Daily readings to prepare for session 4

Day 1: Joshua, the call and the promise – be strong and courageous

Read: Joshua 1.1–18

Reflect:

Fear. We can't seem to get past it.

Despite the so-called 'progress' of society, fear remains. Access to the news 24/7, scaremongering and social media contribute to an atmosphere of fear that fills our world. Fear has become the backing track to our lives. Whether it's about finances, family, health, or stepping out into the unknown, we all feel fear. But fear doesn't have to have the final word in your story …

What was the cause of Joshua's fear in the story?

On the border of the promised land, Joshua knew it was far from being theirs. Moses, their leader, was no longer there and Joshua knew he had large sandals to fill! But God doesn't call the equipped; he equips the called. He tells Joshua to be 'strong and courageous' (verse 6), to not be afraid (verse 9), and to take the land given to them (verse 3). Are these just empty words? God's attempt at a pep-talk?

Joshua's story shows us that God's words are never empty. He does step up to lead the Israelites and God fights their battles. The Bible is filled with unbreakable promises that mean we can have confidence and hope today, despite life's challenges.

What promises does God make to Joshua? What do they mean for us today?

We often associate courage with the absence of fear. But true courage is not the absence of fear, it's the resolve to continue onwards in spite of fear. Courage means holding on to something greater than the fear. Joshua had something greater to hold on to. And so do we.

God promises Joshua his presence will go with him. He promises to never leave him (verse 5). He promises success through obedience (verse 8) and victory in battle (verse 3). With God by his side, Joshua will not fail.

Likewise, with God at our sides we don't need to fear. God has shared the victory with us already in his son Jesus (1 Corinthians 15.57). However great your fear, however impossible your task, you can have courage today. The God of the Bible says to you, as he did to Joshua, 'Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

Respond:

'God doesn't call the equipped; he equips the called.' How can this truth encourage you today?

Day 2: The judges, the cycles of rebellion and the warning – Israel stuck in a loop

Read: Judges 2.1–23

Reflect:

We live in the age of music streaming. We know little of broken records but not long ago, a broken record could get stuck and it would play the same notes over and over again.

After Joshua's death, what was Israel's story?

A new generation grew up knowing 'neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel'. They'd forgotten everything God had done. This was always a danger as they entered the promised land. The surrounding peoples worshipped many different gods.

The god of rain was called Baal. The Canaanites believed he controlled the harvest. Canaanite gods were bribed to get them to do what you wanted. You could do this through cultic rituals, shrine prostitution and even the horrific practice of child sacrifice. When it didn't rain, Israel was tempted to turn to these other gods rather than trusting in the Lord.

In response, God showed Israel his heart (verses 1–2). He reminded them of their story and his fierce commitment. God's language here is the language of marriage, not of business. It's covenant, not contract. The Bible does not present God as an invisible, emotionless force in the sky; rather, we see his emotions running deep. His love is passionate.

They failed to see how damaging their worship of Baal was for their soul and community, so God gave Israel over to their desires and into the hands of their enemies. This handing over is a form of judgement from God, but it's an act of mercy, not cruelty. It shows Israel their need of him.

What does God do in response to Israel's unfaithfulness? What does he do today?

God's mercy does not stop there. He goes on to raise up judges (verse 16). He provides a means of rescue. Despite their rebellion, God remembers his commitment. The faithfulness of God to rescue us does not depend on the goodness of people but on his own nature.

God created us so he could love us, but we've walked away from him. The story of the Bible is that he comes running after us! God has loved us to the point of death.

Respond:

The cycle of rebellion described in the book of Judges is similar to what we experience today. What negative cycle are you stuck in? Go to Jesus. He understands and he's mighty to save – he can set you free!

Day 3: Ruth, Boaz and Bethlehem – there is a redeemer

Read: Ruth 1.1–22; 4.13–22

Reflect:

There are many great stories and tales in the world. There are not many more moving than the book of Ruth. Set in the dark and painful time of the judges, the book of Ruth sparkles like a diamond.

There's romance. If you're getting started in a relationship, Ruth is packed with practical wisdom that you can glean from.

There's also redemption. Boaz in the town of Bethlehem (ring any bells?) is referred to as a kinsman-redeemer, because he rescued his widowed relative, Naomi, from debt. Boaz points us to Jesus; he's our redeemer, bringing us hope and a future.

What does the story's opening scene teach us (chapter 1)?

