# 1717 BIBLE STUDIES

**"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)**

## OVERVIEW

## Study: Judges–Ruth
## Theme: Reverse the Trend

**Overview:** In the days of the judges, God's people forgot him in a single generation and fell into a downward spiral of sin, servitude, and deliverance. In this unit, students will learn from Judges and Ruth that the trend can be reversed when we repent under God's discipline, follow where he leads, stand boldly for him, and serve him devotedly.

## HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



**Tabs** indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

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# INTRODUCTION

**Author**

Neither Judges nor Ruth names its author. Jewish tradition (the Talmud) credits Samuel with writing both books. The repeated phrase, "In those days Israel had no king" (Judges 17:6; 21:25), and the genealogy ending with David (Ruth 4:17-22) suggest both books were completed early in Israel's monarchy.

**Audience**

Both books were written for the people of Israel. Judges showed them what happened when "everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25), and Ruth showed them how God was quietly at work through faithful people, preparing the way for King David.

**Date**

The period of the judges stretched from the death of Joshua to the rise of Samuel and Saul, roughly 1380–1050 BC. The events of Ruth took place "in the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1).

**Setting**

After Joshua's death, the tribes of Israel failed to drive out all the nations of Canaan, and those nations became a thorn in Israel's side. The lessons in this study move from the cycle of sin and deliverance (Judges 2), to Deborah and Barak near Mount Tabor, to Gideon in Ophrah, and finally to Naomi and Ruth on the road from Moab back to Bethlehem.

**Theme**

Reverse the trend. God's people repeatedly fell into a downward spiral when they forgot the Lord, yet God kept raising up deliverers when they cried out to him. The trend is reversed when God's people repent, follow his lead, stand boldly, and serve him devotedly, as Ruth did when she declared, "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

**Why Study Judges–Ruth?**

These books show how quickly faith can be lost in one generation and how faithfully God works to redeem his people. This study calls believers to remember who God is, to follow him courageously, to live by biblical convictions, and to remain loyal to him, trusting that he can do amazing things through faithful servants.

## STUDY CONTENT

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|---|---|
| **WEEK 1:** | Judges 2:10-19 |
| **WEEK 2:** | Judges 4:1-16 |
| **WEEK 3:** | Judges 6:11-16, 25-40 |
| **WEEK 4:** | Ruth 1:3-5, 8-11, 14-18 |

WEEK ONE

**LESSON AIM:** **When God disciplines, repent.**

**STUDY:** Judges–Ruth

**THEME:** Reverse the Trend

**LESSON TEXT:** Judges 2:10-19

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Judges 3:7-31; Hebrews 12:1-11

# STOP THE SPIRAL

## BY MARK SCOTT

Judges may well be the ugliest book in the Bible. Perpetual sin was creating a union with death among God's people. "There was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25, *English Standard Version*; cf. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1). The constant cycle of sin, servitude, supplication, salvation, and silence created a downward spiral for Israel. The only way this trend was reversed was for a judge to show up occasionally and "save" God's people. Our lesson text effectively summarizes Judges.

Joshua had died (Joshua 24:29-31; Judges 1:1; 2:8, 9), and the tribe of the Messiah (Judah) led the way for the rest of the conquest (Judges 1:2). But the conquest was compromised by the tribes of Israel not driving out all the nations that were living there (Judges 1:3-36). These lingering nations would become a thorn in Israel's side (Judges 2:3).

**Forgetting God**

*Judges 2:10-13*

Francis Chan wrote a book on the Holy Spirit entitled *Forgotten God*. He suggested the church in the West has forgotten the Holy Spirit. Israel was worse. They had spiritual amnesia for the whole Trinity. Generation W (wilderness) was gathered to their ancestors (died). The young people who took their place did not "know" God or the stories of God. In short, they had no intimate knowledge of the creator.

This deficit knowledge of God led to evil behavior. There is always a connection between belief and behavior. God's people served the *Baals* (the word means "lord" or "husband," and referred to a Syrian god named Hadad who was the god of storms or war). Israel *forsook* (abandoned or neglected . . . mentioned twice here) the Lord. Israel *followed* (walked) and *worshiped* (bowed down) the gods of the people of the land. God's people being in the world isn't the problem; instead, it's the world being in God's people. In addition to this, they served the *Ashtoreths* (goddess of the Canaanites; essentially it was a fertility cult). God can be forgotten in one generation.

