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# New Beginnings

## *Avoiding a Wasted Life*

The events of the book of Ruth take place during the time of the judges, a term that will be explained on day one. To fully comprehend the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, we have to first understand the complex environment they occupied.

A little over three hundred years before Ruth became a widow, God had brought the Israelites out of Egypt under Moses's leadership and given them a new life in the land of Canaan. A life of freedom.

God had saved His people—saved them from slavery, both physical and spiritual. He had given them a new life full of promise.

But instead of drawing closer to their Savior and fulfilling the promise of their new life, God's people went astray.

After the death of Joshua, the successor to Moses, the people of Israel increasingly chased after the glittery gods of Canaan. These were deities such as Baal, the god of storms, who promised good crops—an enticing promise for people whose survival depended on seasonal rains; or Ashtoreth, the goddess of war and fertility, who reportedly could give them healthy children and protect them in battle.

The background features a soft, painterly style illustration of blue mountains in the distance. In the upper right corner, there is a dark, irregular brushstroke shape that serves as a backdrop for the text.

## WEEK ONE

In other words, they sabotaged the new life God had given them. Squandered the blessings of their new home. They wasted their lives, chasing after empty things.

Every time the people of Israel strayed from God, they found themselves in terrible hardship. When they could not take the consequences of their choices anymore, they repented and cried out for the Lord's help. Their misery and supplication moved God to pity and, at appointed times, He would raise a judge in order to deliver the people from their suffering.

Sadly, it seemed that their repentance was superficial. Not bone-deep and life changing, but shallow and weak. Inevitably, they returned to worshiping the gods of Canaan. This was a cyclical problem. The spiritual life of Israel at this time resembled a leaky boat tossed on stormy waves. Sometimes up. Sometimes down. And never truly balanced.

The book of Judges can be hard to read because it contains the account of so many mistakes. As the years pass, the poor judgment of God's people seems only to grow worse. But their painful missteps give us a glimpse into the vastness of God's mercy.

And they show us how to avoid a wasted life. They teach us to put God first.

As you read about this period in Israel's history, you will gain additional insight into just how extraordinary Ruth, Boaz, and ultimately Naomi, really were. For in spite of living in the midst of an unfaithful generation, these three managed to stay the course. To live lives of extraordinary faithfulness and love.

As we see shades of our own chaotic and broken world reflected in the history of Israel, the question our hearts have to wrestle with is simple:

Will we choose to live a Ruth life in spite of our “judges” surroundings?



WEEK 1 | DAY 1

# DIVINE PURPOSE

## UNDERSTANDING THE WORD

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READ RUTH 1:1. Who ruled in Israel during Ruth and Naomi's lifetime?

The word “judge” can be misleading to the modern reader. A judge makes us think of courtroom dramas and legal cases. But that is a misconception. While they did at times act as arbiters of justice among the people, Israel's judges were often warriors and military leaders. Some were prophets, men—and a woman, Deborah—who heard from God on behalf of the people. Their main role was to deliver the tribes of Israel from enemy attacks and oppression.

After the death of Moses, Joshua was chosen by God to lead the people into the promised land. Much of this land was already occupied by various peoples, whom we can collectively refer to as the Canaanites. The generation born in the desert did not complete their conquest of Canaan by the time Joshua died. In the early years of war, only some of Israel's twelve tribes managed to conquer bits of land, especially in the hill country.

The period of judges began when Joshua died, and these judges, whom God raised

up throughout different parts of Israel in response to the desperate needs of His people, continued the work of conquest and settlement. Settling the promised land required numerous protracted battles and long generations.

If you are like me, you will have many questions about this process. Why was it so important that the people of God settle this land? Why did it require warfare? How can we, as Christians, align the idea of a compassionate and loving Christ with a God who would lead His people into brutal bloodshed?

So before we go any further, let's first linger here a moment and deal with some of these questions.

**READ GENESIS 12:1-3 AND 18:17-19.** Who does God intend to bless through the lineage of Abraham?

**READ GENESIS 13:14-18 AND 17:1-8.** Where is the land that God has promised to Abraham's progeny?

**READ DEUTERONOMY 12:29-31 AND LEVITICUS 18:1-21.** (Molech in verse 21 is a major Canaanite god.) Based on these passages, what are some of the inferred sins being committed in Canaan?

Think of Germany under Nazi rule. Think of the worst atrocities perpetrated by that pernicious regime. Now multiply that evil and lengthen it by generations. Imagine that world, and you will start to understand something about Canaan during this period. Would you want to live under that system?

