

Judges - Commentaries by Henri L. Rossier

Meditations on Judges, Fresh Declension and Fresh Revivals: Tola and Jair: Judges 10:1-5

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Judges 10:1-5

The beginning of this chapter gives us a brief sketch of the history of two judges in Israel-Tola and Jair-both eminent men. The first was renowned for his descent, his ancestors being mentioned in Genesis amongst the sons of Israel who went down into Egypt-namely, Tola and Puah among the sons of Issachar (Gen. 46:13; 1 Chron. 8:1). The second was conspicuous for his wealth, the number of his sons, his prosperity (c.f. chap. 5:10), and his cities. But, strange to say, nothing else is added. Their rule continued for nearly the same length of time. God made use of them, qualifying even Tola "to save Israel" by (Rev. Ver.), but He did not glorify Himself by them in any special way. This reminds us of 1 Cor. 1:26-29; "Not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things, which are not, to bring to naught things that are; that no flesh should glory in His presence." God uses, in preference, weak vessels, and that is the reason why so many of the judges bear, in one way or another, the stamp of weakness. On the other hand, all the value of God's instruments consists in presenting the character of Christ. How difficult it would be for a man who was powerful, noble or rich, to reflect the traits of Him who, when here below, was found in the place of weakness, humiliation and poverty, that He might bring the grace of God to us. The judges who preceded them, being neither Tolas nor Jairs, were examples of humility, of forgetfulness of self, esteeming others better than themselves; and who, having nothing to lose, gave proof of spiritual energy which nothing could arrest and whose very weakness achieved a victory.

Meditations on Judges, Fresh Declension and Fresh Revivals: a Fresh Revival in Israel: Judges 10:6-18

Judges 10:6-18

The peaceful times of Tola and Jair did not prevent the people from sinking lower and lower. The declension increased, and the evil became more pronounced. "And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of Jehovah, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook Jehovah, and served not Him" (vs. 6). Never before had such an assemblage of false gods been seen in Israel. The people were wholly given over to idolatry. Ammon was raised up as the rod of Jehovah and oppressed Gilead eighteen years. He also passed over Jordan to fight against Judah and Benjamin. Then, under the pressure of circumstances, grace wrought in the conscience of the people. It is a remarkable fact, that, in proportion as apostasy approaches its final development, the awakenings in conscience became deeper. I do not say that they widened. We have but to call to mind the song of Deborah, which brought out in the clearest light all the privileges of the people of God. But Israel, at that time, had but a slight sense of their responsibility, the conscience of the people was less aroused, and self judgment less marked. We find here, for the first time, divine light penetrating the conscience of the people, and leading them to judge themselves deeply (c.f. chap. 6:7-10). "We have sinned against Thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim" (vs. 10). Then God reminds them of all His grace and His deliverances on former occasions. and of the number of the nations out of whose hand He had saved them, adding: "Yet ye have forsaken me, and served other gods" (vs. 13)-driving home, like an arrow in their consciences, the word which their distress had wrung from them, and He closes with these words: "Wherefore I will deliver you no more" (vs. 13). Israel, as a whole, could not be restored. This finds its counterpart in the history of the church.

On hearing these words, the children of Israel took a further step in the salutary path in which the Spirit of God was leading them. "We have sinned; do Thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto Thee" (vs. 15). Confessing their sin, passing judgment upon themselves, and acknowledging the righteousness of God's judgment, they added: "Deliver us only, we pray Thee, this day" (vs. 15). They appealed to His grace. Could He turn a deaf ear to their cry? Impossible! Repentance led them to a fuller knowledge of Jehovah than they had ever had before.

This restoration would not have been real, had it not borne fruit. "And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served Jehovah" (vs. 16); turning to God from idols they served the living and true God. Then Jehovah opened to them the treasures of the pity of His heart.

God wishes that this should be the character of revivals in the sorrowful days in which our lot is cast. It is well (or souls to be acquainted with their privileges and heavenly position; but it is also necessary that a deep work in the conscience should accompany the revival, in order that fruits of true holiness, humble devotedness, complete consecration may be borne by Christians, and that without ostentation or putting themselves forward to speak of themselves, but, forsaking idols, to serve the Lord.

However blessed this day of revival was, one thing was painfully lacking-a knowledge of the fundamental truths which God had confided to His people. "And the people and princes of Gilead said one to another, what man is he that will begin to fight against the children of Ammon? he shall he head over all the inhabitants of Gilead" (ver. 18). They had no sense of the unity of the people. Gilead made of himself a party. The authority and guidance of the Spirit of God were but little known, for they said: "What man is he?" They had only another step to make-to

choose for themselves; this step they took in vs. 4-11 of the following chapter. Not that Jephthah was not raised up of God, but Gilead took part in the choice. How widely different was this from the call of Gideon, and how painfully characteristic of the last days of declension-this inter-meddling of man.

Meditations on Judges, Fresh Declension and Fresh Revivals: Strife Between Brethren: Judges 12:1-16

Judges 12:1-16

Chapter 12 is a picture of one of the gravest symptoms of ruin: contention and open war between brethren. Formerly, when the people had not left their first love, or when their leader evinced more spiritual power, this calamity had been averted. The constant design of Satan is to disunite the children of God. He knows that our strength consists in being gathered around a common center; and, not being able to destroy this essential unity which God has established, he seeks to destroy that which has been committed to our responsibility-its manifestation. Now we know how completely he has succeeded in his design. The wolf catcheth and scattereth the sheep.

In the book of Joshua, characterized by the power of the Holy Spirit with Israel, this effort was baffled at the time of the controversy caused by the setting up of the altar, Ed (Josh. 22). Thanks to the energy of the tribes and to the zeal of Phinehas, the introduction of sectarian principles was avoided. When divine principles are at stake we must not fail to stand in the breach, at the risk of war between brethren. The maintenance of Israel's unity, as God had established it, had more value for the saints at that time, than courteous relationships between brethren.

Later, in the book of Judges (8:1), when Ephraim began to chide with Gideon, the conflict was quieted through the humility of the latter who deemed the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer. In chap. 8, and still more in the chapter we are considering, it is no longer a question of defending principles. The discontent of Ephraim proceeded from a sense of his own importance. He had been pacified on the former occasion by the humility of Gideon, but, conscience not having been reached and there having been no self-judgment, he renewed against Jephthah the same accusations. A fault in our career as Christians left unjudged will reappear sooner or later in similar circumstances. Here the state of Ephraim had grown worse, for while on the previous occasion he had gleaned on the present one, waiting for some incentive from without, he had done nothing. This did not, however, make him the less jealous of the results which the energy of faith in his brethren had produced. It is the same in the present day, and we are all in danger of falling into this snare. The church, instead of being a witness for Christ, has gone back to the world; it is a time when God takes for witnesses the weakest, the poorest, and those least qualified among His people. In acting through them, God would confound the "mighty" or the "noble" (see 1 Cor. 1), in whose eyes there is nothing important except what emanates from themselves. Unable to humble themselves, or to rejoice in what God has done by the instrumentality of others, they despise all that does not come within the circle formed by their own worldliness. If the work goes on they express their jealousy, if it still extends they become enemies and proceed from hatred to threats: "We will burn thine house upon thee with fire" (vs. 1).

In Deborah's day, Ephraim was the first; under Jephthah, God accounted him as nothing. All that he could now draw from his former blessings was the remembrance of his importance and the desire to make the most of it. Alas! on the other hand, we no longer find on the part of Jephthah the disinterestedness or humility of a Gideon. He answered the flesh by the flesh, his own wounded feelings clashing with the egotism of Ephraim. In his defense he made self prominent. "I and my PEOPLE were at great strife with the children of Ammon; and when I called you, ye delivered me not out of their hands. And when /saw that ye delivered me not, I put my life in my hands, and passed over against the children of Ammon, and Jehovah delivered them into my hand: wherefore then are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me?" (vs. 2, 3). Jephthah talked of himself, thought about his disputed worth, fell into the snare that Satan had set for him and formed a party, when just before, having identified himself with the people, he had proclaimed their unity in the presence of the children of Ammon (chap. 11:12, 23, 27). But now, "my people" meant Gilead as opposed to Ephraim.

Words intensified the quarrel. "The men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites" (vs. 4). There was not a single principle involved in this struggle. On all sides it was but jealousy, personal importance and angry words exchanged by irritated hearts; and so a fratricidal war broke out in the midst of Israel, brought about by their own hand. At the passages of Jordan they are known, for the purpose of killing one another, by a Shibboleth, a formula used for the name of Jehovah, and which had nothing to do with the truth of God. And there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.

Let us be on our guard against such snares, for if there be one thing which especially belongs to a time of ruin, it is strife in the family of God. Let us have our hearts enlarged as to the work of God in this world. When entrusted to other hands than ours, it should have the same importance and value for us, as though it were done by ourselves. Paul, in chains at Rome, writing to the Philippians, rejoiced that Christ was preached even by those who were adding affliction to his bonds. Let us not give any importance whatever to our work, but like Gideon leave the vintage of Abiezer unestimated. A season of quietness is no guarantee against these dangers. At the beginning of the church's history (Acts 6:1-6), there arose murmurings and jealousies between the Grecians and the Hebrews, to appease which needed more than the humility of a Gideon, requiring even the great wisdom of the apostles. They handed over to others the care of serving tables, relinquishing an authority which would have given them prominence in the administration of the assembly, in order to continue in prayer and to give themselves wholly to the ministry of the word. By such acts as these, consciences are reached and Satan's devices against the testimony defeated.

