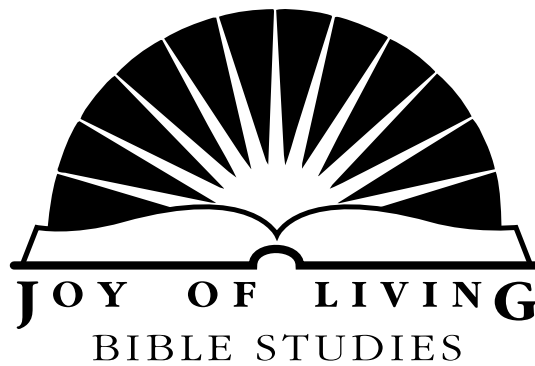


# Judges, Ruth & 1 Samuel Lesson 1



## Introduction—Period of the Judges

You are about to venture out on an exciting study through the Old Testament books of Judges, Ruth and 1 Samuel. Perhaps you are not too well acquainted with this section of the Bible and the question which may be floating through your mind is: What do battles and iron chariots and idol worship of the Old Testament have to do with me, a twentieth-century Christian? If this is your feeling, and if the Old Testament has been sort of a closed book to you, don't be deceived. You may be in for a surprise!

Two young, bored teenagers were sent by their art teacher to view a famous stained glass window in their city. As the two stood outside the church looking at the window one was heard to say, "I see nothing to get excited about. It's just a dark window with a lot of small pieces in it."

A quiet, reserved old gentleman heard the remark and said, "Oh, but you're looking at it from the wrong side! Come, let me show you the window from inside." Light streamed through the window, showering the inside sanctuary with a myriad of color. The bored teenagers suddenly were awed and speechless at the beauty displayed before them.

So it is with the Word of God. We must get *inside* or into the Word and let the light of Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, shine through its message for us to see its beauty, be fed by its message, and guided by its directions. Therefore, each time you open His Word, don't forget to invite the Author to enlighten your heart so that you might see its message for *you*.

## Historical Background

To make our study more meaningful we need a bird's-eye view of a group of people, whom God had been leading, called Israelites. Their story is in the beginning of the Old Testament. In Exodus we read that the Israelite slaves in Egypt were feared and hated by the Pharaoh. In an attempt to control them he was brutal and life was unbearable. In their misery the Israelites cried out to God. He heard their cries and God spoke to Moses: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt . . . I have come down to rescue them . . . and bring them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites" (Exodus 3:7-8). After 430 years of slavery the Israelites were freed as Moses, God's appointed leader, led them out of Egypt (Exodus 12:31-51). Their journey to the land was difficult, but through their wilderness wanderings God was always with His people.

Three months after they left Egypt they came to Mount Sinai where in a very dramatic way God spoke to His people from the mountain (Exodus 19). There the Israelites received the Ten Commandments. It was at Sinai also that God told Moses to tell the people, "If you will obey fully and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession" (Exodus 19:5). Repeatedly the people were told that they must be obedient to God's commands. Note this carefully for it will help you understand more fully some of the events of our study.

The beginning of the book of Joshua marks the death of Moses. The book opens with the Israelites at the very door of the Promised Land for the second time. (Read Numbers 13 to see what happened the first time they arrived!). After the death of Moses, God appointed a new leader, Joshua, and He renewed the promise of His abiding presence with the people. Once again God issued a command that would affect the future of the Israelites. God instructed Joshua, "Be careful to *obey all the law* my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go" (Joshua 1:7, italics added).

If you have a map in your Bible, locate Canaan, another name for the Promised Land. It was 180 miles long and approximately 40 miles wide. The boundaries were the Euphrates River on the east, the Mediterranean on the west, the wilderness to the south, and the Lebanon mountain ranges to the north (see Exodus 23:31).

For such a huge group of people to function in any kind of an orderly fashion some sort of organization was necessary. Earlier God had instructed Moses to group the people into twelve tribes. The tribes (we'll see their names frequently in our study) were named after the sons of Jacob. In their attempt to take over the land of Canaan, the Israelites worked in tribes, one tribe helping another to conquer their new homeland. Although godless people occupied the Promised Land, God had already given the land to the Israelites. The condition for their taking possession of their homeland was strict obedience to God. Much earlier, God told Moses, "I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Seas of the Philistines and from the desert to the River [Euphrates]. I will hand over the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you. *Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods*. Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you" (Exodus 23:31-33, italics added). There was no doubt; the warning from God was clear, and it was necessary.

