

Living by Faith Joshua, Judges, Ruth

Though Joshua and Judges both record the Israel's history in the land before the time of Kings Saul and David, they are quite different in their perspective:

| <u>Joshua</u> | <u>Judges</u> |
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| 1. Upbeat and joyful | 1. Discouraging and depressing |
| 2. Faces difficulties & solves them | 2. Encounters difficulties & compounds them |
| 3. Joshua the leader is faithful | 3. The leaders are increasingly inconsistent |

However these books also have commonality. Both recognize Yahweh as the exclusive Sovereign of Israel. Everything else follows from that common point of view.

The Book of Joshua

The Book of Joshua is organized around Israel's military campaigns. Joshua's first military goal is to establish Israel in Canaan:

- By taking all the territory
- Breaking the back of the opposition and
- By eliminating all the major political centers that could oppose Israel.

The list of conquered kings and cities in Joshua 12 marks the completion of this first military goal.

Phase Two (the remainder of the book) has to do with dividing the land between the twelve "tribes" of Israel (roughly based on the sons of Jacob), and it will become their responsibility to continue removing the smaller pockets of resistance within their territory. This two part strategy is key to understanding the book. Without understanding this two-stage program, some of the statements seem contradictory (e.g. the land is said to have been completely taken by Joshua (Joshua 11:23), yet the Lord tells Joshua, "*There are still large areas of land to be conquered*" (Joshua 13:1)).

In the midst of the first campaigns, we have the renewal of the covenant at Mount Ebal (Joshua 8:30-35), just as it had been prescribed by Moses (Deuteronomy 27). This covenant renewal is about Yahweh being their King. Yahweh has given them the land and Yahweh is the one they must follow.

We should also note that the first five chapters of Joshua are all preparation. This is not incidental material; instead it is vital communication to reveal the true nature of God's activities.

Accomplishing God's Plan

After humankind's fall, God chooses Abraham to begin the process of "reversal." Beginning in the Exodus, God is actively involved in fulfilling those promises. Yahweh delivered them from Egypt. Yahweh made them into a great nation. Yahweh shaped them through the desert, teaching Israel to trust in Yahweh's provision and protection.

God is no longer acting slowly as it seems He does in Israel's days of slavery in Egypt. The Jordan River seemingly dries up for the Israelites to cross over on dry ground (just like the crossing of the Red Sea, and an obvious reminder of that event, but experienced by a new

generation). The walls of Jericho fall after the people march daily, and finally [in unison] blast their trumpets and give a great shout (Joshua 6). The southern Amorites are defeated when Yahweh sends hailstones and answers Joshua's prayer for extended daylight (Joshua 10).

These events affirm to this new generation that they are also Yahweh's people. They've even had their own "Red Sea experience." They too have now been delivered and the land is being provided for them by God.

Their preparations include all the men being circumcised. They were not circumcised in the desert, so they have to be now (Joshua 5:2-9). Next they celebrate the Passover (Joshua 5:10). God's timing in giving them the land paralleled the anniversary of their deliverance from Egypt. They then start eating the produce of the land and the manna stops (Joshua 5:12), but it is still Yahweh providing!

Their first battle (against Jericho) was a ceremony as well. For *seven* days *seven* priests march around the city, blowing trumpets and carrying the Ark of the Covenant. On the *seventh* day they circle Jericho *seven* times. Remember, the seventh day was the Sabbath which was a sign to be kept marking the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 31:14-17; 20:8-11). Taking Jericho was a sacred event.

Jericho is also the first fruits of the land. The livestock and wealth of Jericho is dedicated to the Lord. Later, Yahweh will allow Israel to keep the plundered goods and cattle (Joshua 8:2). Everything in Joshua is being done according to God's plan.

