countrymen - the Ephraimites - because of their pompous speech and aggressive conduct.

Despite his many flaws, God used Jephthah to deliver Israel from the hands of Ammom. Jephthah was an outcast who was shunned by his family and consigned to live with the undesirable people of Israel. But rather than harbor bitterness and hatred against his own brethren, Jephthah rose up to save them from their enemies. Unlike the evil Abimelech, who vengefully killed his brothers, Jephthah rescued his relatives and became their judge.

Jephthah illustrates that a person should never be judged on the basis of factors beyond his or her control. Jephthah couldn't help that his mother was a prostitute. He didn't get to choose the circumstances of his birth or what family he was born into. Still, Jephthah wasn't disqualified from godly service because of his questionable background or family tree. God used Jephthah, and He can use you too.

Ibzan and the Story of Ruth (Part 1)

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But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. - 1 Timothy 5:8

Good morning, Beloved. It's time once again to play "Name That Judge". Here we go...

The 5th judge in Israel, who defeated the Midianites with an army of just 300 men.

The 2nd judge in Israel, who assassinated the obese king Eglon of Moab.

The 7th judge in Israel, who oversaw 30 cities in the land of Gilead.

The 3rd judge in Israel, who killed 600 Philistines with an oxgoad.

The 8th judge in Israel, who defeated the Ammonites but tragically lost his virgin daughter.

The 1st judge in Israel, who led his people against the king of Mesopotamia.

The 6th judge in Israel, who may have helped rebuild and revive the city Shechem.

The 4th judge of Israel, who inspired the nervous men of Israel to battle the Canaanites.

Bonus... The anti-judge, who served 3 years as an evil king and was struck with a millstone.

This morning we are going to meet and discuss the next judge of Israel. His story will take us beyond the book of Judges to another, shorter book of the Bible. It is a beautiful tale of loyalty, love, and redemption that took place during the era of the judges... the story of Ruth.

I. IBZAN (Judges 12:8-10)

The 9th judge of Israel was a man named Ibzan. He lived, served, and died in Bethlehem. Ibzan judged over this region for 7 years. He had 30 sons and 30 daughters, whom he permitted and even arranged to marry outside of the family. Following this approach, Ibzan established numerous positive relationships with other groups, tribes, and neighboring nations to foster a season of peace and stability. Apparently he was a wealthy, successful, and highly skilled diplomat.

The writings and teachings of the ancient Jewish rabbis (as recorded in the Talmud) state that Ibzan is the same person as Boaz (notice similarities in their spelling). However many modern scholars dispute this claim, citing credible Biblical evidence to the contrary. Some have argued that Ibzan judged in Bethlehem of Galilee to the north, within the tribal boundaries of Zebulun, while Boaz lived in the more well-known southern Bethlehem of Judah.

The Bible does not clearly or definitively identify Ibzan as Boaz. Having studied the issue, I am not fully convinced that they are the same man. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this series, seeing as we don't know for certain, this seems to be a good place to insert the story of Ruth.

II. NAOMI AND RUTH (Ruth 1:1-22)

During these days a severe famine struck parts of Israel. Seeking better living conditions, Elimelech and his wife Naomi, along with their 2 sons Mahlon and Chilon, left their home in Bethlehem of Judah and moved to the country of Moab. Their family lived there for about 10 years. During this time Naomi's husband died and her sons both married Moabite wives - namely Orpah and Ruth. Sadly, both of her sons died also, leaving Naomi as a childless widow with 2 foreign born, childless daughter-in-laws.

Naomi heard that the famine in Judah had ended, and decided to return to her homeland to live out the final years of her life. She urged her young daughter-in-laws to remain in Moab, to remarry, to start families of their own, and to have full, joyful lives. Upon her urging, Orpah agreed and decided to stay. However, Ruth was insistent on returning with her aged mother-in-law to Bethlehem, though it meant leaving her own family and country behind. Ruth deeply loved Naomi and was committed to taking care of her. She famously said, "Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." Ruth showed tremendous loyalty to and affection for Naomi.

When the pair arrived in Bethlehem, those who had known Naomi and her family prior to their departure asked her several questions. Naomi explained to them that she had lost her husband and both sons while living in Moab, and was returning to Israel "empty". She told them to call her Mara, because God had dealt with her bitterly (Exodus 15:22-23). Naomi and Ruth reached Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

III. GLEANING IN BOAZ'S' FIELDS (Ruth 2:1-23)

Naomi was a poor widow, but she was kin to a wealthy man in Bethlehem named Boaz through her marriage to Elimelech. She instructed Ruth to go and glean grain from the edges of the barley fields in accordance with the Jewish law so that the 2 women might have food to eat (Leviticus 23:22). Ruth departed and came to a field owned by Boaz where she spent the whole day gleaning. Boaz noticed her and asked his reapers who she was. They answered that she was the young woman who'd returned from Moab to care for Naomi.

Boaz went and spoke to Ruth. He told her to glean from his fields exclusively. He said that she could stay and work with his maids, and drink from the water his servants drew. Ruth was overwhelmed by Boaz's kindness, especially since she was not an Israelite. In the same way, Boaz was impressed by Ruth's love for and devotion to Naomi. He asked her to join them for mealtime (likely lunch), and after the meal was over he directed his servants to treat Ruth well and to purposely leave a portion of grain in the fields for her to glean.

At the end of the day, Ruth went back to Naomi's house with over half a bushel of barley (around 20 liters). Naomi was delighted to see the abundance of grain and asked Ruth where she had gotten it. Ruth replied that she had worked all day in the fields of a man named Boaz and had somehow found favor in his sight. Hearing this, Naomi told Ruth that Boaz was actually a close relative of theirs. She further advised her daughter-in-law to continue gleaning solely in Boaz's fields with his maids until the end of the barley and wheat harvest.

CONCLUSION

As we wrap up today's message, I want to briefly return to the question of whether or not the judge Ibzan was indeed the same person as Boaz. Let me make an observation. Boaz showed exceptional kindness to Ruth, even though she was an outsider from the land of Moab. This is consistent with the fact that Ibzan encouraged his own children - both his sons and daughters - to marry foreigners. While this similarity alone doesn't prove that Ibzan and Boaz were the same man, it is another piece of evidence that they might have been.

Finally, let's consider the amazing character and compassion of Ruth. She sacrificed her own future in her native homeland of Moab to return with Naomi to Israel - a place where she had never been. Ruth knew how difficult life would be for Naomi without a husband or sons to provide for her in her old age, so she stepped up to fill the gap. Ruth exemplifies the Biblical mandate that families have to provide for and care for one another. While the church is commanded to assist widows and orphans, the first and foremost responsibility for their care falls on the immediate family.

Next week we will conclude the story of Ruth and Boaz, and return to the book of Judges. Until then, consider how you can be a blessing to your family. Call your parents and/or your children and tell them that you love them. Maybe they aren't perfect, but neither are you - and they are the only family you've got.

The Story of Ruth (Part 2), Elon, and Abdon

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When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. - Deuteronomy 25:5

Last week we learned that the Talmud - a book which contains the teachings of the early Jewish rabbis - equates Ibzan, the 9th judge of Israel, with Boaz. While this identification is not absolute, it is certainly plausible for a variety of reasons. Therefore, for the purposes of this sermon series, we have temporarily suspended our focus on the book of Judges and shifted to the beautiful story of Ruth. This morning, we will do the opposite - we'll conclude our brief study of Ruth and return to the list of judges.

