

March

March 1

Deuteronomy 1-2

Now the Israelites have reached the border of Canaan , the "Promised Land". We know that God will not allow Moses to enter the land, so Deuteronomy will be Moses' last words to the people before he dies. He does his best to summarize their journey so far, and spends much of Deuteronomy encouraging faithfulness to God and warning of the consequences that will befall them if they are not faithful.

You and I know that hindsight is often slightly inaccurate. We get the main points right, but often get some of the details wrong. (Blessed are you if you have a spouse in your old age to correct you when your memory goes awry!) Don't let it bother you if Moses remembers things a little different than they were written in earlier books. His message is right on---"be faithful to God!".

Verse 2 of chapter 1 is a real gem!!! Moses tells us it takes 11 days to go from Horeb (Mt. Sinai) to Kadesh Barnea by the Mt. Seir road. That's about 150 miles. In the context of chapter 1, he's saying that the Israelites, in the organized fashion God set forth for them to travel, can cover around 14 miles a day. That's phenomenal for a group that large (around 2 million people). Gleaning some relative distances from this precious verse, we can also see from that Jesus and his disciples would have been able to easily go from Jerusalem to Galilee in less than a week by foot.

Moses reminds the Israelites of that day why they have spent the last 40 years wandering in the desert. Those he is speaking to are all under 60; anybody who was 20 or older at the time the spies (1:28) gave a bad report were doomed to die before they got to the Promised Land.

In chapter 2, we see some explanation of why these Israelites are not receiving all the land as far as the Euphrates River , as God had promised Abraham. Other of Abraham's descendants have already received an inheritance in this region. In 2:5-6, we're told that God has given the land of Edom to Abraham's great-grandson Esau's descendants. In 2:9, we're told that Lot , the nephew of Abraham, and his descendants were given the land of Moab . (This does not include the Midianite land that Balak, "king of Moab ", Numbers 22:4, was ruling over before his defeat by the Israelites.)

In 2:14 , we have a chronological correction. It was 40 years before that the Israelites started wandering in the desert as punishment for lack of trust in

God. It took only 38 years to get to the point, in 2:14 , that they begin battles *to get to the edge of the Promised Land*, where Moses is standing during his speech in Deuteronomy. What goes on for 2 years? Some battles, of course, but mainly the building projects of Numbers 32:34-42. Two and a half tribes were allowed to have land east of the Promised Land, but had to promise to leave their flocks and families behind while they helped the other tribes battle for their own lands. Before they left their flocks and families, they built fortifications for them.

March 2

Deuteronomy 3-4

Chapter 3 remembers the battles of the Israelites with the kingdoms east of the Jordan River . Not only is this a history lesson, but a reminder of God's ability to deliver other countries into their hands. By this time, the miracles of the plagues that got them out of Egypt are forgotten or a distant memory, as is the parting of the Red Sea . They don't have to rely on distant memories, for God has done miraculous things *lately*. In 3:11 , it is mentioned that Og king of Bashan , defeated by the Israelites, was the last of that giant tribe known as the Rephaites. (Can you imagine a man who needed a bed 13 feet long and 6 feet wide?) Back in Numbers 13, it was giants like this that the Israelites feared when they had a chance to invade Canaan 40 years before. God can handle giants.

Moses reminds the entire congregation that the two and a half tribes that were given land east of the Jordan River have promised to leave their families behind, while they help the other tribes take possession of their own lands. Everybody knows about that promise now---they'd better keep it.

In 3:26 , Moses blames the people for the fact that God forbids him to personally enter the Promised Land. You and I know better. In Numbers 20, it was Moses and Aaron that failed to give God credit as water was brought forth from a rock, choosing in their anger to take the credit themselves for the miracle.

Chapter 4 is similar to much of the rest of Deuteronomy. Moses knows he will not cross the Jordan River with the people, but will soon die. He does his best to remind them of the laws and statutes God has given them. This is the part of himself he longs to have them carry into the Promised Land. The recurring theme is, "Choose God and live. Forget God and be taken captive out of this bountiful land when God's mercy wears out."

March 3

Deuteronomy 5-7

Of all the laws and regulations God passed on to the Israelites through Moses, concerning worship, offerings, holy days, and all, it seems that Moses is placing a special emphasis here, in chapter 5, on the Ten Commandments. The other things are important, but these are the basics you are to live your life by and be sure to pass on to future generations. For our time, those statutes we find in the Old Testament that are directly derived from the Ten Commandments will never grow out of date. These basics, covering the holiness of God, the basic makeup of the human family, unselfishness, and respect for human life are building blocks that lead us to the abundant life that God meant for us. They aren't arbitrary rules that test our obedience to God, but guides for a better life.

The first few verses of chapter 6 remind us that we must make a conscious effort to pass on our beliefs to the next generation. It's been said that, if you don't, belief in God can disappear from our society in one generation. Do we speak about our beliefs as a natural part of our everyday conversation? Does our lifestyle match what we say we believe? Do our words and actions line up with the Ten Commandments, or do we think we've found a better way?

Chapter 7 has instructions against compromising your beliefs. As the Israelites moved into the promised land, God instructs them to meticulously avoid picking up the idol worship of their predecessors. Isn't that why God allowed destruction of these former residents? Be careful to notice 7:22, in which God tells them that all the former inhabitants won't necessarily be gone, so the temptation will be a little greater than if they had all been completely destroyed. We, of course, live in a world in which everyone is not a Christian; temptations will be around us, but we've got to be determined to know and hold on to our beliefs.

March 4 **Deuteronomy 8-10**

God has provided for his people during these years in the desert. They had lived in a plentiful part of Egypt, and not only has God kept them alive through these 40 years of exodus, but God has sustained them in a *desert*.

One of the pitfalls Moses sees ahead is prosperity. When they attain the Promised Land, will they forget their constant need of God? When the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of cloud by night are no longer their constant companion, will God slip out of their thoughts? When prosperity comes, it can be easy to take the credit ourselves, and to forget that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Deut. 8:3.

Another pitfall (9:4) that Moses warns them of is claiming that we *deserve* God's blessings. I hope they were humbled as Moses listed for the congregation all the times they had turned away from God during their journey from Egypt,

from the incident of the "golden calf" (Exodus 32) when Moses barely saved them from extermination, to (verses 9:22-24) several other times they complained and said they'd be better off back in Egypt. When we get a correct view of sin as rebellion against God's love, how can *any of us* think that we're owed God's blessings?