**Disciplined by God**

*Judges 2:14, 15*

God can get angry, but his anger, which is more like grief (Genesis 6:5-7; Matthew 23:37-39), is motivated by love (Hebrews 12:5-11). The God of the Bible is a gentleman of the highest order. He will not stay where he is not wanted. Hell essentially will be a place where everyone does his or her own thing. That is total anarchy and chaos. People can choose poorly for so long that God will give them over to their choices (Romans 1:24-32) and send on them a delusion to believe what is false (2 Thessalonians 2:11).

That is what God did with Israel. He gave them into the hands of *raiders* who *plundered* them (literally, "plunderers who plundered" them). These nations stole them and their spoils. God *sold* Israel into the hands of their foes, and Israel was not able to *resist* (stand against) them. Whenever Israel would try to fight their enemies, the "Ai syndrome" set in (Joshua 7:2-5). Israel was defeated and in great distress.

**Saved by God**

*Judges 2:16-19*

But God's anger does not last forever (Hosea 6:1-3), and his mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-24). God *relented* (comforted or was moved to pity) because the people cried out about their oppressors. So God raised up *judges* (defenders and deliverers; someone who cares about justice). Some of them were tricky (Judges 3:15-23), and some were brave (4:9). Some of them were timid (6:12-15) but later became arrogant (8:31; Abimelech means "my father is king"), and some were presumptuous (11:29-40). Some were immoral (e.g., Samson, Judges 13–16), but all functioned as saviors of sorts. (The word *saved* is the root for Jesus' name.) In this sense, they were "types" of the coming Messiah.

Sometimes people who are drowning will panic and fight off the lifeguards dispatched to save them. That is what Israel did. They would not *listen to* (hear) the judges. Instead they *prostituted* (went whoring) themselves and worshiped other gods. They *turned* (repented) from the ways of their ancestors. When the people did turn to God, their repentance would last only as long as the judge was alive. Then they would return to ways even more corrupt than before. They had hard hearts and stubborn wills (Acts 7:51-53; Revelation 9:20, 21).

The verses that follow our lesson text indicated that God would leverage this rebellion/redemption arch to "test" Israel, i.e., to see if Israel would walk in the ways of their ancestors (Judges 2:19-23). But alas, instead of reversing the trend, they continued the downward spiral.

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# HALTING THE DOWNWARD CYCLE

## BY DAVID FAUST

"Sin blinds you, then it binds you, then it grinds you." I don't know who first said those words, but they ring true. Disobedience to God leads to a downward cycle. "After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:15) —and that's true on both a personal level and a societal level.

Someone observed, "First we overlook evil. Then we permit evil. Then we legalize evil. Then we promote evil. Then we celebrate evil. Then we persecute anyone who still calls it evil." There are two keys to breaking the cycle.

**Remember Who God Is**

The Israelites fell into a downward cycle because a generation grew up "who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10). Not long before, God gave them the Ten Commandments, but they already forgot the first two: serve only the one true God and never worship graven images/idols (Exodus 20:3, 4). A mere two generations later, "They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors. . . . They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them" (Judges 2:12).

You can substitute margarine for butter, and you can replace old shoes with a new pair, but nothing can substitute for God. Even good things like work, family, and hobbies cannot take God's rightful place. The Canaanites should have been coming to the Israelites to learn about the true God, but instead, the Israelites imitated their neighbors. They worshiped Baal, the male god of power, and Ashtoreth, the female goddess of lust. Power and lust continue to be two popular substitutes for God. Tim Keller says, "The real danger is not atheism, but that we ask God to coexist comfortably with the idols of our heart."

Idolatry looks foolish when we remember what the true God is like: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Exodus 34:6, 7).

**Remember Who We Are**

All kinds of degradation result when we trade "the truth about God for a lie" (Romans 1:25). Confusion about God leads to confusion about our own identity.

Henri Nouwen listed Five Lies of Identity—flawed ways we view ourselves:

**1. I am what I have.** But what if you can't buy the right car, house, or clothes? What if the stock market crashes and your money slips away?

**2. I am what I do.** But where will you find your significance if you lose your job, retire, or get sick and can't work?

**3. I am what other people say or think of me.** But if you derive your identity from others' opinions, what will happen if they neglect or misunderstand you?

**4. I am nothing more than my worst moment.** Must you be tortured throughout life by recalling your biggest blunder?

**5. I am nothing less than my best moment.** Can you really measure your worth by reviewing your life's highlight reel?

Sin drags us down, and we won't break the downward cycle unless we remember who God is and who we are. We are created in God's image, so our true identity is inseparably linked with his.