As you might recall, Naomi brought her foreign-born daughter-in-law Ruth back from Moab to Bethlehem in Israel. Neither of the women had a husband - both were widows. Although they were poor, Ruth was determined to take care of her aging mother-in-law. She went to find and gather grain, and ended up gleaning in the fields of a wealthy man named Boaz. Ruth found favor in Boaz's sight and continued working in his fields with his maids throughout the barley and wheat harvest. By God's divine providence, Boaz was actually a close relative of Naomi through her deceased husband Elimelech.

This is where we left off last week. We'll pick up the story there and learn how the relationship between Boaz and Ruth developed. Turn with me to Ruth chapter 3 and let's begin.

I. RUTH'S PROPOSAL (Ruth 3:1-18)

Just as Ruth had shown great concern for Naomi, so also Naomi was very concerned for Ruth. She wanted to ensure that her daughter-in-law would be taken care of after she passed away. Therefore, Naomi instructed Ruth to bathe and put on her best clothes. She was to go to the threshing floor where Boaz was winnowing barley that night. After he'd finished supper, laid down, and gone to sleep, Ruth was to go uncover his feet and lie down beside them. Ruth did as her mother-in-law instructed.

When Boaz awoke in the middle of the night he was startled to see Ruth lying there at his feet. Ruth asked him to spread his covering over her because he was a close relative. Boaz understood and was humbled by Ruth's request, noting her kindness to ask him rather than a younger man closer to her own age. Boaz agreed to honor her request, but stated that there was a closer relative than he who had first priority. He assured her that he'd make the proper arrangements the next day - one way or the other. Boaz sent Ruth home early in the morning, before sunlight, with 6 measures of barley for her and Naomi to share.

What did Ruth's request mean? By asking Boaz to spread his covering over her, Ruth was in effect asking him to marry her (Ezekiel 16:8) and serve as both she and Naomi's kinsman-redeemer. According to Jewish law, the kinsman-redeemer was "a male relative who had the privilege or responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who was in trouble, danger, or need". Boaz agreed to take Ruth as his wife and to provide for and protect both her and Naomi, in the event that the closer relative wouldn't.

Some interpreters have taught that Ruth waited until Boaz was drunk and then seduced him into a sexual encounter. For several reasons, this interpretation is highly unlikely. For one thing, it runs contrary to the honorable character shown by both Ruth and Boaz up to this point. Secondly, it is completely counter-cultural and undermines the prospect of an acceptable marriage. Besides these general observations, there are several other compelling reasons to dismiss this scandalous claim. I would argue that Naomi's plan and Ruth's follow through were elaborately designed to make her proposal more meaningful.

II. BOAZ AND RUTH'S MARRIAGE (Ruth 4:1-22)

Early the next day, Boaz went to the city gate where he was joined by the closest relative. With the elders of the city present, Boaz informed him that Naomi was wishing to sell property that belonged to their "brother" Elimelech. As her closest living relative, he had the first choice on whether or not to buy the property. Boaz explained that, if he chose to purchase the land, he'd also have to acquire Ruth and father a child with her to carry on the name of her deceased husband. The closer relative was unwilling to do that, as doing so would have jeopardized his own inheritance. Therefore, he transferred his right of redemption to Boaz as indicated by giving him his sandal in accordance with the custom of Israel.

Now empowered to act, Boaz readily agreed to buy Naomi's property and acquire Ruth as his wife, promising to bear a child with her to redeem Elimelech's family name. All of the elders present were witnesses of Boaz's pledge. They pronounced blessings on him, Ruth, and the child that would be born of them. So in the days that followed Boaz and Ruth were married and had a son. Naomi was delighted to hold her grandson, and the women of Bethlehem rejoiced because God had restored her good fortune. They named the child Obed, who would later become the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David.

III. ELON (Judges 12:11-12)

After Ibzan (who may have been the same man as Boaz), Elon became the 10th judge of Israel. He is perhaps the least known of the judges. Elon was from the tribe of Zebulun and led Israel for 10 years. He died and was buried in Aijalon in the tribal territory of Zebulun. The Bible contains no information about what he did during his time as judge or if he delivered Israel from a particular adversary. The name Elon means "strong" or "oak tree". Based on this, some scholars have speculated that Elon provided strong, godly leadership over the tribe of Zebulun during a time of relative peace.

IV. ABDON (Judges 12:13-15)

After Elon, Abdon became the 11th judge of Israel. He was the son of Hillel and lived in the city of Pirathon. Abdon had 40 sons and 30 grandsons, who rode on 70 donkeys. His large family suggests that he was an extremely wealthy man who yielded significant influence. He judged in Ephraim for 8 years. Abdon died and was buried in Pirathon. Many scholars believe that Abdon was instrumental in helping his tribe - the Ephraimites - regain the respect, status, and acceptance among the other tribes of Israel they'd lost due to their disastrous encounter with the Gileadites during the days of Jephthah.

CONCLUSION

Just as Boaz became Naomi and Ruth's kinsman-redeemer, so also Jesus has become our great Kinsman-Redeemer. Jesus is our close relative in the sense that He is the only begotten Son of God and we, as believers, are the born-again children of God. We were depraved and spiritually destitute because of our sin, and our names were destined to be cut off and forgotten. Yet Jesus, our gracious Savior, who exclusively held the right of redemption, sacrificially offered Himself on the cross of Calvary to redeem us, restore us, and give us the assurance of eternal life. Praise the LORD!

In closing, we have now introduced Ibzan (Boaz?), Elon, and Abdon - the 9th, 10th, and 11th judges of Israel. They are all considered "minor judges" and are categorized as diplomatic or civil in their leadership style. This leaves only 1 judge left of the 12 listed in the book of Judges - perhaps the most well known of them all. We will begin discussing his story next week...

Samson (Part 1)

Originally Preached on 11/6/2022

“Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child; Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed; For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous than the sons of the married woman,” says the Lord. - Isaiah 54:1

This morning we will begin a 3-part message about Samson, the 12th and final judge named in the book of Judges. There are 4 chapters dedicated to his story - chapters 13, 14, 15, and 16. In part 1 of this message (today) we will discuss his miraculous birth. In part 2 (next Sunday) we'll talk about his early run-ins with the Philistines. In part 3 of this message (2 weeks from today) we will consider his disastrous relationship with Delilah.

This is the 28th sermon in our series called “The Conquering and Independent Church”. There are 34 sermons in total, so after today we only have 6 left. We should wrap this series up the week before Christmas if all goes according to plan. Here we go...

I. AN ANGELIC ANNOUNCEMENT (Judges 13:1-7)

Following the judgeships of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon, the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. This time He turned them over to the Philistines who persecuted them for 40 years. As you may recall, the Philistines had oppressed and terrorized Israel many years earlier during the days of Shamgar (Judges 3:31).

There was a man named Manoah from the tribe of Dan who lived in Zorah. He was married, but his wife was barren so they had no children. The Angel of the LORD appeared to Manoah's wife and told her that she would conceive and bear a son. The angel said that this child would be a Nazirite from the womb. During her pregnancy she was not to partake of wine or strong alcohol, nor eat anything unclean, nor cut the newborn's hair. Clearly the LORD considered Samson to be a living person from the point of conception. The angel foretold that this miraculous son would begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

Manoah's wife hurried to tell her husband about the man of God she'd seen. She stated that his appearance was awesome - like an angel, and she didn't ask for his name or where he'd come from. However, she did hear his message - that she would conceive and give birth to a child who would be set aside as a Nazirite for his entire life.

