

**Study 5: A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey**

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**Introduction.** God is faithful! This is really one of the major themes of the Old Testament, a theme that is especially apparent in the two books we will now read: Joshua and Judges. In Joshua we see how God acts with perfect fidelity in carrying out his promises. We're also struck by the fact that the Promised Land wasn't simply handed to the People of God. The conquest of Canaan was a long and bitter struggle, with the people suffering defeat and virtual enslavement on many occasions.

The Book of Judges was written to answer an objection. If God was as faithful to His promises as the sacred authors claimed, why was the possession of the Promised Land gained at such a terrible cost? Why was it at best such a transitory and uncertain possession? Another question that naturally occurs is: Why was it so important for the People of God to possess a land in the first place?

The key to this puzzle lies in God's overall purpose: the creation of His Church. To create a channel of salvation through the gradual education of His people to their task, God needed to provide a workshop with an atmosphere of stability and continuity. The land of Canaan would be that workshop.

Throughout the Old Testament we see that God has made man a partner in the work of salvation. In this sense (a very limited sense), God needs us, something that we see clearly in these two books. Here we will see just how this partnership works, and the demands it places on both partners.

Other themes that run through these books include:

- ✠ **Community and solidarity of the People of God.** Here we see the first outlines of the St. Paul's Mystical Body, united in Christ, as well as that universality of salvation and the responsibility of the individual under God. These all eventually reach their fullness in the New Testament. Can you point out examples of the moral unity and solidarity of the community in these two books, situations where all members share in the rewards or punishments of the nation's fidelity or infidelity to the Covenant with Yahweh?
- ✠ **Will of God that all men be saved.** Where in these two books do we see that Israel is not the only beneficiary of the divine plan?
- ✠ **Personal moral responsibility.** Where do we see that each member of the Hebrew nation will also be judged on his own fidelity to the Covenant?

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**Reading. Now open your Bible and read: Joshua 1-7; 23-24 and Judges 2; 13-16**

[You may also want to read Hebrews 11:8-16]

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**Background.** Joshua might well be called "epic history", since it paints with a broad brush and hits only the highlights of a military campaign. It emphasizes the essential event: God fulfilling His promise to give His people a land of their own. Judges, though, is more down to earth, focusing on the events between promise and fulfillment – the slow, painful infiltration, the habitual infidelity to the Covenant that brought defeat and subjection. The two books cover roughly the same period but from different perspectives. In complementary, not contradictory, accounts, Joshua emphasizes the acts of God, while Judges emphasizes the acts of men. Together they make up one fascinating story of the invasion of Canaan.

At the time of the invasion (c. 1,000 B.C.) the Canaanites were a wealthy and highly civilized people. They lived in strongly fortified towns from which they would go out to work on their farms. Politically, Canaan was a complex mix of tiny city-states that all owed a loose allegiance to Egypt. With only two classes of people – the very rich and the very poor – Canaan suffered from internal decay. Their religion was a polytheistic religion of self-interest, with gods worshipped largely for what the worshipper could

get out of it. Sacrifices were essentially bribes, and the victims were usually infants, the aged, or prisoners of war. They were generally burned or buried alive.

Archeologists tell us that Jericho is among the oldest centers of urban life in the world. Its remains go back to the Stone Age, when man first built permanent dwellings. Interestingly, the walls of Jericho uncovered by archeologists seem to have fallen outward and down the hill on which the city sat – just the opposite of what one would expect if the walls had been battered down by an invader.

**Key Passages.** Mark the following passages in your Bible:

† *Battle of Jericho:* Joshua 1-6

† *Joshua's Last Words:* Joshua 23-24

† *Warning Unheeded:* Judges 2

† *Popular Hero:* Judges 13-16

**Battle of Jericho.** The crossing of the Jordan recalls the crossing of the Red Sea under Moses and serves much the same purpose: to confirm Joshua as the divinely appointed leader of God's people. (Can you think of any connections here with Jesus who makes His appearance 1,000 years later?) The description of the Battle of Jericho has the flavor of a religious rite, with priests marching before the army carrying the Ark of the Covenant to the sound of trumpets. Is this also a foreshadowing of the New Testament passages about the trumpets heralding the Day of Judgment?