We've read a lot about how the priests were to do the offerings and animal sacrifices, but we forget that the sacrificial system was a way of training these former slaves how to be God's set-apart people. Moses summarizes God's requirements in 10:12---"And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?" That sounds amazingly like Micah 6:8. If you think about it, it's also the same as Jesus' commands in Mark 12:29-31.

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March 5

Deuteronomy 11-13

Here Moses is addressing the elders, who would be 40 to 60 years old. "It wasn't your kids that saw the plagues in Egypt, the miracles that God used to bring your freedom. It was YOU." He is putting the biggest responsibility on this older group, to lead the people in keeping God's commandments.

Verse 10 of chapter 11 doesn't deny that Egypt was a good land for growing a vegetable garden. Moses points out a major difference: Your garden in Egypt needed regular watering. This Promised Land that God is giving is different. I guess we can see that, if we look at the topography of Canaan. The coastal plains will receive good rainfall, since the nearby mountains cause the clouds to release their moisture before going any further east. Egypt was basically flat.

Deuteronomy 11:18-20 sounds very much like Deuteronomy 6: 6-9. Moses is not ashamed to repeat himself. He's trying to drive home a point, because this will be his last speech to the people before he dies. "Teach your children God's ways!!!"

In 11:26 , Moses repeats himself again, concerning the blessings of following God's commands and the inherent curses in turning away from them. He meant verse 29 to be taken seriously, and it was. We see in Joshua 8:33 this scene enacted, with half the congregation shouting blessings from Mount Gerizim and half shouting curses from Mount Ebal . What a memory aid!

In chapter 12, Moses cautions the people to destroy everything having to do with other religions when they reach the Promised Land. We can hardly believe that the Israelites would pick up such practices as child sacrifice or temple prostitution, but there is evidence that they did. In 12:29 -30, Moses warns against the old idea that each land had its own god. They ought to know better than that, because God has been with them in Egypt , in the desert, and in every country they have passed through since.

Moses warns them in chapter 13 to be steadfast in following God. If a miracle-producing prophet comes along, don't listen if he tries to persuade you to worship idols---instead, stone him to death. In fact, even if your wife or son or daughter try to get you to follow other gods, they should be stoned. He even says YOU should be the one who casts the first stone.

If they only knew how diligent they would have to be in turning from temptation, the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities may never have had to occur. It's not always easy to stand firm in your faith.

March 6

Deuteronomy 14-16

Moses warns his people against certain pagan practices in 14:1, and reminds them, in a short recap of the Jewish dietary laws, that they are to be different than the peoples they see living in the area. Different is good! Being set apart for God is not strange, but holy.

Note the use of the tithe, in 14:22 and following. Usually the tithe of their first harvest is used in celebrating God. Every third year, this tithe celebrates God by giving it all to 'local charities', including any Levites living in the area. I wonder if this is a standard for our time, giving a third of our mission offering locally.

Chapter 15 reminds the Israelites that every seventh year, all debts are to be cancelled, even if they were just made the previous year. This would allow those having the greatest struggle financially to get a fresh start. Of course, it required faith on the lender's part that God would supply his needs. There is good evidence that the Israelites never practiced this, though it was definitely God's command. I suspect that greed or lack of trust in God's providence kept

the people from cancelling debts. You can just imagine, if our citizens were to cancel debts every seventh year, how refreshing it would be to those who had loans out.

We certainly enjoy our vacations. They refresh us and allow us to refocus. The Israelites were instructed to take a vacation from ordinary work three times each year for three national religious festivals. Imagine every man, woman, and child on vacation at the same time, with everyone taking time to refocus on God. It would sure do our nation a lot of good. I can only imagine.

March 7

Deuteronomy 17-20

In chapter 17, God sets up some strict guidelines, doesn't He? Anyone worshipping *any* other gods, is to be publicly put to death by stoning. Anyone not submitting to the judicial authority of the high priest is also to be publicly stoned to death. What is there about these things that is so detestable? God considers these, and other capital offenses mentioned elsewhere, as the very foundation of their relationship with God. They *must* believe that there is only one God, or all authority is lost. They *must* follow the decisions of God's representative, or all order in society breaks down. If people begin to believe in another right, another final source of goodness, God's plan is slowly eroded. (That's sin---choosing another *right* other than what God has determined is *right*.)

In 17:14 -20, Moses exactly predicts some of the problems with a king that the Israelites will face later. Solomon, especially, acquired great numbers of horses, great amounts of money, and hundreds of wives. This led to the division of the nation after his reign. What should he have done with all that money, which I Kings 3 says he got because of his God-given wisdom? You could have asked any citizen of that age: Distribute it back to the people!

Was it scary to be a Levite? They had no inheritance among the tribes of Israel. They were totally dependent on their God-ordained portion of the offerings of the people. If the people did not give a voluntary offering to God because they were thankful, or they would not admit their sin and give a sin or guilt offering, the Levites would have no food. Maybe this was a good incentive! Do your best to keep the congregation close to the Lord, and you'll be provided for.

Verses 18:14-20 speak of a prophet like Moses that God will raise up who will teach the people all God's commands. This is a prophecy of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. He was raised up on the cross. This is exactly the kind of Messiah the Samaritans were expecting, as mentioned in John 4.

I'm not going to spend any time on chapter 19. Suffice it to say that there are obvious pillars that support the laws of our own time.

In chapter 20, important guidelines are given about war. The priest should always give the troops a "pep talk". That is, the priest should remind the troops that God is on their side, so they already have the upper hand. Moses tells them that they should not take into battle any man who is distracted because of responsibilities back home, or anyone who is fearful. They've got to be a focused army. Any opposition they face in the Promised Land in which they are to make their home must be completely destroyed--leave no influence from a people that God has become totally disgusted with. However, if they face an army outside the Promised Land, some leniency is allowed.

March 8

Deuteronomy 21-23

Chapters 21 and 22 cover various laws.

What do they do to atone for an unsolved murder? God provides rules for a ritual sacrifice that will be a payment for the sin of the nearest town to where the body was found. Does that mean the man who committed the crime is free from guilt? No, I'd be inclined to think he'd carry the guilt for the rest of his life!

In 21:18 -21, we see another crime that is punishable by death. Why should a child that rebels against the authority of his parents have to die? It must be because God considers the commandment "honor your father and your mother" as a pillar of society, and so the disobeying tears at the very fabric of their society. Note, though, that the parents must be the ones to bring the rebellious son for punishment.

You couldn't help but see, could you, that verses 21:22-23 could certainly apply to Jesus' crucifixion? He was a man considered "guilty of a capital offense" and put to death and hanging on a tree.