A Nazirite was a person who dedicated themselves to God by carefully adhering to the stipulations of the Nazirite vow found in the Mosaic Law (Numbers 6:1-21). Those who made this solemn commitment were separated or consecrated to the LORD. Typically, the Nazirite vow was taken voluntarily for a specific period of time as a way of yielding oneself to God. However, this child would be a Nazirite from conception until death.

Also notice that this son would “begin” to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines. As we will discover later in this series, Philistine persecution will continue even after the death of this mighty judge. He will, however, deal a crippling blow to the Philistines that will relieve Israel’s oppression temporarily.

II. A SECOND VISIT (Judges 13:8-20)

After listening to his wife, Manoah prayed that the man of God would return and tell them how to parent this special child. God heard Manoah’s petition and sent the Angel of the LORD back to his wife a second time. When the angel appeared, she went and found her husband and they came to the field where the angel waited. Not realizing that he was an angel, Manoah asked the man if he was the same person who had spoken to his wife earlier. He also asked what the boy’s vocation would be. The angel simply repeated what he’d said to Manoah’s wife earlier.

Manoah asked the man to wait while he prepared a young goat for Him. The angel stated that he would not eat of it and recommended that Manoah offer a burnt offering to God. Manoah then asked the man what his name was, but the angel answered by simply describing his name as wonderful. So Manoah took the young goat and grain and made an offering to God while the Angel of the LORD performed wonders in their presence. As flames rose up from the altar, the angel ascended into heaven. In awe, Manoah and his wife fell on their faces to the ground.

Notice that the angel deflected Manoah’s attempt to worship him and instead directed Manoah to give all praise and glory to God. This is yet another Biblical example of how we should worship God only - not angels, saints, or any other created person or thing. The LORD alone is deserving of all worship, adulation, and reverence.

III. A MIRACULOUS BIRTH (Judges 13:21-25)

After witnessing these remarkable events, Manoah and his wife realized that this was no regular man. They had seen the Angel of the LORD. Manoah was concerned that they would die because they had seen the LORD. His wife comforted him by saying that God would not have accepted their offerings or showed them miraculous signs or told them of such wonderful things to come if His desire was to kill them.

In the months that followed, Manoah’s wife gave birth to a son and the couple named him Samson. The child was blessed by the LORD and raised in the tradition of a Nazirite. The Spirit of the LORD began to stir in him even as a youth growing up in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshraol in the tribal territory of Dan.

Many theologians believe that the Angel of the LORD who visited Manoah and his wife was a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. The Angel of the LORD appears multiple times in the Old Testament. Already in this series, we have discussed His appearance to both Joshua as the captain of God’s army (Joshua 5:13-15) and to Gideon on the threshing floor (Judges 6:11-24). Remember, Jesus is God - He is eternal, without beginning or end. He was present and active

in the creation. Jesus did not come into existence when He was born in Bethlehem - He already was. Therefore, it is completely reasonable to believe that Jesus appeared to various people as the Angel of the LORD during Old Testament times.

CONCLUSION

As we wrap up today's sermon, let me ask you... do the events described in this chapter remind you of anything? They should, especially as we enter into the holiday season. The details surrounding Samson's birth are, in many ways, similar to those of Jesus' birth. Consider this:

The Angel of the LORD appeared to Manoah's wife to announce that she'd give birth to a son. Likewise, the archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce that she'd give birth to the Son of God.

The Angel of the LORD appeared a second time and spoke with Manoah, Samson's father, to reassure him and confirm what he'd said to his wife earlier. Likewise, an angel appeared to Joseph (believed by many to be a second appearance of Gabriel) to confirm what Mary had told him and assure him to go through with their marriage.

The Angel of the LORD told Samson's parents that he would be set apart for God's service and would deliver his people. Likewise, the angel Gabriel told Joseph and Mary that Jesus would be the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah, and the Savior of His people.

Both births were miraculous, though in different ways. Samson was conceived in the natural way, to a mother who had previously been barren (such as Sara, Rebekah, and Rachel). Jesus was conceived supernaturally, to a virgin who became pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

So, in some respects, Samson's amazing birth looks forward to that of Jesus Christ. Pretty cool, right? Join us next week as we continue our look at the remarkable life of Samson.

Samson (Part 2)

Originally Preached on 11/13/2022

Seek the Lord and His strength; Seek His face continually. - 1 Chronicles 16:11

Good morning. Today we will continue our 3-part study of Samson - the 12th judge named in the book of Judges. In our message last Sunday, we read about how the Angel of the LORD appeared to Samson's parents, Manoah and his wife, to tell them of his coming birth. We discovered that Samson was a miracle baby, conceived by and born of a mother who was previously barren. Finally, we found out that Samson was a special child, set apart as a Nazirite by God from the womb, who would someday begin to deliver his people from the Philistines.

The Bible doesn't give us any information about Samson's childhood. There is a gap of around 20 or more years between Samson's birth at the end of chapter 13 and the events we'll discuss today in chapters 14 and 15. Our focus this morning will be on the strained and contentious relationship between Samson and the Philistines and how it developed.

I. SHE LOOKS GOOD TO ME (Judges 14:1-11)

Samson, now a young man, traveled to Timnah in the land of the Philistines. While there, he saw and was strongly attracted to a beautiful woman. When he returned home, Samson asked his parents to arrange a marriage between him and this woman. His parents were disappointed that he had rejected the daughters of Israel and instead desired to marry an uncircumcised Philistine, yet Samson insisted. They did not realize that this was God's plan.

So Samson and his parents went to Timnah together. Along the way, a young lion sprang out from the vineyards at Sampson. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him and he killed the lion with his bare hands. Apparently he was not with his parents when this occurred - they didn't see it happen and he didn't tell them about it. When they arrived and found the beautiful Philistine woman and her family, arrangements were made for Sampson and her to be married. Samson and his parents went home to wait.

When the betrothal was over, Sampson returned again to Timnah with his parents to get his new bride. He turned aside to see the carcass of the lion he'd killed earlier, and found a swarm of bees and honey were in its lifeless body. Samson scraped some honey out of it with his hands and ate. He even offered some to his father and mother, who also ate. However, once again they didn't see the lion and Samson didn't tell them where the honey had come from.

After arriving in Timnah, a customary wedding feast was thrown to celebrate the joyous marriage. However, the Philistines seemed somewhat unsettled by Samson. They sent 30 young men to befriend him, mingle with him, and keep an eye on him.

II. RIDDLE ME THIS (Judges 14:12-20)

Samson proposed a riddle to his 30 young Philistine companions. He stated that if they could solve the riddle before the end of the 7-day wedding feast, he'd give each of them a linen wrap and a change of clothes. If they couldn't solve it by then, each of them would have to give Samson a linen wrap and a change of clothes. They accepted the challenge and Samson gave them the riddle, "Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet." What was it?

3 days passed by and the Philistine men couldn't figure out the answer. So they threatened Samson's beautiful young wife to entice him into telling her the answer - otherwise they'd kill her and burn down her father's house. So she began weeping and telling Samson that he didn't love her because he wouldn't tell her the solution to his riddle. Samson initially resisted her, stating that even his parents didn't know. Eventually her charms were too strong, and he told her the answer. She immediately went and told her Philistine kinsmen and they came to Samson with the solution on the last day of the wedding feast.