Meditations on Judges, Fresh Declension and Fresh Revivals: Ibzan, Elon and Abdon: Judges 12:7-15

Judges 12:7-15

After Jephthah, under the reign of three judges, Israel enjoyed the peace which had been acquired. One of these judges sprang from Judah, another from Zebulun, and the third from Ephraim. They were not called on to fight, but to maintain the people in the condition in which victory had placed them. Possibly they had not the energy of a Jair (chap. 10:1-5), who “arose,” as the word tells us, but, like him, two of these judges were men of great wealth. Periods of outward prosperity are not the most profitable for the people of God. The personal importance of the judges comes out, but not the condition of Israel. Who they were, and what they did, is known, but not anything of what was going on in the heart and conscience of the people. And so no sooner was the last of these judges dead, than Israel relapsed into their previous condition (chap. 13:1). There are certain occasions when we have to “overcome,” others when we have to “stand” (Eph. 6:13). How do we employ the corresponding days of peace which the Lord permits us to have? To strengthen ourselves in the truths God has given us, or to go to sleep amid comfortable surroundings, only to be unexpectedly awake when Satan returns to the charge, and to find ourselves powerless in the presence of the enemy? Those who are not fed are not able to fight. Let us use the times of prosperity in growing in our personal knowledge of the Lord and in walking in communion with Him. We shall thus be strengthened to resist fresh attacks, and avoid falling into bondage more cruel than that from which we have escaped.

Meditations on Judges, Introduction: the Condition of Israel at the Time of Joshua's Death: Judges 1:1-16

Judges 1:1-16

Chap. 1:1-16 may be considered as a preface to the book of Judges, and the words, “Now after the death of Joshua, it came to pass,” (vs. 1) are the key to the whole book. It is not as yet, properly speaking, declension, but that which precedes it. What follows is governed by the fact, that Joshua, a type of the Spirit of Christ in power, was no longer in the midst of Israel. So also, in the church's history, the unhindered activity of the Spirit of God lasted but a short time. No doubt, as in the days of “the elders that outlived Joshua” (ch. 2:7), the presence of the apostles stayed the tide of evil; but in both cases, the presence and working of certain deleterious principles, caused it to be foreseen, that when once the obstacle should be removed, the tide of declension would set in.

All was apparently going on well in Israel. The tribes take their several places in presence of a hostile world. They inquire of Jehovah, Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first? God says: “Judah shall go up, behold I have delivered the land into his hand” (vs. 2). The answer was plain, Judah could count implicitly on God's faithfulness to His promise; but already we see that the simplicity of faith was lacking in him, and that his dependence on Jehovah was not so real as it appeared to be. “And Judah said unto Simeon, his brother, come up with me into my lot, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I likewise will go with thee into thy lot. So Simeon went with him” (vs. 3). Judah seems to mistrust his own strength; but, instead of finding his resource in the God of Israel, he seeks it in Simeon, and in reality lacks confidence in Jehovah. True, he does not ally himself with the enemies of God; if his faith fails, he turns to his brother Simeon, only to his brother; but, nevertheless, under the pretext of pushing forward the work of God, we see, in principle, the dawn of human associations and alliances, which have become the ruling feature of all the present activity in Christendom. Did God require Simeon, in order to give Judah the lot of his inheritance?

The result of this combined action was apparently magnificent. We learn from Josh. 19:9 that “the part of the children of Judah was too much for them.” But the inheritance of the children of Simeon was not the best, for it was taken from what Judah could not keep; thus they received their portion out of that which was superfluous to another, at the southern limit of the land of Israel, in the border which looked towards the desert. It was not that God disowned either tribe, for it is written (v. 4), “the Lord delivered the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand;” but warfare undertaken on the footing of a human alliance, bears more or less the imprint of its origin. The allies seize upon Adoni-bezek and “cut off his thumbs and his great toes” (vs. 6). This was not what God commanded of old, nor what Joshua did to the kings of Jericho, of Ai, of Jerusalem, of Makkedah, and all the kings of the mountain and of the plain. To mutilate the enemy was simply human retaliation. It had been, likewise, the custom of Adoni-bezek thus to humble his enemies; keeping them, however, at his court, as their presence served to increase his glory as conqueror. We see similar things in the church's history. How many times she has made a show of past victories to exalt herself in her own eyes and those of others. The conscience of a humbled foe is often more accessible than that of the people of God in prosperity. Adoni-bezek smitten by Judah, acknowledges having acted wrongly towards the vanquished kings, and bows to the judgment of God.

“And Judah went against the Canaanites that dwelt in Hebron (now the name of Hebron before was Kirjath-arba) and they slew Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmi. And from thence he went against the inhabitants of Debir: and the name of Debir before was Kirjath-sepher” (5:10, 11). Josh. 15:14, 15, ascribes to Caleb what our chapter attributes to Judah. Caleb's energy, perseverance and faith on this occasion were such that his whole tribe bore the imprint of it. In the early days of the church it was not so, when all were of one heart and soul, and advanced with oneness of faith towards the goal. The coming to the front of individual faith is manifested far more distinctly in the course of the history of the judges raised up to deliver Israel; we see it, too, in the revivals which God works in our days; and while it is encouraging for the individual, it is humbling for the rest. What an honor for Caleb, that Judah should have gained the victory! On the other hand, let us not forget that each one of us may help to imprint weakness on the people of God as a whole. God grant that the church, though unfaithful, may have many Calebs in her midst to-day.

There is further encouragement to be gathered from the history of this man of God. Individual faithfulness, even in the most corrupt days of the church, arouses and stimulates spiritual energy in others. Othniel, seeing Caleb's faith, is stirred up to act likewise. He serves his first campaign under him, and acquires for himself a good degree, for he becomes the first judge in Israel. But he is not satisfied with belonging to Caleb's family; he fights for the enjoyment of a new relationship, that of the bridegroom with the bride, and he gets Achsah to wife. Josh. 15 relates the fact in the same terms, for individual faith enjoys the same privileges as fully in a time of declension as in the brightest day of the church's history. The church has been unfaithful and has lost the sense of her relationship with Him, who, by His victory had acquired it for Himself; but this relationship may be known and enjoyed to-day in its fullness by every one who is faithful.

This union gave Othniel a personal possession in the inheritance of him whose son he had become, and he had thenceforth an estate of his own. Our portion resembles his; we realize our heavenly position when we have taken our stand as regards the world, our hearts being attached to the person of Christ. Still this precious domain does not suffice to Achsah. The south land would be a barren field to her if her

father did not give springs to water it. Achsah obtained the upper and the nether springs, just as in different circumstances, the saint passing through the valley of Baca, on the one hand makes it a well, and on the other sees rain from heaven filling the pools. Achsah is a thirsty soul, but she thirsts for Canaan's blessings. A Christian coveting the world is in a terrible condition, but God approves of and delights in one who thirsts for heaven. He satisfies such longings by copious springs, spiritual blessings which descend upon us and flow out from us. Those who covet the world, He visits with chastisements such as fell on Achan when he coveted the accursed thing.

The sixteenth verse, which closes this first division of the book, tells us of "the children of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law" (vs. 16). The history of this family, come out of Midian and allied to Moses, is full of interest. When Jethro returned to his own land, after having visited Israel in the desert (Ex. 18:27), Moses asked his son Hophni to be to the children of Israel instead of eyes, to lead them in their encampments in the wilderness

(Num. 10:29-32); and in spite of his refusal, his sons, like Caleb, faithfully followed in the steps of the people of God. (Judg. 4:11, 1 Sam. 15:6.) Like Rahab, these children of a stranger amongst the nations, went up out of Jericho, the city of palm trees (1:16, c. f., Deut. 34:3), to cast in their lot with Israel. In cleaving permanently to Judah, they resembled Ruth. And like Othniel, they allied themselves with the family of Caleb, and out of it they had more especially for their chief, the faithful Jabez, the son of sorrow, who made his requests with understanding to the God of Israel, and to whom God granted that which he asked (1 Chron. 2:50-55, 4:9, 10). The Rechabites were descended from the Kenites (1 Chron. 2:55, 2 Kings 10:15, Jer. 35), and when their history closes in the Bible, they are praised as true Nazarites in the midst of the ruin of Israel. But alas! this faithful remnant come out from amongst the nations, plays its part also in the book of declension. We have an instance of it in Heber, the Kenite, in ch. 4. I cannot refrain from applying this history of the Kenites to the church called out from amidst the nations. Her testimony, too, is gone, but like the sons of Rechab amongst the Israelites, a faithful remnant in the midst of the ruin, can go on to the end in holy separation from evil, obeying the Word committed to them by their Leader.

Meditations on Judges, Introduction: What Characterizes Declension: Judges 1:17-36

Judges 1:17-36

We have seen signs of declension in the verses which we have been considering, while the state of the people was still good. Now we shall see in what declension, properly speaking, consists. It is not the same as ruin, which is declension fully matured, such as we find in Ch. 2. Both reappear in the history of the Church, and in proof of this we have but to read the epistles to the seven churches. (Rev. 2; 3) Declension in Ephesus leaving her first love, -ruin in Laodicea, whom the Lord is obliged to spew out of His mouth.

What, then, is declension? In a word, we may say, worldliness. The heart, principles and walk are in unison with the world. This is invariably how declension begins, and we may well understand the "Take good heed to yourselves" (Josh. 23:11) in Josh. 23:11. How easily this snare might be avoided, if the hearts of God's children were upright before Him. But instead of dispossessing the Canaanites, Israel is afraid of them, tolerates them, and dwells with them. So, also, the Church, looked at as a whole, is allied with the world. Later on we shall see the disastrous results of this alliance. Suffice it for the present that God's Word establishes the fact, that Israel did not keep separate from the Canaanitish nations.