Chapter 22 concern matters a little out of our era. Though particulars have changed, the basic concepts still are relevant: Even if you don't like your neighbor, treat his property with respect. You've got to have grounds for divorce, for the marriage contract is a covenant between a man, a woman, and God. If you eat from your brother's vineyard, that's okay, but don't carry away more in a container.

March 9

Deuteronomy 24-27

At first, this chapter's divorce regulations seem to fly in the face of those mentioned in Deuteronomy 22. When we look a little closer, we find that 22 had

to do with slander of the woman's reputation. It never said there was no other grounds for divorce besides infidelity or unchastity. Frankly, I'm appalled that the husband needed only to be displeased with his wife, to write her a letter of divorcement. That makes the marriage contract sound mighty weak. This is exactly what Jesus spoke against in Matthew 5:31-32, and Matthew 19:3-12, also Mark 10:1-12. It sounds to me like Moses may not have heard God's voice on the Deuteronomy 24 command.

There is a lot in chapter 24 about leniency when you lend, especially to poor people. Somehow the greed we find so rampant today has not yet hit those people. Getting ahead at someone else's expense hurts yourself and everyone else. The poor are always with us, but woe to those of us who make the poor even more poor.

In 25:5-10, we see a description of levirate marriage. Brothers were to take care of each other's family by making sure an heir was left in the event of an untimely death. You've got to remember that God was building a nation among the Israelites. They felt it was their duty to make sure no family line died out. (Of course, if a woman was barren, they considered it God's judgement. That was another matter.)

We'll read often about not having differing weights and measures. We have heard stories about merchants that put their thumbs on the scale when weighing something! Differing weights and measures was akin to not keeping your word. If God's people's word couldn't be depended on, would people believe God's own word was dependable?

In chapter 26, there is implied a certain joy in tithing. It has to do with fulfilling a promise, or reaching a milestone. "Lord, you've kept your promise, and now I've kept mine."

The whole ceremony of pronouncing blessings from Mt. Gerizim and curses from Mt. Ebal is really being impressed on them. Moses wants to make sure the people carry this out after he's dead and gone. It ought to be something they never forget. We find out later that the ceremony comes off as planned.....but the people forget to stand by their word.

March 10

Deuteronomy 28

Only one chapter is listed on our Bible reading schedule today. Why? I soon discovered that that was enough! Chapter 28 starts with the blessings the Israelites can expect if they stay faithful to God, then gets into the curses they can expect for unfaithfulness. I got tired of that list of curses fairly quickly.

Would that really happen? The history of the Israelites as contained in First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, and First and Second Chronicles bears out that it *did* happen. Actually, it wasn't all 'black and white', for there was hardly a time when they were completely faithful or completely unfaithful. Over the years, you can read how increasing unfaithfulness changed the balance of blessings and curses increasingly to the side of the curses.

Ah, I get it. These blessings still apply. Faithfulness to God is never complete, but the closer we come to following God's will and God's guidance for our lives, the more blessed we'll be. On the other hand, the further we stray from God, the more we'll see our world fall apart.

Is this some kind of reward system, where God 'pays' us for doing right? Not exactly. God wants our lives to be as abundant and blessed as possible. Every misstep has its consequences. God's commandments are meant to be more a guideline to the most blessed life possible than tests for obedience. God created us and the world we live in, and God knows how this life will best work out, much like an auto manufacturer knows what kind of driving your car was designed for; any great departure from the norm will result in less than optimal results. People tend to have their own ideas of how the owner's manual ought to read, and depart from its instructions at their own peril. (Our "owner's manual" is the Bible, of course.)

March 11

Deuteronomy 29-31

Moses gathers the people to reaffirm the promises they made to God at Mt. Sinai, including the Ten Commandments. There are still many of the older folks (40 to 60 years old) who remember a little about Egypt and the way God brought them out of that country with a mighty display of power, including the ten plagues against Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea. Most everyone remembers the 40 years in the desert and living on manna, God's miraculous daily provision (they are *still* living on manna). The defeat of the kings of Sihon and Og are still fresh in their memory. Can people get so used to God's miracles that they take God for granted?

Moses sounds quite pessimistic. He seems sure that the Israelites will break their covenant with God. He points out that obedience will not take impossible strength---just do it! He makes it as simple as he can for them: Obedience leads to life, disobedience leads to death.

Remember the words Moses says to Joshua in 31:6, "Be strong and courageous." You'll see them a lot in your reading of the next few days.

Moses has written down the first five books of the Bible, and commands them to read it aloud to the congregation every seven years, during the Feast of Tabernacles. Everyone would hear the Scriptures, together. This would take about 12 hours. What a tremendous idea! Now, our Bible today would take around 72 hours to read aloud; imagine if the whole of Christianity could hear the book from beginning to end, during a special week, every seven years.

In 31:16, even God is pessimistic about the ability of the Israelites to keep covenant with him. Of course, with God, it's more than that, it's actually prophecy.

March 12

Deuteronomy 32-34

The last verse of chapter 31 told us that chapter 32 was a song. It's a long song, and Moses expected them to memorize it. In that culture, the written word was rare; memorizing was a normal task. They could certainly all learn this.

It's kind of a ballad, a song with a story. Moses sees a day in the future when the people have turned away from God, and have suffered the consequences God had promised. In 32:44-47, he makes it clear that this song does not have to come true. He's hoping it will be one of those songs you can't get out of your head, and so will act as a deterrent for them.

You probably remember from reading Genesis (see chapters 27 and 49) that people in that day attached a great significance to the blessing a father would give on his deathbed. The father would call his sons, or at least his firstborn, to his side and solemnly declare what good things the future would bring. Rather than being some magical power, I suspect that the blessing was something that guided the son's actions, something that he could aim his life toward. If you praise someone, they are more likely to do good than if you berate them. In Deuteronomy 33, Moses is giving a blessing to the whole nation of Israel, who have been like children to him.

In chapter 34, the speeches are over. Moses goes up on the mountain on which God said he will die. Was Mount Nebo so high, and the day so clear, that Moses could see the entire Promised Land, the land of Canaan? Whether or not you and I could have seen it all, I think that Moses did, with God-aided vision. There it was, the fertile territory that Moses had labored so long to bring these former slaves to. Moses must have felt a great deal of accomplishment. It had been nearly 500 years since God had promised this land to Abraham for his descendants. There's a sense of "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

March 13

Joshua 1-3

We turn a page in our Bible, and it's a whole new world. Moses, who has been the main character in our reading from Exodus through Deuteronomy, is now gone. Joshua is now the main person. What little do we know about him?

First, we know he has military experience (Exodus 17:8-13). He has been in the middle of battle and seen what God's presence means when the enemy is swinging his sword at you.