Samson was furious that these "companions" had used his wife to lure him into revealing the riddle. So he went to the nearby city of Ashkelon and killed 30 Philistines, took their linens and clothes, and gave them to the young men as their reward for solving the riddle. Obviously, this didn't sit well with the Philistines nor the bride's father and Samson's marriage was revoked. His wife was given to another man, most likely 1 of the 30 supposed friends.

III. FIRE IN THE FIELDS (Judges 15:1-8)

Some time later, during the wheat harvest, Samson again returned to Timnah determined to acquire the wife that had been taken from him. However, her father refused to let him go in to her because she was now married to someone else. Instead, perhaps out of fear of what Samson might do, the father offered his younger daughter to become his wife. Samson rejected this outright, as such a substitution was completely unacceptable.

Samson was greatly disgruntled and upset because he'd been denied, so he went out and captured 300 foxes. He paired the foxes up and tied torches between their tails. Then he lit the torches and released the foxes in the fields, vineyards, and groves of the Philistines. As a result, much of their grain, grapes, and harvest was burned up. When the Philistines learned that Samson had acted out of anger because his wife had been withheld from him, they went and killed both her and her father. A heartbroken Samson vowed revenge upon them for the death of his forbidden love. He ruthlessly struck the Philistines with a great slaughter, killing an untold number of men, and then took refuge at the rock of Etam.

IV. THE DEADLY JAWBONE (Judges 15:9-20)

The Philistines came and camped at Lehi on the western edge of Judah. They told the Judahites that they'd come to arrest Sampson and take him back with them to Philistia. At this time, the Philistines ruled over this region of Israel and the Judahites didn't want to cause trouble. Therefore, Judah agreed to retrieve Samson for them. 3,000 men of Judah were

dispatched to the rock at Etam to take Samson into custody. When they arrived, Samson voluntarily surrendered himself to them on the condition that they not kill him, so they bound him with new ropes and led him back to Lehi.

When the Philistines saw him, they shouted for joy at his capture. Suddenly the Spirit of the LORD came upon Samson and he broke the ropes that constrained him as if they were burnt and brittle. Freed from his bonds, Samson picked up the jawbone of a donkey presumably lying on the ground and used it to kill 1,000 Philistines. After the massacre ended, he boasted of his victory, tossed the jawbone aside, and renamed the place Ramath-Lehi which translates “hill of the jawbone”.

Samson became very thirsty, perhaps from the intense fighting that had just occurred. He cried out to God in thanksgiving for His deliverance, but also to request a much needed drink. The LORD split a hollow place (likely a hole or crevice) in the ground and water flowed from it. Samson drank, was strengthened and revived, and named the site En-hakkore which means “Fountain of the Crier”. This spring is in the city of Lehi. Samson judged Israel for 20 years during the days of Philistine oppression.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of today’s message, we read that Samson singlehandedly killed a lion with his bare hands, 30 Philistines to take their clothes, several more Philistines who murdered his wife, and 1,000 more Philistines with a donkey’s jawbone. Whenever the Spirit of God came upon him, Samson was endowed with incredible, superhuman strength. For this reason, he is sometimes thought of as “the Hercules of the Bible”.

Despite his physical strength, Samson also exhibited several character flaws. He seemed more infatuated by a woman’s appearance than by her character or faith. He was highly susceptible to her charms, which would turn out to be his downfall. He was extremely volatile and lacked-self-control, prone to destruction and violence whenever he became upset or frustrated. Finally, he was obviously ambivalent about the terms of the Nazirite vow, as evidenced by touching the carcass of the dead lion. Samson was an impulsive, reckless, and shallow man in many respects... yet God still used him in spite of his shortcomings.

Samson (Part 3)

Originally Preached on 11/20/2022

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. - John 15:13

During his early adulthood, Samson had several run-ins with the Philistines. He burned their vineyards and fields, killed many of their people, and was a constant source of irritation and agitation. The Philistines longed for the day when they might arrest Samson and punish him for the damage he'd caused. Nevertheless, because of his superhuman strength, capturing Samson had proven to be a risky proposition.

This morning we will wrap-up our discussion of Samson. We will focus on his rocky relationship with Delilah and how it ultimately led to his demise. This portion of Samson's story is, perhaps, the most well-known part of his life.

I. THE HARLOT OF GAZA (Judges 16:1-3)

Although he was a wanted man in Philistia, Samson was not intimidated and continued going there. He went down to Gaza, a leading city of the Philistines, and spent the night with a prostitute. When the Gazites learned that he was in town, they surrounded the place where he was, secured and fortified the city gate so that he couldn't escape, and laid in wait planning to kill him in the early morning. However, Samson got up around midnight, pulled down the city's gate along with the posts that held it, and then carried them on his shoulders to the top of a mountain near Hebron, several miles away in the land of Israel.

Samson's overnight trip to Gaza provides another example of his moral shortcomings. It also foreshadows events to come. The Philistines failed to catch him again and realized that their attempts to do so were futile because of his amazing strength. If they were ever going to get him, they needed a new approach...

II. SAMSON TEASES DELILAH (Judges 16:4-14)

Sometime later, Samson fell in love with a Philistine woman named Delilah who lived in the valley of Sorek. The leaders of the Philistines offered her a bribe of 1,100 pieces of silver if she'd entice Samson into revealing the source of his strength so that they could bind him. So Delilah asked Samson to reveal his secret. He told her that if he was bound with 7 fresh cords he'd become weak like any other man. So, presumably while he was sleeping, Delilah tied Samson up with 7 fresh cords and alerted the Philistine authorities who came and waited in the inner room. Delilah cried out, "The Philistines are upon you!". Samson arose and snapped the cords, so that their attempt to capture him was averted.

Delilah moaned that Samson had lied to her and pleaded with him to tell her the true secret of his strength. So he said that if he was bound with new ropes that had never been used before he would become weak like any other man. Again, presumably while he was sleeping, Delilah

tied him up with new ropes while several Philistines hid in the inner room nearby. When she woke him from his sleep, Samson broke the ropes as if they were thread. The Philistines' plan had failed once more.

Delilah continued to press and coax Samson into telling her how he could be bound. He told her that if she'd weave the 7 locks of his hair and fasten it with a pin, he'd become weak like any other man. While he slept, she did just that. Then she cried out, "The Philistines are upon you!" and he sprung up, pulled the pin from his hair, and was as strong as ever.

Delilah's repeated attempts of persuasion were reminiscent of Samson's first bride in Timnah who seduced him into telling her the answer to his riddle. Ultimately, she was able to find out Samson's secret and, as we will see in the coming verses, so did Delilah. There is a lesson for us here... the Enemy knows your weaknesses and will exploit them again and again in order to destroy you. This is why we must submit to God and seek His strength in order to resist the Devil's frequent attacks (James 4:7).

III. SAMSON REVEALS HIS SECRET (Judges 16:15-22)

Though she had failed 3 times previously, Delilah continued urging and enticing Samson. He eventually became annoyed with and worn down by her persistence. Finally, he revealed his secret. He told her that he'd been set apart by God as a Nazirite from the womb, and that if his hair was shaved off he'd become weak like any other man.

