

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Joshua, Judges & Ruth

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: The God Who Keeps on Giving

"I will give you every place where you set your foot."

(Joshua 1:3)

If I invited you around for dinner, you wouldn't expect to eat it in the hallway. You might comment on how nice and warm it feels to step inside. You might even stop to admire one of the pictures on the wall. But you wouldn't want to stay there. You would see my hallway for what it is: a place to leave your dirty shoes before stepping into the rest of my home.

The same is true with Christianity. Forgiveness is the hallway through which we enter the palace of God's salvation. It's glorious, but it is the means to a far more glorious end. God cleans up our sin so that he can embrace us and lead us into all the riches that are ours in Jesus: deep friendship with the God who made us, adoption as his children, a profound sense of purpose, complete freedom from fear – those are just a few of the magnificent rooms in the palace. When Christians talk and sing about their faith as if it were all about forgiveness for their sins, it falls as short as you and I would if we sat down to eat our dinner between my daughter's wet coat and my son's smelly trainers.

That's why we need the books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth. They are the great antidote to "hallway Christianity" – a downsizing of what it means for us to have been saved by God. These three books were written to remind us that forgiveness is the start, not the end, of the Gospel. They restore to us a proper grasp of the grand vista of our salvation.

The first five books of the Bible are all about forgiveness and redemption. Moses writes about the God who rescued the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt and who led them across the desert as far as the border of the Promised Land. The sixth, seventh and eighth books of the Bible tell us what happened next. They take us beyond the hallway of salvation to describe what it meant for Israel to take possession of that Promised Land. They remind us that the God of Israel is not a reluctant Saviour who begrudgingly permits people to enter his palace and to sit among the coats and shoes in his hallway. He is the God who keeps on giving. He calls us sons and daughters, and he invites us to enjoy the vast delights of what has become ours through the death and resurrection of his Son.

Joshua and Judges aren't just history books. The Hebrew Old Testament groups them among the "Former Prophets". It sees them as far more than a simple record of the past. They are full of prophetic pictures of what it means to be saved by the God of Israel.¹ The apostle Paul has books like these in mind when he reflects that *"These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come."* So does the writer of Hebrews when he points out that *"If Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day... Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience."*² These books aren't simply a record of what God did for the nation of Israel over 3,000 years ago. They are also his call for believers in our own generation to step out of the hallway to explore all the great rooms of their salvation.

In **Joshua 1-12**, we discover the scale of **God's gift to his**

¹ The other books listed among the "Former Prophets" are 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. The "Latter Prophets" are the 17 final books of the English Old Testament, from Isaiah to Malachi. The Hebrew Old Testament lists the book of Ruth separately among the "Additional Writings".

² 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; Hebrews 4:8-11.

people. As we watch the Lord empower a nation of former slaves to conquer with ease the most desirable portion of the Middle East, it starts to dawn on us that Christians tend to speak too much about what they have been saved *from* and too little about what they have been saved *for*. We find ourselves challenged that there are many things that belong to us in Jesus that we have yet to conquer and possess. These chapters remind us that our salvation is huge.

In **Joshua 13-24**, we discover the scale of **God's gift to each of us**. The story gets personal, focusing first on each specific tribe within the nation of Israel, and then on Joshua himself as an individual. This is even more significant if we believe the Jewish Talmud when it tells us that the book was written by Joshua himself – supported by the author's references to “*we*” and “*us*”, and by his statement in 6:25 that Rahab is still alive at the time of writing.³ Joshua wants to stop us from treating his book as a general challenge to God's people. It is a call for each one of us to lay full hold of our salvation.

In the book of **Judges**, we are invited to marvel at **God's gift to sinners**. When the Israelites reject the God who granted them many mighty victories under Joshua, they discover that he keeps on giving. He judges them for worshipping the idols of the Canaanites, but he does so to bring them back to him. Whenever they repent and serve him, he provides them with a leader who delivers them from their oppressors and restores the broken borders of the Promised Land. He anoints those leaders with his Holy Spirit and invites his people to celebrate the way he gently restores any sinner who repents of their sins. All of this is meant to correct the idea, still pervasive among Christians,

³ *We* and *us* are in the Hebrew text of Joshua 5:1 and 6. The rabbis who wrote down the Jewish oral traditions in the Talmud in c.200 AD were convinced that Joshua wrote the last eight verses of Deuteronomy and the whole of Joshua, except its final chapter that records his death (Baba Bathra 15a). Scholars debate this, but their claim is backed up by a statement in Joshua 24:26 that he was a Scripture writer, just like Moses.

that we please God by lamenting our sin in the hallway instead of celebrating his salvation in the palace. It encourages us to respond gladly to the Lord's command in Psalm 100:4 – *“Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.”*

The book of **Ruth** makes this message personal again. It celebrates **God's gift to you**. It homes in on one particular family during the rule of the judges, as a way of helping you consider your own personal response to the God who keeps on giving. By charting Ruth's journey from pagan idolatry to the very heart of the Messiah's family tree, the author invites you to **believe that God has opened wide** to you the doors of the palace of his salvation. **Ruth invites you** to believe that the Lord will do great things in your own life if you resolve as firmly as she did that you will follow him.