**Personal Challenge:**

Rick Atchley says, "The problem with asking God to deal with all the evil in the world is that he often wants to start with the darkness in our own hearts." Are there any dark spots in your heart? Confess them to God (1 John 1:8-10) and to a trusted Christian friend (James 5:16).

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## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struggles have you faced over the last week?

   Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the first two people to read **Judges 2:10-19** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third helper to retell the story in their own words. Remind them to keep it simple.

2. Pick one word you would use to describe this summary of the Israelites during the time of the judges. (Give participants a few moments to think.) What word would you use, and why?

3. Let's look more closely at a few details:
   - Why did the people forsake God?
   - How does the writer describe the attitudes and actions of the people who did not know God?
   - In what ways did God respond to their bad choices (disobedience/sin)?
   - How would you appraise the short-term and long-term effectiveness of the judges?

4. What do you learn about God's nature from this narrative?

5. What do you learn about human nature?
   - In what ways can you personally relate to the sin/repentance cycle of the Israelites?

6. What do you learn about consistently obeying God and living for him?
   - How can this group/class help you in any spiritual battles you are facing?

7. Sadly, one generation "who had been obedient to the Lord's commands" (v. 17) gave way to the next one "who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel" (v. 10). What specific action will you take this week to pass on your faith to the next generation?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

9. What opportunities to serve God will you have this week?

**For Next Week:** Over the next week, read and reflect on **Judges 4:1-16** as we continue studying the books of Judges and Ruth and the theme, "Reverse the Trend." You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

**LESSON AIM:** **When God leads, follow.**

**STUDY:** Judges–Ruth

**THEME:** Reverse the Trend

**LESSON TEXT:** Judges 4:1-16

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Judges 4:17-24; 1 Samuel 12:8-11

# LEAD COURAGEOUSLY

## BY MARK SCOTT

Deborah ("honeybee") was the fourth judge of Israel and the only female judge mentioned in the Bible. Before her came Othniel, who helped Israel achieve peace for 40 years (Judges 3:7-11); followed by Ehud, who was left-handed and killed chubby Eglon (3:12-30); and Shamgar, who killed 600 Philistines yet had only one verse dedicated to his reign (3:31). Then came Deborah, who was assisted by two men, Barak and Heber. This dynamic trio led Israel to defeat Sisera, commander of the army for Canaanite king Jabin ("whom God observes").

**Intimidating Ruler**

*Judges 4:1-3*

The typical cycle of sin and salvation in Judges begins our text. Ehud had died and Shamgar's reign was either so brief or took place in the context of Ehud's time of judging. With these two judges gone, Israel fell into sin (*evil*) again. Therefore God *sold* them (gave them over) to Jabin, who reigned in Hazor (a northern city near the Sea of Galilee).

But the main villain of our text was not Jabin but his commander, Sisera. This intimidating ruler was based in Harosheth Haggoyim ("woodlands of the nations," a location mentioned in our text three times). Perhaps he used some of the lush woodlands of the north to hide his intimidating army. Sisera's superior military force was indicated by the reference to his 900 chariots fitted with iron. He *oppressed* (put the squeeze to) Israel for 20 years. Israel cried out with great distress to the Lord against this intimidation.

**Courageous Leaders**

*Judges 4:4-11*

Confession: I used to think that Barak was just a chicken (and I did not pay any attention to Heber—though he had roots with Moses' family). Therefore God used a woman to lead because she was willing to put her big-girl pants on and take charge. But further study showed my former inadequate reading of the text. Heber actually leveraged his strategic position by the great tree of Zaanannim near Kedesh to help with the battle, and Barak (lightning) is mentioned in Hebrews 11:32 as one who acted in faith. So, we have a dynamic trio of courageous leaders, albeit Deborah seemed to have been the primary motivator.

Deborah was a *prophetess* (one who speaks enthusiastically for God by inspiration) and was married to Lappidoth ("torches"). She was *leading* (judging) Israel at this time. She settled disputes for the people of Israel (cf. Exodus 18:13-27), near a palm tree down south between the towns of Ramah and Bethel, while Sisera was causing havoc up north. Meanwhile, Deborah drew up a battle plan to defeat Sisera and his army.

Deborah challenged Barak, who was residing in Kedesh ("holy place" and a city of refuge mentioned three times in our text), to take 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them to Mount Tabor (a small mountain 1,300 feet above sea level; it is east of Nazareth, near the Jezreel Valley, and was the unlikely but traditional site of the transfiguration of Jesus). Deborah would act as a decoy and lead Sisera to the Kishon River (near Barak's position). Barak did not want to tackle this battle without Deborah's help. She agreed to help, but she reminded him that the honor of killing Sisera might be given to a woman (a reference to her, or more likely, to Jael, the wife of Heber, who "nailed" Sisera's skull to her floor, 4:17-24). The plans were now made for the battle to commence.