In Canaan the Israelites were exposed to many of the Canaanite religions. The Canaanite people worshiped idols, as had the Egyptians in their former home. Religious prostitution and infant sacrifice were some of the horrible practices confronting the Israelites. While Joshua lived, we find that "Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua" (Joshua 24:31). When Joshua knew his years were slipping by and he was getting old, he realized the dangers facing his beloved people. Read his fatherly advice and farewell to them in Joshua 23 and 24.

### Judges 1-2—The Israelites in Their New Land

When reading other books it is comparatively easy to keep track of time periods or the passage of time depicted in the book. It's not so easy in the Bible, however. Often a decade slips by between two verses! In the first few chapters of Judges you will find short phrases such as "the land had peace for forty years" (Judges 3:11), "the Israelites were subject to ... king of Moab for eighteen years" (Judges 3:14), "the land had peace for eighty years" (Judges 3:30). And 183 years just slipped by in three verses! Bible scholars feel the entire book of Judges covers two or three centuries. Interestingly, each generation must pass the message of God to the next generation, but when they fail there is a breakdown in the spiritual lives of the people. This is what happened during the time of the Judges.

Many biblical scholars agree that the centuries of the rule of judges were perhaps the most difficult in Israel's history. They were nomads, living in tents, wandering in the wilderness. Many of the neighboring non-Israelites, especially the warlike tribes in Canaan, watched the Israelites and evaluated their fighting ability. Although a new day was dawning for them the Israelites were not skilled military men yet. The only reason they had conquered as much of the land as they had thus far was because their Commander-in-Chief was the God of the universe!

The Canaanites in the area were not ready for defeat; they "were determined to live in that land" (Judges 1:27). They were quick to see the Israelites' lack of a strong civil defense and they were not as frightened of them as they were when Joshua led the Israelites. Needless to say God's people had a difficult time.

Not only was their fighting defense weak, they also lacked unity, which weakened the Israelites even further. They had no strong leadership. Without strong leaders like Moses or Joshua who were daily in touch with God, the Israelites soon drifted into the ways of their neighbors and worshiped the idol Baal and other gods of the Canaanites.

Undoubtedly the greatest problem the Israelites faced is that they forgot their promise to God and the covenant He had made with them—namely that their success in conquering the land was dependent upon their obedience to Him and of cleaning out the enemy *completely*. A careful reading of the first chapters of Judges clearly tells us that the people failed to do so (see especially chapter 1).

A summary description of life during the time of the Judges was: "In those days there was no king in Israel, but

every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6; 21:25, *KJV*). What a sad commentary!

What about us today? Through our news media we daily hear encouragement for self-centeredness and selfishness with such statements as, "If it feels good do it"; or if the price is high, we say, "But I'm worth it." While this is an attempt for fulfillment or liberation for individuals, we see just the opposite happening. In our day of liberation there is a great breakdown in family units, in moral standards, and in our justice system. Life has been cheapened and human worth devalued, perhaps even more than the dollar. What we need today is a definite return to the moral standards of God's Word. The psalmist who said, "Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!" quickly goes on to plead, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law ... Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees" (Psalm 119:5,18,33). This needs to be our prayer too. Just as our automobiles do not run properly if we fail to follow the maintenance suggested in the operator's manual, so the Christian will fail if he does not daily check his "operator's manual," the Bible, and abide by its message.

In his book *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer says, "Keep the law and in thus serving God you find freedom and delight because human nature is programmed for fulfillment through obedience." While the Israelites knew God wanted obedience they did not experience that "freedom and delight," because they failed to obey Him. Yet God never deserted them. He is fair and righteous, but He cannot wink at sin; therefore the Israelites were punished for their sin. God permitted enemy tribes to oppress them until the Israelites recognized their need and cried out for mercy. Then God "raised up judges who saved them out of the hands of these raiders" (Judges 2:16).