So let's read Joshua, Judges and Ruth together, not just as history, but as a prophetic invitation to us from God. Let's see the highs and lows of Israel's early history as his call for us to **step out of the hallway to enjoy** the full measure of our salvation. Let's discover together what it truly means for us to know and love the God who keeps on giving.



Step Forward (Joshua 1:1–18)

*After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant...
"Get ready to cross the River Jordan."*

(Joshua 1:1–2)

Nobody wants to take over leadership from a genius. Think of David Moyes, who succeeded Sir Alex Ferguson as manager of Manchester United. Unable to live up to his predecessor's twenty-seven years of almost non-stop trophy winning, he was sacked after less than ten months in the job. Or think of Philip Arridhaeus, who succeeded Alexander the Great as ruler of the largest empire the world had ever seen, and who destroyed it even faster than David Moyes destroyed Manchester United's reputation.

So imagine how Joshua must have felt when he took over leading Israel from Moses.¹ His predecessor wasn't just a great leader. He had created the nation he led by facing up to Pharaoh and performing miracles that brought the mighty superpower Egypt to its knees. Moses had spoken to the Lord face to face on Mount Sinai, descending from the mountain with God's Law in his hands and the plans for God's Tabernacle in his heart. Moses had fed two million Israelites four million litres of manna every day for forty years in the desert. He had led them to victory against the Amalekites, the Amorites and the Midianites. The first verse of Joshua therefore emphasizes how intimidated and

¹ Joshua begins where Deuteronomy ended, at the end of 30 days of mourning for the death of Moses.



insecure he was feeling. It says that these things happened after the death of *“Moses the servant of the Lord”* to a man who knew that he was merely *“Moses’ assistant”*.

Joshua was tempted to look back at Moses and to look down on himself. He was the one whose army had been defeated by the Amalekites every time Moses left him to fight them on his own. He was the one that Moses left behind in the Tabernacle whenever there was important business for him to attend to elsewhere.² He was the one who had failed to persuade the Israelites that they could conquer the Promised Land if they listened to him instead of the **ten spies who doubted the Lord**. Although he had served Moses faithfully for forty years, he had only been recognized as his successor two months before Moses died. This can’t have made him feel confident. Aged eighty-four, he wasn’t just older than anyone else in Israel. He was also more out of his depth.³

That’s why Joshua needed to listen to the Lord when he commanded him to step forward in faith. *“Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the River Jordan into the land I am about to give to them – to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.”* Joshua needed to look up and to believe that the Lord is the God who keeps on giving. He needed to believe that the Lord would empower him to succeed where Moses failed, by conquering the most fertile stretch of land in the Middle East, stretching from the desert of Sinai, in modern-day Egypt up to modern-day Lebanon, and from the Mediterranean Sea to the

² Exodus 17:8–16; 33:11; Numbers 27:12–23. Joshua had been leader of the tribe of Ephraim for 40 years, but even his own tribe refused to follow his lead in Numbers 13–14. This didn’t bode well for him.

³ For a timeline of the book of Joshua, see the chapter “Milk and Honey”. Since Joshua died aged 110 in 1380 BC (Joshua 24:29), he must have been aged 44 when the Israelites came out of Egypt in 1446 BC. Only Caleb, five years younger than him, also survived from that generation (Numbers 26:65; Joshua 14:10).



River Euphrates, in modern-day Iraq.⁴ He had to trust that the leadership genius of Moses had not originated with Moses. It had been given to him by God's Holy Spirit.⁵ *"As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you."*⁶

Joshua felt weak and afraid, so he needed to listen to the solemn charge that he is given four times in this opening chapter: *"Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land."*⁷ We are told in verse 8 that this courage comes from reading and reciting the Word of God. Joshua had only the first five books of the Bible, whereas we have it all. When the Lord tells Joshua to *"Be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful"*, he is still speaking to you and me today, reminding us that his Word raises our expectations and prevents us from settling for something less than our salvation.⁸ As we study the Bible, we discover all that Jesus has won for us and we receive the courage we need to step forward to inherit our own Promised Land.

These opening verses also remind us that courage comes through surrounding ourselves with Christian friends. That's why we need to join a local church. Joshua encourages the

⁴ Joshua 1:4 emphasizes the vast expanse of God's promises to us. The territory described here would not be fully conquered until the time of King David (2 Samuel 8:1–15).