**Stunning Victory**

*Judges 4:12-16*

Sisera got word that Barak and his army was at Mount Tabor. No doubt Sisera thought his 900 chariots could best Barak's 10,000 soldiers. He took off from the north (Harosheth Haggoyim) and headed south to the battle. The plan was working perfectly. Deborah gave the command for Barak to come off the mountain and attack Sisera. She had confidence God would give Sisera into Barak's hands. In fact, she reminded Barak, "Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" The unseen hand of God was directing every part of this victory.

Barak and his army came running down Mount Tabor at Sisera. Maybe Sisera was surprised by this attack or realized he was being hemmed in by Heber and Deborah. But the Lord was behind it all, for the text said, "The Lord *routed* (chased or pursued) Sisera and all his chariots and army." The battle was so one-sided that Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot. Barak chased Sisera and all his army all the way back north. All of Sisera's soldiers were killed. Sisera ultimately ran into Jael, who left a strong impression on his mind.

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# FAITH FOLLOWS

## BY DAVID FAUST

Judge Deborah gave General Barak a tall order. It would take considerable amounts of faith and courage for him to lead 10,000 soldiers and face a formidable enemy at Mount Tabor. But Deborah declared, "Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" (Judges 4:14). In today's troubled times, Deborah's question can help us climb our mountains and face our battles, too.

"Hasn't the Lord gone ahead of you?" Yes, he has. He is ahead of us in time, for he knows the future. He is ahead of us in wisdom, for his ways are higher than our ways. He goes ahead of us with power beyond our imagination and grace far beyond what we deserve.

God even stays ahead of our scientific advancements. He isn't irrelevant and out-of-date. He doesn't lag behind the curve of knowledge and progress. Our troubles don't shock him, nor do our discoveries surprise him. The Lord didn't smack his forehead in amazement and exclaim, "Well, who would have imagined that!" when we discovered the complexities of DNA. We're never ahead of him. He's always ahead of us.

**Two Transformational Words**

Because he's out in front, Jesus calls disciples with two transformational words: "Follow me."

***Follow.*** Don't stand still. Don't stay where you are. Move forward, but don't rush ahead. *Follow* (in Greek, *akoloutheo*) isn't a passive word. It can mean "accompany," "assist," or "understand," as in, "I follow (grasp) what you're saying." Jesus doesn't call us to tag along aimlessly, but to participate actively in his work.

***Follow me.*** Not "fulfill these religious duties." Not "adopt this ideology," "join this club," or "follow these traditions." We follow Christ. He leads us up the mountain. We follow behind, but we stay close enough to hear the voice of our guide.

**Leading from Behind**

Before we lead others, we must be followers ourselves who say yes to Christ and no to self. When we trust the Lord's wisdom more than our own instincts, we live by faith and example, not by fear and intimidation.

**Faith follows the Lord into vagueness.** When the future looks foggy, murky, and bewildering, the lamp of his Word lights the way. By faith we tell the Lord, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2 Chronicles 20:12).

**Faith follows the Lord into valleys.** Yes, sometimes God calls us to the top of the hill, but on this side of Heaven mountaintop experiences are the exception, not the norm. Ministry usually happens in valleys. Right up front, Christ tells us to expect hardship and suffering. His invitation isn't merely "follow me," but "take up *your cross*, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24, *New Living Translation*, emphasis mine). Pain comes as no surprise to someone carrying a cross.

**Faith follows the Lord into victories.** In Christ the shadow of death leads to the sunshine of eternal life. Surrender brings success. The cross leads to Easter.

It's fine to be an up-front leader if that's where God places you, but even up-front leaders must keep the Lord in front of them. The best leaders aren't necessarily charismatic figures good at drawing a crowd, but those who consistently walk behind Jesus with their eyes fixed on him. These leaders can say with humility and integrity, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

**Personal Challenge:**

Specifically, how will faith shape what you do this week? What actions will you take for no other reason except that you are a follower of Jesus? Share your response with a close friend.

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## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struggles have you faced over the last week?
2. What actions did you take this past week to pass on your faith to the next generation?

   Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Judges 4:1-16** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to retell the story in their own words. Remind them to keep it simple.