Delilah alerted the Philistines and they came and hid in the next room as they'd done before. While Samson was sleeping, she cut off all his hair. Then she cried out and Samson awoke. However, his strength was gone because the LORD had departed from him. Seeing his weakness, the Philistines sprung forth and arrested him. They paid Delilah her bribe, gouged Samson's eyes out, and led him to Gaza in chains. They cast Samson into prison where he worked grinding grain. As time passed by, Samson's hair began to grow back...

It is difficult for me to understand why Samson trusted Delilah. Based upon his past experience in Timnah and Delilah's seemingly obvious allegiance to the Philistines, it confounds me that he'd tell her his secret. Perhaps he thought she was just playing with him (he didn't know that there were actually Philistines waiting to ambush him) or perhaps he was just overconfident in himself believing that nothing bad would happen. For whatever reason, he made a foolish decision and should have known better. May this be another lesson for us, that we practice awareness and are not surprised by something we should have seen coming.

IV. SAMSON IS AVENGED (Judges 16:23-31)

The lords of the Philistines, along with many regular citizens, gathered to offer sacrifices to Dagon their god and to celebrate Samson's incarceration. As the party ramped up, they had Samson brought out from his prison cell to entertain them. This was done to further humiliate the once mighty champion. Samson stood in the center of the house between 2 pillars. Because

he was blind, Samson asked the young boy who was leading him around by the hand if he might feel the pillars that supported the house in order to lean on them. Meanwhile, all of the Philistine officials and people in the house, as well as about 3,000 watching from above through the open roof, looked on as Samson amused them.

Then Samson called out to God pleading for a final burst of strength that he might avenge himself from the Philistines. He took hold of the 2 main pillars upon which the house rested, 1 with his right hand and the other with his left hand. Then he shouted, "Let me die with the Philistines!" and he pulled the load-bearing pillars toward himself so that they broke. The entire house crumbled and fell, killing all those assembled inside and those who had been standing on the roof. Samson took out more Philistines in his death than he had throughout his life.

A few days later, Samson's brothers and family members came to retrieve his body. They took him home and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. At the time of his death, Samson had judged Israel for 20 years.

For most of his life, Samson was extremely self-centered. He took what he wanted and threw a fit whenever he couldn't have it. He constantly provoked his enemies and recklessly flirted with danger. Samson's parents, who had been visited by the Angel of the LORD prior to his birth, almost certainly expected him to turn out differently. Yet, in his final moments, Samson humbly submitted to God and acted sacrificially. Though he'd stumbled all along the way, in the end Samson finished well.

CONCLUSION

Like his birth, Samson's death also shares some similarity with that of Jesus. Both gave their lives voluntarily in order to deliver their people from the grip of the enemy. While Samson's victory over the Philistines was short-lived, Jesus' victory over sin and death was complete and eternal. Samson spread his arms wide to grasp and break the pillars. Jesus spread His arms wide to be nailed to the cross, where He sacrificed Himself to pay for our sins and secure our forgiveness. Have you received salvation by placing your faith in Jesus Christ?

We have now completed the book of Judges, but there are still a few more judges to consider. They are covered in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel. Join us next Sunday as we enter into the homestretch of our series on "The Conquering and Independent Church".

Samuel's Birth and Early Childhood

Originally Preached on 11/27/2022

This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him. - 1 John 5:14-15

This morning we move into the book of 1 Samuel. The first 7 chapters of 1 Samuel describe the lives and ministries of Israel's final 2 judges - Eli and Samuel. Both of these men were priests who served in the tabernacle at Shiloh. They will be the topic of our discussion over the next 4 weeks, as our sermon series over Israel's conquest and judicial era winds to an end.

Based upon most of the relevant timelines I've seen and studied, it seems most probable that the events described in today's message actually took place a few years prior to the judgeship of Samson. In other words, 1 Samuel does not begin exactly where Judges ends, but rather backtracks a few decades causing the 2 books to overlap each other somewhat. With this setting in mind, let's get started...

I. ELKANAH AND HIS WIVES (1 Samuel 1:1-18)

Elkanah was an Ephraimite from the town of Ramathaim-zophim. He had 2 wives: Hannah, who had no children, and Peninnah, who did have children. Peninnah spitefully teased and provoked Hannah because she was unable to bear children, so that the pair became rivals.

Each year, Elkanah and his wives would make the pilgrimage to Shiloh in order to worship the LORD and offer sacrifices at the tabernacle. At this time, Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas were serving as priests there. Elkanah apparently offered a peace offering on behalf of his family because portions of the sacrifice were returned to them in order to be eaten (Leviticus 7). Elkanah would divide these portions between his wives later during the meal. He would give Hannah a double share, because he loved her and she was barren. Despite his generosity and kindness, Hannah was overcome with sorrow and Elkanah was unable to console her.

After eating, Hannah went to the tabernacle to pray. She was in great distress and swore to God that if He'd allow her to have a son she would give him to the LORD all the days of his life. Now Eli the priest was watching Hannah as she prayed silently, and based on her mannerisms he thought she was drunk. Eli approached her and began to question her, to which Hannah explained that she wasn't drunk but rather in anguish of spirit. Eli blessed her and asked the LORD to grant her petition. So Hannah returned to her family filled with hope and expectation.

Centuries earlier, during the days of the patriarchs, there was a similar situation. Jacob had 2 wives also - Leah, who had given birth to several children and Rachel who was unable to have any. However, in due time God blessed Rachel and opened her womb. She ended up having 2 sons - Joseph and Benjamin. Perhaps Hannah looked to Rachel as a source of strength and

inspiration. Hannah knew that with God anything is possible and she trusted in His provision. Therefore, she turned to Him in prayer. May we learn from and follow Hannah's example.

II. SAMUEL IS BORN AND DEDICATED (1 Samuel 1:19-28)

Elkanah and his wives left Shiloh and returned home the next morning. Not long afterward, the LORD remembered Hannah and she became pregnant with Elkanah's child. 9 months later she gave birth to a son and named him Samuel, which means in Hebrew, "God has heard".

It was time once again for Elkanah and his family to make their yearly trip to Shiloh. However, on this occasion, Hannah stayed home with the newborn baby who was still just an infant. Hannah convinced Elkanah that they should wait until the child was weaned before dedicating him to the LORD. Weaning usually took place between the ages of 18 months and 5 years old. Thus, a few years passed. Once Samuel was weaned they took him to the tabernacle, along with some items to be sacrificed, intent on giving him to God. They made their offerings and dedicated young Samuel to the LORD. Hannah told Eli the priest about the promise she'd made during her last visit to the tabernacle and how God had answered her. Even Samuel, though just a small boy, worshiped the LORD.

God always hears and answers the sincere prayers of His people. Unfortunately, sometimes our prayers are selfish and/or misguided so the LORD says "No". On occasion, the timing of our petitions isn't right so the LORD says "Wait". But whenever we ask God to do something that is in line with His will for our lives right now, He answers "Yes". In Hannah's case, He miraculously allowed her to have a son. The key to an effective prayer life is to align our will with God's and to identify and pray for the very things that He already desires to give us.

III. HANNAH REJOICES AND IS BLESSED (1 Samuel 2:1-11, 18-21)

Hannah burst into an expression of praise and thanksgiving to God. In it she exalted the LORD and declared that there is none like Him. She described how God humbles the proud and shatters the mighty, while raising up the poor and the weak. She emphasized that God can make even the barren give birth, as He'd done for her. She declared that the LORD watches over and protects His own, while judging those who contend against Him. When she finished singing, Hannah and Elkanah returned home to Ramah. However, they left young Samuel with Eli the priest in fulfillment of the vow they'd made.