The Israelites, perhaps a bit like Christians today, were slow learners. So frequently did they drift away from God that the phrases telling of their drifting run like a refrain through the entire book of Judges: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord . . . they forsook the Lord . . . they followed and worshiped various gods of the people around them." It could become a depressing refrain except that there is an exciting truth to watch for; the instruments and methods God used in each deliverance.

### Judges 3—God's Chosen Judges

There were fourteen judges—the chief ones were Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and Samuel. We'll discuss each of them. These judges were Spirit-filled people, raised up by God and empowered by Him to meet specific crises in Israel's history. God gave the judges authority and power in both military and civil matters, so they made legal decisions also.

Before we meet Deborah, the first female judge, we must mention two judges who preceded her. The first judge God raised up to deliver His people was Othniel. Judges 3:10 says, "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge." For the first time in the book of Judges we see a mention of the Holy Spirit. We will frequently see similar comments such as, "the Spirit of Jehovah came upon" or "was upon" or "clothed" a person. It is important to note that

the activity of the Holy Spirit was different from His activities today. In Old Testament times the Spirit was not given to all. He did not indwell a believer. Instead He came upon a person to empower that individual to accomplish a specific task. When that God-given task was completed, the Holy Spirit left. His activities, however, changed at Pentecost (Acts 2). Today the Holy Spirit indwells every born-again believer. He enters our hearts at the time of our rebirth. Titus 3:5-6 says “[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, *whom he poured out on us generously* through Jesus Christ our Savior” (italics added; see also Mark 1:8; Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16; John 1:33). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit does not depart after He has accomplished a work through us—but He is with us forever! (See John 14:16; John 16:7.)

Instead of possessing the land and driving out the enemy completely as God had commanded, the Israelites disobeyed. They lived among enemy tribes, they intermarried, and they even worshiped the idols of their enemy. God allowed the enemy to oppress His people for eight years. At last they cried out and God sent the “Spirit of the Lord upon” Othniel who went to war and defeated the enemy. After judging Israel for 40 peaceful years Othniel died.

Look at Judges 3:12. Same song, second verse. Israel fell back into her evil ways. This time God raised up a left-handed man by the name of Ehud. He led the Israelites and defeated the enemy of the Moabites. There was peace for eighty years until he died.

#### **Judges 4:1-10—Deborah, God’s Person of the Hour**

No matter how often His children fail or fall, God does not give up on them. Truly, God is love! You might ask, Why didn’t God stop the people before they got so deeply into sin? God has given each of us a free will. He will not violate that will. He will never force Himself upon an individual—and we will be delivered from our own way only after we are helpless and need His help.

In the highlands of Scotland, sheep often wander off among the sharp crags and get trapped on treacherous ledges. Lured on by the sweet grass on the mountainside, a sheep may leap down ten to twelve feet to get this delicious food, only to find he can’t get back up. While the shepherd knows where his sheep is, he often will not immediately rescue it. He allows the sheep to remain in its self-imposed trap until it becomes weak and helpless. Finally, the shepherd will tie a rope around his own body and go over the cliff to the dangerous ledge and rescue his wandering sheep. An observer once asked the shepherd why he did not rescue his sheep immediately. “Sheep are so foolish, they would dash right over the precipice and be killed if I didn’t wait until their strength is almost gone,” was the reply.

How like human nature. We want to do it “our way” without being hampered by constraints from anyone. The Israelites knew God’s commands; they knew of God’s great love and His desire for their obedience, yet it wasn’t until they were on that “ledge of no return” that they finally cried out to God in despair, pleading for His help.

As Judges 4 opens we find that God is using the Canaanites to oppress His wandering children and bring them back to Himself. King Jabin was the most dreaded of all enemies from the well-fortified city of Hazor, the largest and strongest Canaanite City of Galilee. Apparently a group of well-armed Canaanite city-kings had joined forces in an attempt to cut off communication between the Israelite tribes of the north and their brother tribes in the central mountain range. Jabin’s general, Sisera, with his nine hundred iron chariots had terrorized the northern tribes.