3. Imagine we as a group are writing a sermon on this passage. Let's brainstorm a title for the message!
4. Let's look more closely at some of the details:
   - How would you describe the spiritual and emotional state of the Israelites at this time?
   - Who are the two opponents? Who are the main leaders? Describe the "weapons" each side could deploy.
   - What was Deborah's strategy to defeat Sisera and the Canaanite army?
   - What do you learn about Deborah: her role, gifts and abilities, calling, challenges, heart?
5. What do you learn about God from this narrative?
6. What does this passage teach you about following and trusting God in difficult times?
7. It's not uncommon for Christ followers to be apprehensive about sharing their faith. How can knowing that the Lord has gone ahead of you help you to tell someone about your relationship with Jesus this week?
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
9. What challenges do you anticipate this week?

**For Next Week:** Over the next week, read and reflect on **Judges 6:11-16, 25-40** as we continue studying the books of Judges and Ruth and the theme, "Reverse the Trend." You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

## WEEK THREE

**LESSON AIM:** **Follow God boldly.**

**STUDY:** Judges–Ruth

**THEME:** Reverse the Trend

**LESSON TEXT:** Judges 6:11-16, 25-40

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Judges 7:1-8, 19-23

# STAND BOLDLY

## BY MARK SCOTT

The fifth judge of Israel was hardly bold when God called him. Gideon ("hewer") was more on the order of Barney Fife than Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. But he became bold, and he ultimately was mentioned in the faith chapter of the Bible (Hebrews 11:32). In fact, by the end of his life, Gideon may have become a bit arrogant, evidenced by naming his son Abimelek (my "father is king," Judges 8:31).

Some people, like David, seem to be born with boldness (1 Samuel 17:37). Others, like Nicodemus, need to grow into it (John 3:1-8; 7:50, 51; 19:39). The early church prayed for boldness (Acts 4:29). Like the apostle Paul, we probably should ask God's people to pray for us to be more bold (Ephesians 6:19).

**Mighty Warrior?**

*Judges 6:11-16*

The angel of the Lord (later simply called "the Lord," 6:11, 12, 14, 16, 25) came and sat down under a tree in Ophrah ("fawn," a town near Shechem) that belonged to Joash ("given by the Lord") the Abiezrite ("my father is help"). This was near where Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress. In a winepress? It's where a scared person would work. Gideon knew the Midianites would confiscate his wheat if they saw him working in a more public place.

The angel greeted Gideon by referring to him as a *mighty warrior* (brave person of valor) and telling him, *the Lord is with you*. This phrase *mighty warrior* was used of Jephthah (Judges 11:1) and Boaz (Ruth 2:1), and the greeting bears a certain similarity to Gabriel's first words to Mary ("Greetings, you who are highly favored!" Luke 1:28). No doubt Gideon was puzzled ("Who, me?"). Then he asked one of the chief apologetic questions of all time. "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" (i.e., if God is God, why does evil exist?). Gideon voiced what all Israel felt—that God had *abandoned* (deserted) them and given them into the hands of their enemies.

The angel was not put off by Gideon's question. The angel pressed Gideon into service. Gideon looked inward (like others had done before, Exodus 3:11). His *clan* (family) was the *weakest* (poorest or neediest) in the tribe of Manasseh. God's presence would turn Barney Fife into a mighty warrior.

**Timid Judge**

*Judges 6:25-27*

Like Manoah (Samson's father) and Thomas (Jesus' disciple), Gideon needed some reassurance of the divine message (Judges 13:8-20; John 20:21-29). He extended typical ancient Near Eastern hospitality and then experienced some miraculous phenomena (Judges 6:17-24). But witnessing the miraculous does not ensure boldness. Think of what Timothy later witnessed on the missionary journeys, yet Paul had to encourage him to be strong (2 Timothy 1:7).

So when the angel told Gideon to tear down his father's altar to Baal and the accompanying Asherah pole and offer a burnt offering of a seven-year-old bull on top of the pagan debris, Gideon did it. But he did not do it alone. Gideon had ten of his servants help him, and he did it at night rather than in the daytime. Timid?

**Weaker God**

*Judges 6:28-32*

The issue of our boldness is always related to another issue—namely, whose god is God? Is Baal of the Midianites God? Or is the Lord of Israel the real God? In the morning there was no small stir about the demolished idol and pole. The people *carefully investigated* (searched and inquired) as to who was responsible.

