

**Old Testament Survey 07 – Judges & Ruth:  
Cycles of Decline and the Need for the King**  
For the Bible Institute at GCBC Spring 2026  
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**Introduction:**

Judges and Ruth deal with one of the most chaotic times in Israel's history. Israel lacked strong leadership, and they failed to obey the Law. This time period in Israel history is characterized by moral anarchy. The moral atmosphere in this time period is described in Judges 17:6 and Judges 21:25. These verses say, "**In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.**" God's standard of morality had not changed, but the people behaved as if morality was relative. The Law made it clear what was right and wrong for the people of Israel, but the people had forsaken the Law. They thought they could establish their own standards of right and wrong. They forsook God, and they went after other gods. However, there is an important truth that is highlighted in this chaotic time period of Israel's history. God's faithfulness is not dependent on the faithfulness of man. These books highlight God's faithfulness to His covenants and promises even when Israel was unfaithful to God.

**The Biblical Context:**

The key covenants that impact the setting of this time period are the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Land covenants. The Abrahamic covenant involved the land, seed, and blessing. The Mosaic covenant focused on the conduct of Abraham's seed. The Land covenant is closely connected to the Mosaic covenant, and it further detailed incentives to obey the Mosaic Law while in the land. The conduct of the seed in the land is a key aspect of this time period. God deals with Israel in accordance with these covenants throughout this time period. There is also movement towards the need for the Davidic covenant towards the end of this time period. God will fulfill His promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation.

These books take place in the dispensation of law. The people requested a standard from God, but they continually failed to keep that standard. The Mosaic Law served several purposes. It revealed the holiness of God while also revealing the sinfulness of man. It revealed exactly what God required of His people in this time period. Ultimately, the Law was meant to bring Israel to Christ (Galatians 3:24). Keeping the Law was never the means of salvation. The Law showed that man could not live righteously, and that man needed a Savior. The sinfulness of man and his inability to keep the Law is put on full display in the time period of the Judges.

Judges connects the gap between Joshua's leadership and the future monarchy. Judges 1:1 connects this book to the context of Joshua. Judges 1:1 says, "Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass, that the children of Israel asked the LORD, saying, Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first, to fight against them?" The death of Joshua was the beginning of a chaotic time for Israel. Chapter 1 goes on to describe the primary problem that Israel was facing. They had failed to drive out the Canaanites as God had commanded them to do. God told Israel that the Canaanites would be thorns in their sides if they failed to totally drive them out of the land. This failure represented a lack of faith and obedience on the part of Israel. God provided them with everything they needed to experience total victory over the Canaanites, but Israel failed to follow through with God's instructions regarding their conquest of the land. Chapter 2 will go on to describe the consequences that Israel would face for their failure to drive out the

inhabitants of the land. God used judges to lead His people in this transition time after Joshua's leadership. These judges were not primarily spiritual leaders, but rather these judges were military deliverers and civil leaders. Israel was still under theocratic rule, but they continually chose to reject God.

Judges and Ruth build toward the future monarchy. God had planned for Israel to have a king, and this is evident from Deuteronomy 17:15. However, it was not yet time for Israel to have a king. The key verses, Judges 17:6 and Judges 21:25, show how Israel needed a godly leader. The conclusion from Ruth 4 also connects this time period to the future monarchy. That passage shows how God was preparing the Davidic line. Therefore, these books show continued movement toward the kingdom that God has planned for Israel.

### **The Downward Spiral:**

Judges 2 is perhaps the key chapter for this time period. This chapter shows God's faithfulness to keep His promises to Israel. God would keep His promises regarding blessings for obedience, and also His promises regarding curses for disobedience. The covenant in Deuteronomy 28-30 lays the foundation for the cycle that happens in Judges. God deals with His people according to His covenant with them.

