

BIBLE CHALLENGE

A 12 day study of the books Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges and Ruth

Deuteronomy

Much of Deuteronomy is in the form of a sermon. It is Moses' final address to the people of Israel. Technically, it is a second giving of the law – a repetition of the law – which was first given in Exodus. (“Deutero” means “second” and “nomos” means “law”.) Deuteronomy, for instance, contains a repetition of the Ten Commandments.

Deuteronomy begins in the first four chapters with Moses recounting to the people God's faithfulness despite their unfaithfulness, remembering everything that has happened in the wilderness. Moses then repeats the law and the covenant. We'll take a look at a couple of key passages from Deuteronomy before we press on into Joshua.

Monday:

Read Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 7:7-9

What to look for:

- 6:4 is called the *Shema*, the earliest and most basic confession of faith for God's people.
- Note how Jesus quotes 6:5 in Matthew 22:34-40
- Note how in 7:7 we get the basis for God's command in 6:4. After all we've seen of these people – their faithlessness, their lack of trust, their willingness to turn their backs on the God who rescued them – why does God stick with them? Why does God continue to choose them? Why does God still seek and ask for them to love him above all others? 7:7-9 is the key. God's own love is the basis for the love he seeks from the people. God's love is the foundation for the commandments, the laws, and for the command to love him in return. It all has as its fundamental basis God's own initiative of love. It is purely out of his own love for these strange, mixed up creatures that he bears with them.

Tuesday:

Read Deuteronomy 18:9-21

What to look for:

- The Canaanites, who occupied the land God intended for the Israelites, were a people whose religion involved the worship of many gods, religious prostitution, and, as indicated in this passage, child sacrifice. Knowing that makes it clear why it was so important that the Israelites worship God alone and not adopt the practices of the people who were already in the land.
- 18:15 contains a promise that will be very important to New Testament writers. They will argue that this ancient promise was

fulfilled in the person of Jesus, the new Moses. See John 1:43-45, John 6:14-15, Acts 3:13-23

Wednesday:

Read Deuteronomy 34:1-12

What to look for:

- Moses has reached the conclusion of his service. Note how it ends as it began, in the presence of the Lord. The God who called him to lead his people, is also with him at the end.
- Note how vs. 9-12 sets up a transition to new leadership under Joshua.
- Vs. 10-12 form an appropriate epitaph for Moses. Think of all the ways in which Moses was a pioneer in his relationship to God. Note, however, in vs. 10 that Moses' knowledge of God was never the key, rather it was God's intimate knowledge of Moses.
- After 40 years of wandering, the people are finally about to enter the land God had promised.

Joshua and Judges: Entering and Occupying the Promised Land

Thursday:

Read Joshua 1:1-16

What to look for:

- The first portion of the book of Joshua will tell the story of Israel's move into the Promised Land. The second portion of the book will focus on how the land was divided among the tribes of Israel (The people of Israel were organized into tribes or family groups. Each tribe bore one of the names of Jacob's sons, and two of the tribes bore the names of Joseph's two sons.)
- Note God's renewed promise to be faithful. Note also the different, more positive attitude of this new generation of people, as opposed to the fear, rebellion, and slave mentality of their parents.
- Joshua was one of the original spies who slipped into the Promised Land 40 years earlier. Unlike the other spies at the time, he had expressed optimism and trust in the Lord. (see the reading for May 25 and 26 in week 11)

Friday:

Read Joshua 2:1-24

What to look for:

- As is so often the case when God is at work, the hero of this story is none other than a pagan prostitute!

- Note why Rahab helps the spies (vs. 8, 11) – Rahab knows that God is at work.
- Note how Rahab is remembered by New Testament writers; see Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25. Note as well that Jesus traces his own lineage directly to Rahab (Matthew 1:5)
- Reflect: How does it make you feel to realize that God continually uses such disreputable characters for his purposes...in this case Rahab who has a suspect occupation and tells full-on lies?

