

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

After the death of Moses, we encounter two key figures in the next two books of the Bible who represent different kinds of leaders for Israel in the Promised Land—leaders who will either inspire the nation to godly living or drag the people down because of their own personal weaknesses.

At one end of the spectrum, Joshua stands out as the courageous leader who is committed to God's covenant, challenges the people spiritually, and encourages them to live a more godly life. On the other end of the spectrum, Samson is a failed leader who is a slave to his passions. Though endowed with unique gifts, he does not have the inner moral strength to use those gifts for good. Lacking self-control, Samson gives in to his anger, his stomach, and his sexual appetites, selfishly using his gifts to pursue pleasure for himself instead of carrying out his mission to help others and rescue the Israelites from their oppressors.

As salvation history moves forward to its next phase of life in the Promised Land, the stories of Joshua and Samson remind us that real strength lies not in muscles, wealth, sex, or power, but deep within the soul that remains faithful to God.

The Book of Joshua: Entering the Land

Let's begin by considering the exemplary leadership of Joshua. After Moses dies, the governance of Israel now passes on to this man, who had been Moses' faithful servant throughout the desert wanderings. God first assures Joshua of His presence with him. He calls him to be "strong and courageous" and careful to follow the law that Moses had given, as he is about to lead the people into the Promised Land (Jos 1: 5-9). Joshua was one of the few who had faith in God's promises when the Israelites rebelled out of fear that God would not protect them, after which they were forced to wander the desert for forty years until they perished. At last, Joshua stands at the Jordan River, ready to lead the people into that same land that their parents had rejected.

By means of a miracle reminiscent of the parting of the Red Sea, Joshua parts the Jordan River and the Israelites pass over into the Promised Land on dry ground (Jos 4). Their first significant action is to head to the fortified city of Jericho, where God demonstrates how the Israelites will possess the land originally promised to their forefather Abraham: not by military might alone, but by divine intervention.

Some archeologists have noted that the walls of Jericho were wide enough to race chariots on top of them. Scripture itself notes that some people even had their homes built *inside* the walls (Jos 2:15). But this heavily fortified city ends up falling not through weapons but through worship, as the Levites guide the nation in a procession around Jericho, with the Ark of the Covenant leading the way. They do this for seven consecutive days, culminating with trumpet blasts and shouts from the people—and miraculously, the walls tumble down *without the use of a single weapon*. The message of this first victory in the Promised Land is clear: Israel will come to possess the land not through its own machinations or military might but through the intervention and protection of the Lord.

Covenant Renewal at Shechem

The rest of the book of Joshua chronicles the initial settling of the Promised Land until, at the end of his life, Joshua gathers the people one last time at Shechem. This place is significant, for it was the first place in the land of Canaan where Abraham had built an altar to worship God, marking out the land God gave to him and his descendants (Gn 12:6). Now, centuries later, Joshua gathers the people together and calls them to worship the one, true God, just as their father Abraham had done at this same sacred place.

However, there is one problem Joshua needs to address first: Idolatry is still plaguing the people. This new generation of Israelites has fallen into the same sin as the generation before, bringing a part of Egypt, its idolatry, into the Promised Land. Joshua confronts the people and calls them to renounce their idolatry once and for all, saying, “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the Lord” (Jos 24:14).

Joshua stands here as a new Moses. Just as Moses, near the end of his life, challenged the people to choose between the way of obedience that leads to life and the way of covenant infidelity that leads to death, so too does Joshua, near the end of his days, force the people to make a choice between the pagan gods and Yahweh. He says to them, “Choose this day whom you will serve,” and he leads the people with his own pledge of fidelity: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Jos 24:15).

Joshua’s challenge was effective: The Scriptures tell us, “And Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work which the Lord did for Israel” (Jos 24:31).

The Book of Judges: The Downward Spiral

The Book of Judges, however, opens up with a dramatic shift in Israel’s history. For two generations, the people have flourished under the godly leadership of Moses and Joshua—true spiritual leaders, calling the people to faithfulness. But after Joshua’s death, Israel languishes without strong leaders who challenge them to walk in the Lord’s ways. Judges 2 announces the harmful results of this leadership vacuum: “There arose another generation...who did not know the Lord” and began to “serve” other gods from the nations around them (Jgs 2:10-12).