**READ JOSHUA 2 AND 6:1-25.** Who was Rahab?

**READ HEBREWS 11:31.** Why was Rahab's life spared even though she was a Canaanite?

Did Rahab's family participate in saving the spies? Why do you think their lives were spared?

What does this imply about God?

Do you think other Canaanite lives may also have been spared by God if they had been willing to repent and change their ways?

## APPLYING THE WORD

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The key to understanding the importance of the nation of Israel lies in understanding its purpose. God was not merely calling a nation into being for its own sake. He was not merely invested in giving this particular group of people a happy life, or providing for their personal needs. Beyond those things lay a far greater purpose.

As a nation, Israel would one day bless all the world.

By growing in their awareness of the holiness of God, by understanding their own sin and their need for salvation, and by learning the boundaries of God's moral laws, they became the cradle of divine restoration for the whole world.

Israel was like the setting in which the jewel of God's salvation could come to rest. His Son, Jesus, was not born into a vacuum. He was born into the only nation, which through its tumultuous history, had learned something about the nature of God.

The nation of Israel had to remain pure. If its people became infected by the egregious sins of Canaan, if they were reduced to the same spiritual ruin reflected in the lives of the nations that surrounded them, their whole purpose for being would be ruined.

They would lose the power to bless the world.

This is a lesson that applies on a personal level as well. For those of us who follow Christ, it is easy to lose sight of the larger picture, the one that places our story into the context of the kingdom of God.

You have a purpose, beloved. Far beyond your present comfort or provision, you have a role to play. You are called to love, to encourage, to restore, to reconcile. You are called to heal, to help, to serve, to mend. Like Israel, you are called to be a blessing.

You are a lighthouse for God. Every aspect of your life, its heartaches and afflictions as well as its victories and joys, is the light that shows the path to the shores of God's mercy and faithfulness. Ruth and Naomi teach us this very lesson. Their tears and laughter through the years gathered to tell the story of God's faithfulness. God's sovereignty.

If you love Jesus, the story of your life is itself a healing balm to an aching world. Your central calling is to be God's ambassador, His friend, His daughter, His bride: by faithfully living out these roles, you will become a light.

Your life, far from being a private affair serving only your own ends, is meant to be the light of the world. Just like the nation of Israel, your life has the power to bless the world in a unique way, a way only you can accomplish.

How tempting it is to make personal happiness and the security of our loved ones our primary goal, and to set our life's course on that self-focused trajectory. It is not so much that God has no interest in your happiness or provision. It is merely that these things ought not occupy the central place in life. When they do, they lead to a disordered and diminished life.

Take a moment to examine your heart. Have you veered off course? Have you set your focus on your small life, your joys, your sorrows? Have you forgotten to widen the scope of your soul's desire to include the kingdom of God? If so, express how you feel to Jesus.

**READ ROMANS 1:29-32 AND GALATIANS 5:19-21.** Are there any sins that have clogged your heart lately? Love cannot flow rightly through a mind tarnished with gossip. Blessing cannot pour out of a heart blocked by envy. Kindness cannot extend from a querulous soul. Reconciliation cannot work through habitual anger.

If there is a specific situation that has led you to one of these responses, take a moment to write about it. Ask Jesus to show you what about this situation has triggered your heart to respond this way. Take time to pray for forgiveness.

Is there a pattern of behavior you seem to have trouble with? Describe your pattern. Why do you think you have a problem with this particular sin? Please take a moment to identify this pattern, repent of it, and ask Jesus to forgive you.

Sometimes, when we examine our lives, we feel as though we have come up short. We criticize our limitations and focus on our failures. Criticism leads to shame. It does not lead to repentance, and ultimately, to a fresh start. As you think of your choices, if you are landing in criticism and condemnation, please stop!

**READ JAMES 2:13.** In your own words, write the second part of that verse:

What is “triumphing” in your mind? Take a moment and make sure that your thoughts toward yourself and others align with this passage. Show yourself some mercy!

## **PRAYING THE WORD**

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**READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17–20.** Rewrite these verses, using your own words.