The downward spiral: **Sin** → **Servitude** → **Supplication** → **Salvation** → **Silence** → **(repeat)**

This cycle is outlined in Judges 2:11-19. Verses 11-13 show how the people **sinned** by doing evil in the sight of the LORD. They forsook the LORD that brought them out of Egypt. They turned to false gods such as Baal and Ashtaroath. Verses 14-15 show how the LORD delivered them into **servitude**. The LORD was angry with Israel, and He allowed them to be plundered and to be taken into servitude. This is exactly what the LORD said would happen if Israel decided to turn away from Him. Verse 18b shows how Israel made **supplication** to the LORD in their servitude. Verses 16 and 18 show how the LORD heard their supplication and provided them with **salvation** through various judges that He raised up. Verse 18a also shows how the LORD's presence with the judges allowed Israel to experience temporary **silence** and rest. Verse 19 shows that this cycle **repeated** over and over again. Not only did this cycle repeat, but they actually corrupted themselves more and more. Therefore, this is not just a cycle or a wheel, but it is actually a downward spiral. The moral state of Israel gets progressively worse and worse during the time of the judges. The end of the book of Judges includes some of the most morally corrupt stories in the Bible. This downward spiral happens because Israel was sinful and could not keep the Law. They had an external law, but they had sinful hearts. The primary problem was not the strength of Israel's enemies, but rather Israel's rejection of the LORD and His rule.

This downward spiral created many problems among God's people. The tribes became more divided and fragmented. The people continually tried to have peaceful politics with the Canaanites in direct rebellion against God's instructions. Intermarriage with the Canaanites became a huge religious problem because they began to serve the gods of the Canaanites. Baalism became a regular problem for Israel. Syncretism began common religious practice. Moral relativism demonstrated a complete rejection of God's Law. Materialism and the worship of material things reflected the heart of the people. These problems lead to the religious, moral, political, and tribal chaos that is especially evident in Judges 17-21.

### **Overview of the Major Judges:**

Othniel (3:7-11) is the first judge, and he is also perhaps the “model” judge. Othniel delivered Israel from Mesopotamia. Othniel shows what faithful leadership should look like during this time period. Israel served Cushanrishathaim, king of Mesopotamia, for 8 years. Othniel was empowered by the Holy Spirit to deliver Israel from their servitude, and the people had rest in the land for 40 years. Othniel is the best example of a faithful judge with no recorded moral failures.

Ehud (3:12-30) is the first judge where the narrative gets more detailed and dramatic. Ehud delivered Israel from Moab and King Eglon. Israel served Moab for 18 years. Ehud personally assassinated King Eglon with a concealed dagger. This bold action rallied Israel to defeated the Moabites and experience 8 years of rest. Ehud shows how the downward spiral started to get more chaotic as it progressed.

Shamgar (3:31) could be considered a minor judge, but the people that he fought against is identified which is unique to the major judges. Shamgar delivered Israel from the Philistines, but the Philistines would continue to be a persistent thorn in Israel’s side. Shamgar killed 600 Philistines with an ox goad. This was an instrument meant for driving cattle. Shamgar is a good illustration of how God often used unconventional means to deliver His people.

Deborah & Barak (4-5) reveals some of the fragmentation that Israel was experiencing. King Jabin of Canaan oppressed Israel for 20 years. Deborah, a prophetess, was judge over Israel. She called for Barak to go deliver Israel from King Jabin. Barak insisted that Deborah comes with him. This show that Israel’s leaders were getting weaker and less bold. Jael, the wife of Heber, is the one that actually kills Sisera, the captain of Jabin’s army. The people experienced rest in the land for 40 years. This conflict also reveals further tribal fragmentation. Not all of the tribes participated in this conflict, and this points to the fragmented state of Israel without strong leadership.

Gideon (6-8) is known for being doubtful and hesitant because he required a sign from God. However, God still used him to deliver Israel from the Midianites. Israel served Midian for 7 years. God used Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites through unconventional means. God reduced Gideon’s army to just 300 men, and He caused the Midianites to turn against one another. The people had rest in the land for 40 years. However, Gideon also demonstrates spiritual compromise. Gideon makes an ephod that the people start to worship. This idol become a snare for Gideon and his household. Gideon represents inconsistent leadership. Gideon delivered Israel by faith, but he failed to lead Israel by faith with consistency. The leadership of Israel is becoming more and more spiritually inconsistent.