To feel the full force of this statement, recall how the fundamental purpose of the exodus from Egypt was to liberate Israelites so that they could *know* the Lord—to live in covenant with Him—and to *serve* Him, which means to worship him (see Ex 4:22). The fact that this next generation no longer even *knows* the Lord and is *servicing* other gods represents a reversal of the exodus. Although God has redeemed (literally, “*bought back*”) the Israelites from the Egyptians (Ex 6:6, 15:13), He now “*sold* them into the power of their enemies round about” (Jgs 2:14). This highlights the critical importance of handing on the faith. No matter how faithful one generation is, there will be a cultural crisis if the faith is not passed on to the next generation.

In Judges 2, we come face to face with the Israelites’ spiritual amnesia: they no longer even know the Lord. Furthermore, they have forgotten who they are and how they need to live as God’s chosen people.

This is the beginning of a catastrophic cycle that will enslave Israel for more than 300 years. Seven times in the Book of Judges, Israel falls into the following pattern of sin, slavery, supplication, and salvation:

- *Sin*: First, the people forget the Lord and fall into sin by serving foreign gods.
- *Slavery*: Second, their punishment is to be enslaved by foreign nations that oppress them.
- *Supplication*: In their distress, they cry out to God in supplication.
- *Salvation*: God sends them a judge to save them from their enemies—at least until they fall back into sin and repeat the cycle.

The fact that this cycle of sin repeats over and over again demonstrates that the judges whom God sends to rescue the people do not leave a lasting, beneficial spiritual impact. Some may successfully free the people from their enemies, but even they do not seem to challenge the people to turn away from their sins. Moreover, many judges are themselves corrupt, leading the people away from God's law.

Strength Is More than Physical

This fact is demonstrated most clearly in the life of the famous judge Samson. Samson embodies both the call and the weakness of God's people. He was endowed with extraordinary gifts of strength and a mission to liberate Israel from their current oppressors, the Philistines. Moreover, an angel revealed to his parents that he was to be consecrated to the Lord as a Nazarite. Nazarites were Israelite men and women who were set apart for special service to the Lord. They expressed their consecration by vowing to never consume alcohol, cut their hair, or come in close contact with a corpse (Jgs 13:4-5, Nm 6:1-8).

Though Samson was called to do great things for the Lord, he failed to carry out his mission. Instead of liberating Israel from the Philistines,

he fell into their pagan ways, marrying a pagan woman (Jgs 14:1-3), getting drunk (14:10), murdering in vengeance (Jgs 15:7-8), and taking a prostitute (Jgs 16:1). In the end, he died as one of their prisoners. Samson is a man who gives in to his passions for food, drink, and sex. Though physically strong, he was not strong in virtue. His moral weakness leads him to break his three Nazarite vows.

First, Samson sees a swarm of bees and honey inside the carcass of a lion. He was so desperate for the honey that he scrapes it out of the carcass with his hands and eats it—even though this violates his vow to avoid corpses (Jgs 14:8-9).

Second, the Bible tells us that Samson goes to the vineyards of Timnah and has a feast there, "for so the young men used to do" (Jgs 14:10). The word for feast (*mishteh*) implies a drinking bout. Samson thus violates his second vow of a Nazarite, that of abstaining from wine or strong drink.

Third, when the seductive Philistine woman Delilah pleads with him day after day to reveal the secret of his strength, Samson finally gives in and tells her, "A razor has never come upon my head for I have been a Nazarite to God from my mother's womb. If I be shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man" (Jgs 16:18). With this knowledge, Delilah has Samson's head shaved while he is sleeping, and his third vow is broken. The strength of the Lord immediately leaves him, and he is captured by the Philistines, who gouge out his eyes.

The very names of Samson and Delilah sum up the story of this tragic judge. The name Samson is connected with the Hebrew word *shemesh* (which means sun) and can be translated "sun child."¹ Delilah's name literally means "lady of the night." Samson was called

¹ Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 153.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Joshua 1:1-9; 6:1-5, 15-20; 24:1-5; Judges 13:2-7; 14:5-9; 16:4-22

Please read aloud: After the death of Moses, we encounter two key figures in the next two books of the Bible who represent different kinds of leaders for Israel in the Promised Land—leaders who will either inspire the nation to godly living or drag the people down because of their own personal weaknesses. Let's begin by considering the exemplary leadership of Joshua.

Read Joshua 1:1-9.

1. What does God promise to Joshua in this passage, and what does he expect of Joshua and the people? Why might this be important at this stage in the story?