Another principle comes out in this passage: declension is gradual. Step by step Israel's course is downward, until the solemn moment when the angel of the Lord definitively quits Gilgal for Bochim. This is true both of the Church (Rev. 2; 3), and the individual. A Christian who has walked in the power of the Holy Spirit, if he allows the world even a little room in his heart, instead of treating it as an enemy, will by degrees get under its thralldom, and will perhaps close his career in the sore humiliation of a defeat.

Chapters 19-21 of our book are a narrative of events which historically precede Chap. 1. We shall consider them more particularly by-and-by, but I mention it here to bring out a third principle apparently contradictory to the second - namely, that, from the first, before God had delivered them over to their enemies, the people, as to their moral state, were totally lost. It was the same with the Church. Scarcely had the last apostle passed off the scene, when a tremendous gap was visible between the principles of the primitive church and those of the times immediately following. Christians suddenly lost even the elementary views of salvation by grace, the work of the cross, justification by faith.¹

These two principles, gradual declension and sudden downfall, are of immense practical importance for us, setting us on our guard against the least worldly tendency, on the one hand; and, on the other, teaching us not to put any confidence in the flesh, but to depend solely on God and His grace.

Let us now consider in detail, the portion of scripture before us. "And Judah went with Simeon, his brother, and they slew the Canaanites that inhabited Zephath, and utterly destroyed it. And the name of the city was called Hormah," (vs. 17) which signifies "utter destruction." This is a remarkable fact, and recalls the book of Joshua. Judah refused all link with the Canaanite. The strong cities of the Philistines were conquered "and the Lord was with Judah," (vs. 19) But why did he only possess the mountain, and not drive out the inhabitants of the valley? Alas! he feared their "chariots of iron" (vs. 19).

Mistrusting, to all appearance, his own strength. Judah had, nevertheless, allied himself with Simeon, and this was, as we have seen, in measure to mistrust God. To tremble before the power of the world is a consequence of not confiding in the power of God. Had they not on a former occasion of victory burned Jabin's chariots with fire? (Josh. 11:4-9) Had not God promised the house of Joseph that "they should drive out the Canaanites, though they have iron chariots and though they be strong"? (Josh. 17:17, 18.) What then were iron chariots to Jehovah? When our confidence in Him and in His promises is shaken, we say like the spies sent by Moses to view the land: "And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak.... and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight" (Num. 13:33).

How different to Caleb! (v. 20.) He expelled the enemy, even the three sons of Anak, from his inheritance. In days of declension, individual faith can act, where collectively it is impossible. In v. 21 "the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem." Judah, in days of prosperity (v. 8), had smitten this city with the edge of the sword, and set it on fire. But the forces of the vanquished enemy are skilful in reforming, and never consider themselves beaten. Israel's low estate gave them a favorable opportunity, and so "the Jebusites dwell with the children of Benjamin in Jerusalem unto this day" (vs. 21).

The history of the house of Joseph (v. 22-26) recalls that of Rahab in Josh. 2, with this main difference, the work of faith is absent. The act of the man of Luz, delivering up his city to the children of Israel, is that of a traitor, not that of a believer. Joseph decoys him by a promise of his life, and instead of, like Rahab, associating himself with God's people after his deliverance, he returns to the world and rebuilds in the country of the Hittites, the very Luz which Jehovah had destroyed.

Many, alas! were the cities which Manasseh did not dispossess (v. 27, 28). Observe the word: "The Canaanites would dwell in that land" (vs. 27). The world has more power over a Christian in a low state than the Word and promises of God. It is true that "when Israel was strong, they put the Canaanites to tribute;" (vs. 28) but that was ruling, not driving out. Christendom, grown rich and powerful, did the same with regard to paganism. It may have been permitted by God in His providential ways, that it should be so, but it was not faith.

Ephraim and Zebulun allowed the Canaanites to dwell among them (v. 29, 30). Henceforth, the world formed part of the people of God. Asher and Naphtali (v. 31-33) went a step farther: they dwelt among the Canaanites. Israel is engulfed by them.

One more trait, and the picture is complete. "And the Amorites forced the children of Dan into the mountain; for they would not suffer them to come down to the valley" (vs. 34). The world, at length, obtains what is sought, and spoils the children of God of their inheritance. Satan's aim always is to rob us of those things which constitute our joy and strength; and he succeeds only too well.

Do not let us forget how gradual declension is.

Ere long, we shall see poor Israel abandoning the God who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; bowing down to false gods, and, as a consequence of their idolatry, oppressed and plundered by their enemies.

Beloved brethren, we all belong to a period of declension. It is too late for the Church, collectively, to return; but let us, at least, individually, avoid this slippery path. Let us watch against

the world, and mistrust even its fairest baits, seeking, in these closing days, to be amongst the faithful ones to whom the Lord can say, "I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me" (Rev. 3:20). God grant that holy separation from the world, and increasing communion with the Lord, may characterize us until the close of our course

Meditations on Judges, Introduction: the Origin and Consequences of Declension: Judges 2:1-5

Judges 2:1-5

Israel's declension was characterized by the fact that they had not remained in separation from the world, and this in itself denoted that they no longer had strength to drive out the enemy. Their lack of power was due to what we have just read. "And the angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim" (2:1). The book of Joshua, the record of Israel's victories, was characterized by Gilgal, the blessed spot wherein lay the secret of their strength. It was the place of circumcision, that is to say, typically, of the putting off of the flesh—"In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the flesh by Me circumcision of Christ." (Col. 2:11.) At the cross of Christ, in His death, the flesh was absolutely condemned and made an end of for the believer. At Gilgal, Jehovah had rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off the people.

Delivered (in type) from the dominion of the flesh which was connected with the world, i.e., Egypt, they now belonged only to God. The great fact of circumcision at Gilgal, the cutting off of the flesh, is a Christian responsibility. But continual returning to Gilgal was a necessity. There must be for the believer the constant realization before God, what the cross of Christ teaches, that "the flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63). True self-judgment must be maintained if we would know wherein lies the secret of spiritual power by which we mortify our members which are upon the earth. (Col. 3:5.) We may learn this from the victories in the book of Joshua. The Israelites always returned to Gilgal, except in one case (Josh. 7:2) where they were defeated.

But Gilgal had been neglected, nay, even forgotten since the days of Joshua. It is thus that hearts become worldly through the absence of daily self-judgment. The angel of Jehovah, the representative of Divine power in the midst of the people, had remained there alone, so to speak with nothing to do, waiting for Israel to return to him; he had waited long, Israel did not return. There was nothing for it, but that the angel should quit this blessed spot and go up to Bochim, the place of tears. Those days of strength and joy, when Jericho fell at the sound of God's trumpet, were over; the days, too, of Gibeon and Hazor were forever gone. Israel could not recover the blessings dependent on Gilgal; Jehovah's power was no longer at the disposal of the people, looked at as a whole. Those days were past, when Israel went up willingly to Gilgal, judging, in type, the flesh; so that, sin not being there, they might conquer. Achor, too, was past with its lesson of humiliation and blessing, when the people judged their sin to put it away and were restored. At Bochim Israel wept, obliged to bear their chastisement and its irremediable consequences; present restoration was not possible; God does not re-establish what man has ruined. The church has trodden the same path. Its ruin as a testimony and looked at on the side of human responsibility will be continuous to the end of its history. It has become unfaithful, till at last it has become established in the midst of the world, mixed up with iniquity of every kind which goes on to the close. God compares it to a great house with vessels to honor and dishonor. (2 Tim. 2) And yet the moment will come, when the history of man's responsibility being over, the Lord will present to Himself His church, glorious, having neither spot, nor wrinkle, nor any such thing. (Eph. 5) At that time it shall be said of her, as of Jacob, not "what hath man wrought," but "what hath God wrought!" (Num. 23:23).

It was not a sense of humiliation which filled the hearts of the poor people at Bochim: they were there, shedding tears at the sentence of judgment, and seeing no issue, for there was none.

In the course of the book, we meet with times of partial deliverance, and even a beginning of real humiliation (10:15, 16). But Israel's restoration is reserved for a future day. There is a sort of foretaste of it under Samuel, type of Christ, the true Judge and Prophet. In the scene at Mizpeh (1 Sam. 7), we have a picture of the day when Israel humbled, will be restored to their place of blessing as the people of God. Samuel convenes the people at Mizpeh, which is not merely the place of tears, but of humiliation. It was there that "they drew water and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day, and said there, 'we have sinned against the Lord.'" It was there that they put away their strange gods, and it was the dawn of an era of blessing which shone in all its splendor under the reigns of David and Solomon.

Bochim characterizes the book of Judges, as Gilgal does that of Joshua. Likewise the place of tears characterizes the present period of the church's history. It is no longer a question of retracing the pathway; the edifice is in ruins: to replaster it, would be but to adorn its decay, which would be worse than the ruin itself.

The angel of the Lord has come up from Gilgal to Bochim, and forfeited strength cannot be recovered. The Lord abhors pretension to power in a day such as the present. The display of human, fleshly power which we see on all sides, is utterly different to the power of the Spirit. Those who talk loudly about the power of God being with them, savor somewhat of the crowds who followed Simon Magus, saying: "This man is the great power of God" (Acts 8:10); and of Laodicea, who says, "I am rich," not knowing that she is "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). However, we must never forget that if the church as a corporate witness has failed, God has preserved a testimony to Christ in the midst of the ruin, and those who seek to maintain it, acknowledge and weep over their common failure in the presence of God. We find something similar in Ezek. 9:4. The men of Jerusalem who sigh and cry are marked on their foreheads by the angel of the Lord; they are a humbled people, as in Mal. 3:13-18. There are two classes in this chapter; those who say: "What profit is it that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of Hosts?" (Mal. 3:14). (ver. 14), and the faithful ones, a feeble and afflicted remnant who speak one to another, acknowledging the ruin, but waiting for the Messiah who alone can give them deliverance. These latter do not say: "What profit is it?" (Gen. 37:26). Their humbling is for their profit, turning their eyes to Him who "raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes" (1 Sam. 2:8).