Second, he was with Moses as he came down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments, and discovered how quickly people can turn away from God.

Third, we saw him overcome with the presence of God (Exodus 33:11). When Moses would meet with God at the Tent of Meeting, Joshua would be with him, and would stay longer after Moses had finished.

And, of course, we've seen that God has directed Moses to choose Joshua to be his successor. It looks like Joshua hears at every turn the phrase, "Be strong and courageous!"

In chapter 2, Joshua sends two spies (two because only two of Moses twelve spies in Numbers 13 were faithful) to check out Jericho, which will be the first city they attack in this land God is giving them. They visit a prostitute! Actually, this makes sense, because 1) The prostitute's home was between the two walls of the city, so it's the first they'd come to, 2) It wouldn't look strange for a prostitute to have unfamiliar men visiting, 3) A prostitute could keep secrets (her business depended on it), and 4) Men would often reveal intimate secrets to her during intimate encounters (she would know their secret fears and hopes). As it turns out, this was the perfect person to get information from, with the bonus that she protected them when the soldiers came looking for them. God's hand was in this! I guess we shouldn't be surprised to see the prostitute Rahab listed in Matthew 1 as included in Jesus' lineage.

God goes before the Israelites as they enter Canaan. The ark of the covenant (the vessel carrying God's covenant with the nation, the Ten Commandments) is carried by the priests into the middle of the flood-stage Jordan River, and even the water must stand back in the presence of God. The nation crosses the River on dry ground.

Don't you reckon the Canaanites were scared now? We already know they were fearful of an Israelite invasion, even when Israel was on the other side of the high-rising Jordan. *The river didn't slow them down a bit!*

March 14

Joshua 4-6

The Israelites complete the crossing of the Jordan River , into the Promised Land. Joshua gets great respect from the people when God brought them through the flood-stage Jordan on dry ground, because they see that he is as great a leader as Moses, who brought them through the Red Sea on dry ground.

It seems that the crossing of the Jordan is just as great a miracle as the crossing of the Red Sea . Not as many people remember it, though; something to do with Charlton Heston?

The memorial of rocks from the Jordan will remind the people that God brought them through on dry land. You'll see many similar occasions as you read through the Old Testament. Sometimes it's a pile of rocks like this and sometimes it's just a "standing stone", left as a reminder of some great event, or some promise. Remember that these signs were a way of remembering history in a society without much access to writing and the written word.

The circumcision ceremony in Joshua 5 leaves the Israelites very vulnerable. For a few days, all the fighting men will be recovering from this minor surgery. (Remember the massacre in Genesis 34, two men killing all the adult males in a city as they recovered from circumcision.) God has it covered, though, for 5:1 says that the enemy was too scared of Israel to attack.

5:13-15 is incredible. A warrior appears from God, with sword drawn. Joshua walks right up to him and asks who side he is on. (Joshua and Caleb were the only adult males not recovering from surgery!) When the warrior identifies himself as the commander of the Lord's army, Joshua falls facedown before him. Wonder of wonders, the angel does not stop him, as is usually the case when a man bows down before an angel. Can you see why? Because this is an appearance of the Son of God in the Old Testament.

God had told Joshua to be strong and courageous. He needed that courage when he explained to the people God's plan for victory at Jericho ! What a crazy sounding idea! Instead of attacking Jericho , they just silently march around it, accompanied by the blowing of rams' horns. On the seventh day they march around Jericho seven times and ... the plan works! The walls fall as the army gives a great shout. Don't try this at home.

March 15

Joshua 7-8

Jericho had fallen. Who suspected anything was wrong? One soldier had kept some Jericho goods for himself, when God had commanded that everything be burned up, except vessels that could be used in God's service, and the silver

and gold, which was to be given into the treasury of the house of God. Achan was not only disobedient, but he stole silver and gold from God.

God had warned the people not to be tempted by the religions of the Canaanites. Maybe that is what this is all about. They were to destroy any idols. Can't people make a god of money and material things? After years of having every need met by God, Achan begins to serve *greed* as a god. It will do the Israelites no good to destroy every idol and every site of pagan worship if they become a nation of money worshipers. Again, this sin is seen as a capital crime because it happened at a critical time and place. (Besides, Achan's little sin caused 36 men to die.)

Because of Achan, the inhabitants of Canaan now have seen that the Israelite invaders can be beaten. The aura of invincibility has been dispelled. Joshua now must take his whole army to battle Ai, to put on a show of power. The ambush and slaughter of all the inhabitants of Ai brings the fear back to all the Canaanites who live nearby.

In 8:30 -34, the Israelites line the mountains Gerezim and Ebal, as the priests stand with the Ark of the Covenant in the valley between. This is the great memory help that Moses had commanded they do when they reached the Promised Land. Six tribes yelled out from one mount the blessings that the people would experience if they were true to God, as the other six tribes answered with the curses that would befall them if they became unfaithful to God. It was almost like Moses speaking to them from the grave. This was intended to paint a permanent picture in the minds of all the people, so *they would not forget*.

March 16

Joshua 9-10

The preliminary defeat at Ai may still be having an effect, even though the second attack on Ai was a resounding success. Whereas Canaanite kings earlier were shaking in their boots at the thought of the advancing Israelite army, now they are banding together to make some kind of defense (verses 9:1-2).

What a ruse the Gibeonites pulled! Their representatives come into Joshua's camp claiming to be from a distant country. They've got worn and patched wineskins, worn out sandals and clothes, and moldy bread. When questioned, they never say exactly where they *do* come from, only that it's a distant country. It seems silly to us that the Israelite leaders think that moldy bread is evidence of coming from a far away place--why, without our modern preservatives, bread would be moldy the day after tomorrow. And surely they don't think the bread took as long to mold as it took their clothes and wineskins to wear out.

Consider this, though: The Israelites have been living on manna for most of the last 40 years. They didn't really know much about bread and its properties. As for worn out clothes, God had kept their sandals and clothes from wearing out the whole 40 years they'd been traveling (Deut. 29:5-6), so to the Israelites, the worn clothes and sandals of the Gibeonites were extremely amazing.

Not too much needs to be said about the battles in chapter 10. Five Canaanite "city kings" attack Gibeon for making a treaty with Joshua, and the Israelites defend their new treaty partner. God continues to fight for the Israelites. Here he steps in with huge hailstones to help kill the enemy--"more of them died from the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelites" (10:11). In addition, at Joshua's request, God miraculously kept the sun up for an extra 24 hours while the Israelites were sweeping through the opposing army. To this day, there are scientists who believe they've found a day missing in the calendar that could be explained by this phenomenon.