Eli raised and trained Samuel. As a boy, he lived and ministered in the tabernacle at Shiloh. He even wore priestly garments as a child. Each year, when his parents would come to make their annual sacrifices to the LORD, Hannah would bring Samuel a robe that she'd made for him. If he was like most kids, he had already outgrown the previous one! Also, Eli would bless both Elkanah and his wife for dedicating their son Samuel to the LORD. God permitted Hannah to have several more children - 3 sons and 2 daughters. Meanwhile, Samuel continued to grow.

Hannah's song is 1 of many found in the Bible. According to an article I read, there are at least 185 psalms, or songs, recorded in Scripture. 150 of them are included in the book of Psalms, 5 make up Lamentations, and the Song of Solomon is itself a song. The others are scattered out across the Old and New Testaments. There are battle and victory songs, prophetic songs, dirges and lamentations, and even songs of rejoicing and praise. Music is an important part of our faith, and it always has been.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both Elkanah and Hannah serve as tremendous role models for us. He led his family well, faithfully offering sacrifices each year, and joined with his wife in dedicating Samuel fully to God. As for Hannah, she took her sorrow and burden directly to the LORD and asked Him to give her a son. She trusted in His power and provision. When God answered, she worshiped Him and sang praises of thanksgiving. Elkanah and Hannah were a godly couple, who acted in righteousness and obedience.

Next week we will continue the story of Samuel, and contrast him with Eli's 2 older, biological sons Hophni and Phinehas. We will also read about the LORD's prophetic calling of Samuel. Until then, let your light shine so that others might see Jesus in you.

Eli's Sons and Samuel's Calling

Originally Preached on 12/4/2022

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; - John 10:27

Good morning. Last Sunday we began the book of 1 Samuel. We read that, during her family's annual pilgrimage to the tabernacle, barren Hannah prayed that God would give her a son. She vowed that if God granted her petition, she'd dedicate this child to the LORD all the days of his life. Sure enough, God heard and answered Hannah's prayer. She bore a son and named him Samuel. Once he was weaned, she honored her commitment by leaving him at the tabernacle in Shiloh under the care of Eli the priest.

Eli had 2 sons of his own who also assisted him in the tabernacle (1 Samuel 1:3). These young men were probably 20 or more years older than Samuel. Unfortunately, they were not good role models for young Samuel to admire or learn from. On the contrary, they were worthless and self-serving. Samuel was not like them at all.

I. HOPHNI AND PHINEHAS (1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22-36)

Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, did not know the LORD, nor did they follow the proper procedures regarding sacrifices and offerings. The Law clearly specified what parts of the peace offering were to be given to the priests, but they greedily desired more. So they took excessive portions for themselves from the animal sacrifices that were made. They insisted that the meat they took be raw so that they might roast it later for themselves, thereby preventing the person making the sacrifice from burning the fat as prescribed. If the sacrificer objected, they would threaten to take it by force. Their sinful behavior greatly angered the LORD and upset the people of Israel.

This corruption continued for several years. It seems rather unlikely that this could have gone on for so long without Eli's knowledge, yet he apparently turned a blind eye to it - even though his sons were sleeping with the women who served at the tabernacle. Finally, in his old age, Eli confronted them. He warned that they were sinning against God and urged them to quit. But Hophni and Phinehas did not listen to their elderly father and continued in their evil ways. His efforts were too little, too late.

The text describes the unscrupulous men that Hophni and Phinehas became. Then it reverts back to when Samuel was still just a boy increasing in favor with both God and man. Even then, Hophni and Phinehas were already acting irreverently.

An unnamed man of God came to Eli and rebuked him for knowingly allowing his sons to practice evil in the tabernacle. He charged Eli with honoring them over the LORD. He told Eli that his family would be cut-off from serving in the LORD's house. He prophesied that Eli's sons would both die on the same day, neither of them reaching old age, and that Eli would weep and suffer great distress. Finally, the anonymous prophet stated that God would eventually replace

Eli's family line with a new, faithful priest whose house and lineage would endure for generations.

Some have pointed to the wickedness of Hophni and Phinehas and presumed that Eli was a terrible father - but remember that Eli effectively raised Samuel, too. The fact is, sometimes kids just go their own way. This passage is not exclusively a condemnation of Eli as a parent, but more so as a priest. He was not responsible for the behavior of his adult children, but he was responsible for the operation of the tabernacle. He knowingly allowed his sons to profane the LORD's house without taking any meaningful steps to prevent it. As such, Eli came under God's judgment for his inaction. For Christians today, this incident highlights the importance of church discipline and the disastrous results that will come from permitting blatant sin to go on unchecked in the LORD's house (Matthew 18:15-20).

II. THE LORD CALLS SAMUEL (1 Samuel 3:1-9)

During the days while Samuel was ministering as a boy before Eli in the tabernacle, visions and prophetic words from the LORD were rare. God's relative silence suggests that the people may not have desired to hear or even been receptive to His voice.

Late one night, after Eli and Samuel had gone to bed in their tabernacle rooms, the LORD called out to Samuel. He woke from his sleep and answered, "Here I am!" The boy hurried to Eli's chamber assuming that the voice had come from him. But when he arrived Eli said that he hadn't called for Samuel, and he sent the lad back to bed. Not long after, the LORD called out to Samuel a second time. He arose and came to Eli again. The drowsy priest told Samuel that he hadn't called for him and sent the child back to bed. Later that night the LORD called out to Samuel for a third time. The boy rushed to Eli's room as he had done twice before. This time, Eli perceived that it was God who was calling out to Samuel. He instructed Samuel to go lay down, and if the voice called out to him again, to answer, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening." So Samuel returned to his room and waited.

Samuel was a young boy and this was his first personal encounter with the LORD. Is it any surprise that he initially mistook God's calling for that of someone else? You or I would have probably done the same thing! Fortunately, Eli recognized what was happening and was ready to assist. Mature Christians should always be willing to help new, young, and/or less mature believers in their walk with the LORD. Through this experience, Samuel became familiar with the sound of God's voice.

III. GOD'S MESSAGE TO SAMUEL (1 Samuel 3:10-21)

The LORD called out to Samuel once more. This time, Samuel asked God to speak. The LORD told Samuel about the judgment He'd declared against Eli for consciously permitting Hophni and Phinehas to profane the house of God. Their family would be permanently removed from the priesthood. Samuel's prophetic message was virtually the same as that of the unnamed prophet who had already spoken to Eli.

The next morning, Eli approached Samuel and asked him to share his vision. Young Samuel was initially afraid to do so, perhaps fearing how Eli would react, but the priest insisted. So Samuel told Eli everything that the LORD had said. Shockingly, Eli didn't seem troubled by the prophecy and somewhat callously stated, "Let God do what seems good to Him." Eli had already heard this same rebuke from the unnamed prophet, so Samuel's vision simply reaffirmed it. Apparently Eli had accepted his fate, as he made no efforts to change it.

In the years that followed, Samuel grew into manhood. All of Israel recognized him as a prophet of the LORD who had spoken directly with God at Shiloh. None of his prophetic words failed. Samuel was highly regarded among the people as both a priest and prophet.