God grant that this may also be our attitude, and that we may not be indifferent to the state of the church of God in this world, but rather weep at having contributed towards it. Let us, like Philadelphia, be content to have a little strength, and we shall hear the Lord say for our consolation: I have the key of David, power is mine, fear not, I place it entirely at your disposal.

In verses 1-3, the angel of the Lord speaks to the people. Had God broken His covenant? Had He not accomplished all that His mouth had spoken? It was Israel who had broken the covenant. "Why have ye done this?" (vs. 2). How this question reaches and probes the conscience. Why? Because I preferred the world and its lusts to the power of the Spirit of God, idols to the ineffable favor of Jehovah's countenance. What then was the natural heart of this people? What is ours? Israel weeps and sacrifices (ver. 5). How touching the grace which provides for worship in the midst of the ruin. The place of tears is one of sacrifice, and God accepts the offerings made at Bochim.

Meditations on Judges, Introduction: Israel's Ruin Looked at in Reference to God: Judges 2:6 - 3:4

Judges 2:6—Judges 3:4

Chap. 2:6-9 is a repetition of Josh. 24:26-31, closely connecting this history of declension with that of the people before their fall. There were elders, that outlived Joshua, to help and encourage the people, just as there were apostles for the church, but in the days of the apostles as in those of the elders, principles, destructive of the assembly, were already at work. Judaism, worldliness, corruption, all these things Paul set his face against by the power of the Spirit of God, but with the certainty that after his departure, grievous wolves should enter in, not sparing the flock. The close of Chap. 1 gave us Israel's declension, in their connection with the world; the verses we have just read, show it to us in reference to God. We have a summary of the whole book of Judges in this passage. Worldliness and idolatry succeed each other. In whatever measure our hearts go after the world, they turn away from God; and between that and forsaking Jehovah to follow after idols, there is but a step. We see the same things in the life of Christians individually. It is not without purpose that the Spirit of God warns us so solemnly: "Little children keep yourselves from idols," (1 John 5:21) 1 John 5:21. If we associate with the world, its cherished objects gain possession of our hearts, robbing Christ of His place.

Two things describe the low estate of the generation that arose after Joshua. "They knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel" (2:10). Where a personal knowledge of Christ and of the value of His work are lacking, the floodgates are open to an overflowing tide of evil. This was the case with Israel: "They forsook the Lord and served Baal and Ashtaroth" (vs. 13). Then the anger of the Lord was hot against the people, and He sold them into the hands of enemies round about, who spoiled them (2:14); and left the enemy within to be a thorn in their sides (3:3). The enemy within the house of God is the distinctive feature of the last days. The nations whose terrible moral condition is described in Rom. 1, are now-a-days established with all their corrupt principles in the very midst of this building, so beautiful of yore, when it came forth from the hands of the Divine Architect; but entrusted by Him to human hands, it contained thenceforth, amidst material only fit to be burned up, the sad mixture of vessels to honor and to dishonor.

The judgment of God on His house consists in this, that He allows these things to exist in it. How little account Christians take of this. But the God who judges is also the God who has compassion (2:18). Israel groans under the oppressor; then the Lord looks on this people for whom He had done such great things, and raises up deliverers for them. Such is the history which we shall see unfolded in the book of Judges, and of which we have here the summary. There are awakenings and then a short space of rest and blessing. The chains broken, the enemy silenced, God leaves the people to themselves, and they fall as before into idolatry. "They ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way" (vs. 19).

There was only one resource, and it was worthy of God. In His grace He makes use of the very unfaithfulness and its consequences to bless the people. In suffering these nations to remain, God had not merely chastisement in view; He also wished "to prove Israel by them whether they will keep the way of the Lord to walk therein as their fathers did keep it" (2:22); in short, would they separate from evil? Thus in 2 Timothy God uses the mixture of vessels to honor and dishonor to test and bless the hearts of those that are faithful. "If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work" (2 Tim. 2:21). What a blessed description of faithfulness in perilous times! God would show us a path which glorifies Him as much in the darkest day of ruin as in the brightest days of the church.

But the Lord had yet another object in leaving these nations to prove Israel (3:4), "to know whether they would hearken unto the commandments of the Lord, which He commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses." The blessing which God had in view, was to cause Israel to return to that Word which had been given at the first, and which was their only safeguard. Similarly now, the apostle says to Timothy, in an Epistle which dwells on the ruin: "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:14-15) (2 Tim. 3:14, 15). Has the condition of Christendom compelled us to take a place of separation to God down here, adhering closely to His Word? Unless we can be thus characterized, we cannot be a testimony for God in a day of ruin. Those in Philadelphia bore this stamp, for He who addresses them is Himself the holy and the true; and they, walking in communion with Him, had kept His word, and not denied His name. These will also be the marks of the future children of the kingdom. In Psa. 1, they separate themselves from the way of sinners, and their delight is in the law of the Lord, meditating in it day and night.

There was a third object which the Lord had in view, in permitting these enemies to continue in the midst of Israel: "That the generations of the children of Israel might know, to teach them war" (vs. 2). When we allow ourselves to be cast down by the state of the church and its prevailing evil, we are apt to think that it is no longer any use to fight, and that our part should be exclusively that of the 7000 hidden ones who had not bowed the knee to Baal. (1 Kings 19) This is a serious mistake. There are Elijahs in days of ruin, and conflict is more than ever needed. Christian warfare is not, it is true, waged against flesh and blood, as with Israel, but against wicked spirits in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12, margin). This satanic power is always at work to hinder our taking possession of heavenly things, and to bring the people of God into bondage. We fight then either to conquer or to deliver. In Joshua and Ephesians the conflict is to put us in possession of our privileges; in Judges and 2 Timothy the warfare is more especially for the deliverance of the people of God. "Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ," (2 Tim. 2:3) says the apostle to his faithful disciple (2 Tim. 2:3). "Endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist," (2 Tim. 4:5) he says further on, adding, "I have fought the good fight" (2 Tim. 4:5, 7).

What goodness it is on God's part, in a day of universal weakness, to have allowed the enemy to continue, that we might learn what warfare is. Christian conflict will never cease on earth, but the Lord says: Put your trust in Me, I have set before you an open door, and I will recompense the overcomer. May God give us to take to heart the deliverance of His people, in seeking to reach souls by the gospel, and in setting them free from their chains of bondage by the two edged sword of the Spirit.

Meditations on Judges, Revivals: Othniel: Judges 3:5-11

Judges 3:5-11

It is most important to understand, as we have seen, that the church having been unfaithful to the call of God, restoration collectively is no longer possible. Christians are sometimes misled, as their thoughts by these very revivals effected by God, especially if they are themselves identified with one of these partial restorations wrought by the Spirit of God. Limited views, perhaps a narrow heart accustomed only to think of and love that portion of the church which more immediately concerns ourselves—a sectarian spirit which leads us to designate as church, the systems which man has substituted for the building of God—such are some of the causes which hinder us from forming a correct estimate of the true state of the assembly in this world. Now it is an indisputable fact for every Christian, in the habit of depending on the Word of God, that the present days are evil, that the mystery of iniquity already works, for there are already many antichrists, and everything ripening for the final apostasy. But another fact quite as positive is, that God is faithful and will never leave Himself without testimony. He can even make use of the evil as in Ch. 2 to dispense fresh blessings to His people.

In the same way in Judges the deserved oppression of the enemy is used by God to bring about revivals in Israel. "They cried unto the Lord" (Josh. 24:7) is invariably the word that ushers them in. Christendom in the present day discusses what means should be used to inaugurate revivals. "There is but one;" (ch. 14:9) such a sense of the low condition of the world, of the sinner or of the church, as shall lead the exercised soul to turn to God. "They cried unto the Lord" (Josh. 24:7). Then He sent deliverers to them. We shall see these revivals in their various phases from Chap. 3 to Chap. 16 of this book.

Let us begin by a general observation. When things are morally in a low state, God uses instruments which in themselves are imperfect and bear the stamp of weakness,—Othniel sprang from a younger branch of the family; he was "the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother" (vs. 9). Ehud was weak through his infirmity, Shamgar through his weapon, Deborah from her sex, Barak by his natural character, Gideon on account of his relations, Jephthah by his birth. Other judges are mentioned who are rich, influential, or prosperous (10:1-4; 12:8-15), and God uses them no doubt, but more to maintain results already obtained than as deliverers. We are no longer in the days of Joshua, or of the Apostles, when a power was developed in man, which hindered the weakness of the vessel from appearing, and yet the very infirmity of these witnesses (characteristic of the period we are in) glorified the power of Him who could use them.

We have already spoken of Othniel in his private, domestic life (Ch. 1). God had thus fitted him to be the first judge in Israel. Having fought to win a wife, he became the possessor of his own personal inheritance and of springs to water it. God now uses him to fight for others, and it is ever thus. Before the Christian can be publicly used of God, he must individually have made progress in the knowledge of the Lord, and in the power of his privileges. Before taking up public service, the Christian should have made progress in his own soul in the knowledge of the Lord and of the character of the calling; the absence of these generally accounts for our service being so contracted, our hearts are so little

occupied with heavenly things. The moral wealth which Othniel had acquired for himself was soon evident in his walk. In the short compass of verses 10 and 11, six things are mentioned of him: first, "the Spirit of the Lord," (vs. 10) the power of God to deliver Israel "came upon him;" secondly, "he judged Israel," (vs. 10) he was entrusted with government; thirdly, he "went out to war," (vs. 10) here we have conflict; fourthly, "the Lord delivered Chushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia, into his hand," (vs. 10) this is victory; fifthly, "his hand prevailed against Chushan-rishathaim," (vs. 10) the enemy is finally subjugated; sixthly, "the land had rest forty years" (vs. 11). Israel quietly enjoys the fruits of Othniel's victory, -God's end is achieved; this man who belonged only indirectly to the lineage of the noble Caleb, was fitted beforehand for this service, and when put to the proof, showed himself to be suitable material in the hands of the divine workman.