After the army is defeated, Joshua leads his army in attacks of the territories of these five small-time kings. It's interesting that the attacks didn't include Jerusalem . This was a Jebusite stronghold until 3-400 years later, when King David defeated it and made it the new capital city of Israel .

March 17

Joshua 11-13

These three chapters tell us of the last great military campaign against Canaan . Joshua by this time is getting old, and will soon leave it to the individual tribes to finish ridding their lands of the Canaanites.

As chapter 11 begins, several of the remaining kings unite to battle against God.....er, I mean against Joshua and the Israelites. God tells Joshua not to be afraid of them, for God will hand that opposing army over to him within twenty-four hours.

Two minor points: The Jebusites living in what-became Jerusalem held on to that fortress city until the reign of King David. (See II Samuel 5:6-8.) It was an incredible fortress! It's only weak point was the tunnel through which fresh water entered the city. The legend has it that when David came up against the city, he dammed up the stream that fed this tunnel, leaving a pathway in.

The other minor point I want you to notice is found in 11:21 -22, concerning the Anakites. This was a family of very tall warriors (described by the spies in Numbers 13 as "giants"), something like 10 to 12 feet tall each! Joshua destroyed them, except for those in Gath and Gaza and Ashdod (in the territory of the Philistines). You remember one that David encountered a few years later, don't you? His name was Goliath, of Gath .

Chapters 12 and 13 speak of land conquered and land not yet conquered. The boundaries don't mean a lot to us. Keep in mind that there is some discussion among archaeologists and historians as to whether the Philistines were actually living in the region yet, though some think they had arrived before the time of Abraham. The Philistines had migrated by sea from either Crete or a region of Egypt . They were the most technologically advanced people of the region, especially in the use of iron. Joshua left the region of the Philistines to the tribe of Judah to conquer, but they never really got them under control.

The most reliable time estimates have Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt about 1400 B.C. They enter the Promised Land (Canaan) about 40 years later. King David's reign began about 1000 B.C.

March 18

Joshua 14-16

You remember that there are 12 tribes in Israel , named after the 12 sons of Jacob. However, the descendants of Levi were not given an inheritance of land, only cities. (Their inheritance was God---they were the priests and temple workers.) The tribe that had formerly been Joseph's descendants has been considered as two tribes since Joseph was found alive in Egypt , with two tribes being named after his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Caleb is of the tribe of Judah . He has a special gift when the Promised Land is divided up, since he spoke out for God when the majority of the spies sent to check out the land (Numbers 13) persuaded the people not to enter the Promised Land. Talk about being blessed!!! Caleb says he's as strong and vigorous now, at 85, as he was at 40.

The same three giants the spies saw in Numbers 13 are still around (15:14), and Caleb's forces drive them out. Caleb's tribe is actually given a much larger share than the other 11 tribes. Part of it is desert. They claim all the land but Philistia and Jebus (Jerusalem).

Manasseh's portion of Canaan is enough for only half a tribe, since they have already received some inheritance east of the Jordan . The two parts are adjacent, with the Jordan running down the middle.

March 19

Joshua 17-19

Much of chapters 17-19 is spent in describing boundaries for the land being given to the various tribes. What are we to do with this? I hope you are praying before you read each day, for God to heighten your understanding. Still, some

chapters can be just a list of names to us. Take time to scan through the names for any you might recognize, like Megiddo or Endor in 17:11, or the Valley of Jezreel (17:16). Other than that, try to understand the process of what's going on. Of course, take special note of the passages that *aren't* just a list of names, such as 17:12 -17.

Already the army is starting to doubt their ability to get the Canaanites out of their way. There are fears of Canaanites who have iron chariots. Isn't it amazing that the descendants of Ephraim say in 17:14, that "God has blessed us abundantly", yet a couple verses later forget God's help when they complain to Joshua that the enemy has iron chariots? If God has provided in the past, won't he provide now?

At last, in 19:49 , we see that Joshua has been granted a special inheritance, the city of his choosing. Caleb, the other faithful spy from Numbers 13, has been granted his inheritance, and it only seems fitting that Joshua now get his. Caleb had boasted that his strength had not diminished from age 40 to 85, but Joshua makes no such claim for himself. We'll see later that Joshua lived to be 110.

March 20 **Joshua 20-21**

God had instructed the people to set up six cities of refuge in their new homeland, three on the east of the Jordan River and three on the west. (Crossing a river could be a major obstacle in those days. You didn't just drive across a bridge.) If you accidentally killed someone, a close relative was likely to be seeking revenge. ("An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.") You could find safety in one of these cities until your trial, but you had to first tell your story at the city gate, to stake your claim that the death was indeed accidental.

Of the six cities of refuge, three are prominent elsewhere in the Bible: Shechem, Kiriath Arba (Hebron), and Ramoth-Gilead. Shechem is the site of great assemblies for the renewal of the covenant in Joshua 8 and Joshua 24, and was the Samaritan city (Sychar) that Jesus visited in John 4. Ramoth-Gilead is mentioned several times in battle stories. Kiriath Arba was the place Abraham's wife Sarah dies, with the burial site Machpelah on its outskirts.

Two of the 48 cities given to the Levites are especially worth mention. Gibeon was the home of the Canaanites who tricked the Israelites into a treaty in Joshua 9. The Gibeonites saved themselves from destruction by this hoax, but destined themselves to always be woodcutters and water carriers for the community. The Levites, then, were given a city *and* "flunkies".

Hebron is the more amazing story. Back in Numbers 13, Moses had sent 12 spies to examine the Promised Land. All twelve came back with glowing

reports of Canaan's bounty, but 10 discouraged the people from trying to conquer, saying "There are giants in the land." Caleb spoke up at that time and said, "God is on our side. Let's go!" The 10 prevailed, and God was UPSET, with the punishment being 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Caleb, however, was to eventually receive Hebron for himself, a direct gift from God for his faith. In Joshua 14, Caleb receives this award and conquers the city. Now he gives it back to God, keeping only the surrounding country! Caleb obviously believed that everything he owned was to be at God's disposal.

March 21

Joshua 22-24

In Joshua 22, we find the first threat of civil war among the Israelites. As soon as Joshua releases those troops to return home that have homes on the eastern side of the Jordan, they build an altar on the west river bank. Surely these Gadites, Reubenites, and half tribe of Manasseh know that it is an awful crime to build an altar that is an alternative to the one at the Tabernacle. The other nine and a half tribes come to make war with their brothers, to avoid God's vengeance on the whole of Israel. However, they are relieved to find that this is not an actual altar for sacrifices, but a monument for unity. Common sense should have led them to pick a different design for their monument, knowing how much God hates any altars other than his own. It was never meant for sacrifices, but it could become a temptation for such in the future.