Remembering Moses' Instructions

Moses gave specific instructions before his death and Israel entered the land. Now it will be more important than ever for them to remember his words:

- The Land and "Rest" – the land is an inheritance from Yahweh (Joshua 1:3-5; 23:16), and a partial fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Joshua 1:6). Israel's obedience will result in her "rest" (Joshua 21:44-45; 23:1).
- Memory – For the Israelites to continue being landowners, they must continue to tell the story and remember religious ceremonies.
- Covenant Obedience – "be careful to obey all the laws my servant Moses gave you" (Joshua 1:7).
- Rebellion and the Land – Joshua, like Moses, must warn the people against their tendency to be rebellious (Joshua 23:16; 24:19).

Yahweh As Warrior

The idea of God "fighting" for Israel is not new in Joshua. It was said in Exodus also (14:14; 15:3, cf. Deuteronomy 32:39-42):

But many wonder why God insists on the total destruction. Joshua's answer is that this is the final judgment of God. Remember the Flood (Genesis 6-7) and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19)? God's judgment on the Canaanites continues the theme of Yahweh as righteous Judge. In fact, at Jericho Israel is told that if she does not practice God's complete judgment (*herem* in Hebrew), she herself will be *herem* (under God's judgment – Joshua 6:18).

Israel was obedient to Yahweh under Joshua, but this will be the height of their faith in Yahweh (Joshua 23:9-10; 24:31).

Deteriorating Faith Under the Judges

The Book of Judges teaches the same lessons as Joshua, but one author said that they are taught from the perspective of “lessons from the woodshed.”

The book begins at the end of Joshua’s era, and tells of Israel’s progress in taking the land (Judges 1:1 – 2:5). Close to Joshua time there is success, but things go down hill the farther from Joshua the history is told.

Judah succeeds initially (Judges 1:1-18), but is later unable to drive out those who live on the plains and have chariots (1:19). The author’s theme is clear. The actions of the leaders of Israel is inconsistent at best – and they begin to worship other gods (2:10 – 3:4). Disobedience grows with each judges’ death (2:18-19). This leads to a repetitive cycle in the Books of Judges:

- Sin – Disobedience to the first commandment of Israel.
- Servitude – The nation loses some of its freedom to its enemies.
- Supplication – Israel cries out to Yahweh for deliverance.
- Salvation – Israel is delivered and they enjoy temporary peace.

Israel’s history is going downhill and this is seen in the character of the judges themselves:

- Othniel (Judges 3:7-11) – he delivers Israel from an outside oppressor, his history is brief (Judges 1:12-14).
- Ehud (Judges 3:12-30) who is a brave warrior but unorthodox.
- Deborah provides a positive note (Judges 4 – a woman judge!), but her general Barak takes constant assurance.
- Gideon (Judges 6-8) shows a man who is weak in faith and unwilling to do what God asks. His “fleeces” are a sign of unbelief and are not an example for people of faith to follow. Gideon tries Yahweh’ patience, yet Gideon is still used by God (with a greatly diminished force – to prove its about God and not Gideon or his army).
- There is more deterioration following Gideon (Judges 8:33 – 10:10). Yahweh announces he is tired of their faithlessness (Judges 10:11-14). The Israelites repent and get rid of their idols (Judges 10:15-16).
- The last full accounts of judges are those of Jephthah in the east (he is not chosen by Yahweh, but asks to be a judge as payment of leading the people against the Ammonites (Judges 11:4-11) and Samson in the west (Judges 13 – 16).

The amount of time spent on Samson, and his ultimate failure, is because he climaxes the Book of Judges and reflects Israel’s failure. Samson has a special calling (just like Israel). Having been chosen before his birth, his beginnings are like those of Samuel, Jeremiah and John the Baptist. Much would be expected from him, but he will be found wanting! His life is marked by his unfaithfulness to Yahweh and intermarrying with the other nations of the land.

The final chapters (Judges 17-21) are an appendix on failure. Rather than following the Law, “*everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Judges ends in stark contrast to Joshua. Joshua meditated on the Law, kept it, and found success. The Judges are inconsistent and ignorant in the practice of God’s Law. Judges ends with futility and frustration. The Mosaic Covenant of Deuteronomy 6 has been completely unfulfilled.