Ruth, a hurting widow, journeys with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi, who was originally from Bethlehem in Judah. As a Moabitess, Ruth would be an outsider in Naomi's homeland. Naomi instructs her to return to Moab, where there might be more for her. Ruth chooses to go with Naomi (verses 17–18). Committing to Naomi meant choosing the unknown, but Ruth was all in.

In what ways does Boaz point us to Jesus?

In a time when there was no welfare state, God cared and provided for Ruth and Naomi. His hidden hand led them to the fields of Boaz. Boaz observed the law of God by allowing Ruth to glean from the edges of his fields, and he made Ruth his wife. Marriage made Boaz a protector and provider for Ruth and her family. The marriage meant Ruth and Naomi were no longer poor and desperate but welcomed into a new home and life. Jesus invites those struggling today into a similarly life-changing relationship with God.

The story of Ruth finishes with a family tree. Ruth and Boaz have a son, Obed. He was the great-grandfather of King David. David was in turn the great, great, great (times a few) grandfather of none other than Jesus Christ – born in Bethlehem! That means Ruth is in Jesus' family tree.

Just consider this – Matthew opens his account of Jesus' life with this genealogy! Surely this is no way to start a story?

Mathew wanted us to know that Jesus came from a family of outsiders so that those who feel like outsiders can be brought in. Jesus came from a messy family line for those who live messy lives! The story of Ruth is a gateway into the heart of God. Whoever you are, whatever you've done, however you're feeling – God flat out loves you.

Respond:

Inspired by Jesus' heart for widows and refugees, how could you serve those who are suffering?

Day 4: Samuel, the voice and the vision – hear the word of the Lord

Read: 1 Samuel 3.1–21

Reflect:

Leaders influence. Leaders change things. In the world of sport or business, the right leader can turn the tide for teams or organisations.

The final verse of Judges highlights the desperate need for leadership in Israel: 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.'

To turn the tide God needed to appoint the right leader.

Enter Samuel.

What does Samuel do when God speaks?

Ministering under the priest Eli, Samuel learns to hear the word of the Lord. During those days the Bible records that a word from the Lord was rare so it's no wonder that Samuel initially failed to see what was going on.

Eli instructed Samuel to respond to the voice by saying, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' Samuel learned the practice of listening to the voice of God; this would go on to shape his life and leadership. In order to lead with integrity and renew Israel as a nation, he'd need the voice of God directing and strengthening him.

God was calling Samuel to a giant-sized task. He was calling him to be the servant priest of Israel, a faithful prophet of God and judge for the people. He was to be the new leader that would turn the tide for Israel.

What can we learn from Samuel's example today?

Samuel had real spiritual authority because he'd learnt to listen to the voice of God. Have we learnt to do the same today? We have grown accustomed to leaders without integrity but God wants to raise up leaders who are not like the leaders of this world. He wants leaders who turn the tide – not shaped by the world but shaping the world around them.

Do we have lives and rhythms that are set to 'hear the word of the Lord?'

Samuel finishes by sharing words from God to Eli. How does his example apply to us today?

First Samuel listened. Then he spoke, faithfully, hiding nothing from Eli despite the word being tough to bear (verse 18). In a world that desperately needs to hear the word of the Lord, have we chosen to hide out of fear? Let's rediscover true integrity by first listening and then speaking the truth with love.

Respond:

Hearing the voice of God starts with us stopping and listening. Spend five minutes of today being still and silent.

Day 5: David, the giant and the stones – God's servant brings victory

Read: 1 Samuel 17.1–58

Reflect:

We love an underdog story. From Rocky and The Karate Kid to modern films like 1917 and Creed, Hollywood has made a fortune out of the underdog narrative. What if our love for the underdog has been wired into us by God?

The story of the Bible often has God choosing not the strongest, the wisest, or the eldest to carry out his purposes. Instead, he chooses the outsider, the forgotten one, the youngest, even deceivers and doubters. God loves an underdog story, perhaps because the underdog's triumph tells of the might of God.

What's the story up until now?

Saul was an impressive choice as king – he was the tallest and most handsome man in Israel. But he also had a shadow side. His insecurity and anger only grew during his reign. His inner character did not match his outer strength. So Samuel was told to look for Saul's replacement. Enter David – the least likely candidate to be king! He was the youngest, and presumably the smallest, of eight brothers in the household of Jesse. Outwardly he was not impressive. But God, who knows and sees everything, examined David's heart and found something far more important.

What is the state of Israel and their leader when David arrives on the scene?