Monday:

Read Joshua 6:1-25

What to look for:

- Jericho is the first major city on Israel's path of invasion.
- God's instructions seem designed to make certain that no one misunderstands who is really in charge. An invading army cannot take any credit for victory using tactics such as marching around a city and shouting. Clearly this is God's battle for God's purposes and God is in charge.
- Note their actions in vs. 20-21. Much of ancient warfare (and perhaps modern war as well) included the practice of armies taking for themselves the goods of those they conquered. Soldiers benefited from looting their enemies. This war was to be waged for God and not for self. To make sure that no one took anything for their own benefit, the city was offered up to God. When the city was destroyed it meant no one could gain anything from it, thus it was given over to God.

Tuesday:

Read Joshua 7:1-12, 19-8:2, 28-29

What to look for:

- A big victory at Jericho is followed by a big defeat at Ai, a rather small, inconsequential town that Israel should have won at little expense. To understand why, look at 7:1. Achan, in looting some of Jericho for himself, has violated the reason for the battle and brought down sin and judgment upon Israel.
- The placing of the story of defeat at Ai immediately following the story of the victory at Jericho reinforces the notion that if Israel obeys God and places their trust in him, no challenge would be too great, for God himself was fighting for them. But to the extent that they insisted on handling things themselves, even the smallest of obstacle would trip them up.
- 7:25 – they get rid of the sin by getting rid of the sinner.
- Joshua's humiliating defeat forces him to recognize yet again his total dependence upon God, at which time God once again wins the battle for them.

- Holy War is a difficult and foreign – even repulsive – concept for us to understand, especially in this day and age of terrorism. The wars in the book of Joshua were not wars just for any reason, but wars commanded by God for his purposes in which he was ultimately the warrior, the victory would be his, and his rules were to be followed. Issues at stake in this Biblical concept of Holy War included:
 - The land had been promised to the Israelites 400 years before and if the promise was to be fulfilled, Israel would have to occupy the land.
 - Israelites fighting style fit the harsh, brutish pattern of warfare in that day. It takes place within its historical context.
 - In these wars, God clearly shows his unchallenged power and authority, not only to the Israelites who seem never quite sure to what extent they believe in him anyway, but also to all other people. Those people would be relying on their gods for victory, so the wars of Israel are also, in a sense, a power struggle which shows the God of Israel establishing his superiority over other pagan gods.
 - As later events would prove, it would be a disaster for weak-willed, faithless Israel to intermingle with an undefeated and ever-present Canaanite culture.

Wednesday:

Read Joshua 24:1-7, 13-15, 21-24, 28-32

What to look for:

- Joshua is delivering a farewell speech, just as Moses did when he reached the end of his life.
- Much of Joshua's speech focuses on remembering all that God has done for his people and reminding the people of their obligation to be faithful to the covenant God has made with them. God, Joshua reminds them, has always, at every step, been the sole source of their success, including having finally fulfilled the promise of giving them the land.
- Note vs. 25 – only *after* having once again reminded the people of God's faithfulness, Joshua seeks a response: Choose. Their response sounds like things we've heard before from these people, which do not bode well for the future. As we move into the book of Judges, we shall see how long the people will honor their commitment.
- The book ends on a poignant note. Over 400 years after the death of Joseph, his bones are finally buried in the land of his ancestors. Abraham's descendants have come home.