*Lord God, widen my world beyond a small life, so that I can become a light for You. Use me, imperfect and limited as I am, as Your own dear ambassador. Transform me into the blessing You always intended me to be. Help me to not waste the daily opportunities You send me to fulfill my purpose here on earth. By the power that is in the name of Jesus, I ask. Amen.*



WEEK 1 | DAY 2

# DIVINE RELATIONSHIP

## UNDERSTANDING THE WORD

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As the end of his life approached, Joshua knew that the tribes of Israel still faced many challenges and, perhaps worse still, tremendous temptations. Before his death, Joshua issued some final instructions to God's people. Read Joshua 24:14–15. Rewrite these verses using your own words:

**READ JOSHUA 24:16–18.** Write the people's response to Joshua in your own words:

What did Joshua expressly warn the people about (Josh. 24:23)?

How did the people respond (Josh. 24:24)?

**READ JUDGES 2:7-10.** What generation was this?

**READ JUDGES 1:1-2.** Shortly after Joshua died, how did the people of Israel make decisions for their future? How would you describe their relationship with God at this time?

In this early period, Israel did not look like a nation as we understand that term. There was no central government yet. Israel was a collection of independent tribes, loosely connected to one another, coming together in times of war and national crises. Its borders were fluid and constantly changing.

Against the express command of the Lord, several of the tribes of Israel actually settled among the Canaanites. The promised land became the blended land. Instead of becoming a distinct nation, a holy people set apart for the Lord, some tribes amalgamated with Canaanites. Let's look at the results together.

READ JUDGES 2:11–15. Describe what has gone wrong.

READ JUDGES 2:16–19. What is God’s response?

Some scholars estimate that the period of judges lasted about 410 years. Since we don’t know how many years passed between the rule of one judge and the next, or whether some may have overlapped, we can only guess at the timeline. But we can see that over the generations, a tremendous shift took place in the hearts of the people.

READ JUDGES 21:25, and rewrite this verse in your own words:

READ REVELATION 3:14–22. What do you think a lukewarm life looks like?

Some time ago, Shodankeh Johnson, an African pastor from Sierra Leone, visited our church. Shodankeh and his teams have planted over three thousand churches, mostly in Muslim areas of Africa. He began one of his teachings by singing the well-known hymn “I Surrender All.” His beautiful baritone voice filled the ancient spaces of our historical church. My eyes drifted closed and I began to worship. Suddenly, I snapped my eyes open and sat up. Shodankeh had changed the words of the hymn. Instead of singing the traditional words I was expecting, he sang:

I surrender . . . *some*

I surrender . . . *some*

*Some for me and some for Jesus;*

I surrender . . . *some!*

While I laughed, I also cringed. There was a sting to those words, because his version of the hymn came with the sharp end of a thorn. Most of us hold back a little bit of ourselves from God.

Some of our time. Some of our dreams. Some of our thought life. Some of our money. Some of our relationships. Sure, we surrender to Jesus . . . *some*.

God frowns upon a lukewarm community or a lukewarm heart. There is no “some for me and some for Jesus” in God’s glossary. He has set His affections on you, and He expects your affections back.

The Bible tells us to “Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually!” (1 Chron. 16:11). We are to actively seek God. Pour effort and will into that seeking. We are to chase after His strength, not be content with our own. Our quest isn’t primarily for a pain-free and comfortable life—our quest is first and foremost for the presence of God.

This was a quest that Israel failed to complete. In fits and starts, they would begin, would attempt a relationship of sorts. But ultimately, they wasted every fresh opportunity that God gave them for a new life, a life with Him in control. Instead, they ended up doing what was right in their own eyes.

## **APPLYING THE WORD**

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Compare Joshua 24:24 to Judges 21:25. Do you see the tectonic shift that has taken place in the hearts of God’s people? Examine your own heart for a moment. Do you sense similar shifts in your own life? Shifts in faith, obedience, love, action? Express to Jesus the current state of your relationship with Him:

Think of the divine intimacy that Jesus is offering you. The relationship that would capture and involve every part of your life, both insignificant and major. Are you ready to open that door today? Will you share all of your life with Him? If not, what do you think prevents you from surrendering completely?

## PRAYING THE WORD

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**READ REVELATION 3:20.** In your own words, write a prayer to Jesus, using this verse. Although this verse is addressed to a church, it has significance for individuals as well. Be honest with Jesus. Tell Him how open (or closed) the door of your heart is to His approach.

*Father God, help me not waste Your invitation to spiritual intimacy with You. Help me long for it, and be satisfied with nothing less. I want to begin a deeper, more honest relationship with You. I commit my life and heart to You. In Jesus' precious name I pray.*

WEEK 1 | DAY 3

# DIVINE OPPORTUNITY

## UNDERSTANDING THE WORD

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Israel's judges were not perfect. Far from it. The disintegration of Israel's moral and spiritual fiber was reflected in the lives of its judges.