Let us ask God to raise up Othniels in the present day; yea, rather let us be Othniels ourselves by true consecration of heart to the Lord, by an increasing desire to appropriate and realize these heavenly things, and we shall be instruments well-fitted for the Master and prepared unto every good work.

Meditations on Judges, Revivals: Ehud: Judges 3:12-30

Judges 3:12-30

Othniel dies; the children of Israel return to their evil ways, and forget the Lord. The same God who had strengthened Othniel against the enemy, now, in judgment, strengthens Eglon, king of Moab, against Israel. Eglon and his allies take possession of the city of palm trees (Comp. 1:16, Deut. 34:3), of Jericho, not in its character of the accursed city, but in that of blessing for Israel. And now Israel, in their fallen state, make use of the very one, whom God was about to employ for their deliverance, to carry a present to Eglon, ratifying thus their subjection to the world, whose favor they seek. How many gifts there are in the present day which become but willing instruments for keeping God's children under the dominion of the world. But Ehud is faithful—he makes himself a two-edged sword: his first 'act-his only resource. The Christian in the day of ruin has also his two-edged sword, the Word of God being his chief and only offensive weapon. (Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16; 19:15; Eph. 6:17.) True, this sword was only a cubit in length; Ehud's weapon was short, but well suited to its work. It was a tried sword, capable of piercing to the inward parts of God's enemy and of giving him his death blow.

Before using his weapon, Ehud "girt it under his raiment upon his right thigh," carrying it about him, ready for use; not displaying it, conscious that it was there. The Bible is often displayed, and much quoted, without being used. But the Word of God has a purpose. Ehud, left-handed, adapts his sword to his infirmity, girding it on his right thigh. Had he worn it in the usual way it would have been useless. The manner in which the weapon is used invariably corresponds to the personal state of the one using it. To imitate others is of no avail, as we learn from the case of David, who was unable to handle Saul's sword, being accustomed, as a shepherd, to a sling and a stone.

Having brought the present to Eglon, Ehud turned again from the graven images (ch. 3:19, margin) that were by Gilgal; having, as he said, a "secret message" unto the king. It was not, as with many others, a public victory, but a secret, single-handed encounter between the deliverer and the enemy, the public results of which were soon to appear. It was so with Christ when He was tempted of Satan in the desert. Here all takes place silently, with no apparent struggle, no cry; the enemy was found dead by the servants, who thought their Master was resting. The power by which Israel had been enthralled is destroyed by the short sword of a left-handed man.

There was no fame or glory attending such a victory. It was a secret message, but a "message from God" (vs. 20) unto Eglon (v. 20). Our weapon is divine, and therein lies all its power. With Ehud, as with Gideon, it was the "sword of the Lord" (ch. 7:18). The king was dead, but the weapon was not drawn out of his belly. Ehud was gone, but the servants had before their eyes the instrument of victory; God proved to their confusion, that it was this short sword which had abased the proud man, whose eyes stood out with fatness.

It remained for Ehud to reap the fruits of his victory. "He blew a trumpet in the mountain of Ephraim" (vs. 27) to assemble the people of God, and they "took the fords of Jordan toward Moab, and suffered not a man to pass over" (vs. 28). The people recovered these usurped possessions; and, through the vigilance of the children of Israel, the way of approach for the enemy was cut off. The usurper was expelled and destroyed, Moab could no longer maintain himself on the two banks of the Jordan. Such should be the practical result of conflict at the present time. If the actual effect is not to make us openly break with the world, it is fruitless and does not answer to the purpose of God. The more complete the separation, the more lasting is the peace. "The land," we are told, "had rest fourscore years" (vs. 30).

Meditations on Judges, Revivals: Shamgar: Judges 3:31

Judges 3:31

Shamgar, the son of Anath, who followed Ehud, gained a signal victory over the Philistines: he also delivered Israel. Ehud's sword was mighty, though short. Shamgar wrought deliverance by the means of a weapon which seemed wholly unsuited to such a work; a contemptible instrument, to all appearance only suitable for goading brute creatures. Without wishing to press unduly here a typical meaning—a tendency to do which in teaching is dangerous in more ways than one—I would like to compare the ox-goad of Shamgar with the short sword of Ehud. We have one weapon; the Word of God; it may be presented in different aspects, but it is the only one that the man of faith makes use of in the warfare. To the intellectual and unbelieving world it is like an ox-goad, fit, at the best, only for women, children and uneducated persons; full of fiction and contradictions; yet it is this instrument, despised by men, that God uses to gain the victory. In making use of it, faith finds a weapon where the world only sees folly, for the weakness of God is stronger than men. Doubtless, it is written for the unlearned and suited to their needs and to their walk; but this very ox-goad can kill six hundred Philistines.

Let us, then, make use of the Word with which God has entrusted us, always remembering that faith only can make it effectual, and that, too, when the soul has found therein for itself communion with God, the knowledge of Christ, and, therewith blessing, joy and strength.

Meditations on Judges, Gideon: the Word of God Reaching the Conscience: Judges 6:1-10

Judges 6:1-10

In spite of all the blessings enumerated in chap. 5, Israel very soon relapsed into evil ways and forsook Jehovah. By way of chastisement for this unfaithfulness, God delivered them into the hands of the Midianites. The people passed through all the phases of misery (material for them-moral for the church) which invariably follow going after the world and forsaking God. Under Jabin, Israel was without arms (chap. 5:8); under the yoke of Midian he was famished -the consequence of our unfaithfulness, from which we always suffer when we seek our portion with the world. It drags us down and takes away our arms, our strength leaves us, and we lose every means of withstanding; not only so, but the very sources of existence are also lacking, for the world never affords nourishment to any one, and we perceive it by the barrenness which invades the soul, when, in our folly, we leave the marrow and fatness of the house of God for the harvests which are merely a mirage of the desert. This was the experience of Israel; Midian "left no sustenance" (vs. 4) for him (ver. 4).

Then in his misery Israel cried unto Jehovah. He responded, and wrought a fresh revival, in which He sought to probe, more deeply than in the past, the conscience of this poor people. It is interesting to see the way the Lord took to bring about this result. "Jehovah sent a prophet unto the children of Israel" (vs. 8). His name is not given, nor does it matter, for this man was simply the bearer of the word of God, in order to bring the people into His presence. God has a means by which to bless us: His word, which meets every requirement and ought to be quite sufficient for us. Psal. 119 shows us the marvelous part the word plays in the life of the faithful. This psalm exceeds all the others in length. The word of God ought to occupy a corresponding place in our lives. Do we appreciate its value? Does it fill up our days and nights-our thoughts, more or less, when we have not time to sit down and meditate upon it?

God applied, in a way full of grace (vs. 8-10), this word to the conscience of the Israelites, telling them all that He had done for them; how He had led them out, given them deliverance and victory, and brought them in; and, having unfolded before them all His goodness, He adds one word: "But ye have not obeyed My voice" (vs. 10). Not a word as to how they might be delivered; He did not yet open the way for their return to Him. The prophet disappeared, leaving them under the weight of their responsibility in the presence of grace. God had borne them in His arms and upon His heart;

He had been to them a cloud of fire and of darkness (Ex. 13:21, 22; 14:20); He had fought for them. Have I failed, said He, in any respect towards you; but what have you done? This silence was calculated to touch their conscience far more than any reproaches. They were impressed, if not convicted; but the word of grace did not yet give to the unfaithful people what they needed. Israel continued powerless before the enemy.

Meditations on Judges, Gideon: Gideon Prepared for Service: Judges 6:11-40

Judges 6:11-40

The remainder of this chapter shows us how God wrought in order to raise up a servant in those times of ruin, and to fit a powerful instrument for carrying out His work of deliverance.

Before entering upon our subject, we would press a truth of general application. When the people of God, as such, have lost all power, it can still be found by the soul individually in quite as great and marvelous a measure as in the times of Israel's greatest prosperity. If this is true, how ardently should our hearts desire to possess this power! Are we among those who, settled down in their weakness, put themselves on a level with their surroundings, and accept the worldliness of the family of God as an inevitable or necessary state of things? Or, have we rather the ears of Gideon when God says to us: There is unlimited power at thy disposal.

We will now go on to the history of this man of God. Personally, he was even weaker than his people; without confidence before the enemy, for he "threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites" (vs. 11); without resources among his relations, for his family was the poorest in Manasseh; without power in himself, for he was the least in his father's house (ver. 11). Such was the man that God visited and chose as servant-a man who realized his utter weakness, and who said: "O, my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel?" (vs. 15). When it is a question of the work of God in this world, we then find a first great principle, it is, that God does not ask in any case what man can offer Him. The instruments He takes up to glorify Himself by, are those that are weak, and who are conscious of their weakness (1 Cor. 1:27-29; 2 Cor. 12:9, 10).