It's ironic how quickly these tribes stand up for God, when they can't even drive all the Canaanites from the Promised Land because of lack of reliance on God.

In Joshua's farewell address, he says in a few paragraphs what Moses took all of the book of Deuteronomy to say. The message is simple, but not easy: Hold fast to the Lord your God. If you don't, you'll perish from this land.

Faithfulness takes everyday vigilance. Joshua says don't even associate with the remaining Canaanites. Before you know it, you'll be intermarrying with them and worshipping with them.

In Joshua 24, Joshua assembles the people one more time at Shechem. On each side were Mount Gerezim and Mount Ebal, the mountains of blessing and cursing (Joshua chapter 9). Joshua reminded them of what God had done for them, then gave them a great challenge: Now serve the Lord, and get rid of anything else you worship. If that seems too hard, then go ahead and serve whatever god you want to. "But as for *me* and *my household*, we will serve the Lord." This was a personal affront to the people, and indignantly they said, "NO! We will serve the Lord!"

Joshua returns their indignation: "Are you kidding me? Do you think I was born yesterday? When I look up the word 'rebellion' in the dictionary, there I find a picture of the nation of Israel. You are about as able to serve the Lord as I am to play the piano." (Or some such words.)

Again the people say, "NO!!! We will serve the Lord!!"

Joshua then wrote down their promise, in permanent ink. He also put up one of those 'standing stones': "I may not be with you much longer, but this stone will remind you of the promise you've just made."

I wish I could tell you that the Israelites never forgot or turned away from their promise made that day. I *wish* I could.

March 22

Judges 1-2

The book of Judges has as its theme what you will read as its very last verse: "In those days there was no king in Israel ; every man did that which was right in his own eyes." (KJV) Joshua has died, and God has not given them a replacement. If they will obey the covenant, God himself will be their leader.

Though Judges is thought to have the same author as Joshua (see how similar Joshua 15:13 -19 is to Judges 1:9-15), some of the order and facts are confused, such as the conquest of Hebron and the defeat (or not) of Jerusalem and Philistia (Gaza , Ashkelon , and Ekron).

Though much of the land has been subdued, several cities of Canaan in each tribal territory are not defeated. Why not? Has God's hand been shortened? It seems to be a matter of faith and of obedience.

In chapter two, "the Angel of the Lord" paid the Israelites a visit. This is a manifestation of God in the flesh; I'd like to think of this as an appearance of Jesus in the Old Testament. The Lord is not pleased that the Canaanites remain. He declares that the remaining Canaanites would be a snare to them, thorns in their sides. God's intent had been that these rebellious nations living in Canaan should experience the justice they so richly deserved after several hundred years of disobedience (and God's mercy). The Israelites had skewed their understanding of God's will to be that he wanted only to provide space for them to live. In their opinion, they had enough room, even with some Canaanites still around. It is not for us to decide what God intends by his commandments; our job is trust and obedience.

God provided "judges", who were temporary military leaders. The judge would help the Israelites defeat their immediate oppressors, which should have been enough to get them back on track in obedience to God. However, when the judge died, so did their obedience to God. What a mess! God is incredibly merciful, giving us chance after chance to be obedient, yet if God really is justice (He is!) there must come a time of punishment.

March 23

Judges 3-5

Though Israel should have been through with war, they had failed to drive all the previous inhabitants out of Canaan, their new home, the land God had promised them 500 years before. This angered God, and He allowed neighboring countries to oppress them. When the cry of the Israelites touched God's heart of mercy, he would raise up a leader for them ("judge") to throw off their oppressors and lead them back to faithfulness to God. However, at the death of the judge, the people would revert to their previous sinful ways. The greatest offense to God was worshiping the false gods of the people they should have driven out.

We should remember the name Othniel, the first of the judges. He had been a great warrior under his uncle Caleb. Othniel served God well as judge for 40 years. Then, of course, Israel reverted to sin.

Ehud was called by God to lead against the next oppression. Moab, led by Eglon (even the name sounds fat to me!) had invaded Israel and taken Jericho. Ehud assassinated Eglon and drove the Moabites back to their own boundaries. Peace lasted for 80 years, including the time under the next judge, Shamgar.

Remember that, when the Israelites were first on their way to the Promised Land, Moab wouldn't let them pass through on the trading route The King's Highway. God wouldn't let them attack the Moabites then, because they were descendants of Lot, and had been given land by promise from God to Lot. Though Ehud pushed them back out of Israel, he didn't take any Moabite land, though Moab "was made subject to Israel".

At the time of the next foreign oppression, Deborah was recognized as the spiritual leader of Israel. She called on Barak to lead the people against King Jabin's general, Sisera. Barak refused to go to battle unless Deborah went, too; she agreed to go. During the ensuing rout, the escaping general Sisera sought shelter with Jael, a female descendant of Moses' father-in-law Jethro. She killed him as he slept. Jael was a hero because God had put her in the right place at the right time, and she was not afraid to act. Like Joshua, she was "strong and courageous".

March 24

Judges 6-7

God allows misfortune to befall the Israelites. Does that seem like a loving God, like the one we know in the New Testament? You've got to remember that Moses told them time and time and time again that if they were unfaithful to God, He would allow these exact consequences. God even directed Moses to set up three annual holy festivals as remembrances of all God had done for the Israelites. Joshua also reinforced these teachings. If God is a loving parent, continued warnings of consequences must be followed up by action. We all know parents who are too kind-hearted for consequences to be invoked---we all hate to be around spoiled children!

Gideon feels inferior for the task God calls on him to perform, and asks God continually to give him a sign. God is incredibly patient! God knows that, when Gideon is convinced it's God talking to him, Gideon will wholeheartedly follow God's directions.

On the other hand, God turns the tables on Gideon and seeks a sign that Gideon will be faithful, by weeding out thousands from Gideon's army. Gideon didn't waver. Out of 32,000 men that answered Gideon's call to serve, he sent 22,000 home and nearly 10,000 back to their tents to be reserves; only 300 were actually going to attack a Midianite army "thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore."

It's fun to see the battle plans God can come up with when He knows he's got a faithful commander. Remember the crazy plan God gave Joshua for defeating Jericho?

Now it's Gideon's turn. The men were told to have a trumpet in their right hand, and a pitcher with a lighted torch in it in their left hand. At Gideon's command, they all broke their jars and blew their trumpets. What a nerve-shattering sound!

