

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 4: JOSHUA, JUDGES, RUTH – THE CONQUEST

As we leave Deuteronomy after the death of Moses and with Joshua follow the signpost towards the Promised land, we come to three separate junctions. At the first one in the Book of Joshua we immediately find a vastly changed landscape. From the arid, rocky inhospitable desert, the Israelites behold a vista of a fertile land. And it was all theirs for the taking. So, the very first landmark we encounter is full of optimism and promise.

Joshua 1:5-6 (NIV) No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. 6 Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

Joshua 1:7-9 (NIV) “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. 8 Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

In the first verses of chapter 1 of Joshua, we read that Joshua is the God-appointed successor to Moses and is given the same promise of God’s presence with him upon the same condition of obedience to the Law of Moses. With God’s express order Joshua prepared the people to move into the Promised Land to claim their inheritance according to the covenant made with Abraham, his son and grandson. Only two obstacles stood in the way – the river Jordan and the heavily fortified city of Jericho. Knowing he would have to take the city, Joshua sent spies who were aided by Rahab. They reported the city would fall. The miraculous crossing of the Jordan when the priests stepped into the water carrying the Ark of the Covenant added to the fear that was already gripping the inhabitants of Jericho and other tribes in the region. Then Joshua ordered twelve memorial stones to be set up at Gilgal on the other side of the Jordan explicitly so that future generations would know of this event.

Joshua 5:2-5 (NIV) At that time the Lord said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.” 4 Now this is why he did so: All those who came out of Egypt—all the men of military age—died in the wilderness on the way after leaving Egypt. 5 All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the wilderness during the journey from Egypt had not.

Joshua 5:10-12 (NIV) On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. 11 The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. 12 The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan.

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Joshua 6:2 (NIV) Then the Lord said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men.

At Gilgal two important ceremonies reminded the Israelites of the sign of the covenant with Abraham and their delivery from slavery led by Moses. The 2nd generation Israelites were circumcised and the Passover was celebrated. These rituals were reminders that God was directing their destinies and fulfilling His promises. And as a confirmation that they had entered a new phase on their route 66, the manna ceased and they got their first taste of the produce of the land. Then armed with God’s promise of victory, they went on to take Jericho. Only one incident mars the auspicious start to the conquest of Canaan. Achan’s bringing of forbidden loot from Jericho resulted in defeat of the Israelites at Ai. (Chapter 7). Because Joshua did not inquire of God his second attack also failed. When Achan’s disobedience was discovered, he and his whole family suffered the penalty of death by stoning.

Joshua 10:12-14 (NIV) On the day the Lord gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the Lord in the presence of Israel: “Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.” 13 So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. 14 There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a human being. Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!

Joshua 13:1 (NIV) When Joshua had grown old, the Lord said to him, “You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.

After that Ai was taken, as was much of the land. Many kings were defeated, the most spectacular battle being that when the sun stood still when the Israelites were attacked by 5 Amorite kings (Chapter 10). In spite of all these victories, as Joshua came to the end of his life, the conquest of the whole land had not been completed. Before coming to the consequences of that, one more landmark is significant in Joshua and it begs the question: Why was Joshua so sure the Lord was fighting for Israel?

The answer inscribed on this landmark can be summed up in one word – Obedience. Joshua, throughout his whole career had remained faithful to God. With Caleb, he was the only one of the first-generation Israelites to enter the Promised Land. The memorials of what God had done for the people as he entered and moved through the land, circumcision, celebration of the Passover, acting with courage and resolve based on believing God’s promise to give him victory, were all evidences of Joshua remaining as close to God as he possibly could. As a result of this Joshua was given the privilege of dividing the land between the twelve tribes. And, like Moses, as he came to the end of his life, he called the people together at Shechem for the renewal of the covenant.