Many biblical scholars believe the events of Judges 4 took place at the beginning of the Iron Age. Remember, the Iron Age was ushered in when an effective and economic process for smelting iron was discovered. This would explain the specific mention of the nine hundred iron chariots (Judges 4:3). At this time the Israelites had no standing army. It was a matter of one tribe helping another when attacked. Unfortunately, no iron was available for them for military warfare (Judges 5:8). The power of Sisera’s iron chariots was no doubt as frightening to the Israelites as nuclear warfare is to us today!

Finally, after twenty years of being “cruelly oppressed” the Israelites realized their need and cried out to the Lord for help. Twenty years of suffering! How often we have been guilty of carrying unconfessed sin with us for days before we turn to the Lord for forgiveness. A repentant heart and confession is all that is necessary to once again restore blessed fellowship with our Lord. When we allow guilt and unconfessed sin to linger, then we become depressed and discouraged. That is when our enemy, Satan, comes and tries to convince us that because of our sin we are not worthy to even speak to God. When you slip and sin, don’t wait as the Israelites did. Confess your sin immediately and enjoy restored fellowship with Him (1 John 1:9).

Lovingly, God heard the cries of the Israelites. This time God chose a woman, Deborah, as His instrument of rescue. We know that she was married, she was a prophet and she was a judge (Judges 4:4). Some scholars think she “held court” (Judges 4:5) out in the open; others believe she had a house built under the trees.

Judges 4 and 5 give us details about the persecution and rescue of the Israelites. From Judges 5 we learn that the oppression of the Israelites was so cruel that the people went into hiding, “Village life in Israel ceased” (Judges 5:8). Travel on the main thoroughfare was unsafe. The frightened Israelites “took to winding paths” (Judges 5:6), which literally means “crooked paths” or back ways, which the enemy did not use so that the Israelites would be unlikely to meet their enemy. Although others had turned away from God, Deborah must have lived close to Him during this time of hardship, for she knew exactly what God told her to do. Her call from God is not described as fully as was Moses’ call, for example; the first we know of it is when she informed Barak of his mission. He was to invite two of the Jewish tribes, Naphtali and Zebulun, and attack Sisera and his frightening nine hundred chariots.

Deborah must have been a woman of patience and great courage. Usually one expects the man in a team to be the stronger, but notice Barak's comment in Judges 4:8. Deborah could have gone back to God and argued with Him about His choice for deliverance: "God send a man with courage. It's not fitting for a woman to be at the battle front!" But she didn't. Immediately she was willing to go with Barak. Deborah must have known from past experience that when God makes a promise, He keeps it! And God did say, "I will lure Sisera.... with his chariots [notice, God put His finger on their greatest fear!] and his troops ... and *give him into your hands*" (Judges 5:7, italics added).

In one of his "Back to the Bible" radio messages, Theodore Epp said, "When a man is thoroughly convinced he is in God's will, that man is invincible." So whether Barak was frightened or not, Deborah's faith was strong. In spite of the fact that the situation had not changed—the nine hundred chariots were just as frightening now as they had been earlier—there was one big difference: now God was in control. Deborah believed God, and in her heart and mind she knew the battle was already won even though it had not started. The honor of victory, however, would not go to Barak, but to a woman because of the way Barak was "going about this" (Judges 4:9).

Imagine the sight. In response to the call of Barak and Deborah the Israelite men came, ten thousand strong, to rise up against their dreaded enemy. With God's promise of victory burning within them, the Israelites began to converge in small groups, coming on foot from all roads and directions to Mount Tabor, a beautiful cone-shaped mountain six to eight miles east of Nazareth.

Judges 5:11 breaks into the account of battle preparation and gives us a bit of historical information to help us understand the later part of the action when we meet Jael, the Kenite. Historians believe the Kenites were nomadic people whom Moses first met during his bout in the desert with his father-in-law before Moses led the people out of Egypt. Heber, one man of this nomadic tribe, had separated himself from the main body of his tribe in Egypt and had settled near Kedesh.

### Judges 4:12-14—The Confrontation

Whether the bold, arrogant Sisera realized it or not, he was gathering his troops in response to God's plan. God promised Deborah, "I will lure Sisera ... with his chariots and his troops...and give him into your hands" (Judges 4:7). Without the aid of newspapers or television, news of the Israelite military activities reached Sisera. His response was that of any well-trained military man—he saw the enemy gathering and confidently made ready for the attack with his well-equipped army.