Jephthah (10:6-12:7) was an outcast because he was the son of a harlot. However, they fetched him to come deliver them from the Ammonites. Jephthah delivers Israel from the Ammonites, but he is probably most commonly known today for his rash vow. It seems that he ended up in a situation where he would have to sacrifice his daughter in order to keep his vow. Jephthah judged Israel for 6 years. He was successful militarily, but he demonstrated spiritual confusion and a misunderstanding of God’s character. This shows a continuing pattern of unstable spiritual leadership in Israel during this time period.

### **Samson (Judges 13-16):**

Samson demonstrates external strength, but also spiritual weakness. The moral decline from Othniel to Samson highlights the reality of the downward spiral that Israel found themselves in. Samson illustrates the moral atmosphere of this time period. God used Samson

as a judge to deliver Israel from the Philistines, but he was not a good moral leader. God's call and empowerment of Samson comes in Judges 13, and it is before he has proved anything. Samson's moral compromise starts in Judges 14 when he desires a Philistine woman, and also when he eats honey from the lion carcass. Samson had continually escalating conflict with the Philistines in Judges 15, and the LORD still used him to defeat many Philistines even though he was morally compromised. Judges 16 shows Samson's moral collapse. Samson sins with a harlot, and then he chooses to love Delilah. Delilah guilts Samson into revealing the source of his strength. Delilah has Samson's hair cut off, and this breaks Samson's Nazirite vow. Judges 16:20 is a sad verse that says, "And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him." The enabling power of the Spirit was not permanent for Samson. Samson failed to realize in this moment that the LORD departed from him, and that the source of his strength was gone. The Philistines captured Samson and plucked out his eyes. However, God allowed Samson to perform one final act of deliverance as a judge over Israel. God gave him his strength back to push down the pillars of the house that he was in, thus killing more Philistines than he had killed during the rest of his life. Samson's life highlights both his failures and God's faithfulness. This illustrates the state of Israel during this time. Israel continually failed their part of the covenant, but God remained faithful to His covenant.

It is worth noting that the work of the Holy Spirit is obviously different in this dispensation of law than in the dispensation of grace. The book of Judges and the example of Samson show some of the ways how the work of the Holy Spirit was different. The words and phrases regarding the work of the Holy Spirit help us understand this difference: "Came upon" (was upon) - Judges 3:10, "Came upon" (clothed) - Judges 6:34, "Began to move" (impelled or driving something forward) - Judges 13:35, "Came upon" (overpowered; took control over) - Judges 14:19. These cases of the Holy Spirit coming upon or moving the judges were temporary and for the specific ministry of delivering Israel from their oppressors. The Holy Spirit could leave them, and this is most clearly seen from the example of Samson. This ministry of the Holy Spirit is different than the baptism of the Spirit for the New Testament believer. The Holy Spirit indwells the New Testament believer permanently, and the Spirit baptizes the New Testament believer into the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:13).

Samson and some of the other judges are actually mentioned in Hebrews 11 for their faith. Hebrews 11:32-34 says, "And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: **Who through faith** subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens." These judges were far from perfect leaders, but they still exercised faith in God in order to deliver Israel from their oppressors. Samson made many mistakes, but his faith in God is how he is remembered in the New Testament. Faith is what God desired most from His people. God wanted His people to have faith in Him and in His promises.

Samson is the last judge in the book of Judges, and then the downward spiral totally collapses. Judges 17-21 are characterized by total anarchy, moral depravity, idolatry, sexual perversion/violence, and tribal war. Israel's repeated rejection of the LORD brought them to rock bottom. This low point revealed that Israel was in need of righteous leadership. This low

point also highlights the reality that the Law exposed the sinfulness of Israel, but it could not mature the believer.

### **The Faithfulness of God:**

God never forsook His covenant with Israel. God was always faithful to His people. Israel forsook their part of the covenant, and they were not faithful to God. The key truth here is that God's faithfulness is not conditioned upon Israel's faithfulness. This is an encouraging theme throughout this time period of the judges. The state of Israel was constantly changing, but God never changed. Israel was stuck in a downward spiral, but God still kept His promises to them. God still made sure to provide for His people, and God was still moving them towards the kingdom that He had planned for them.

