



WEEK OF JANUARY 28, 2024

(COVERS READINGS FROM JANUARY 28 – FEBRUARY 3)

Overview

The following information is provided as a basic orientation to reading the Bible. Feel free to add to it and use it in any way that is helpful for your group. Also, feel free to make copies of these pages for members of your group!

The Book of Judges begins with a transitional phase after the death of Joshua and the elders of his generation. The Israelites, dwelling in the promised land, start turning away from the Lord and engaging in idolatry. Consequently, the consequences of their faithlessness lead to oppression from neighboring nations. Despite their disobedience, God continually intervenes by raising up judges like Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar to deliver them from their adversaries. This section sets the stage for the recurring theme of Israel's cycle of disobedience, oppression, repentance, and deliverance.

In Judges 4-7, the focus shifts to the story of Deborah, a prophetess, and judge in Israel. The Israelites find themselves oppressed by the Canaanites, particularly King Jabin and his commander Sisera. Deborah, with the military leader Barak, leads the Israelite forces to victory. Notably, the narrative emphasizes the role of women in leadership and the power of faith. Gideon's story follows, illustrating the theme of God using the weak to accomplish mighty feats. Gideon, chosen by God to lead a small army, experiences the miraculous defeat of the Midianites, underscoring the significance of divine intervention in human affairs.

Judges 13-16 shifts to the story of Samson, one of the most well-known judges, highlighting both his extraordinary strength and tragic weaknesses. Samson's birth is foretold by an angel, and he is set apart as a Nazirite, symbolizing his dedication to God. However, his moral failings, particularly his relationships with foreign women, lead to his capture by the Philistines. Despite his flaws, Samson's final act of strength, collapsing the Philistine temple, serves as a moment of redemption, highlighting God's ability and intention to use imperfect individuals for sacred purposes.

The Book of Ruth is a beautiful narrative set against the backdrop of the time of the judges, hence its canonical placement as a transition between Judges and Samuel. It begins with Naomi, an Israelite woman, and her Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Facing destitution, Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their families, but Ruth's steadfast loyalty leads her to stay with Naomi. The story unfolds in Bethlehem (the place of provision whose name literally means "house

of bread”), where Ruth gleans in the fields of Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi. Boaz, acting as a kinsman-redeemer, ultimately marries Ruth, highlighting themes of loyalty, redemption, and the providence of God. This union becomes significant as Ruth, a foreigner, becomes an ancestor of King David, illustrating God's inclusion of all nations in the redemptive plan.

1 Samuel opens with the story of Hannah, a woman who, despite her barrenness, fervently prays for a child (a persistent theme throughout the Hebrew Bible). Her heartfelt petition results in the birth of Samuel, whom she dedicates to God. The priesthood at Shiloh, led by Eli and his sons Hophni and Phinehas, is marred by corruption and disobedience. Samuel, growing up in this environment, receives a divine call from God, setting the stage for his prophetic ministry. This section explores themes of faith, prayer, and the consequences of spiritual decline.

In Chapters 8-10, as Israel demands a king to be like the surrounding nations, God warns them about the potential consequences of having a human king. Despite these warnings, the people persist, and Saul, a Benjamite, is anointed by the prophet Samuel as the first king of Israel. Saul's journey to kingship is marked by a series of divine confirmations, demonstrating God's sovereignty in the midst of human choices. The narrative explores themes of obedience, leadership, and the tension between human desires and God's plan.

After several missteps by Saul, God *regrets* making him king and sends Samuel to Bethlehem (the place of provision) to anoint a shepherd boy, David, to be the future king of Israel. Immediately, we feel the stark contrast between Saul and David, where the current king faces a deteriorating relationship with God and future king grows in strength, power, and popularity. The famous encounter with Goliath showcases David's courage and faith, leading to his prominence in Israel and a growing rift with Saul. Jonathan, Saul's son, forms a close friendship with David, setting the stage for the complex dynamics of power, loyalty, and the eventual transition of leadership from Saul to David.

General Discussion Questions

Use any or all of the following questions, depending how much time you have:

- How familiar were you with this week's readings? Was there anything that surprised you?
- What do you learn about God from these readings? What do you learn about humanity, or about human nature? How did the authors of these writings understand their relationship with God?
- What passages or aspects of these readings give you comfort or assurance? What passages or aspects of these readings do you find difficult to accept?
- Are there any particular passages that you want to study in-depth?

This Week's Discussion Questions

Judges 4-7 | In the story of Gideon we witness his journey from uncertainty to becoming a valiant leader. How does Gideon's interaction with God, particularly in seeking confirmation through signs, inform our understanding of faith and the discernment of God's will? How might this narrative guide our approach to seeking God's guidance and assurance in times of uncertainty within our individual lives and communities?

Ruth 1-4 | Consider the role of loyalty and redemption in the relationship between Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. How does their story challenge conventional societal norms and expectations, and what implications might this have for our understanding of justice and compassion within our faith communities? How can the themes of loyalty and redemption influence our interactions and support for those who may be marginalized or facing challenges in our midst?

Closing Prayer

Covenant God, your Word tells us of your faithfulness in the lives of your people, and we have seen your faithfulness in our lives. May we confidently live in the peace and hope that come from being your children so that we may share your love with others. For Jesus' sake and in his name, we pray, Amen.