Notice Deborah's encouragement to Barak in Judges 4:14. No doubt tension in the Israelite camp had reached a high pitch as they watched this powerful enemy approaching. But Deborah's faith shines through clearly. Remember this was not the day of Women's Lib! It was back in the days when a woman's role was far inferior to that of a man. But Deborah

was intimately acquainted with God. She knew that when God made a promise it was as good as accomplished. Loud and clear she gave the battle cry: "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?"

Deborah's battle cry is like the one John gives us for our battle against *our* greatest enemy, Satan: "Ye are of God, little children and have overcome them [false teachers, evil spirits]; because greater is he [Christ, Holy Spirit] that is in you, than he [Satan] that is in the world" (1 John 4:4, *KJV*). The Lord has already defeated Satan. What victory is ours when we believe God and take Him at His Word!

### Judges 4:15-24—Israel's God-Given Victory

It was when Barak went forth in faith that the Lord took over the battle (Judges 4:15). For a more complete picture of what happened see also Judges 5:20-21. The words "the Lord routed" literally mean He confused Sisera and his army by sending a storm of hail and rain, which caused the waters of the Kishon River to overflow—the Lord God, was fighting for His people. An enemy—even one with iron chariots—was no match for a people whose God fought for them! The frightening chariots were useless in the mud and flood. Sisera's mighty army became an easy defeat just as God had promised. "All the troops of Sisera fell by the sword; not a man was left" (Judges 4:14).

In fear, Sisera fled on foot to the tents of the Kenites (remember, we met them in Judges 4:11). Although the Kenites lived quietly on the boundary of Jabin's territory in the extreme south at Arad, they had not participated in the Israelite uprising against the Canaanites; therefore, they were unmolested by Jabin.

Sisera apparently believed he had found refuge with friends. Jael, the wife of the Kenite Heber was a good hostess and her hospitality increased Sisera's trust. While he slept, she killed him in a very un-womanlike way. Some scholars feel that Jael's actions were motivated by her loyalty to Israel. While the Bible describes Jael's action, it ascribes the victory for Israel's defeat of Jabin to God: "On that day *God* subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites" (Judges 4:23).

### Judges 5—Deborah's Praise to God

Have you ever been guilty of praying for God's wisdom, guidance, or deliverance in an impossible situation, only to forget to thank Him when the answer comes? Or at best, in your joy you only tossed a brief thank you toward God? Not so with Deborah. Her praise to God is penned in a song or ballad recorded in Judges 5. It is a song of praise and worship for God's mighty act in saving His people from their oppressor. While Judges 4 gives us a general idea of Israelites' hardship, Judges 5 reviews the situation and then pours out praise and worship to God for the great things He had done. Some Bible scholars suggest the following division of the song in Judges 5:

Verses 2-3—a great composition of praise

Verses 4-5—asking for help or support from God

Verses 6-8—suffering and grief under the enemy

Verses 9-18—the call throughout the tribes for fighting men

Verses 24-27—the death of Sisera

Verses 28-30—the mother of Sisera waiting for her son's return

Verse 31—the epilogue.

God is pleased when we express our joy and thanksgiving to Him for what He does for us. Psalm 147:1 says, "Praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him." Ask the Lord to help you never to take His blessings for granted. Work to develop the habit of praise. He has done great things in your life by paying the price for your salvation and making you His child.

Written by Ruth M. Bathauer, Ventura, CA

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### Study Questions

#### Before you begin each day:

- a. Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- b. Use only your Bible and lesson notes for your answers.
- c. Write your answers and the verses you used.
- d. Challenge questions are for those who have the time and wish to do them.
- e. Personal questions are to be shared with the class only if you wish to share.

**First Day:** Read all the notes and look up all the Scriptures.

1. What helpful or new thought did you find in the notes concerning the period of the Judges?
2. What personal application did you select to apply to your own life this week?
3. The suggested memory verse is Isaiah 41:10, or choose another verse which was meaningful to you.