CONCLUSION

Take a moment to consider this... Samuel's boyhood calling was to rebuke and chasten his mentor, elder, and father-figure Eli. There is no doubt that this was uncomfortable and challenging for him to do. That said, even as a lad, he bravely obeyed the LORD. He delivered a difficult message. Meanwhile, Eli was sheepishly unwilling to discipline and punish his 2 sons for their sinful behavior in the tabernacle. Eli wasn't necessarily a bad man, but he was weak. We see this same lack of courage in Pontius Pilate. May we have the strength to stand up for the LORD, even if it means reprimanding members of our own family.

The Philistines Capture the Ark

Originally Preached on 12/11/2022

There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel. - Exodus 25:22

In last week's message, Samuel was a young boy when the LORD called to him during the night at the tabernacle. However, in today's message, he appears to be a grown adult. This seems to suggest that several years have passed (approximately 15 or more) between the ending of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4.

Also, in this morning's passage we see a resurgence of the Philistines. Remember that Samson only began to deliver Israel from Philistine oppression (Judges 13:5). God used Samson to deal a mighty blow to the Philistines, but in the years after his death they obviously regrouped and continued their persecution of the Israeli tribes.

With these things in mind, let's dig into today's message. We will be reading and focusing on chapters 4 and 5. This sermon is called, "The Philistines Capture the Ark".

I. THE ARK IS TAKEN (1 Samuel 4:1-11)

Samuel was widely known as a prophet throughout all of Israel and God spoke through him. Meanwhile, the resurgent Philistine army moved northward into the land of Israel and camped at Aphek. The men of Israel went out to meet them and a battle broke out near Ebenezer. The Philistines were victorious that day and killed about 4,000 men before Israel retreated back to their camp.

Having been soundly defeated in the 1st wave of the conflict, Israel's elders decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant up from Shiloh to go with them into battle. Perhaps it would bring them good fortune. So they sent word to the tabernacle and Eli's 2 corrupt sons, Hophni and Phinehas, brought the Ark. When they arrived at the camp with it, all of Israel shouted with excitement. The Philistines overheard the celebration, understood that the Ark had been brought up to Israel's army, and became very afraid. The commanders of the Philistines encouraged their fearful soldiers to stand strong.

The battle resumed the next day. The Philistines defeated Israel again, slaughtering some 30,000 men. Those Israelites who survived fled to their tents. Both Hophni and Phinehas were killed during the fight, thereby fulfilling the words of the unnamed prophet to Eli (1 Samuel 2:34). Worse than that, the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant.

Throughout the exodus and the conquest of Canaan, the Ark of the Covenant went before the children of Israel into battle. God's manifest presence was upon the Ark and it always brought them great success. The LORD literally led them into battle. But on this occasion the Ark was

merely an afterthought. After suffering defeat on the 1st day of battle, Israel sent for Ark as some sort of good luck charm to help them turn the tide. God was clearly not pleased. The LORD should never be plan B - to be called upon only after our plans fail. When we disrespect Him like this, we can and should expect disappointment and defeat.

II. SORROW IN SHILOH (1 Samuel 4:12-22)

A survivor from the tribe of Benjamin hurried from the battlefield to Shiloh. He shared the news of Israel's great loss and the entire city wailed. Now Eli was sitting in his chair nervously waiting for a report. He was very old - 98 to be specific - and could barely see. The messenger came to Eli and told him what had happened. He said that the Philistines had completely routed Israel and that both Hophni and Phinehas were dead. On top of that, they had taken the Ark of the Covenant. When Eli heard that the Ark had been captured, he fell backward off his seat, broke his neck, and died. Eli judged Israel for 40 years.

Phinehas' wife, the daughter-in-law of Eli, was very pregnant at the time. When she learned that the Ark had been snatched by the Philistines, that Eli had died, and that her husband had been killed in the fighting, she went into heavy labor. She died as the result of the difficult childbirth, but not before naming her son Ichabod. The name Ichabod means "inglorious" or "there is no glory" and was given to express her grief over the Ark's capture.

The glory of God had departed from Israel because the Ark was lost. Jesus made a similar declaration centuries later when the Jews rejected Him as their Messiah (Matthew 23:37-39). He announced that God's favor upon and covenant with Israel would be suspended and that they would be desolate until He returned again. May we learn from their mistakes and not repeat their sins, lest the LORD's glory depart from us also.

III. GOD IS PROVOKED (1 Samuel 5:1-12)

So the Philistines took the Ark from Ebenezer and brought it to Ashdod, where they placed it in the temple of their pagan god Dagon. When they came in the next morning, the idolatrous statue of Dagon had fallen on its face before the Ark. So the Philistines stood Dagon up and reset him in his place. The next morning, Dagon had fallen before the Ark again. This time his head and hands had broken off, leaving only his body intact. In the years that followed, neither the priests of Dagon nor all who entered his house walked on the threshold where he fell for fear of the LORD's judgment.

The hand of God was heavy upon Ashdod and the surrounding area. He ravished them with severe tumors and sores. So they sent the Ark of the Covenant to Gath, another prominent city in Philistia. However, God smote the people of Gath with great confusion and painful tumors broke out on them also. In desperation, they sent the Ark to Ekron. The citizens in Ekron didn't want it because they knew the affliction that it brought. Sure enough, the LORD struck them with tumors and confusion, too. They urged the Philistine lords to send the Ark back to Israel.

The Philistines had provoked God's anger by taking the Ark of the Covenant. They defiled the Ark by placing it beside Dagon in a pagan temple. Dagon fell on his face twice before the Ark, symbolizing that even the false gods bow and are broken before the LORD. In addition, God tormented the Philistines with tumors and confusion. They acknowledged the LORD's mighty power, and realized that they needed to return the Ark immediately. While they didn't trust in Him for salvation, they certainly feared His strength (James 2:19).

CONCLUSION

Let's do a quick recap of today's major lessons. The LORD is not a good luck charm or a backup plan we turn to only when we get in trouble. If we treat Him in such a cavalier way, we risk the revocation of God's glory from among us. And what's the value of our faith and service apart from God's glory? Finally, even the LORD's enemies we someday bow before Him and acknowledge His almighty power.

With Eli's death, Samuel became the final judge of the judicial era. He began his judgeship under the most dire of circumstances. The Ark of the Covenant had fallen into the hands of the hated Philistines. What would become of Israel and could they recover from this unspeakable setback? Join us next week as we find out what happens and wrap up our series on "The Conquering and Independent Church".

The Ark Returned

Originally Preached on 12/18/2022

When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—all of which took about four hundred and fifty years. After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. - Acts 13:19-21

In our previous message, the Philistines defeated the Israelites in battle and took the Ark of the Covenant. They brought it back with them to Philistia and displayed it in various locations, starting with the temple of Dagon in Ashdod. God struck the Philistines with heavy afflictions in every city where the Ark was set up. They soon realized that they should return the Ark of the LORD to Israel... for their own good.

I. THE PHILISTINES RETURN THE ARK (1 Samuel 6:1-12)

The Ark of the Covenant had been in the land of Philistia for 7 months. Finally the Philistine leaders met with the priests and diviners to determine how to return it to Israel properly. They wanted to appease God's wrath and end the curses that had befallen them. The priests advised the Philistines to include a guilt offering with the Ark. This offering should consist of 5 golden tumors and 5 golden mice - crafted to represent the plagues that God had stricken them with - 1 for each of the lords of the Philistines. The priests urged the Philistine rulers to humble themselves before the God of Israel and not to harden their hearts as the Egyptian Pharaoh had done almost 4 centuries earlier.