But there is another principle of the greatest importance: this work requires that all be of God. Gideon was already a believer, before the angel of Jehovah sat under the oak. Whatever he had yet to learn, he believed the word of God, which had been transmitted to him by his forefathers (ver. 13). Moreover, he identified himself with the people of God: "If Jehovah be with us" (vs. 13)-"Jehovah hath forsaken us," he says. He did not follow the course of Heber, he endured with the Israelites the consequences of their wrong-doing. Respect for His word and affection for His people are two signs of divine life at all times, and appertain to all the faithful. Gideon had, however, much to learn. His faith was very feeble, for he did not count on the goodness of God. Humble, doubtless, but looking at himself, he formed a conclusion what God ought to be to him, from what he was. "Now," said he, "Jehovah has forsaken us" (vs. 13). The situation is hopeless, for it is the consequence of our unfaithfulness. Thus reasoned Gideon, but did God reason thus? "Jehovah is with thee, thou mighty man of valor" (vs. 12). Ah! how little did he know what was in the heart of God, and how many there are that reason like Gideon. Moreover, notwithstanding his humility,

there had not yet been true judgment of self. He wished to offer something, to “bring forth his present” to Jehovah (ver. 18). It was, doubtless, not with the intention of doing some great thing for God, but with the thought that all would be well if God accepted his present. We will see the answer of Jehovah, but first let us go back to the principle enunciated above; that, in the work of the deliverance of His people, God is alone upon the scene (see Ex. 14:13, 14; 2 Chron. 20:12-18). In the first place, “the angel of Jehovah appeared unto him” (vs. 12). Like Saul on the way to Damascus-it is God who commences by revealing Himself to the soul of every one of His servants, in the person of Jesus. Secondly, Jehovah revealed Himself to Gideon as associated with him: “Jehovah is with thee” (vs. 12). Thirdly, it was He who gave Gideon a character “thou mighty man of valor” (vs. 12)-a character which Gideon himself, in his weakness, would never have dreamed of obtaining. Fourthly, “Jehovah looked upon him” (vs. 14) in grace, in order to reveal Himself, not only to Him but in Him, as the God of power. If Gideon had no strength, Jehovah had it for him; it is the secret which He made known to him, for He said: “this thy might.” Fifthly, it was He who sent him: “Go in this thy might” (vs. 14). So was Paul, the servant of God, sent: “not of men, neither by man” (Gal. 1:1).

Finally, God gave him the proof of the interest He had in him. We have already seen that Gideon wished to offer something to Jehovah, but He can accept nothing from man as such. “Take,” said he, “the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock, and pour out the broth” (vs. 20) (ver. 20). The only offering which God can accept, is Christ. If He did not receive what Gideon offered Him, He accepted that which represented Christ in it. This man of God had a very imperfect understanding of the value of the sacrifices, which Jehovah had commanded to the children of Israel; “the broth in the pot” was a witness of his ignorance. But God discerned what was real, underlying this feeble faith, and accepted the offering when Gideon laid it “upon the rock.” The fire of judgment rose up out of the rock, consuming the flesh and the unleavened cakes. The proof of the interest which God had for him was, in figure, the judgment fallen upon Christ.

It was still necessary that the servant should learn the value of this work for himself. At first he was filled with fear. “Alas, O Lord God for because I have seen an angel of Jehovah face to face” (vs. 22). But “Jehovah said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not; thou shalt not die” (vs. 23). The consequence of the fire of judgment having consumed the offering, was peace for Gideon. To be a servant of God, one must have received for oneself the knowledge of the work of Christ, and the peace which flows therefrom; the assurance of peace having been made, by virtue of what has passed between God and Christ; the assurance of what God and not Gideon thought of the sacrifice. Such is the foundation of all Christian service (alas! how much it has been forgotten), for, if we have not peace ourselves, how can we proclaim it to others?

The first result of what Gideon had just learned was not to press him into service (another fact completely lost sight of by Christians of our day), but to make him a worshipper. “Then Gideon built an altar there unto Jehovah, and called it Jehovah-shalom” (vs. 24) (the God of Peace). The believer should enter the presence of God as a worshipper, before engaging in service. The word illustrates this fact in a multitude of cases-that of Abraham, and the man born blind, among others. Gideon praised the God of peace, and could thenceforth offer upon the altar of worship a sacrifice which Jehovah accepted.

It was only after the altar of worship was set up that God called Gideon as a servant to bear public testimony, and this began in his father's house. It consisted in destroying “the altar of Baal, and the grove that is by it,” (vs. 25) and substituting for these the altar of testimony-the altar of the God whom Gideon knew. The positive duty of one who would be a testimony for God is, before all else, to cast down his idols. Why is it that there are so few true servants among Christians, walking in the power of a testimony for Christ? It is because they have not the two altars. And why have they not the second? Because they have not provided themselves wood for the sacrifice. The idols are the wood (ver. 26). Let us overthrow them, let nothing of them remain. Let us begin in the innermost circle of the family. If we do not do this, where will our testimony be? The overthrowing of the idols is the secret of power; the Spirit of Jehovah only came upon Gideon when he had accomplished this act. We have not now, as he, Baals of stone, and groves of wood, but we have many other idols; and, little like him, we often prefer them to the power of a faithful walk with God. Gideon obeyed unhesitatingly, without compromise or reservation. For him the idols were nothing compared with the God he knew. This “mighty man of valor” (vs. 12) had been wanting in courage. Fear of the enemy (ver. 11), afraid of God (ver. 23), fear of his father's house (ver. 27), were some of his characteristics. He did his work at night, fearing to do it by day; he did it, nevertheless, for God had so commanded him. It was only in the morning that the people of the city saw what had been done. He who knew the character of Gideon had not said to him: Do this work by day. Let us, too, feeble as we are, destroy our idols in silence, when no eye observes us. Let us not speak too loudly of the matter; let us accomplish this difficult work with fear and trembling, looking to God only, in the silence of the night. The world will soon perceive that we have a new altar which it knows not, and that the grove has no value for us except as wood to be burned. Then the world, which has hitherto sustained us, will hate us. It was the altar of testimony which drew upon Gideon the animosity of all. Hated, but what did it matter, for he received the name of Jerubbaal (let Baal plead), and became in presence of all, the personal witness of the worthlessness of the things he had formerly worshipped.

The effect of Gideon's testimony was to convince his father of the nothingness of Baal. The faith of the father was less than that of the son. Gideon destroyed Baal because he knew God; Joash received God because he no longer acknowledged Baal. It was very little, but it was something.

Brethren, are we witnesses before the world of the folly of all that it finds its interest in? If we have not maintained the altar of Baal, possibly we have not destroyed “the grove that is by it” (vs. 25).

Unqualified obedience to the word of God, is the path of power. At certain periods of our lives power has characterized our service, at others it has been lacking. Let us then ask ourselves if we have not rebuilt some idol that we had destroyed. All public service for the Christian must begin by faithfulness in the little circle in which he is called to move.

Gideon proved at first the hostility of those who bore the name of people of God, a hostility which was restrained for the time by the sincerity of his testimony. Midian and Amalek (ver. 33), however, were not thus restrained. If, in their folly, the people of the city sought to hinder their own deliverance, the world made a determined effort to suppress the revival which was to release Israel from bondage.

Up to this time Gideon had only performed an act of obedience; now the Spirit of Jehovah came upon him. His first act of power was to sound the trumpet, assembling the tribes together after him. The strength of Israel was in their gathering together, it was that which Satan and the world most feared.

Gideon, notwithstanding his strength, did not manifest much confidence in God. He asked for signs to know if Jehovah would save the people by his hand. All God's orders to Gideon were clear and simple, but when Gideon asked for signs of God, all became obscure and complicated. We can hardly understand what his thought was. It may be that the fleece represented Israel, blessed of God, when dryness rested upon the nations, and vice versa, for having proved God, Gideon put Him to a counterproof. What poor faith! What feeble confidence in Him! But the God of grace patiently did what His servant required. He wished to deliver His people. He wished, by all means, to sustain the feeble heart of His witness, in order to enlist him in His service and to make him an instrument for His glory.

Meditations on Judges, Gideon: What Characterizes God's Witnesses in the Day of Ruin: Judges 7:1-14

Judges 7:1-14

In chap. 6, we have seen the servant prepared for the work for which God destined him; the verses which we have just read show us the characteristics of God's witnesses in a day of ruin.

In the days of the nation's moral prosperity under Joshua, when it was a question of going to war, all Israel went up to battle, and the unity of the people was thereby strikingly manifested. The first conflict at Ai (Josh. 7:1-5), the only exception to this rule, resulted in the defeat of those who took part in it. In a time of declension, it is otherwise. When all the people went up with Gideon, Jehovah said to him: "the people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands," (vs. 2) for the danger was that Israel would vaunt themselves against Jehovah, saying: "Mine own hand hath saved me" (vs. 2). At such a period God takes special care to repress the pride that would attach credit to man in a work which belongs exclusively to Himself. Christendom in the present day boasts of the number of its adherents, under the impression that it sees therein a factor in the work of God. If any work is wrought of Him, she attributes it to herself; and, like Laodicea, prides herself in her resources: "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing" (Rev. 3:17).

This then is the first characteristic of God's testimony in the midst of ruin: fewness of numbers and absence of display.

In verse 3, we find the second characteristic: "Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from Mount Gilead" (vs. 3). Moses had formerly given this command to the children of Israel: "What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart" (Deut. 20:8). The same passage (vs. 5-7) teaches us that those who were fearful and afraid, were those who had something to lose. A servant of God is full of courage for his work, when he has nothing to lose here, because the excellency of Christ has made him despise what the world values. Alas! what numbers of fearful there are in our days, even as formerly, when: "there returned of the people twenty and two thousand, and there remained ten thousand" (vs. 3). God wants undivided hearts for the accomplishment of His work; hearts that have nothing to lose, that are afraid of nothing, and who cannot exert a baneful influence over those who have gone out to the war unentangled with the affairs of this life. The twenty-two thousand came in for the spoil, but were unequal to the effort required to get it. Those that are fearful will profit by the testimony, but have not the qualification necessary to maintain it.