### **The Faithfulness of a Few (Ruth):**

Israel as a whole was characterized by unfaithfulness to God during this time, but there were still a faithful few. The book of Ruth provides some contrast to the chaos that is common in the book of Judges. Ruth 1:1 gives the setting of the book, "Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled." This is a story of loyalty and faith in a time of chaos and unfaithfulness. In chapter 1, Naomi experienced the loss of her husband and her sons in the land of Moab. Naomi became bitter as a result of this experience. However, her daughter-in-law, Ruth, demonstrated great loyalty. Ruth 1:16-17 says, "And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me." Ruth 2 highlights God's providence and provision even in the midst of this chaotic time period. Ruth gleaned in the fields of Boaz, and this is clearly part of God's providence and plan. Ruth 3-4 highlights the process of the kinsman redeemer. Boaz redeems Ruth and marries her.

This book gives clear insight in the concept of the kinsman redeemer. There were several qualifications for someone to be a kinsman redeemer. They had to be a blood relative, able to buy, willing to buy, willing to marry, and a freeman. Boaz fits these qualifications to be the kinsman redeemer, but there was a closer relative that could have potentially qualified to be the kinsman redeemer as well. This other relative passed on this responsibility to Boaz once he learned that marriage to Ruth was part of the responsibilities. The man gave his shoe to Boaz which is a way of saying "what is mine is now yours." The responsibilities of the kinsman redeemer involved land redemption, redemption of any enslaved relatives, avenging of blood, levirate marriage (why he married Ruth), trustee, caring for poor relatives, and assisting in law suits to ensure his relative gets justice. Boaz is an example of a man that was qualified to be a kinsman redeemer, and he also took his responsibilities seriously as the kinsman redeemer.

This is an important story because it leads to King David. Ruth 4:21-22 says, "And Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed, And Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David." God's providence is at work even in the time period of the judges. God was still working out His plans for Israel even while they were repeatedly rejecting Him. There were still a faithful few in Israel who had faith in the LORD. Boaz and Ruth are both examples of individuals that had faith in the LORD. They showed respect for the Law, and they obeyed God's instructions found in the Law. This is seen through the gleaning process and then also through the process of the kinsman redeemer. This highlights the truth that faith is individual. There can be faithful individuals in the midst of an unfaithful people.

**Dispensational Tie-in**

The Mosaic Law was not maturing the Jewish believer, it was pointing out why God was faithful in judging them. The people had requested a standard (Exodus 19) and God gave them one, and now they were caught in a downward spiral because of their failure to keep their part. The time period of Judges & Ruth further reveals God's faithfulness to His people, His covenants, and His promises. God deals with His people according to His Word. Israel should not have been surprised by the cycle that they were stuck in because it was clearly laid out for them Deuteronomy. God's way of dealing with Israel at this time is different from how God deals with the church today. God does not promise the church material blessings for their obedience. In fact, the church is actually told to expect suffering, trials, and persecution. God also does not promise the church any land. However, the thing that does not change between dispensations is God's character and faithfulness. Believers in every dispensation can trust God to be faithful to His people, His covenants, and His promises. The book of Judges ought to encourage believers to have confidence in the faithfulness of God. It is a comforting truth that God's faithfulness is not dependent on human faithfulness or obedience.

**Conclusion:**

God's plans are bigger than the failures of His people. Israel's repeated rejection of the LORD did not change His ultimate plan for them. God was moving Israel towards legitimate kingship under God during this time period. Israel was learning more about their inability to keep the Law. Israel was learning more about their need for righteous leadership. The trajectory towards King David also points further to the Son of David. There will one day be a perfectly righteous King ruling over Israel. God will keep all His promises to His people. God did not forget His people in the time period of the judges, and He has not forgotten His people today. God's plans are bigger than the failures of His people. God's faithfulness is not conditioned upon the faithfulness of man. God is always faithful to His people, His covenants, and His promises.