Someone ratted on Gideon, so the locals headed to Joash's house. They demanded that Gideon be put to death. But Joash made an intriguing speech that stopped the madness. Even though it was his Baal idol that was cut down, Joash defended the Lord by suggesting that if Baal were really God, then he could *defend* (contend or strive for) himself. This same logic later would be used during the ministry of the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 18:21). This experience gave Gideon a nickname ("Jerub-Baal," Judges 8:29).

**Assured Battle**

*Judges 6:33-40*

People do fight for their gods. The Midianites, Amalekites, and others crossed the Jordan River and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. Gideon gathered his troops from the tribes of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. But Gideon had a weapon the others did not have. "The Spirit of the Lord *came on*" (clothed or dressed) him.

The famous fleece passage concludes our lesson text. God could make the wool fleece wet or dry. It did not matter. Gideon had the God-sized assurance that made him stand boldly for the battle—and with only 300 soldiers.

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# A TIME FOR BOLDNESS

## BY DAVID FAUST

When astronauts take untethered space walks, they float in outer space without anything attaching them to the space station. What a feeling of complete freedom! They are untethered and free from all restraints—but in grave danger. I'm sure those astronauts feel relieved when they scramble safely back into the spaceship. They couldn't survive out there alone.

Do you want to be untethered and free from any restraint? Consider what it was like during the raucous era of the Judges. "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 17:6; 21:25)—and that remains a widely accepted philosophy. These days, "Do whatever seems right in your own eyes" would make a popular bumper sticker slogan.

Rebellious and stubborn, the fickle Israelites were up and down, hot and cold, in their obedience to God. Sometimes they were faithful, but they quickly drifted back into unfaithfulness. Unfortunately, this pattern isn't unusual. Sadly, many of us would admit it's our story, too.

**Convictions Over Preferences**

In a do-your-own-thing society, God calls us to live by biblical convictions, not merely by our personal tastes. Personal preferences are the easy choice. They keep us skimming on the surface, but convictions drive us deeper. I like coconut cream pie, but I won't die for it. I enjoy football, but it won't ruin my life if my favorite team misses the playoffs.

There's an old saying, "In matters of principle, stand like a rock; in matters of taste, swim with the current." In other words, hold strong to your core beliefs, but be flexible in other matters. Our minds are like sponges. Convictions help us decide what to soak up and what to squeeze out. Ranchers have a saying: "It's easier to guard the gate than to clean the corral." Biblical values keep us on the right course and help us resist temptation.

Are you convinced about the reality of God? The trustworthiness of Scripture? The deity and lordship of Christ? Do your personal convictions include the Restoration Movement ideals of biblical authority, Christian unity, and fulfilling the Lord's Great Commission?

**Flawed but Faithful**

In the book of Judges, the leaders were deeply flawed, and their stories reveal glaring weaknesses. Gideon obeyed the Lord and tore down the altar to Baal his father had built, but he did it under cover of darkness because he feared what others would think (Judges 6:25-27). Before leading the Israelites into battle, Gideon tested the Lord by putting out a fleece (vv. 36-40), and late in life he still struggled with idolatry, which "became a snare to Gideon and his family" (8:23-27). Others like Samson and Jephthah made foolish decisions. Yet, despite their weaknesses and flaws, the names of these leaders appear in God's Honor Roll of Faith. "Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah . . . through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised" (Hebrews 11:32, 33). In the big picture, these flawed believers stood out from the crowd because of their bravery and convictions.

Someone has said, "The wishbone will never replace the backbone." In an untethered culture, God calls us to be bold—not obnoxious, rude, and overbearing—but willing to express unashamed devotion to God, sacrificial love for our neighbors, and unyielding devotion to the truth. Convictions form the fertile soil where courage grows.

**Personal Challenge:**

In your prayer journal or on a piece of paper, list your core convictions—principles you believe so deeply that you will never surrender or compromise them.

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## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What challenge did you face last week?
2. In what ways did you see the Lord going before you over the past week?

Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Judges 6:11-16, 25-40** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to retell the story in four acts: Act 1: A Mighty Message; Act 2: "Altering" the Altar; Act 3: Dad's Defense; Act 4: A Trumpet and a Test.

3. What stands out to you in this passage?
4. Let's look more closely at some of the details:
   - How would you characterize Gideon's attitude at different times in this narrative?
   - What encouragement does the angel of the Lord give to Gideon?
   - What do you think is the turning point in Gideon's transformation? Why?
   - What differences between false gods and the true God does this story illustrate?
5. What do you learn about the Lord God from this narrative?
6. What does this passage teach you about how God sees you?
7. What do you learn about obeying God even when you feel weak or afraid or doubtful?
8. Serving God well often depends on allowing him to change our attitudes—from "Why do bad things happen?" or "Who, me?" to "I am a mighty warrior whom God is sending, and he will be with me. Why should I be afraid? What can man do to me?" What can you do, empowered by God's Spirit, to share the love of Jesus with someone?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. What challenges do you anticipate this week?