We come now to a third characteristic of the witnesses. God tested them in order to bring out if they realized that all is loss for those who would win the battle. "He brought down the people unto the water" (vs. 5). Will they bow down upon their knees to drink, or lap of the water with their tongues, as a dog lappeth? Some seek their ease, and enjoy to the full those blessings which Providence has placed in their path; others, having as their sole aim to gain the victory, do not allow themselves to be diverted from their object, but, tasting the water by the way, only find therein what invigorates them for their service. It is said of the Lord, "He shall drink of the brook in the way" (Psa. 110:7). When He thus drank, "He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem," the scene of His agony and death (Luke 9:51). There is nothing that so trammels the action of the Christian in his testimony, as taking his ease, and settling down in the enjoyment of the earthly blessings which the providence of God bestows upon him, instead of simply tasting them by the way. The Christianity of the present day, boweth down upon the knees to drink; it gives thanks, it may be, to God, but sees, in the earthly blessings, the object and end of its piety; whereas, the witnesses for God, just take as much as will enable them to continue on their journey. These three hundred, who lapped the water as a dog lappeth, drinking what the hand carried to the mouth, were not only the devoted, but the humble ones. They remind one of the poor Syrophenician woman, who, when compared to a dog, replied, "Yes Lord," happy to be dependent only on His grace (Mark 7:28). God wants devoted yet humble witnesses.

These men took in their hands their trumpets, symbols of testimony, but they also took their victuals (ver. 8). We cannot overcome without being fed, of which Israel was a proof under the terrible yoke of Midian who left them without sustenance.

Before the engagement, Gideon himself was called to undergo two personal experiences which strengthened him for the victory (vs. 9-14). In the first place, that, in himself, he was no better than the twenty two thousand fearful ones. "If thou fear to go down," (vs. 10) said Jehovah to him. Did he reply: I am brave, I have already sounded the trumpet in every direction to assemble Israel to battle? No, he accepted the humbling truth. Then God placed him before the enemy, which lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude, and traced his portrait by the mouth of one of them. This mighty man of valor was compared to a cake of barley bread, coarse and homely food, and this was "the sword of Gideon!" (vs. 14). Fine sort of a sword wherewith to smite this multitude! But, in reality, the sword of Gideon was "the sword of Jehovah" (ch. 7:18) (ver. 20), and it was therein the power lay.

Gideon learned to know himself, but God also revealed to him the moral state of the enemy that he was called to encounter. It was a vanquished foe. "For into his hand," (vs. 14) said the Midianite to his fellow, "hath God delivered Midian and all the host" (vs. 14). May we have a better understanding of this truth in connection with our three enemies, the flesh, the world and Satan. The flesh is crucified, the world is overcome, Satan is judged. This fills us with courage before them. Gideon realized all these things and worshipped.

Meditations on Judges, Gideon: What Testimony Consists In: Judges 7:15-25

Judges 7:15-25

The passage we have read is a reply to the question: In what does the testimony of God consist, and what does it do in a day of ruin? Full of joy and confidence, Gideon returned to the camp of Israel. "Arise," said he, "for Jehovah hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian" (vs. 15). Then, dividing the three hundred men into three companies, "he put a trumpet in every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers" (vs. 16). These three things represent the principles of God's testimony in the struggle with Satan and the world.

We find the use of the trumpets detailed in Num. 10:1-10. They were the voice of God to communicate His mind to the people on four important occasions: they gave the signal for gathering the people together; for the journeying of the camps; for battle; and also for the solemn feasts or worship. That which the sound of the trumpets formerly represented for Israel, we find in the present day, in another and very precious way, in the word of God. By it God speaks to us; it is that which regulates and directs the gathering together, the walk, the warfare, and the worship, of the children of God. How much these things are forgotten in our day! It seems to the majority of God's children that Christianity consists only in taking the gospel to the unconverted. It was otherwise that Gideon understood the testimony of faith. He began where God begins (Num. 10). "He blew the trumpet, and Abi-ezer was gathered after him" (chap. 6:34). He was the bearer of the divine voice for the gathering together again of Israel, who had been scattered by their own failure. Brethren, have we at heart in this day, the gathering together of the children of God? Let us then take the word of God, let us make its voice heard in the ears of the saints who have been unaccustomed to hear it. Let us show Christians that their being gathered together is the purpose of God, the purpose of the cross of Christ, as well as of the energy of the Spirit in the world. Let us show them that it is the enemy who has scattered us, and that the great opposition to his power is the gathering together of the children of God apart from the world, and we will have the joy of having labored for that which the word calls "good and pleasant!" (Gen. 49:15). (Psa. 133:1).

The trumpet also sounded for the march, for which there can be no other directions than the word of God affords us. The relinquishment of this standard has been the sole cause of the divergences of the walk of the children of God. Why should we not walk in the same path if our hearts were all equally subject to that word which furnishes us with unerring guidance for each step?

The trumpet called to battle; and here we arrive at the circumstances of our chapter. The testimony of God is inseparable from conflict, for it not only consists in gathering together, and the march, but in an attitude openly taken in opposition to the world, the enemy of God. We have to proclaim boldly that we are-without any possible compromise-in a struggle with the world. The conflict has two purposes: to put us in possession of our privileges (which is the subject of the book of Joshua), and to deliver the people of God who have been brought into subjection to the enemy through their own unfaithfulness, which is the way it is looked at in the book of Judges. In Joshua all Israel were to go up to the conquest of Canaan; here, the struggle is reserved to a certain number of witnesses, champions of Jehovah, for the deliverance of His captive people.

The trumpets sounded for their solemn feasts. The word of God alone, defines and regulates worship. We merely allude to this subject, as this is not the place to go into it.

The empty pitchers are a second factor in testimony. They were, doubtless, some of the utensils which had contained the victuals of the people (ver. 8); and though now empty and worthless, Gideon, taught of God, knew how to utilize them for His glory. 2 Cor. 4:1-10 makes obvious allusion to this scene. The apostle Paul speaking there of the position he was placed in as a witness before the world, says, he was "for the manifestation of the truth," and to bear "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (Rev. vers.) before men. He then adds: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7) (ver. 7). An earthen vessel, such was the "mortal flesh" of the great apostle of the Gentiles. Empty pitchers represented what Gideon and his warriors were in themselves. The lesson which their leader had just learned in the camp of Midian, the three hundred had also individually to realize. Like Paul's earthen vessel, these empty pitchers were only fit to be broken. When God raises up a testimony, He only glorifies Himself in instruments which He has broken. He carried His gospel to the nations by a Saul whom He had previously cast down in the dust on his way to Damascus, and glorified the excellence of His power in a Paul whom He continued to discipline to the end. "Troubled on every side," (2 Cor. 4:8) said the apostle, "yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus"

Of what use were these empty pitchers? To hold the lamp; the third and most important element in testimony for God; to carry within them this treasure, the divine light, in order that, as the apostle says, "the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:11). If, in testimony, the trumpets represent the word of God, and the pitchers ourselves, what are the lamps but the life of Jesus, the light of Christ. The first two elements only serve to make the third manifest amidst the surrounding darkness. Gideon's men blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers (7:19), and the light shone out all about them. It is the same with real witnesses: "For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake;" it is God Himself who takes care to break the vessels, "that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:11). It does not say: the life of Christ; but that of Jesus, the life of that Man whose path through this world was one of holiness. We are called to represent down here the Man Jesus, walking as He walked (1 John 2:6), and it is in that that our testimony consists.

There is not a single Christian in the world who cannot be the bearer of these three elements of testimony for God. How is it then that so few are found? It is because these three principles that God requires are lacking. The trumpet must be sounded, the pitchers must be broken, the lamp must not be put under a bushel. Are we taking our ease down here, having all we need in the world, loved and respected of men; have we never had any of the apostle's experiences, tribulations, perplexities, persecution, cast down? Ah! if not, we are wretched for we have nothing. God has not accounted us worthy to bear a single ray of the light of Christ before the world. Happy those who are broken! "Blessed.... blessed," (ch. 5:24) as the Lord said in Matt. 5, adding: "Rejoice and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven" (Matt. 5:12).

The three hundred, standing every man in his place round about the camp, cried: "The sword of Jehovah, and of Gideon!" (vs. 18). The world is put to rout by this simple cry! Bear testimony to Christ, live Christ, taking no account of self; let the two-edged sword of the Lord be your weapon: all the power of Satan and of the world will be unable to resist you. Occupied with their glorious task, neither Gideon nor his companions were in danger of sitting down under the tents of Midian, which the judgment of God was about to overthrow; for they found their security and strength, notwithstanding the broken pitchers, in the trumpets of Israel whose notes were so penetrating, and in the lamps of God whose light was so bright.

It is an encouraging fact that testimony begets testimony. The three hundred were employed to reunite the people. The men of Israel were gathered together and pursued Midian (ver. 23), and all the men of Ephraim came together and joined in the pursuit and shared in the spoil. We shall see this result if we are faithful. Let us be witnesses for Christ, and we shall awaken zeal in those who are His. May that time soon arrive in which, when Jesus comes, He shall find, not only some hundreds, but, a people who are all witnesses, who have fought, held fast, and overcome for Him!

Meditations on Judges, Gideon: Difficulties and Snares in Service: Judges 8:1-23

Judges 8:1-23

The moment that we set out to walk with God, and to bear testimony for Him, we may be sure of finding all sorts of difficulties in our path. In the preceding chapter, Gideon and his three hundred companions encountered some. Their conflict was not without suffering, for they had to forego their pleasures and comforts, only taking so much refreshment by the way as would enable them to attain their object. Judges 8 shows us other ways in which they had to suffer.

