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Joshua 1:1–9, NLT, abbreviated

*After the death of Moses the LORD's servant, the LORD spoke to Joshua. He said,
² "Moses my servant is dead. The time has come for you to lead these people, the Israelites, into the land I am giving them. ³ I promise you what I promised Moses: 'Wherever you set foot, you will be on land I have given you. ⁵ No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live. I will not fail you or abandon you.*

⁶ "Be strong and courageous, for you are the one who will lead these people to possess all the land I swore to their ancestors I would give them. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do. ⁸ Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

Nehemiah 8:1–3, NLT, abbreviated

When the Israelites had settled in their towns, ^{8:1} all the people assembled with a unified purpose at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had given for Israel to obey.

² So Ezra the priest brought the Book of the Law before the assembly, which included the men and women and all the children old enough to understand. ³ He faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and read aloud to everyone who could understand. All the people listened closely to the Book of the Law.

History.

My message today is going to be a little different than normal. Rather than include a fragment from Scripture and discuss its meaning and its context within

the Bible as a whole, I'm going to give a summary of a big chunk of the Bible. I have a reason for doing this. Please bear with me. I think it will at least prove interesting.

The books of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, are usually broken into the following categories: Law, History, Poetry, and Prophets. The Law books make up the Torah or the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. I'd like to talk today about the History books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, 1st and 2nd Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. These books cover the period of time that spans the Judges and the Kings. The Judges were charismatic leaders and they ruled during a time when Israel was highly fragmented; the Kings brought Israel together into a single, powerful empire. One thing I'm not going to do is postulate as to which parts of these history books are literal history and which ones represent an idealized past. There are many internal inconsistencies in these books, and surely, they are not all completely accurate historically. But we will accept them as essentially true.

We start with the Book of Joshua. Remember that Moses died just before his people entered the Promised Land. It was Joshua who led Israel into Canaan, conquered the Canaanites, and then settled the land. Joshua gave each of the twelve tribes of Israel a portion of land and did his best to get his people to follow

their covenant with God. Next is the Book of Judges. Israel had defeated the unified and mighty armies of the Canaanite tribes. Joshua passes away, leaving his fragmented people with the job of successfully occupying the land. Judges essentially tells us that God's people failed at this. They fell apart morally and socially, and they began to adopt Canaanite ways instead of living the way God had planned for them. God punished them. Their main problem was a lack of centralized, effective leadership.

Next comes the Book of Ruth. This book perhaps shouldn't be considered a history book, but it is classified that way. We have looked closely at this book in the past. Naomi, along with her husband and two sons, leave their hometown of Bethlehem during a drought. Famine strikes the land of the Israelites. The family goes to a non-Israelite area called Moab, a land filled with Gentile people whom the Israelites saw as morally, culturally and racially inferior. There, the two sons of Naomi marry Moabite women. But then Naomi's husband and two sons all die. Naomi is left in a foreign land with her two daughters-in-law. The three widows are now totally destitute. One of the daughters-in-law goes back to her family in Moab. But the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, out of loyalty and love for her mother-in-law, decides to go back to Israel with Naomi. Ruth knows that the Israelites hate Moabites and that she, Ruth, is likely to never be able to marry

again, and that she will probably live in abject poverty in Bethlehem. Amazingly, Ruth's beautiful character captures the heart of an Israelite man named Boaz. Ruth has children who are half gentile, something that Israelites would have looked down upon, but she ends up an ancestor of both King David and Jesus. This is one moral of this story, that God favors Gentiles as much as he does Jews. Interestingly, while the Book of Ruth takes place during the period of the Judges, it is thought to have been written much later, during the period of the Kings.

The next books are 1st and 2nd Samuel. In the original Hebrew Scripture, these two books are a single book. These books set the stage for Israel's eventually shift from the rule of the charismatic leaders called Judges to the Davidic lines of kings; the fragmented lands of Israel go from chaos to unification and national power. These books revolve around three major characters: Samuel, a prophet, and then Kings Saul and David. But the transition to kingship rule is at best rocky. Tragedy strikes the line of David, and successful unification proves a failure – at least for the time being.

Next comes 1st and 2nd Kings; they follow the period from the accession of King Solomon, a son of David, until the Israelites are sent into Exile in Babylon after Israel is conquered by the Babylonians. It's a tragic tale. Israel has horribly broken its covenant with God. Solomon turns his people away from God and

toward idolatry. The kingdom is again badly divided, with the descendants of David ruling over the area around Jerusalem, called Juda. 1st and 2nd Chronicles come next. They provide a history that overlaps with the history presented in the Samuel and Kings books. But the main focus of Chronicles is on David's kingship and the smaller nation of Judah. It presents a more optimistic view than the Kings books. It is a more idealized presentation and strongly suggests that Israel will come back to God and eventually survive as a unified kingdom.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah pick up at the end of 2nd Chronicles and illustrate God's determination to stand behind the Israelites who have been exiled in Babylon. God moves the Persian ruler Cyrus to set the people of God free and order them back to Jerusalem. The Jerusalem temple and the walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt. God's people turn back to God. They go back to following God's covenant with them. Finally, in the Book of Esther, we have another story, rather than a true history book. What people like to say about the Book of Esther is that God's name is never mentioned, not once. Esther is an orphan who is raised by her godly cousin Mordecai. When the King of Persia, who is not a Jew, is looking for a possible new queen, Esther becomes that person. It's a complicated story of treachery in the king's court. The central focus is that Esther ends up preventing the Jews from being murdered by pleading their case before the king.