There was an ancient practice of proclaiming a *ban* against one's enemies in wars, which was probably what was taking place in Jericho when the people shouted and the trumpets sounded. Such bans were always linked to religious wars among the ancients of the Middle East. The enemy, his cities, possessions, families and slaves were "dedicated" – i.e., destroyed or slain – to the god. Similar practices continued among Germanic tribes in the waning days of the Roman Empire. There was no Geneva Convention or international law in those days, only the law of survival.

In Joshua, the emphasis placed on this custom was due to the extreme danger of religious and moral contamination. That this danger was very real is clear from the first chapters of Judges. The cruelty of this ancient institution, a common heritage of the people who lived in that place and time, was gradually ameliorated among the People of God as He led them along the road of moral education. Keep in mind, however, that God is Sovereign over all creation. This Sovereignty carries with it full control over life and death. (This is an interesting concept that we can certainly address during our session.)

**Joshua's Last Words.** These chapters (23-24) summarize the theme of the whole book. An aging Joshua sums up his life's work and warns the people of the danger of contamination by the idolatrous and licentious practices of their Canaanite neighbors. He recalls all the love and care God has lavished on them since the time of Abraham, and calls for their unswerving loyalty to Yahweh and His Covenant.

**Warning Unheeded.** Judges 2 introduces the book pointing to a religious interpretation of Jewish history. Behind the individual events we see a definite pattern: Sin – Punishment – Repentance – Deliverance.

**Popular Hero.** The leaders of the people were called judges since deciding disputes was among their chief duties (but not their only ones). The Hebrew word for judges might better be translated as "champions." Indeed, the judges were the national heroes of the time, and were primarily military commanders. With Samson we have a perfect example of the popular hero. He's brave, has a fatal weakness for women, and is gifted with an earthy wit and sense of humor. His life also mirrors the four steps addressed above: Sin – Punishment – Repentance – Deliverance.

**Old and New Testaments.** The cry "Hosanna" is familiar to us all. It's in the glad tidings of the angels at Jesus' birth and in the cry of the children on the first Palm Sunday. But did you know that it comes from the Hebrew verb meaning "to save" and means, "Save Now!"

Christ is preeminently *He who saves*, and it was no accident that He was given the name *Jesus* or *Joshua*, meaning “God’s Salvation.” The Jews of Our Lord’s day revered Joshua as one of their great national saviors, since it was he who led the people into the land of promise. And so, just as Joshua led God’s people into a land of their own, so Jesus leads all of us into the Promised Land of Heaven.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the sacred writer reminds his readers of God’s promise to their ancestors, the promise of a land of their own. He explains that this promise has now been more wonderfully fulfilled in the Christian’s hope of eternal life in heaven than it ever was in the days of Joshua.

**Questions.** We, who belong to the new People of God, also have divinely appointed leaders in the Pope and the bishops of the Church, successors of the Twelve. Pray for them. Their tasks today are no less awe-inspiring than those that faced Joshua and the Judges of Israel.

Now let’s consider some possible questions for our group discussion:

1. What is the main theme of the book of Joshua? Can you find a passage that best expresses this theme?
2. What do the Lord’s remarks to Joshua in chapter one tell us about the spirit of the Old Testament?
3. What light does Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 shed on the story of Rahab and the spies?
4. What is your reaction to the *herem* (ban) in Hebrew warfare? (See Jos 6:18,21; 7:1-26) Do you see any modern parallels?
5. What do you think of the following statement? *The entire history of the conquest of the Promised Land is a prophecy of the spiritual conquest of the world through the Church under the leadership of Jesus the Messiah.*
6. What is your interpretation of the period of Israelite history offered in Judges 2?
7. How does the account of Samson illustrate this interpretation?
8. How would you compare Joshua and Samson?
9. How is Joshua the “new Moses?”