As they broke their jars, the soldiers shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" Think about it" WHERE WERE THEIR SWORDS? They had the trumpet in their right hand, and continued to blow the trumpet held in their right hand. Well, actually, they didn't need their swords just yet. The Midianite soldiers were so frightened and confused that they were battling each other. When the Midianites started to flee for their lives, then it was time for the Israelites to grab their swords. The reserves were called in, and more troops were called out.

March 25

Judges 8-9

The saga of Gideon continues in chapter 8. The Ephraimite tribe exhibits jealousy because they weren't in on the defeat of Midian as soon as some others. Later, the citizens of Succoth and Peniel will not share provisions with Gideon's 300 mighty warriors *until after the victory is complete*. In both cases, we see the breakdown of the confederation of 12 tribes because of self-centered action. Gideon soothes the ego of the Ephraimites, and punishes the citizens of Succoth and Peniel. A unifying vision is supposed to be enough to keep the people behind a leader, but how much clearer did this have to be? They were in the middle of a war of liberation!

The golden ephod made for Gideon should have been a great reminder of the mighty power of God in throwing off the oppression of the Midianites. Instead, the Israelites considered it to have power within itself, and idolized the ephod. Isn't that ridiculous? Later on, we'll see that the ark of the covenant gets used in the same way, as having power within itself rather than representing the mighty power of God. I'll leave it to you to figure out how we do the same thing today!

In chapter 9, Abimelech, son of Gideon by a mistress, would like to be his father's successor now that Gideon has died. Of course, Gideon had many other sons (70!) by his many wives. Who should rule? Rather than letting God decide, or letting the people decide, or even doing without a judge,.....Abimelech decided to take the job himself. He killed all his brothers (one escaped), and sought to take control of the government by force. Judges 9 is an ugly page in the history of Israel. Better to be an ordinary citizen than a ruler without God's blessing.

March 26

Judges 10-11

At the beginning of Judges 10, we're introduced to two leaders, or "judges", that are lesser known. Who ever remembers Tola or Jair? Yet God sent them, as He did all the judges (see 2:16). They did their duty, and that was good enough, just as it should be for us.

Jephthah is a problem. He was unacceptable to the leaders of his hometown, and even to his kinfolk, because his mother was a prostitute. Though he had the reputation of being a mighty warrior, he had to be content in living away from friends and family with a band of "adventurers". Somehow I think adventurer is an especially kind way to describe Jephthah.

Though Jephthah was unacceptable in polite society, the leaders in his hometown came to find him when they needed a warrior to lead them. He could easily have spurned them, but the prospect of being acceptable and even leader of his people softened his stance. It turns out that he was a great leader, and even a wise diplomat (Judges 11:12-27). Jephthah indeed was able to lead the Israelites in throwing off the oppression of the Ammonites.

The biggest problem with Jephthah is the vow he made in 11:30-31. If God would give him victory, he would sacrifice to God whatever came out the door to meet him when he returned home. God *did* give him military victory, but it was his *daughter* that came out to meet him on his return, not an animal. He carried out his vow. Jephthah was wise in most respects, and a good diplomat and general, but a man that truly knows God's heart must also have learned that there is a time for mercy.

March 27

Judges 12-14

Again we see, as in the start of Judges 8, jealousy arising between tribes. This time, though, it leads to civil war. Self-centeredness is not God-centeredness. The troops of Jephthah of Manasseh killed 42,000 from the tribe of Ephraim.

The next judge, Ibzan, sought to patch up conflicts within the confederation of tribes by being sure his children intermarried with other tribes.

Elon and Abdon, the next judges, were of little note. Do notice, however, that this is the second instance (also 10:4) we see of princes riding donkeys as a symbol of their position. Remember that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, came riding into Jerusalem the last time on a donkey.

In chapter 13, we hear the details of Samson's birth, who would be the next judge of Israel (and, boy, did they need a deliverer!). Samson was to be a Nazarite from before birth, never to drink wine or strong drink, and never to cut his hair, as a symbol that his life was devoted to God. Incidentally, Numbers 6 gives more details about the Nazarite. This was often a temporary vow, and was completed by shaving the head and giving a significant offering to God.

Samson takes a wife in Judges 14, and God inspires him to ask his parents to get him a Philistine wife. (The Philistines had been oppressing Israel for 40 years.) At the beginning of the wedding feast, Samson made a riddle about the time he had killed a lion with his bare hands (as David also claimed to do in I Samuel 17), but the 30 Philistine men serving as his groomsmen couldn't solve

it. They secretly asked Samson's fiancée (threatening her with death) the answer, and she found out for them. Samson was fighting mad at the Philistines, just as God wanted him. Note that the fiancée is given to Samson's best man; that will be important later.

Samson was a hothead. God had given him incredible strength, and channelled it against Israel's enemies. Ask God to use your good and bad qualities in his service, instead of keeping control of the steering wheel!

March 28 **Judges 15-17**

Samson is certainly one of those larger-than-life characters in the Bible that legends are made of. Could he possibly have done all these things he's given credit for? You'll have to decide that for yourself. Remember that the Bible is not meant to be a history book; it is a book of spiritual history. By that, I mean that whether or not you believe each event happened exactly as stated, be sure not to miss the faith lesson it is trying to teach you, intended for your spiritual growth.

Samson is so enraged, when he finds out that his wife has been given to another, that he destroys a huge amount of the Philistine wheat crop that is ready for harvest. He captures foxes, ties their tails together by pairs, and ties a burning torch to each pair. As they race wildly about, they set fire to the wheat fields.

In revenge, the Philistines murder Samson's wife and father-in-law. This, in turn, sets Samson on a killing rampage of Philistines. When the Philistines hunt him down to a cave in a mountain region, his Israelite brothers persuade him to give himself up, to save the country from renewed oppression. Samson gives himself up, but easily breaks free by his tremendous strength, and kills a thousand more Philistines. God is using Samson's uncontrollable rage to break the Philistine oppression of Israel.

We all know the story of Samson and Delilah. This great champion has a weakness: Let's call it "raging hormones". He loves women. It gets him in trouble time and again, and finally leads to his destruction. Romance is fine, but we've got to remember to never put anyone or anything above our devotion to God.

In Judges 18, a woman gets the wayward idea of letting the making of an idol be her gift of gratitude to God. It only leads to sin. The idol becomes the center of a shrine, and the woman's son adds more idols and hires a Levite to be the priest for the shrine. The son says, "Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest." As verse 6 said, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." What a crazy turn the worship of God has taken!

March 29

Judges 18-19

The rest of the book of Judges gets a little gruesome. If your children are reading through the Bible this year, be sure to take time to discuss today and tomorrow's readings with them.