READ JUDGES 6. Who was Gideon?

When we first meet Gideon, where is he and what is he doing?

What does this imply about his state of mind?

How did Gideon see himself (v. 15)?

How did Gideon see God's role in Israel's past and current circumstances (v. 13)?  
What does this imply about Gideon's faith at this time?

Can you relate to Gideon's feelings about the Lord? If so, express why you feel this way.

How did God see Gideon (vv. 12, 14)?

How did God reassure Gideon (vv. 16, 21, 23)?

After God's reassurance, both verbal and miraculous, Gideon was able to obey God and destroy the altar of Baal. Read verse 27. God has now reassured Gideon three different times. What does this verse reveal about Gideon?

READ JUDGES 6:34 AND JUDGES 3:9-10. What do Gideon and Othniel have in common? What is the Spirit empowering them to do, specifically?

Now go back to Judges 6 and read verses 36–39. By now, God has reassured Gideon three times, and imparted His Spirit to him. Before truly fulfilling his calling, what does Gideon ask for?

Is God angry with Gideon (v. 40)?

Gideon's greatest battle is described in Judges 7:9–23. Read this passage. Is Gideon still afraid? How do you know?

How does Gideon win the battle?

**READ JUDGES 8:22-27.** (An ephod can refer to a priestly garment; see e.g., Ex. 28:2-4. But in ancient times, it was also an ornate covering that clothed idols. The context of this verse suggests the latter.) What does this say about Gideon's relationship with God?

Sometimes we need a lot of reassurance from God. Gideon's story reveals the depth of God's patience with us when we battle fear and self-doubt. Over and over again, God strengthens Gideon—strengthens him when he is overwhelmed by fear, when he doubts himself, when he doubts God.

Sadly, while Gideon fulfills his great calling to come to the aid of Israel, he fails his greatest calling. Ultimately, this talented judge fails to trust God and set his heart steadfastly on Him. In spite of the magnitude of the Lord's faithfulness to him, Gideon is still snared by the world around him.

## **APPLYING THE WORD**

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It's so easy to believe that you can't. Believe you are not good enough. Believe you will fail. Believe you will be a laughingstock. It's too easy to be aware of your imperfections and feel inferior.

More than anything, Gideon shows us that God loves to use imperfect people. Throughout the Bible, we see this principle at work. God invites sinful people. Those with a broken past. Those with impediments. Those with weaknesses. And He turns them into instruments of healing and restoration.

Is there something in your heart that makes you feel that God can't really use you? If so, tell Him why:

Is there something in your life that makes you feel you can't really trust God? Past experiences that make you feel He will ultimately disappoint you? If so, what made you come to that conclusion?

**READ JUDGES 8:29-34.** How does the story of Gideon end?

Although Gideon managed to trust God to a point, ultimately he wasted the greatest opportunity given to him by God, which was to draw near to Him and love Him with all his heart. He had the opportunity, fueled by that love, to live the kind of godly life that would influence his children and his nation.

Think of specific opportunities God is giving you right now to live a life of influence. Like Gideon at the start of his story, you may not know what your particular gifts are. You may not feel you have anything to offer that could possibly matter.

Rather than trying to focus on figuring out your particular gifts, focus instead on the opportunities God is giving you. Your realm of current influence could be with your children, your friends or coworkers, in a particular ministry, or in your private prayer closet.

He will hone your natural talents and spiritual gifts in your present circumstance. But you need to draw close to Him. You need to knit your heart to His. And out of that love, allow Him to use you as *He* wills, not as you wish.

Ask Jesus to show you the opportunities He is placing before you. Name them in the space provided. How can you fulfill these opportunities with God's help? Be sure to thank God for each opportunity, even if it is not the one you had hoped for. It is a privilege to serve Jesus in whatever capacity He chooses for you right now.

## PRAYING THE WORD

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READ ROMANS 8:14-17 out loud. Write out the passage.

*Dear Jesus, will You apply the truths and principles of this verse deep into my mind, heart, and spirit? Thank You that I am Your beloved daughter. Remove the yoke of slavery to fear from my soul. Remove it from my personal history and my memories. Remove it from the weight of the generations that came before me. Teach me to call You my Abba, my own dear Father, and understand the intimacy of belonging to You. In Your love, protect me from wasting the opportunities You have placed before me.  
In the mighty name of Jesus I ask.*