**Second Day:** Read Judges 1:1-2; 19-22;28-31 and Judges 2:10-16.

1. God had commanded the Israelites to drive the enemy tribes out of the land. From the verses above give verse numbers and phrases that show whether or not the people obeyed.
2. How does 1 Peter 1:13-16 challenge the Christian concerning obedience?
3. One of the problems the Israelites faced in the Promised Land was their disobedience to God. Tell the many acts of disobedience you find in Judges 2:10-16.
4. How did their disobedience affect their relationship to God?
5. Tell what God did to help His people. See Judges 2:16.
6. What can you do about sin in your life? Read 1 John 1:9. Does God give up on you when you sin? See John 10:28-29.

**Third Day:** Read Judges 3:6-7 and Judges 4:1-10.

1. The Lord made an agreement with His people back in the time of Moses. Briefly describe the specific commands He gave in Deuteronomy 7:1-6.
  
2. How many of these commands did the people obey? See Judges 3:6-7.
  
3. a. Describe how Deborah showed great courage in her obedience to God in Judges 4.  
  
b. Where do you think Deborah received her courage?
  
4. a. Where does faith come from? Romans 10:17 will help you find your answer.  
  
b. (Personal) If you have faith in Jesus Christ, how are you helping others to know Christ?
  
5. Challenge: Why is faith important to us? Write a brief answer after each of these references:  
  
Romans 5:1  
  
2 Corinthians 1:3-4  
  
Ephesians 3:16,20

**Fourth Day:** Read Judges 6:1-10.

1. Why were the Israelites being oppressed, and how long had the oppression been going on?
  
2. Who were the people God used to oppress the Israelites and bring them back to Himself?
  
3. Describe something of the living conditions for the Israelites during this time.

4. According to the following Scriptures, what will be the result of a Christian's obedience to God?

John 12:26

John 14:21

Hebrews 13:6

5. Which of the above verses means most to you? Tell why and share with your discussion group if possible.

6. What message did the prophet give the Israelites in Judges 6:10?

**Fifth Day:** Read Judges 6:11-23.

1. Where was Gideon when the angel of the Lord appeared to him and why was he there?

2. a. Copy from the Bible statements that indicate that Gideon must have had religious training as he was growing up. Give references.

b. (Personal) How could you communicate Christ's love to children in your home, church or community?

3. Challenge: Compare the response that Gideon and Moses made when God called them to deliver His people from their enemies. Write down some of the similarities. See especially Judges 6:15 and Exodus 3:11; 4:1,10.

4. What assurances did God give to both Gideon and to Moses when they expressed feelings of inadequacy for the task God called them to do? Read Judges 6:16, Exodus 3:12; 4:12.

5. How did Gideon know he had been speaking to the Lord? Write down the verse numbers in which you find your answer.

6. a. What did Gideon say when he realized he had spoken to the Lord?

b. Why was he so frightened? See Judges 6:22-23 and Exodus 33:20.

**Sixth Day:** Read Luke 9:18-36. The Lord knows the potential and abilities in each one of us—even when we have not yet discovered them in ourselves!

1. In Luke 9:18-20 what did Peter say that indicates to you that he was growing in the Lord and that some of his abilities had begun to develop?
  
2. What happened on the Mount of Transfiguration that gives you a clue that there were still some rough edges in Peter's life that needed polishing? (See Luke 9:33-36). Hint: When/why did he speak when he should have been silent?
  
3. (Personal) When you meet with the Lord in prayer do you ever remain absolutely silent and just think of Him? You may want to try to do that.
  
4. **Challenge:** From our study we have discovered that one of the problems the Israelites had was their disobedience to the Lord, and they lost out on many of His blessings. In the Bible the Lord has given *us* commands which we need to obey. With each command He has also given a promise. Read the following Scripture verses and write in the first column *what you* are to do. In the second column write what *God* will do when you obey. You may want to read the Scripture verses in a modern paraphrase such as *The Living Bible* and compare what the verses say with the Bible version you usually use.

**Scripture**

**For Me to Obey:**

**God Promises to:**

Proverbs 3:5-6

Romans 10:9

1 John 1:9

Psalms 37:9

Isaiah 41:10

1 Peter 5:6

5. Share your memory verse with your discussion group to encourage others in your circle to "hide God's work in their hearts."