There you have it. I will now distribute the test. A passing grade will be 70%. I hope you have taken good notes. But seriously, why did I summarize this chunk of the Bible? Consider our two Bible passages for today, one from the beginning of the Books of History, Joshua, and one from near the end, Nehemiah. In the first quote, God is telling Joshua that he shall lead the people of God into the Promised Land. God says the following: ⁸ *Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.* In the second passage, a scribe named Ezra is reading from something referred to as the laws given by God to Moses; we assume that this is the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, what Christians call the Greek Pentateuch. He is reading it to all the people. They are gathered on the Water Gate, which was a giant gate in the eastern portion of the wall around Jerusalem. It was a huge area, chosen because it could accommodate thousands. Notice what this passage says about this Scriptural reading by Ezra: ² *So Ezra faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and read aloud to everyone who could understand. All the people listened closely to the Book of the Law.*

Both of these quotes, from the beginning and end of the History Books of the Old Testament, tells us how important it is to read Scripture. That's my message, in a nutshell. I want to encourage everyone here to give Scripture a try. Pull out your Bible. Take a look at it. I have tried over the last couple of years or so to incrementally introduce you to much of the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments. It really is important as a believer to understand where our faith comes from. It's easiest to start with the New Testament, perhaps with the Gospels or the Book of Acts. But I think you're prepared for even the most intense parts of the Old Testament, except for perhaps the Book of Leviticus, of which I readily admit I have not fully read. Let me offer, though, a personal story that I hope might motivate you even further to look at Scripture.

A while back, I walked a woman out of the hospital at about three in the morning. Together, we had watched her husband die. They had been together for about ten years. Theirs was a late marriage. When he died, they were around fifty years old. Neither had been married before. It was cold out. Very cold. I asked her where her car was, and she told me that it was on the far edge of the parking lot. Then she said that she didn't think she could drive just yet, and that she wanted to sit on one of the benches in the parking lot and pray. I told her that it might be kind of cold for this. She said it was okay, she was wearing a coat

and a knit hat. To be honest, I was in short sleeves and was already shivering. But I was afraid to leave her alone there and so I sat down with her for a few minutes. She told me that she wished she had her Bible with her, that there were some passages that her husband had always loved, and she wanted to look at them. I knew she had a smart phone in her purse, and I told her I could install a free Bible on her phone in less than a minute, but she said she had never gotten used to reading things on a screen. I said I could go back in the hospital and get a Bible for her. But then, a man whose age I had trouble judging in the dark, but might have been about thirty-five, strode over to us and said that he couldn't help but overhear us. He held out a very compact Bible. He asked her if her husband had died. She nodded toward the hospital and said yes, about an hour ago. This young man said that it would make him feel very happy if she would keep his Bible. She said thank you and he walked silently away.

That's the story. I left her sitting there, paging through a Bible someone had just given her, reading under a light in the parking lot. I can't tell you what she read. But I can tell you that in those stunned, oddly calm minutes after leaving behind her husband's body in an ICU bed, she reached for Scripture. A man, who sensed that he had an opportunity to help her through this period, gave her his Bible. Give it a try. Do it now, before you find yourself desperate for

something to lift you up toward God after a tragedy. Prepare yourself. Build a platform on which you will find the godly support you will need someday.

One last thought. One of the reasons I like the story of Ruth is that it is the pivot point in the History books of the Old Testament in three ways: 1. It's about halfway through the History books; 2. It takes place in the time of the Judges but was actually written for the people living during the time of the Kings, as they were becoming racist and by telling a story about bigotry during an earlier age, the writer of Ruth could get the people of the time of the Kings more willing to accept the moral lesson of loving non-Jews as if they were Jews; and 3. It represents the turning of the people of Israel from disappointment at their failure in the eyes of God during the time of the Judges to being blessed for returning to the ways of God, as dictated by their covenant with God. Please pray briefly with me.

God, you gave us Holy Scripture. Much of it is not easy to read and demands some introduction and a lot of patient thinking. Parts of it are more accessible. But together, this book, which spans the entire history of your ancient people, and which lays the foundation for all that we believe, all that gives us hope, all that relieves our anxiety, all that allows us to live in joy every day of our lives, is a stunning gift. Thank you for Scripture. Amen.