**For Next Week:** Over the next week, read and reflect on **Ruth 1:3-5, 8-11, 14-18** as we continue studying the books of Judges and Ruth and the theme, "Reverse the Trend." You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

**LESSON AIM:** **Serve God devotedly.**

**STUDY:** Judges–Ruth

**THEME:** Reverse the Trend

**LESSON TEXT:** Ruth 1:3-5, 8-11, 14-18

**SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT:** Ruth 2:17-23; 4:9-17

# SERVE DEVOTEDLY

## BY MARK SCOTT

Arthur Gossip was the preacher at the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, Scotland. The day after his wife suddenly collapsed and died in 1927 he preached his famous sermon, "When Life Tumbles in, What Then?" In the days of the judges, life tumbled in for three widows: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. This last widow taught us what to do when life tumbles in: serve devotedly.

**Devotion Can Reverse Disobedience**

*Ruth 1:3-5, 8-11*

The local famine in the land was the result of disobeying God. In the house of bread (Bethlehem) there was no bread. The dysfunctional cycle in the book of Judges had created destruction. Elimelek (also spelled Elimelech and meaning "My God is king") took his wife, Naomi ("delight"), and his two sons, Mahlon ("sick") and Kilion (also spelled Chilion and meaning "pining"), to Moab to survive the famine. The Moabites had a rough beginning (Genesis 19:36, 37), and while it was not sinful for an Israelite to marry a Moabite, it was far from ideal.

In the course of time, Elimelek died. The sons married Moabite women. Mahlon married Ruth (Ruth 4:10) and Kilion married Orpah. After ten years (literal or figurative . . . for a substantial time) both sons died. When word came that there was bread in Israel, Naomi decided to head home. Was she reversing the former disobedience of going to Moab to start with? A Jewish tradition said that death was the punishment for leaving Bethlehem (John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*). In the Old Testament, marriage meant security for a woman. And consider the thought of leaving three graves in a Moab cemetery.

Naomi was accompanied on her journey by her daughters-in-law. She said to them, "*Go back*." This phrase springs from a single Hebrew word that appears in this text five times; it is translated, "go back," "return," or "turn back." (Dialogue is one of the main literary features of this book; 59 of 84 verses are dialogue.) Naomi wished Orpah and Ruth well in two ways: kindness and rest. *Kindness* is the word for God's loving-kindness or covenantal love. *Rest* can also be translated as "comfort." By the phrase, "May the Lord . . ." Naomi was invoking God's special kindness toward them.

This was an emotional scene. They kissed and *wept aloud*. The weeping involved more than shedding tears. They "wailed, lamented, and bewailed." The girls not only refused to leave their mother-in-law, they also pledged to be assimilated into the Israelite nation. Naomi insisted that they go back. Naomi reminded them that even if she were to marry again and have sons, the girls could hardly wait for the boys to mature in time to marry (vv. 12, 13). Naomi felt that God's hand had been dealt against her. Later she will desire not to be called "delight" but "bitter."

**Devotion Can Give Evidence of Conversion**

*Ruth 1:14-18*

There was more weeping. Orpah headed back to Moab, and she was not criticized for her decision. But Ruth's devotion did stand out. She *clung* to Naomi. The word can be translated "join" or "cleave." It is the same word used of Adam clinging to Eve (Genesis 2:24) and Israel clinging to God (Deuteronomy 10:20). Naomi had met her match in terms of devotion. Ruth would not take no for an answer.

One of the most beautiful statements of devotion ever occurs next in our text. It is often said (or even sung) at weddings—even though that is not its context. Ruth chose life with Naomi over family, national identity, and religion. Ruth was loyal. It is as if she said, "Enough already! I am going with you!" Ruth will go with and stay with Naomi. Her people would be Ruth's people. And, most importantly, Naomi's God would be Ruth's God. This is the language of conversion in the Bible. Ruth crossed a line.

Ruth's attitude was like Cortez's attitude ("burn the ships"). She would die in Israel and be buried in Israel. What she probably did not realize was how this decision would feature into the coming of the Messiah (Ruth 4:15-17). Do we realize what our conversion can bring?