Chapter 18 starts out by telling us, "In those days Israel had no king." Well, actually God was their king, if they would be subject to Him. Instead, 'each man did what was right in his own eyes'. (We have the same option today. Jesus will give us abundant and eternal life, if we will make Him our Lord.)

The tribe of Dan sent spies to check out a new homeland for them. God had already granted them land in Canaan. The Danites had refused to trust God to bring them victory against those living in the land God gave them (and refused to be God's instruments in bringing justice against those Canaanites). Now they were looking for a land that they could conquer without God's help!

The spies found a good land with a gentle, unsuspecting people. They also found a Levite who was serving a man named Micah (see Judges 17) as his personal priest. Micah worshiped God, plus he worshiped a silver ephod and a few other 'household' idols. The spies reported their findings, and the tribe of Dan headed for the conquest, taking away Micah's idols and priest as they went. Micah was upset, but couldn't confront the army by himself, so he had to let them have their way. The Danites continued on to destroy the peaceful and unsuspecting people of Laish, and rebuilt and renamed their city. The confederation of Israelite tribes is disintegrating, idol worship is coming into style, and life is getting harder for "the people of God". It gets worse!

Judges 19 is not for weak-stomached people. A Levite with a concubine (a priest living in adultery) stops in Gebeah for the night. The custom was that travelers would sit in the city square, and God's good-hearted people would invite them into their home for the night. (It was one of those 'love your neighbor as yourself' kind of things.) Well, nobody invited the travelers into their home until, at the end of the day, an old farmer who wasn't a native of the city took pity on them and asked them to be his guest for the night.

While the old man and the travelers were enjoying their evening meal, men ringed the little cottage and demanded that the old man send out the Levite so that they could all have homosexual sex with him. The old man was shocked, and offered his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine instead, "But to this man, don't do such a disgraceful thing." The men persisted, and the Levite finally shoved his lady friend out the door. The men of the village viciously raped

her, abused her, until she was left barely hanging on to life itself. She crawled to the cottage door, where the Levite found her dead the next morning.

He quietly loaded her on his donkey and took her home. Would he seek revenge? The Levite took a sharp knife and cut the lifeless body into 12 pieces, and sent one to each of the tribes of Israel, along with a description of what had happened in Gibeah in the land of Benjamin. All who heard of it were enraged, and sent word to the Levite, "Just tell us what you want us to do!"

It's hard to know where to start in extracting a faith lesson from this chapter. Obviously, sin could be found everywhere in this chapter, from the adulterous Levite to the sex-crazed men of Gibeah to the old man who would give his own sweet daughter to quiet a mob. Maybe it's enough to say that sin begets worse sin. It can be a cycle that is seemingly unending. God's solution has always been to turn back to Him; I've never found God to be wrong yet.

March 30 **Judges 20-21**

You know, it seems obvious to us that God would not want civil war among the Israelites. There must have been a better way. The phrase we see throughout Judges, "In those days, there was no king in Israel," rings true here, because God was no longer seen as Lord in the lives of His people. "Each man did what was right in his own eyes."

The non-Benjamite tribes assembled for war, and sent word to the tribe of Benjamin that they should send the murders out from Gibeah to receive their justice. The tribe of Benjamin refused! In former times, the tribes might have allowed God to choose them by lot from an assembly of all Israel and, when they were separated from the rest, execute justice Himself. However, when Benjamin decided to shelter the murderers, there was little choice left but to destroy the whole town of Gibeah. Not only would they shelter the murderers, they would defend them with force.

Why would God allow such casualties among the Israelites as they sought to bring justice to bear? I'm not sure. Maybe to show that civil war was not to be taken lightly, that taking revenge against your brothers was really God's job, or maybe to remind them that *none* of Israel was pure enough to consider themselves the instrument of God.

Many of the decisions the Israelites make about the war sound like they were made by consulting the Urim and Thumin, objects that the priest carried with him as a way to know God's will. They were something like dice, in that how the Urim and Thumin fell on the ground revealed God's answer. I'd have to

suggest that, if you really weren't listening to God at other times, this rolling of the dice would not be a reliable way to hear from God.

After slaughtering most of the Benjamites, the other tribes feel remorse for nearly eliminating one of the 12 tribes. They devise a plan for finding wives for the remnant of Benjamin, 600 men. It's a crazy and creative solution, and is an apt illustration to finish the book of Judges, the final words of which are (as you could guess), "In those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes."

March 31

Ruth 1-4

We don't know exactly when the events recorded in Ruth occurred, only that they happened during the times of the judges (approximately 1200-1040 BC). The Israelites are very conscious of maintaining their family lines, and right to land, in Canaan, for land ownership is voice in society. Note especially that when Elimilech and Naomi left for a temporary stay in Moab, they did not forfeit their land or home; Naomi knew that the house would be there, and vacant, when she returned to Bethlehem.

When Ruth, a widow, makes the decision to go with Naomi, her widowed mother-in-law, back to Israel, she makes a choice to take God as her Lord, forsaking her former worship in Moab forever. With this, she also accepts the terms of remarriage in Israel, that she will live on charity as a widow forever, unless a near relative chooses to take her as his wife as a duty to perpetuate her dead husband's family line. (When Naomi and Ruth die, the nearest relative would inherit their land, since there are no male heirs. Free land, but not his until who knows when.)

Ruth goes to the fields during the wheat harvest. It is the law in Israel to not harvest too precisely, leaving 'scraps' for the widows and fatherless. As it happens, Ruth chooses to glean in a field owned by the second-nearest kin of her deceased husband. Boaz takes a liking to her, and makes sure that his harvesters "accidentally" leave plenty to glean.

Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, notices that Boaz likes Ruth, and suggests that Ruth propose marriage to Boaz. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." Boaz is quite flattered that a younger woman would choose him, and have the courage to ask for marriage in a male-dominated society. He accepts her proposal, but there is the matter of the kinsman with a closer right of redemption, who may want to marry Ruth just to have the right to her deceased husband's and father-in-law's land (a very real possibility).

Boaz meets the other kinsman at the city gate, where legal transactions were carried out in that day. Yes, the kinsman would love to have the land. Oh...the Moabite woman comes with it? Well, no thanks. The reader should keep in mind that Moab, Ruth's country of origin, was not on good terms with Israel during the time of the judges; they are one of several countries that God has allowed to oppress Israel as part of God's judgement for Israel's unfaithfulness.

All ends well. Boaz marries Ruth. Another impurity is added to Jesus' family line! (See Matthew 1.) Boaz was descended from Perez, who was the offspring of incest between Judah and his daughter-in-law, and Rahab, who was a prostitute.