Relief in Ruth

On a completely different note, among the poetic books, adopted in the last section of the Hebrew Bible (A.D. 70), but belonging to this time period (and included here in the Greek and English Old Testament texts), is the short book of Ruth. It is both a heart-warming story and a literary gem. The Judges tells the story of unfaithful leadership. In Contrast, Ruth is the story of the life of some common people who live their lives in harmony with Yahweh and are aware of God's grace.

The themes of grace and redemption in this story begin with the decision of a Moabite woman named Ruth, who refuses to leave her mother-in-law Naomi. Ruth's husband dies, as do Naomi's two other sons (who could have taken Ruth as their wife). Ruth, a foreigner, commits herself to Naomi, Naomi's people and Naomi's God, Yahweh. She becomes a vehicle of Yahweh's blessing (Ruth 1:11-17).

It is also a transitional story. The book begins in the time of the judges and ends under the reign of King David. It begins with a failed genealogy and ends with a famous genealogy. The story begins with no hope, and ends with Naomi having a son (Ruth 4:13, 16), a kinsman husband for Ruth, and a continued line for Elimelech (whose name means "My God is King").

The primary theme of this book is that God is in control of life's events – both the bad as well as the good. A second theme is redemption. A word used over twenty times in Ruth is a word that becomes famous over time in the Old Testament – *hesed*. This word refers to God's unfailing covenantal love. It is often translated "loving kindness." The word is used to describe Yahweh, Ruth and Boaz.

This book becomes an important part of Scripture because it reminds God's people that God is at work, even in the darkest times, to fulfill God's promises. Yahweh seems to work best with those who are not among the greatest, but are often numbered among the "least."

Ruth and Boaz are named in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1:5 (also Boaz in Luke 3:32).

When Wars Cease and Rest Finally Comes

The idea of "rest" summarizes the goal of Joshua, as Israel – living in the covenant God made with her – inherits the land, occupies it, and lives under the blessing of Yahweh.

This same idea of rest is written about by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews as he encourages his readers to follow Jesus. Jesus is greater than Moses and has become the author of eternal salvation (Hebrews 2:9-10; 3:1-2). But that writer is concerned that some of his readers, though they have heard the Good News, will not enter into God's rest because of their rebellion (Hebrews 3:15, quoting Psalm 95). The author of Hebrews sees believers on a journey to their ultimate goal which is rest (Sabbath). Those who truly believe will enter that rest (Hebrews 4:3) and says further, "*If Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God*" (Hebrews 4:8-9).

We look to a heavenly country, as did the Patriarchs of old (Hebrews 11:15-16). The promise of God will bring us to the heavenly Jerusalem ("Mount Zion"), the city of the living God – where the angels and the righteous ones who preceded us, and Jesus Himself, whose resurrection made it all possible, will also be there (Hebrews 12:22-24).

The most important thing about this "land" of promise is that we will finally "*come to God*" and "*to Jesus*" (Hebrews 12:23-24). "*The dwelling place of God is with people*" (Revelation 21:3).

Reflection (Discussion) Questions

1. What are each of the two parts of Joshua about? Why may the Lord have wanted each tribe to take its own territory? Were they successful?
2. What areas of disobedience characterize Judges, but not Joshua? In your estimation, how much of our own spiritual failure is due to direct disobedience, how much to circumstances and trials, and how much to confusion over God's will?
3. How does Samson's judgeship illustrate the failure of being only half-committed to God? Why does a life like this fail to bring honor to God?
4. How does the idea of "Yahweh as Warrior" tie in to divine justice? How will this idea of divine judgment have its fulfillment?
5. What does "rest" mean? Why is the need for rest and peace a commonly felt need among us? How is this need met by Jesus? How is this rest related to fellowship with God?