David arrived on the scene not for a fight but as a delivery driver! Everything changed though when he saw the giant Goliath defying 'the armies of the living God' (verse 26). Saul and the Israelites were paralysed by fear, but David couldn't stand back and let this go on. He knew God's glory was at stake. Despite criticism from his brothers, a doubting king, a mocking enemy and a lack of armour, David drew his courage from God. He knew the 'battle is the Lord's' (verse 47). So with one smooth stone he floored the nine-foot giant Goliath, cut off his head and allowed the rest of Israel's army to triumph over their enemies. Similarly, like a warrior, Jesus stepped into our battle with the giants of sin, sickness, evil and death and won the decisive victory for us. What David did for the people of Israel, Jesus has done for the whole world on the cross – his is the greatest underdog story ever.

Respond:

Read Romans 8.31–39. Because of Jesus, we really are 'more than conquerors'. Speak these truths over the giants you are facing today.

Day 6: The king, the dream and the baby – the wisdom of Solomon
Read: 1 Kings 3.1–28
Reflect:
'If you could ask God for one thing, what would that be?' Now that's a conversation starter! Maybe try discussing it around the dinner table with family or together with friends.
How we answer this question shows us where our hearts are. King Solomon did not have to dream up this moment. He lived it. His answer revealed a deep and righteous desire.
He had walked in the ways of his father David (verse 3), and devoted himself to God with lavish offerings (verse 4). Then God appeared to Solomon with a most unexpected invitation.
What can we learn from Solomon in this moment before God?
Daunted and afraid, Solomon fell to his knees; he felt his inadequacy deeply (verses 7–8). God wasn't insulted by Solomon's doubt and fear. Instead he provided the resource he needed. Today, you might be feeling the pinch of inadequacy or be overwhelmed with fear at a task or a situation before you. Remember that God is near and he has the resources you need.
Solomon asked for a discerning heart (verse 9) and this pleased the heart of God (verse 10). Solomon knew that above everything, wisdom is the way to live and lead well.
Solomon was presented with an impossible situation. What does his response teach us today?
Our sin-fractured world can bring us deeply complex and painful moments. Wisdom does not take us out of the pain; rather it teaches us how to navigate it well. In the story, Solomon's wisdom preserves a child's life and prevents injustice. Wisdom does this. It's the foundation to doing good to others and the world in which we live.
Solomon later wrote that the 'fear of the Lord' is the beginning of all wisdom (Proverbs 1.7). To want wisdom means to look to God. In a messy and complex world, there can be no better place to turn. You may feel daunted and afraid. You may feel overwhelmed at the complexities of life and wonder how you can make it through or make a difference. Remember that God is with you. Remember that wisdom begins with him.
Respond:
How can you apply the wisdom of God found in the Bible to do good to the world around you today?

Day 7: Judges, kings and Jesus – the ultimate judgeDay 1: Egypt and slavery – God's people in trouble

Read: Judges 3.7–11 and Romans 8.1

Reflect:

In 1953, at her coronation in Westminster Abbey, Elizabeth II was crowned Queen. Dressed in royal robes, she was adorned with the crown jewels – including the Star of Africa, the largest cut diamond in the world, valued at over £400 million. Despite all that, the Queen was handed a book and told: 'We present you with this book, the most valuable thing this world affords.' It was a plain copy of the Bible, just like ours. When we pick up the Bible, we hold in our hands something more precious than the crown jewels.

This week our readings have focused on some high-profile leaders in the nation of Israel. Most of us will never come close to shouldering the responsibilities of a judge like Deborah or a king like David. But all of us can lead influential lives, whether monarchs or mothers, prime ministers or plumbers, and the Bible is an endless source of wisdom to guide us.

A brief recap …

With God's help, Israel took possession of the land of Canaan. By the end of the book of Joshua, Israel had settled in the territory God promised to Abraham and 'the land had rest from war'. However, the next part of the story was hardly 'and they lived happily ever after'. Instead, Israel, meant to be the solution, became part of the problem. God's covenant people compromised with the surrounding nations and ended up living like everyone else.

God raised up leaders to guide his people – charismatic judges like Samson – and anointed kings like David. But even these leaders struggled to live God's way and often set a bad example. Israel's story is a warning to all God's people. When we take our eyes off him, it's easy to get stuck in negative cycles of thought and behaviour. How is that an ongoing challenge for you today?

What hope can Jesus give us today?

However, as we fast-forward through the Bible's story, we're pointed to the ultimate leader, Jesus. He is God's anointed one. He can deliver us from cycles of sin and negativity. His Spirit empowers us to change. As the New Testament puts it: 'There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8.1, ESV).

Respond:

Ask God to show you the power of his word so you can live a life of influence that leaves a godly legacy.