Answer: God first assures Joshua of His presence with him. He calls him to be "strong and courageous" and careful to follow the law that Moses had given. This is essential as he is about to lead the people into the Promised Land—especially after their failure to be courageous previously.

Please read aloud: After this, at last, Joshua stands at the Jordan River, ready to lead the people into that same land that their parents had

rejected. By means of a miracle reminiscent of the parting of the Red Sea, Joshua parts the Jordan River and the Israelites pass over into the Promised Land on dry ground.

Their first significant action is to head to the fortified city of Jericho, where God demonstrates how the Israelites will possess the land originally promised to their forefather Abraham:

Read Joshua 6:1-5 and 6:15-20.

2. What causes the wall of Jericho to fall? What does this teach us about what God wants to do? How will Israel come to possess the land?

Answer: This heavily fortified city ends up falling not through weapons but through worship, as the Levites guide the nation in a procession around Jericho, with the Ark of the Covenant leading the way. They do this for seven consecutive days, culminating with trumpet blasts and shouts from the people—and miraculously, the walls tumble down without the use of a single weapon. The message of this first victory in the Promised Land is clear: Israel will come to possess the land not through its own machinations or military might but through the intervention and protection of the Lord.

Please read aloud: The rest of the book of Joshua chronicles the initial settling of the Promised Land until, at the end of his life, Joshua gathers the people one last time at Shechem. This place is significant, for it was the first place in the land of Canaan where Abraham had built an altar to worship God, marking out the land God gave to him and his descendants (Gn 12:6). Now, centuries later, Joshua gathers the people together and calls them to worship the one, true God, just as their father Abraham had done at this same sacred place.

Read Joshua 24:1-5

3. What does Joshua ask of the people? Specifically, what does he ask them to get rid of? What problem is still rampant in Israel? (Direct participants to v. 14, if necessary.)

Answer: He asks them to be faithful and cast out their idols. Idolatry is still plaguing the people. This new generation of Israelites has fallen into the same sin as the generation before, bringing a part of Egypt, its idolatry, into the Promised Land.

Please read aloud: Joshua stands here as a new Moses. Just as Moses, near the end of his life, challenged the people to choose between the way of obedience that leads to life and the way of covenant infidelity that leads to death, so too does Joshua, near the end of his days, force the people to make a choice between the pagan gods and Yahweh.

Moreover, Joshua's challenge was effective: The Scriptures tell us, "And Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work which the Lord did for Israel" (Jos 24:31).

4. Joshua was effective in leading the people. What was it that made him a good leader? What were some of the keys to his leadership? And how might God be inviting you to be more like Joshua?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Now we move on to the book of Judges. For two generations, the people have flourished under the godly leadership of Moses and Joshua—true spiritual leaders, calling the people to faithfulness. But after Joshua's death, Israel languishes without strong leaders who challenge them to walk in the Lord's ways. Judges 2 announces the harmful results of this leadership vacuum: "There

arose another generation...who did not know the Lord" and began to "serve" other gods from the nations around them (Jgs 2:10-12).

5. Knowing what we've studied up to this point—God's work in the Exodus, Israel's wanderings in the desert, and Joshua's leadership of the people in the Promised Land—how significant are these words? What does this mean for Israel?

Answer: The fundamental purpose of the exodus from Egypt was to liberate Israelites so that they could know the Lord—to live in covenant with Him—and to serve Him, which means to worship him (see Ex 4:22). The fact that this next generation no longer even knows the Lord and is serving other gods represents a reversal of the exodus.

6. No matter how faithful one generation is, there will be a cultural crisis if the faith is not passed on to the next generation. In Judges 2, we come face to face with the Israelites' spiritual amnesia: they no longer even know the Lord. Furthermore, they have forgotten who they are and how they need to live as God's chosen people. What does this reality teach us about the importance handing on the faith? How have you experienced this in your own life?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: This is the beginning of a catastrophic cycle that will enslave Israel for more than 300 years. Seven times in the Book of Judges, Israel falls into the following pattern of sin, slavery, supplication, and salvation:

- *Sin:* First, the people forget the Lord and fall into sin by serving foreign gods.
- *Slavery:* Second, their punishment is to be enslaved by foreign nations that oppress them.

- *Supplication:* In their distress, they cry out to God in supplication.
- *Salvation:* God sends them a judge to save them from their enemies—at least until they fall back into sin and repeat the cycle.