Ruth was so serious about this that she invoked a judgment of the Lord: "May the Lord deal with me." Naomi twice used similar phrases, each starting with "May the Lord," early in our text (Ruth 1:8, 9). Ruth promised that even death could not separate her from Naomi. Ruth would not be deterred. She was *determined* (persistent or obstinate). Devotion was in place. Now the bigger story can unfold.

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# RUTH'S EXEMPLARY LOYALTY

## BY DAVID FAUST

Brand loyalty keeps us buying Coke or Pepsi, Fords or Toyotas, and cheering for our favorite sports teams. Loyalty can be misplaced, though. Have you been burned by an unscrupulous salesperson who cheated you, an unfaithful friend who betrayed you, or a church leader who wounded you? Jesus urged us to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves, refusing to follow untrustworthy preachers, priests, or politicians who would lead us astray.

Loyalty is rare. "Many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful person who can find?" (Proverbs 20:6). Even Jesus wasn't immune to disloyalty. Peter denied him and Judas betrayed him. At first, George Washington trusted a soldier who later plotted to surrender West Point to the British, and we remember Benedict Arnold as a traitor.

Ruth—one of two women to have books of the Bible named after them—serves as a positive example of loyalty.

**Loyal to God's Covenant Community:**

*"Your people will be my people" (Ruth 1:16)*

Ruth grew up in Moab, but she chose to identify with her mother-in-law Naomi's kin, the Israelites. In our day it's popular to trash the church. Do we have the courage to stand with God's covenant people and say, "I'm with them"? Although it's flawed, the church is "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" (1 Peter 2:9). We can be honest about its imperfections without body-shaming the body of Christ.

**Loyal to the Lord:**

*"Your God [will be] my God" (Ruth 1:16)*

How did Ruth even know about the true God? She must have learned about the Lord while she worked beside Naomi at home and in the fields, and it's likely their family observed the Passover every spring. Naomi's family moved to Moab to escape from a famine, but on a deeper level, God sent them there as missionaries! If a new job takes you to a different city—if you move away to attend college or serve in the military—don't leave your faith behind. Take it with you and share it. Loyalty to God is our highest commitment.

**Loyal Until Death:**

*"Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried" (Ruth 1:17)*

Jesus said, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown" (Revelation 2:10).

After serving 18 years as missionaries in Ethiopia, my friends Adrian and Jennifer Fehl returned home to America. To clarify that the Fehls' departure was permanent, Ethiopian authorities stamped "Leave for good" on their passports. My friends said, "We looked at those words a different way. It was good to be there in Ethiopia, but now we were leaving for a good reason and we knew God would use us for good back in the USA, too." When a Christian dies, the message, "Leaving for good," could be stamped on our caskets. It's good to serve the Lord here on earth, but after death comes something far better.

In time, Ruth's son Obed became the grandfather of Israel's famous King David. A bit of Ruth's Moabite blood flowed in the veins of the Messiah (Matthew 1:5, 6). Jesus slept in a manger in the same village where Ruth cradled little Obed in her lap. It's amazing what God can do through loyal servants who remain faithful to him.

**Personal Challenge:**

Do a loyalty self-check. What are you doing to build trust with others? Are you completely faithful to your family? To your spouse? To the Lord? To your coworkers? To your friends? If you identify any pockets of unfaithfulness in your heart, confess them to the Lord.

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## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What was the biggest challenge you faced last week?

2. What did you do last week, as empowered by God's Spirit, to share the love of Jesus with someone?

Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Ruth 1:3-5, 8-11, and 14-18** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to retell the story as if telling it to a group of fifth- and sixth-graders. (Option: Ask three people to act out the main parts of the narrative.)

3. What stands out to you about the relationships between Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth?

4. Let's look more closely at some of the details:
   - What words in this passage reveal the feelings these three women had for each other?
   - In what specific ways did they show humility, not looking to their own interests but to the interests of the others?
   - Look through the passage for the possessive pronouns *her*, *your*, and *my*; who used each one; and to whom they referred. In what ways do these words and phrases signify each woman's priorities in life?
   - Look for the phrase, "May the Lord," and who said it. What does this repeated phrase indicate to you about these women and how they viewed God?

5. What do you learn about God from this narrative?

6. What does this passage teach you about humanity and what's truly important to us?

7. What do you learn about devotion and obedience?

8. Take a few minutes to think about someone you know who is not fully following Christ as Savior and Lord. Now imagine this person someday saying to you, "I want your God to be my God." How can you work toward that kind of redeeming relationship with this person?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. What challenges do you anticipate this week?

**For Next Week:** This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.