Joshua 24:1 (NIV) Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

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Joshua 24:14-15 (NIV) Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Joshua 24:19-20 (NIV) Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. 20 If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

Joshua took their history back to the call of Abraham and rehearsed all that God had done for them since that time. He then challenged them to make the choice between serving Yahweh or the foreign gods of other nations. He warned them of retribution for unfaithfulness and ingratitude. When the people agreed to choose Yahweh, a covenant was made. It was recorded in the Book of the Law of the Lord. A stone placed under an oak tree served as a witness against them should they renege on their agreement. When Joshua died at the age of 110 he was buried at Shechem, and it is a testimony to his influence that the covenant was kept while he lived and during the lifetimes of the elders who had served with him.

The landmark of Joshua shows what can be done when a man with the right qualifications puts them at God’s disposal and follows God’s way of getting things done. Relying on God’s promise of His presence, Joshua took his courage in both hands and deployed his strategic military prowess to leading the Israelites to victory. Yet in doing so, he did not neglect to make the people fulfil their religious obligations to God. He stood out as a godly leader and worthy successor to Moses and ended his life, like Moses with honour before God and man.

Our next junction is book of Judges and, in contrast to Joshua, our landmarks here become increasing pessimistic. First on the landmark are the details of who continued the fight to take the land they had been allocated by Joshua.

Judges 2:10-13 (NIV) After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. 11 Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. 12 They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord’s anger 13 because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.

In spite of some success, particularly by the tribe of Judah, much of the land remained in Canaanite hands. This was the root cause of why for approximately 330 years, the Israelites progressively, and increasingly rapidly, entered a downward spiral into a moral abyss. The failure to eradicate the Canaanites and dispossess them of their land as God had commanded would prove to be the root cause of all their future problems. The whole book of Judges is a continuous cycle of sin, bringing oppression by surrounding nations, repentance and a call for

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help from the Lord, a period of peace; then the cycle starts all over again. Again, we have to ask the question: Why did each generation during these centuries not learn from the past?

The second landmark at this junction gives us a partial answer for it shows us the characters of the main judges.

Judge	Date	Bondage	Rest	Reference
Othniel	1317-1324	8 years	40 years	3:7-11
Ehud	1316-1237	18 years	80 years	3:12-31
Deborah	1237-1198	20 years	40 years	4:1-5, 31
Gideon	1191-1151	7 years	40 years	6:1-8:28
Jephthah	1087-1081	18 years	6 years	10:6–12:7
Samson	1068-1049	40 years	20 years	13:1-16:31

This table gives the names of the major Judges and it can be seen that towards the end of this period the number of years in bondage is greater than the years of peace. In one sense this alone tells us that the calibre of the judges deteriorated with the passage of time.

Judges 3:9-11 (NIV) But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, who saved them. 10 The Spirit of the Lord came on him, so that he became Israel’s judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. 11 So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.

Judges 4:4-5 (NIV) Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. 5 She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.

The writer of Judges appears to be favourable towards the first three judges. Othniel, nephew and son-in-law of Caleb was the model judge, because of God bestowing His Spirit upon him. Ehud gives out mixed signals because he succeeded through deception. Like Othniel, Deborah emerges with her reputation intact. Deborah stands out, not just because she was a woman, thereby exemplifying God’s prerogative in choosing who will serve Him in any given task. Deborah also stands out because she was also a prophetess and the detail of her holding court under a Palm bearing her name testifies to the high position she held and the respect she commanded in a rigidly patriarchal society.

A further example of Deborah being an exceptional judge is the fact that Barak refused to go to war without her.

Judges 4:8-9 (NIV) Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.” 9 “Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.

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Judges 4:18-22 (NIV) Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Come, my lord, come right in. Don’t be afraid.” So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. 19 “I’m thirsty,” he said. “Please give me some water.” She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.....21 But Jael, Heber’s wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died. 22 Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. “Come,” she said, “I will show you the man you’re looking for.” So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

Barak’s reluctance to trust the words of a prophetess is an example of how little faith the tribal leaders had in the word of God. Her prophecy against a victory for Barak, came true because the woman, Jael, who killed Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, is not only named in the narrative, but honoured in Deborah’s song of victory as “the most blessed of women” and further detail of her action is also repeated. (6:24-27). While it is true that there was no king in Israel and therefore the 12 tribes were only coming together in times of crisis, the failure of male leadership in this period appears to be symptomatic of the distancing of the Israelites from the Mosaic law and their widespread adoption of the pagan ways of those they had allowed to stay in the land and settle among them.