Following the priests' instructions, the Philistines took and prepared a new cart with 2 milch cows that had never been yoked. They hitched the cows to the cart and took their young calves away from them so as not to be a distraction. Then they placed the Ark of the Covenant and a box containing the golden guilt offering on the cart. The priests told them to send the cart on its way without an escort to see where the cows went. If they took it to Beth-shemesh on the western edge of the tribal territory of Judah, then God had punished them. If not, the harsh afflictions that had ravished them were merely coincidental.

The Philistines loaded the cart and sent it away. Sure enough, the cows headed straight down the highway toward Beth-shemesh, neither turning aside to the right or left, lowing as they went. The Philistines followed the cart, watching closely as it came to the city limits of Beth-shemesh.

II. THE ISRAELITES RECEIVE THE ARK (1 Samuel 6:13-7:2)

The people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest when they saw the cart approaching. It came into and stopped in the field of a man named Joshua, where there was a large stone. The Levites were summoned to come and unload the cart. They placed the Ark of the Covenant and the box containing the guilt offering on the stone. Then the men split the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. They were so thankful

that the Ark had been returned to Israel. After seeing this, the Philistine lords who were looking on from a distance returned to their country.

Unfortunately, some of the men of Beth-shemesh looked into the Ark. This was an egregious act of irreverence toward the LORD and was strictly forbidden by the Law. Because they had profaned the Ark, God struck down 50,070 men of Beth-shemesh. The survivors mourned deeply over the slaughter and sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim asking them to come and take the Ark.

So some men from Kiriath-jearim came and took the Ark of the Covenant. They brought it to the home of Abinadab, whose house was on a hill. They consecrated his son Eleazar to keep the Ark. And thus, it remained at Kiriath-jearim (about 12 miles west of Jerusalem) for 20 years during the judgeship of Samuel.

Notice that God's anger toward the Philistines also struck the Israelites in Beth-shemesh. Just because they were descendants of Jacob did not exempt them from the LORD's judgment. By violating His commands and disrespecting His holiness, the people of Beth-shemesh foolishly provoked the LORD. It is bad enough when God's enemies do it, but you'd think that His own people would know better. Yet, oftentimes, we act no differently than they do.

III. SAMUEL JUDGES ISRAEL (1 Samuel 7:3-17)

Once the Ark had been returned, Samuel urged the people of Israel to repent of their idolatry and remove their foreign gods from among them. He told them to worship the LORD alone, that He might deliver them from the oppression of the Philistines. The sons of Israel obeyed Samuel's plea and they put away the Baals and the Ashtaroath.

The Philistines heard that the sons of Israel had gathered in Mizpah. They came up to do battle with them, and the Israelites were very afraid. Samuel told the people of Israel to cry out to God for salvation and deliverance. He offered a burnt offering and prayed on behalf of his people. When the Philistines drew near to attack, the LORD caused a great thunder which utterly confused them. The men of Israel routed the Philistines, pursuing and killing them from Mizpah all the way to Beth-car.

Samuel set up a memorial and named it Ebenezer because the LORD had helped Israel during the battle. The Philistines did not come up against Israel anymore during the days of Samuel. In fact, much of the territory they had taken was restored eventually to Israel. There was peace between the Philistines and Israel once again. So Samuel made an annual circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, ministering in each of these places. Then he'd return to his hometown of Ramah, where he had built an altar to the LORD. Thus Samuel judged Israel for the remainder of his life.

When the people of Israel turned to the LORD and sought His strength prior to the battle, they were victorious. He fought on their behalf and struck the Philistines with thunderous disarray.

This is in sharp contrast to their behavior in last week's message, when they sought the LORD's help only after their efforts were failing. This is an important distinction that we would be wise to consider.

CONCLUSION

Following their victory over the Philistines, the elders of the 12 tribes of Israel decided to unite themselves into a single nation. Rather than continuing as a confederation of distinct, independent tribes led locally by regional judges, they desired to become a united kingdom like those around them. Though God warned them of the dangers that this change would bring, the tribes insisted. Therefore, in the years that followed, according to the LORD's guidance, Samuel searched for, found, and crowned Israel's first king. A new era in Israel's history had begun, as the time of the judges (which had persisted for some 350 years) gave way to that of the kings.

Samuel continued judging in Israel until his death, although his authority was superseded by that of King Saul in his latter years. Samuel bravely stood up to and openly rebuked King Saul when he disobeyed God. This caused a fracture in their relationship. In the wake of the king's disobedience, Samuel anointed a young boy named David to someday take Saul's place. However, Samuel died before David ever became king. Samuel also wrote extensively, preserving the history of Israel during the age of the judges.

And so we have come to the end of our series on "The Conquering and Independent Church". We have read as the people of God experienced seasons of victory and success followed by seasons of persecution and defeat. From the triumphs of Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and others to the oppression of the Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, Philistines, and more - back and forth they went. In much the same way, our lives cycle between highs and lows - from mountaintops to valleys and back again - a rollercoaster ride that repeats itself over and over. May we as God's children, in all of these circumstances, whether they be good or bad, trust in the Lord Jesus, our Great Judge and Deliverer!

Timeline of the Conquering and Independent Church Series

All dates are approximate

1406	Israel Crosses the Jordan River - The Conquest of Canaan Begins
1399	The Promised Land Is Subdued, Divided, and Settled by the Tribes
	A Portion of the Tribe of Dan Resettles in Laish
	Israel Almost Eradicates the Tribe of Benjamin
1375	Joshua Dies
1370	Mesopotamian Oppression (8 years)
1362	Othniel Delivers Israel (40 years rest)
1322	Moabite Oppression (18 years)
1304	Ehud Delivers Israel (80 years rest)
1224	Canaanite Oppression (20 years)
	Shamgar Defends Israel
1204	Deborah and Barak Deliver Israel (40 years rest)
1164	Midianite Oppression (7 years)
1157	Gideon Delivers Israel (40 years rest)
	<i>Abimelech Reigns as King in Shechem</i>
	<i>Tola Judges in Israel</i>
	<i>Jair Judges in Israel</i>
1117	Ammonite and Philistine Oppression (18 years)
1099	Jephthah Delivers Israel from Ammon
	Philistine Oppression Continues (40 years ¹)
	<i>Ibzan Judges in Israel</i> ²
	<i>Elon Judges in Israel</i>
	<i>Abdon Judges in Israel</i>
1092	<i>Eli Serves as Priest then Judge in Israel (40 years)</i>
	Elkanah and Hannah Dedicate Samuel to the LORD
1079	Samson Begins to Deliver Israel (20 years, during Philistine Oppression)
1059	Samson Dies
1052	Philistines Take Ark; Eli Dies; Samuel Judges in Israel

The judges names are in bold letters

Those judges who did not deliver or defend Israel from a named enemy are in italics

¹ The 40 years of oppression span until the death of Samson which is the chronological end of the book of Judges. However, Samson only *began* to deliver Israel from the Philistines. They were able to regroup and continue oppressing Israel in the years that followed as detailed in the book of 1 Samuel.

² For the purposes of this series, we dated the story of Ruth around the time of Ibzan because the ancient Jewish rabbis equated him with Boaz. However, modern scholarship disputes this assertion and suggests that Ruth should be placed much earlier in the era of the judges, perhaps near the beginning. The exact date remains unknown.