The men of Ephraim contended with Gideon. In the time of Deborah they had been in the post of honor (chap. 5:14), but since then there had been declension, and Gideon, taught of God, had not summoned them; they were fallen to the second rank. This distinction made them jealous of what Jehovah had entrusted to their companions, jealous of the energy of faith and of its results to the others. "Why hast thou served us thus?" (vs. 1). (ver. Ephraim, preoccupied with his own importance, thinks of himself instead of thinking of God. This is a frequent source of strife between brethren, and such contentions are far more painful and trying than conflict with the world. It is precious to see the man of God pass through this difficulty in the power of the Spirit. The book of Judges gives us three examples of similar contentions: the case of Gideon, that of Jephthah, and that of the eleven tribes against Benjamin. Here trouble was avoided, and a breach prevented. Later on, it was not so. When altercations arise among Christians, deep humility is their only resource. Gideon had learned this in the school of God, as the preceding chapters relate, so that it was not difficult for him to realize on this occasion how to act. God had made him understand that the courage and strength which he had, did not emanate from himself; and that, in itself, the sword of Gideon was worth as little as a cake of barley bread. And so, in the presence of Ephraim, the servant that Jehovah had used for this great deliverance, took care not to speak of himself. He devoted his attention to what God had done by the hands of his brethren. "What have I done now," (vs. 2) said he, "in comparison of you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?" He took the lowest place and acknowledged the zeal for God which, after all, they had shown to their honor; and the humility of this servant of God is thus the means of removing a great difficulty. Let us act in a similar way, and, when we speak of our brethren, let us enumerate, not their failures, but what God has wrought in them. Can I not admire Christ in my brother when I see how God is dealing with him, breaking him down so that, at all costs, what characterized the Lord may be manifested in Him? Nothing so appeases contention as seeing Christ in others; it is the result of a normal Christian condition in the children of God.

Gideon and his companions encountered a second difficulty far more trying than the previous one. They were "faint yet pursuing," (vs. 4) experiencing, as to the outward man, that daily perishing, which is the portion of believers in their testimony, at the same time pressing forward so as to reach the goal, cost what it may (2 Cor. 4:16; Phil. 3:12).

They reached Succoth, a city of Israel which belonged to the tribe of Gad. Succoth rejected them, refusing even to give them bread. There was thus, in the midst of the people of God, an entire city, bearing the name of Israel, which had renounced all corporate responsibility with those who bore testimony for Jehovah. They said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand, that we should give bread unto thine army?" They had confidence in the enemy, and would not compromise themselves by taking part with Israel. There are many in the present day who bear the name of Christ, and yet seek the friendship of and alliance with the world; who, through fear of compromising themselves, make common cause with our enemies, increasing the difficulties of the way for believers, and hindering them from being overcomers. It need not surprise us that a righteous indignation does not stop us in the way to chastise this spirit. Our hearts, like Gideon's, should be wholly in the conflict. The man of God kept on his way; the infamous conduct of Penuel no more arrests him than that of Succoth. Everything in its time for God's witness. Satan seeks to bring in confusion as to this, so as to make obstacles for us. Zebah and Zalmunna must not be allowed to escape; the judgment of the rebellious cities will be executed later. On his return, the man of God exercised discipline in the assembly of Israel, and "cut off the wicked," (Psa. 94:23) for God would be dishonored were evil-tolerated in the assembly.

I am not sure that I have sufficiently noticed, in all this history, the way in which the two characteristics, humility and energy of faith, were united in Gideon. Energy, to gather and purify the people for battle and for pursuit of the enemy; humility, which delivered from all self-confidence and led to implicit reliance on Jehovah. And yet it was on the side which seemed to have the least need of watchfulness, that the enemy was about to lay a snare for him, finally bringing about the moral ruin of this eminent leader in Israel.

The vanquished kings were not sparing in their praise of Gideon (ver. 18-21), which was all the more dangerous because there was apparently no interested motive. He asked them, "What manner of men were they whom ye slew at Tabor? And they answered, As thou art, so were they; each one resembled the children of a king" (vs. 18).

Let us distrust the flattery of the world. A moment's reflection before the Lord would tell us, that the world flatters to enfeeble us, and to deprive us of the weapons with which we fight against it.

It does not appear as if Gideon was turned aside from God's path by this speech, but he seems to have lost a true sense of the power of the enemy, and to have despised rather than feared it. This was not the case with Joshua when he made prisoners of the five kings (Josh. 10:22-27). Far from underrating the strength of the enemy in the eyes of the men of Israel, he said to them: "Come near, put your feet upon the necks of these kings;" (Josh. 10:24) then he added: "Fear not, nor be dismayed, be strong and of good courage;" (Josh. 10:25) so much did he realize at the same time the power of the world and the strength of Jehovah. Two things become us when we are fighting with the enemy-fear and trembling as to ourselves; and full assurance as to God, excluding all alarm, for we know that Satan and the world are vanquished foes. Gideon realized these things imperfectly. He entrusted to his son Jether, the task of killing these two kings. "But the youth drew not his sword, for he feared" (vs. 20). In chap. 7, Jehovah had separated those who were afraid and withdrawn them from the conflict. Here Gideon, committing to a child the destruction of an enemy he despised, did not act in keeping with the ways of God, who does not call those that are but children in the faith to perform publicly brilliant actions; a child goes to school and not to war.

Then those kings said: "Rise thou, and fall upon us; for as the man is, so is his strength" (vs. 21). A fresh flattery, against which Gideon ought to have protested, for he had learned a totally different lesson in the school of God. In reality, his strength was exactly the opposite to that which was of man. Did he not know it when the angel of Jehovah said to him (the least of his father's house), "Go in this thy might?" (ch. 6:14). Had he not realized it on that solemn night when God had revealed to him, that a cake of barley bread was about to overthrow all the tents of Midian? In his better days, Gideon would not have accepted this flattery, nor have allowed the adversary to plant a germ of self-confidence in his heart.

But we see him exposed to a fresh snare (ver. 22-23). It is no longer the flattery of the world, but that of the people of God. The men of Israel said unto Gideon: "Rule thou over us, both thou and thy son and thy son's son also, for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian" (vs. 22). They put their leader in the place of Jehovah and offer him the scepter. "Rule thou over us" (vs. 22). None are more prone to clericalism than the people of God. It is not only the bane of Christendom, it is also the innate tendency of the natural heart of believers. The fact of ministry being blessed is apt to lead us to make of the servant a "minister" in the human sense, thus losing sight of God. By the grace of God, the faith of Gideon escaped this danger. He said resolutely, "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; Jehovah shall rule over you" (vs. 23). The object of his ministry was that God should have the pre-eminence and lose nothing of His authority over His people.

Meditations on Judges, Gideon: Gideon's Ephod: Judges 8:24-35

Judges 8:24-35

Hitherto Gideon had been marvelously preserved amidst dangers and snares. His heart was still full of good intentions; but a subtle poison had been doing its work in his heart, and we are about to witness the ruin of the career of the judge, as formerly we have seen the ruin of the people.

"And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey;" (vs. 24) a request with which the people willingly complied. Gideon did not covet these things as Achan did, when he brought judgment upon Israel. He was noble-hearted and disinterested, and wished to make a good use of the gold. Aaron, of old, had asked for their ornaments to make therewith the calf of gold. Jerubbaal, who had cast down the idols, in no wise sought to set them up again; but, impressed with the sense of his own importance, he wished to erect a memorial of his victory at Ophrah, his native town. This memorial was to be an ephod, an article of divine appointment. It formed part of the vestments which the sacrificing priest wore when representing the people before God. It was indeed a beautiful object, yet in Jehovah's eyes it was worthless, apart from the high priest who wore it. Alas! all Israel looked upon this ephod as a means of approach to God, and went and prostrated themselves before it. Even Gideon and his house fell into the snare.

Christendom is no stranger to ephods. Many are the things of divine appointment which it has apart from Christ and by which it imagines that it can approach God. The church, ministry, baptism, the Lord's supper, and even prayer, separated from their source, become ephods before which people prostrate themselves. Form takes the place of God, and souls thereby fall again into idolatry. Ah! do they not even make an idol of Christ on the cross! The brasen serpent had been kept and the people had made a false god of it. Like the faithful Hezekiah, the true witness of the present day cannot put up with that. The king brake in pieces this idol, and called it Nehushtan, i.e., a piece of brass (2 Kings 18:4).

What a humbling fact, that the leaders of the people should be the instruments to lead them back into idolatry! Frequently, after an auspicious beginning, the heart, allowing itself to be acted upon by the flattery of the world, is influenced thereby, and the desire gradually gains ground to be of some importance in, as well as recognized by, it. A monument is thus erected which can only add material to the increase of the ruin; thus their Ophrah became a gathering center, and the ephod became a center of Ophrah, to the displacement of the divine sanctuary at Shiloh, the true center of gathering for Israel. Gideon was not a proud man, but, his heart being deceived, he was no longer upright before God. He dwelt in his own house (v. 29), and rested from his glorious labors. He was surrounded by a numerous family, but he had set up a "serpent" which was eventually to accomplish the destruction of his race. No sooner had he closed his eyes in death, than Israel returned to unmixed idolatry, and made Baal-berith their god (v. 33), thus making a demon their chief and "Lord of the covenant" (ch. 2:1).

But there is one consolation in the midst of all the ruin which will be seen in chap. 9: God never leaves Himself without a testimony in this scene. Let us then be His witnesses, holding fast this word of Gideon to the people: "Jehovah shall rule over you" (ch. 8:23).

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