⁵ A change of church leader always feels like an upheaval, but there is far more continuity than change. This principle from Joshua 1:5 is restated in Hebrews 13:7–8, when many of the original apostles were dying.

⁶ Joshua 1:5 is the closest the New Testament ever comes to quoting from the book of Joshua, yet even here Hebrews 13:5 may actually be quoting from Deuteronomy 31:6.

⁷ Joshua 1:6 echoes the charge that Moses gave to Joshua when he commissioned him to lead Israel a few weeks earlier (Deuteronomy 31:6–8, 23). It is echoed in turn by 1 Corinthians 16:13, where Paul takes the Greek word *andrizomai*, meaning *to be manly*, from the Greek Septuagint translation of this verse. God's promises must never breed passivity. Christian leadership is always a call to courageous action.

⁸ The Hebrew word *hāgāh* in 1:8 is the same word used in Psalm 1:2 for *meditating* on the Word of God. Reading the Bible isn't enough. We need to meditate on it until it drowns out the voice of fear in our minds.



eastern tribes of Israel to fight, and they encourage him by echoing God's words back to him: *"Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you... Only be strong and courageous!"*⁹

Moses means *Drawn Out*, because his mission was to save Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Joshua had been born Hoshea, which means *Salvation*, but Moses changed his name to Joshua in Numbers 13:16, which means *The Lord Saves*, because his mission was to lead Israel into the full reality of their salvation. He was not to be a David Moyes or a Philip Arridhaeus, a pale shadow of his predecessor. He was to take Israel further than Moses ever had into an experience of the Lord as the God who keeps on giving.

The name Joshua in Hebrew is *Yehōshua'* or *Yēshūa'*. It is the same Hebrew name that the angel commanded Mary and Joseph to give to the baby boy that was born to Mary in Bethlehem. Although English Bibles try to honour the Lord by translating it as either *Joshua* or *Jesus*, we need to remember that both are *Yēshūa'* in Hebrew and *lēsous* in Greek.¹⁰ The life of Joshua is meant to be a prophetic promise that a better Conqueror will come after him and lead God's people into a better Promised Land. If you feel too weak to step into all that your salvation means, remember that you have a far better Joshua to lead you into your own Promised Land than the men of Israel.

Don't stay in the hallway of your salvation. With Jesus leading you, if you step forward in faith you cannot fail.¹¹ Don't settle for anything less than the vast expanse of spiritual

⁹ These 2½ tribes had settled in the land to the east of the River Jordan in Numbers 32. While Joshua models how second-generation leaders ought to take up the reins, these tribes model how they ought to be received.

¹⁰ Matthew 1:21; Luke 1:31. Joshua calls himself *Yehōshua'* throughout the book of Joshua, but later historians shortened his name to *Yēshūa'* (Nehemiah 8:17). Jesus is called *Yēshūa'* throughout the Hebrew New Testament, and they are both called *lēsous* throughout the Greek Bible (see Acts 7:45 and Hebrews 4:8).

¹¹ The Lord uses a Hebrew perfect tense in 1:3 to assure Joshua it is a done deal – literally, *"I have given you"*.



territory that is yours through his death and resurrection. The Lord encourages you:

*Be strong and courageous. Follow your great Joshua.
Step forward into your Promised Land.*



Unreasonable (Joshua 2:1–24)

“The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family.”
(Joshua 2:11–12)

The great British playwright George Bernard Shaw argued that *“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”*¹

I don’t know if George Bernard Shaw was right, but what I do know is that Rahab was an unreasonable woman and that the Lord loved it. She had no reason to expect favour from the God of Israel, yet she gambled everything on his mercy. She was saved from the destruction of Jericho because she trusted that he is the God who keeps on giving.

For a start, she was a Canaanite. She was part of a nation that sacrificed its babies on the altars of its false gods and had sex with close family members and even with animals. The Lord had vowed to judge her nation’s sin when it *“reached its full measure”*. Rahab was living in a nation on death-row.²

What was more, she lived in the city of Jericho, one of the greatest strongholds of Canaanite sin. Its name means *Moon City* because its citizens worshipped the moon instead of the Lord. Her own name means *Proud*, signifying that she was part of the problem. She works as a prostitute and doesn’t think twice about

¹ This is one of his *Maxims for Revolutionists*, published in 1903.

² Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:1–30; Deuteronomy 12:29–31; Ezra 9:11.



lying to the squad of soldiers who knock on her door.³ On top of all this, we are told in verse 15 that her house was built into the walls of Jericho, the very structure that the spies had come to learn how to destroy!⁴ Putting all of this together makes one thing exceedingly clear: If Rahab expected to receive anything good from God then she was being totally unreasonable.