The flaws of the last three major judges seem to bear out this conclusion. God actually had to convince Gideon that he was the man to go up against the Midianites.

Judges 6:15-17 & 39-40 (NIV) “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” 16 The Lord answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive.” 17 Gideon replied, “If now I have found favour in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me..... Judges 6:39-40 (NIV) Then Gideon said to God, “Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew.” 40 That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.

Judges 8:27 (NIV) Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

One fleece sign wasn’t enough for Gideon, he had to have a second one. But in spite of having God’s Spirit and having the victory, Gideon slid back into his old ways. He refused the offer of kingship, but melted down gold rings he took from the plunder of the Midianites and made it into an ephod, a priestly item of clothing. Scholars suggest it is possible either a representation of an ephod was made with the metal or the imitation ephod was placed on an existing idol. Whatever was produced it subsequently became part of the idolatrous worship of Gideon and his family.

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It also says something about the tribal leaders when they had to turn to Jephthah, whom we are told was the son of a prostitute and had been cast out of his father's family.

Judges 11:30-31 & 34 (NIV) And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, 31 whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."..... When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter.

The Israelites turned to him because he was a warrior and he opportunistically accepted command. Opportunistic because God had not raised him up as a deliverer. Sadly, he disobeyed the Levitical law of making a thoughtless oath that he would sacrifice to the Lord the first thing he saw when he returned home. The result was child sacrifice, for he was met by his only daughter. Apparently, the tradition mentioned in Judges 11:37-40 is still carried out by young Israeli women today in memory of Jephthah's daughter.

The story of Samson, the last judge mentioned in the book is well known and is a key illustration of the consequences of intermarriage forbidden by the Mosaic law. Samson's womanising and the breaking of his Nazarite vow led to his death, even though it meant delivery for the Israelites for a time. It also brought to the fore just how far the Israelites had failed God. As if the decline of moral standards among the judges wasn't bad enough, this degradation even reached into the ranks of the religious leaders.

In chapter 17 we read of Micah who set up a family shrine and installed one of his sons as a priest, thereby rejecting God's anointing of Aaron and his descendants as the only legitimate holders of that office. This situation was exacerbated when Micah invited a Levite to become his priest. Levites were the religious officials, not priests. The Danite tribe then attacked Micah and compounded the sacrilege even further.

Judges 18:27-31 (NIV) Then they took what Micah had made, and his priest, and went on to Laish, against a people at peace and secure. They attacked them with the sword and burned down their city.The Danites rebuilt the city and settled there. 29 They named it Dan after their ancestor Dan, who was born to Israel—though the city used to be called Laish. 30 There the Danites set up for themselves the idol, and Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses, and his sons were priests for the tribe of Dan until the time of the captivity of the land. 31 They continued to use the idol Micah had made, all the time the house of God was in Shiloh.

This was the precedent for appointing non-Aaronic priests and that practice would eventually be established when the future Northern Kingdom of Israel came into being.

The crime of another Levite which led to his concubine's death and the near extermination of the tribe of Benjamin is recorded in chapters 19-21. The total disregard for human life and the failure to accept any personal responsibility for these events is further evidence of the depth of depravity that engulfed the people of God during these 300 or so years.

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Judges 21:25 (NIV) In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

This landmark recording the flaws of even the people who were supposed to uphold the law of God, is one which you really don't want to linger too long at, because on it is inscribed the very last verse of the Book of Judges. There is nothing new in the concept of 'doing your own thing'. Moral anarchy pervaded the land and this one verse suggests that things could only get worse. The contrast between the religious devotion and political success of Joshua and his generation and the spiritual and political failures of the generations of Judges could not be more stark. We would have to question why in spite of God's willingness to respond to repentance with mercy and deliverance, the Israelites had not learned the lessons of disobedience, but insisted on going their own way. They blamed it on the fact they had no king, but they all recognised their common ancestry. The name Israel is mentioned more often in this book than in any other book of the Hebrew Bible, an indication of the recognition that what happened to one tribe happened to all. The fact remains that individuals and individual tribes had choices as to their religious allegiance and the majority chose the easy path compromising their religious heritage.