7. What does this repeated cycle tell us about Israel and its leadership during this time?

Answer: The fact that this cycle of sin repeats over and over again demonstrates that the judges whom God sends to rescue the people do not leave a lasting, beneficial spiritual impact. Some may successfully free the people from their enemies, but even they do not seem to challenge the people to turn away from their sins.

Please read aloud: Many judges were themselves corrupt, leading the people away from God's law. This fact is demonstrated most clearly in the life of the famous judge Samson. Samson embodies both the call and the weakness of God's people. He was endowed with extraordinary gifts of strength and a mission to liberate Israel from their current oppressors, the Philistines.

To understand Samson's story, we must first understand the special service he was supposed to offer to the Lord. To begin, let's read about how Samson's birth is foretold:

Read Judges 13:2-7.

8. What does God ask Samson's parents to do? And what isn't Samson supposed to do, even after he is born?

Answer: God asks Samson's parents to consecrate him to the Lord. And, even after he is born, he isn't supposed to cut his hair as part of this consecration.

Please read aloud: The angel revealed to his parents that Samson was to be consecrated to the Lord as a Nazarite. Nazarites were Israelite men and women who were set apart for special service to the Lord. They expressed their consecration by vowing to never consume alcohol, cut their hair, or come in close contact with a corpse (See Nm 6:1-8).

Though Samson was called to do great things for the Lord, he failed to carry out his mission. Instead of liberating Israel from the Philistines, he fell into their pagan ways, marrying a pagan woman (Jgs 14:1-3), getting drunk (14:10), murdering in vengeance (Jgs 15:7-8), and taking a prostitute (Jgs 16:1). In the end, he died as one of their prisoners. Samson is a man who gives in to his passions for food, drink, and sex. Though physically strong, he was not strong in virtue. His moral weakness leads him to break all three of his Nazarite vows. Let's read about each:

Read Judges 14:5-9.

9. At first, this might seem like an unimportant story, but how does this act show a lack of character and infidelity on Samson's part?

Answer: Samson sees a swarm of bees and honey inside the carcass of a lion. He was so desperate for the honey that he scrapes it out of the carcass with his hands and eats it—even though this violates his vow to avoid corpses (Jgs 14:8-9).

Please read aloud: Secondly, the Bible tells us that Samson goes to the vineyards of Timnah and has a feast there, "for so the young men used to do" (Jgs 14:10). The word for feast (*mishteh*) implies a drinking bout. Samson thus violates his second vow of a Nazarite, that of abstaining from wine or strong drink.

Now, let's read about the breaking of the third vow:

Read Judges 16:4-22.

10. First, how does Samson violate his vow a third time?

Answer: When the seductive Philistine woman Delilah pleads with him day after day to reveal the secret of his strength, Samson finally gives in and tells her, "A razor has never come upon my head for I have been a Nazarite to God from my mother's womb. If I be shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man" (Jgs 16:18). With this knowledge, Delilah has Samson's head shaved while he is sleeping, and his third vow is broken.

11. What happens to Samson because he has broken this final vow?

Answer: The strength of the Lord immediately leaves him, and he is captured by the Philistines, who gouge out his eyes.

Please read aloud: The very names of Samson and Delilah sum up the story of this tragic judge. The name Samson is connected with the Hebrew word *shemesh* (which means sun) and can be translated "sun child."¹ Delilah's name literally means "lady of the night." Samson was called to do great things for Israel and for the Lord—in a sense, to be a light for God's people. But in the end, this "sun child" of Israel is eclipsed by a Philistine "lady of the night."

12. How did Samson fail in leadership, and what can we learn from his (bad) example?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The life of Samson embodies the history of Israel in the period of the judges. Israel was called uniquely among all the

¹ Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 153.

nations to serve the Lord in this Promised Land, but like Samson, the Israelites intermarry with the pagans and live more like the people around them than as sons and daughters set apart for the Lord. Enticed by the pagan ways of life around them, the Israelites break covenant with God and fall into greed, murder, sexual immorality, and idolatry, all culminating in a great civil war.

The result of this spiritual death spiral can be seen in the final verse of the Book of Judges: "In those days there was no king of Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Jgs 21:25). With no spiritual leader like Joshua to lead them and challenge them, the people fall deeper and deeper into the slavery of sin.

13. How does "everyone doing what is right in their own eyes" lead to problems? Where do you see this today? In opposition to simply "doing what is right in our own eyes," how are we called to live as Christians?

Allow the group to discuss.