

Summary for Session 9: Conquest and Judges—Part 1

Prep work: Joshua 1-24

DVD: We open this session with the Israelites across the Jordan from Jericho, ready to fulfill the promise given to Abraham—possession of the Promised Land. Jeff begins with a description of Canaan and its inhabitants. The land is about 50 miles wide and 150 miles long. It acts as a land bridge, connecting Mesopotamia and Egypt, and would have been a key trade route. Canaan encompasses four distinct ecological zones, ranging from the fertile northwestern region to the arid southwest. Jeff notes that the land of Canaan symbolizes the whole gamut: the tame, the wild, the predictable, the unpredictable, the fertile, and the futile. The key to possessing all this is to trust solely in God. Jeff encourages us to take note of how the Israelites, while originally possessing all the land, are pushed back further and further into the desert southwest as they fall deeper and deeper into sin. In describing the people of Canaan, Jeff remarks that in general, less-developed cultures are overshadowed and eventually subsumed into more sophisticated cultures. The Canaanites were a collection of city-states with an advanced material culture and strong fortifications defending their cities. Their religion was polytheistic, mainly revolving around El, Ashtora, and their offspring, Baal. Baal was revered as a god of water and fertility—cult prostitution was rampant in Canaan and Jeff notes that socially, the Canaanites' world revolved around sex. This would represent a huge stumbling block for the Israelites as the Law contained strict rules against promiscuity. Another treacherous practice of the Canaanites was child sacrifice. Jeff describes a huge bronze statue in the image of Molech, another Canaanite god. The ritual involved heating the bottom of the statue and then placing a baby between the statue's hands to be burnt to death. A drum would beat during the sacrifice to drown out the child's wails and keep the father from attempting to save his child. Jeff recalls Moses' admonitions to his people that they will survive in the Promised Land only if they constantly recall that their God is the only one and if they teach their children well, valuing them as the next generation instead of as an appeasement. The book of Joshua can be viewed as an encounter with the works of God and an ultimatum: accept God or reject God? Various groups and individuals will face this decision and decide their fate by their choices.

Before the Israelites cross the Jordan into the Promised Land, Joshua send spies into Jericho to scout out the situation. They encounter Rehab, a prostitute of the city, who tells them that all of Jericho has heard of the Israelites and their God, and the city is in terror of them. Rehab asks for mercy when the Israelites take over Jericho and declares she will place scarlet chords above the window to mark that her house and its inhabitants should be left untouched. Jeff pauses to recall how the first spies sent to the Promised Land, during Moses' time, were the ones in terror, but the situation is now the opposite. Had they trusted God at that time, they would have taken the Promised Land easily and driven the Canaanites ahead of them (God's original plan). Since they did not trust, however, and let fear overcome them, taking Canaan will be an arduous task. Rehab echoes the Passover, as she declares her faithfulness, signifies it with a blood-colored sign, and is “passed over” while destruction comes to all the unbelievers. Significantly, she becomes the father of Boaz, a direct forebear of Jesus and one of four women named in the genealogy prologue of the gospel of Matthew.

We return to the book of Joshua to find the Israelites crossing the Jordan in a manner reminiscent of the crossing of the Red Sea—the Ark of the Covenant is taken into the waters, which then recede and the people cross on dry land. Jeff notes that the Canaanites, watching the symbol of the Israelites' religion, the Ark, overpower the symbol of their god, Baal (water), must've been struck with fear at such a display. Jeff also remarks that the crossing happened

around the same place John the Baptist would later baptize multitudes, including Jesus. After crossing into Canaan, the Israelites celebrate Passover and circumcise this desert generation as a re-dedication of themselves to the Covenant. At this point, the manna stops appearing, too; the people of God have come into their own land.

The initial conquest of the Israelites is Jericho, and it is taken in spectacular style as an example of God handing them victory if they remain faithful to Him. The second attempt is a smaller town, Ai, but here the Israelites are defeated. Why? Achan has taken some of the precious metals for himself, defying God's ban on taking anything captured during the conquests. God declares all of Israelite's conquests will be an offering to Him—nothing is to be retained as an individual's possession. This herem warfare, a holocaust (burnt offering), is to mark the difference between Israel and all other nations. They are invading with the Word of God and the Canaanites can either accept or reject God, but the price of rejection is forfeiting their lives and all they own. Achan is put to death for his sin, but the whole episode takes a much deeper level as Jeff points out the spiritual implications of God's command as a type of purgatory. Citing Paul: our works are tested by fire, and like precious jewels and metals, they will survive the fire and return to God (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

The mass destruction in the book of Joshua, seemingly in God's name, gives rise to a certain fear—Nominalism—is God arbitrary? How can He be loving and protective of one, vengeful of another? Is His decision to wreak destruction a spur-of-the-moment choice? Jeff's answer is a resounding: “No!” God did not “throw a curve” at the Canaanites. Rather, God kept them in His sights for 400 years, as far back as Genesis 15. They have had plenty of time to hear God's Word, see His actions, and turn toward Him. Jeff references the Catechism in stating that God's will is informed by His intellect and justice, He does not act irrationally (CCC271). In Ezekiel, we find that God takes no pleasure in death (18:32, 33:11), and again in the Catechism it states that we know God by His actions in history and can trust Him (CCC2738).

The book of Joshua ends with the Israelites resting from war. They have divided tribally into their regions. Joseph's descendants make up the half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, and Jeff points out that they are only half-Israelite—Joseph's wife was Egyptian. This will come into play as their region will turn back to Egyptian deities in time. Not all the land is conquered, either, so the Israelites will have to learn to remain faithful to God in the midst of the Canaanites. Joshua gives a farewell address to the people, admonishing them not to intermarry with the Canaanites. Jeff uses Solomon's intermarrying, turn of heart, and practicing idolatry as a good example of why the Israelites shouldn't intermarry. Joshua also reminds them of God's works and has the people renew the Covenant. The time of the Judges will show how Israel lives up to the challenge of living the Covenant in the Promised Land.