There is no doubt there are few light aspects to the Judges landmark. With the exception of the abilities of Othniel and Deborah in their local situations, none of the judges reach the stature of Joshua who led the whole nation. Hence, the fragmentation of authority. As mentioned, neither individually nor corporately, were the Israelites prepared to staunchly try to stop the downward spiral into moral decay and religious idolatry and apostasy. It seems inconceivable to us that they ignored warnings that God would punish sin and punish it severely. Because they ignored those warnings, their decline, decay and defeat became inevitable. While they had given up on God, however, He had not given up on them.

Thankfully our next junction taking us into the Book of Ruth, starts to show us the route from God's perspective. This is truly a heart-warming story of a foreign daughter-in-law's devotion to an Israelite mother-in-law.

Ruth 1:1 (NIV) In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

Ruth 1:16-17 (NIV) But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."

After having moved to Moab because of famine, the deaths of their husbands caused Naomi and Ruth to return to Bethlehem, It was a fortunate timing, for their return coincided with the beginning of the barley harvest. As widows, therefore among the poorest in society, Ruth would be allowed to glean the leavings of the barley crop for herself and Naomi. And that fact takes us to the key aspect of this landmark which spells out God's providence in not just

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supplying food for the women, but also introducing Ruth to a relative of Naomi who would become the kinsman-redeemer.

Ruth 4:9-10 (NIV) Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, “Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. 10 I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!”

These practical details of the story were the means by which God was furthering His plans and purposes for His people in that era, and in the long-term for the world. While the days of the Judges saw the people turning away from God, God was acting to reclaim them back to Himself and re-establishing them as His people. As was the custom in those days, a near relative would marry a young widow and raise children for her dead husband. A closer relative than Boaz was unable to do this for Ruth, and so Boaz took on that responsibility.

The third landmark in Ruth, however, is the most significant of all.

Ruth 4:11-12 (NIV) Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, “We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. 12 Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

Ruth 4:16-17 (NIV) Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. 17 The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now, it’s true that we all like a happy ending to a romantic story, and from a human perspective we do feel these women who had lost everyone and everything belonging to them, deserved their happiness. But from the perspective of God’s sovereignty of perpetuating the line of those who would further His plans for a Saviour, the words of the elders are very significant. They place Ruth on a par with the wives of Jacob, the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel. They place the marriage of Boaz and Ruth in the context of the lineage of Judah, the son of Jacob and great-grandson of Abraham. The marriage also takes a step further in fulfilling the prophetic blessing that Jacob had given regarding the sceptre not departing from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet. While the elders would probably have had no idea of the import of their words, the fact that all these events happened in Bethlehem, speaks of God’s planning even of locations of what He would do in the future, a thousand or more years before the descendant of this couple came to earth to save the world.

The landmarks in the Book of Ruth are ones which engender hope for a better future for the Israelites. Obviously, things could not go on as they had been doing for over 300 years. God had shown infinite patience with, and mercy to, His errant people. He had never forgotten His covenants with their forefathers. Those promises stood alongside the Mosaic Law and a

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clear principle had emerged from the history of the period of the Judges. The Mosaic Law was sacrosanct. God would not abrogate any of the laws He had commanded to be kept. Neither would He admit any loopholes or excuses for not following it to the letter. The position could not have been communicated more clearly or adamantly to the people by both Moses and Joseph. Obey the law and your way will prosper. Disobey and suffer the consequences. This principle would stand throughout the Old Testament period. Ruth, on the other hand is the proof that God's promises would be fulfilled: His plans and purposes would progress as intended in spite of human sin. The texts inscribed on the last landmark in Ruth linked God's dealings with the patriarchs of the past, to the future which would see crowning of Israel's most revered king. So, as we leave Ruth and take the next signpost into Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, we sense that God is going to reveal how He will take His salvific purposes to the next level of development.