And yet God saves her. This account of the conquest of the land of Canaan begins with the Lord extending grace towards a Canaanite who pleads for mercy. It doesn't matter that she is so steeped in sin that she embodies everything that has provoked **the Lord to judge her nation**. Anyone can be saved if they lay hold of the God who keeps on giving.

Rahab proclaims her faith in the God of Israel. While the Israelites east of the River Jordan wonder whether they can trust Joshua to lead them into battle, Rahab states her own conviction unequivocally: *"I know that the Lord has given this land to you."* While Joshua fears that he may not lead Israel as well as Moses, Rahab recognizes that Israel's victories were never manmade. It was the Lord who parted the Red Sea for them in Exodus 14 and who gave them victory over the Amorites in Numbers 21. She recognizes the root cause of all their victories: *"The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."*⁵

That's why readers miss the point when they question how Rahab could attract God's salvation despite telling a lie. Her deceit towards the soldiers is the least of her problems. Her idolatry, her prostitution and her sinful lifestyle have already

³ The Greek word *pornē* in Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 makes it clear that Rahab was a *prostitute*, although innkeeping and prostitution were closely linked in the ancient world. She must have recognized who the spies were when they asked for a room only, and not for a girl on the side.

⁴ Moses sent 12 spies to explore the land of Canaan in Numbers 13. Joshua only sends two spies because their mission is simply to inspect the city of Jericho and to come back with thoughts on how to destroy it.

⁵ Compare Rahab's words of faith with the Hebrew words of unbelief in Numbers 13:33. The enemies of God often see the realities of Kingdom warfare much more clearly than believers do. See also James 2:19.



forfeited any reasonable hope of her receiving forgiveness from God. Her only hope lies in his mercy, which is why this chapter shouts so loudly about the God who keeps on giving.

In the Hebrew text of this chapter, the word that is used for the “scarlet cord” that Rahab hangs from her window in verses 18 and 21 is *tiqvāh*. In the thirty-two occurrences of that word elsewhere in the Old Testament, it never means *rope*; it only ever means *hope*. The word is therefore used here as a clue to explain how a prostitute whose house was built into the very walls of Jericho could be spared its destruction. Rahab didn’t know that the redness of the scarlet cord pointed prophetically to the blood that Jesus would one day shed to save sinners such as her.⁶ All she knew was that the spies God had sent to her from Shittim told her that hanging it from her window would express her faith in his willingness to save her.⁷ Remember that the book of Joshua is listed among the “Former Prophets” in the Hebrew Old Testament. Remember also that the writers of the New Testament use Rahab as an example of how God loves to forgive the undeserving.

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were unbelieving. (Hebrews 11:31)

Was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? (James 2:25)

⁶ She knew a remarkable amount about the God of Israel. She refers to him four times by his covenant name *Yahweh* (2:9–12), and she uses the technical words *hāram* and *hēsēd* to describe his *destructive judgment* of sin (2:10) and his *loving mercy* towards those who repent (2:12).

⁷ The Israelite campsite at Shittim, meaning *Acacia Trees*, was the place where Israel sinned by having sex with pagan women in Numbers 25:1. Don’t miss the irony as men go from there to save a pagan prostitute.



There is a reason, therefore, why the book of Joshua begins with a visit to a prostitute in Jericho. The God who keeps on giving wants to teach us what it means to put our faith in him. Faith in God is seen, not by what we say we believe, but by what we actually do. If Rahab had sung songs about the God of Israel but failed to hang the scarlet cord from her window, she would have died on the Day of Judgment. If she had hung out something other than the scarlet cord that pointed to the blood of Jesus, then she would have died too. It isn't the amount of faith we have that saves us, but what we place that faith in. It didn't **matter how little faith the members of Rahab's family had in her story about the scarlet cord – if they stepped inside her brothel and closed the door behind them, they were saved. A little faith unleashes an unreasonable amount of mercy.**

So don't move on from this chapter without praying to the God who turned a brothel in the walls of Jericho into a centre for salvation. Tell him that you trust him for your own forgiveness too. It doesn't matter who you are or where you've been or what you've done. The blood of Jesus is powerful enough to wipe away all of your sin.

If you pray that prayer, the Lord will do far more than simply let you into the hallway of his salvation. Rahab wasn't just spared from the destruction of Jericho. We are told in 6:25 that she was admitted to the very heart of Israel, and in Matthew 1:5 that she went on to become an ancestor of the royal family of Israel, including Jesus the Messiah.

Rahab was sinful. Her faith was unreasonable. But God is even more unreasonably merciful. Tell him that you share the faith of a prostitute in the God who keeps on giving.