Thursday:

Read Judges 2:6-23

What to look for:

- A brief background to the book of Judges:
 - When Israel entered the land they did so less as a unified nation and more as a collection of tribes, or groupings, of people based on family relationships. As they spread through the land, each tribe claimed a certain portion of the land as belonging to that tribe. As a kind of confederacy, each tribe went its own way unless there was a common threat.
 - The term “judge” does not refer to someone who presides at a court case. They were people who, today, we might consider freedom fighters or guerilla leaders. They were people whom God raised up to act as a short term – primarily military – leader, in the face of a foreign threat.
 - Following the mode that God has established to this point, many of the judges are not whom we would consider to be the perfect selection: Deborah is a woman at a time when women had no social standing, Jephthah is a social outcast and a leader of a gang of outlaws, Samson is an overgrown adolescent who is pitifully captive to his lust for women.
- Note 2:10-11 – trouble is brewing. Within a generation’s time Israel is once again returning to its old ways.
- Note the pattern that takes place in this reading: The people turn away from God to other gods, the consequence comes in the form of a threat to their security, God raises up a judge to help them, the people return to God briefly only to once again go sniffing after other gods. Note how this cycle is similar to that which took place in the wilderness, with God’s answer also being similar: “Have it your way.” This pattern is repeated again and again throughout the book of Judges.

Friday:

Read Judges 6:1, 6, 11-18, 36-7:8a, 16-25

What to look for:

- Note 6:11 – Gideon is apparently doing his threshing in hiding, afraid that anyone might see. So the angel’s greeting is all the more unusual (6:12) – mighty warrior?
- Much of the rest of chapter 6 details Gideon’s protestations about being of no account and his skepticism that God would really want to use him. Sound familiar? Gideon even goes so far as to ask to test God’s intentions (6:36), and when God fulfills the test, Gideon asks God to do it again, just to make sure it wasn’t a fluke!
- Note how Gideon’s fighting force is winnowed from over 30,000 men down to a band of 300. God wants the army to be so small

that no one could possibly think that Gideon won the battle on his own. This will be God's victory, not Gideon's

Monday:

The story so far: The Israelites continue in a pattern characterized by faithlessness, followed by a mortal threat to the nation by enemies from the outside, upon which God raises up a judge (military leader) to defend them. The nation returns to God until the danger passes and then the pattern repeats itself. Things in the book of Judges go from bad to worse as the nation follows a downward spiral into ever more chaos, cruelty and insensitivity to their own sin. The book finishes with one of the most poignant sentences in the whole Bible – Judges 21:25. We will spend one more day in Judges and then move on.

Read Judges 16: 1-30

What to look for:

- Note the refrain that begins each new episode in Judges by looking up Judges 13:1.
- Samson was born with great strength and great possibilities. The Spirit of the Lord moved in him. And yet, he forfeits the potential God has for him and misuses the strength he has been given for his own purpose and desire. How can strength – spiritual, financial, physical, emotional, etc. – not only be a gift but a danger? Note what the Apostle Paul says about strength and weakness in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29; 1 Corinthians 2:7-10.
- Note God's faithfulness even in light of Samson's unfaithfulness.
- How does the final verse in Judges - 21:25 – make you feel when you read it? How might that be the refrain of our own day and age: "It is right if it is right in your own eyes"? Note the results of that kind of philosophy in the book of Judges, when people become laws unto themselves and human will becomes the law of the land.

Tuesday:

Read Ruth 1:1-2:3, 2:8-12, 4:13-17

What to look for:

- Note the setting for the book of Ruth in 1:1. While the book of Judges tells the sweep of the nation's story, Ruth focuses more closely on the story of an individual family during that time.
- Note that Ruth is a foreigner. Naomi and her husband and sons have moved out of Israel's territory to Moab, a pagan land that is not a part of Israel. Ruth is a local girl of different ethnicity and religion who enters the story when one of Naomi's sons marries her.
- Years later, after Naomi's husband and sons have died, Naomi – now alone in the world except for her daughters-in-law – decides to return to her homeland. Note the depth of Ruth's loyalty and its

cost in 1:16-18. She is willing to return with Naomi to Israel, though she is, herself, a foreigner.

- Note how God's love is not reserved for the people of Israel alone. Ruth is accepted by God as well, despite not being one of his chosen people. The evidence for that is in 4:16-17. One of Ruth's descendants will be King David, and from David's line will come...Jesus.