Judges - Commentaries by Samuel Ridout

The Christian Shepherd: 2003, Buying and Wasting the Truth (2:7-10)

“The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua.... And there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel” (Judg. 2:7,10).

The second generation of any movement is a time when the danger of giving up what the first generation bought is very great. Israel under Joshua and the elders was faithful, living in the fear of God. But the second generation had not seen the works of the Lord. They got the truths from the elders secondhand. They learned them in an intellectual way, rather than embracing them in their hearts.

It is very easy for the second generation to have the truth in the head, yet not in the heart. We may have all these truths on our bookshelves, for they can now be purchased for a few dollars. But it is one thing to pay out of the pocket, quite another to pay for it out of the soul. It is one thing to get truth into our heads, another to get it into our hearts.

There was a time when the Spirit of God sounded the midnight cry, “Behold the bridegroom cometh.” With what power it took hold of souls and brought them out to meet the bridegroom. How near was the glory! How dear the Lord! And how insignificant all the world became!

What blessings the Spirit of God has revealed: a glorious Christ at God’s right hand, a heavenly church, and all the precious truths that flow from and are connected with it. Oh! that we may have these truths revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. Those generations who bought the truth have passed on, and we are arisen in their place. Have we had to do with God about these precious truths? Have we been alone with Him concerning them? We cannot follow leaders, except for the example they leave in following Christ. May God stir us to be found searching the Scriptures for ourselves (Acts 17:11), buying the truth (Prov. 23:23), and never letting it slip away (2 Tim. 1:13; Rev. 2:25).

S. Ridout

Glimpses of Christ, Second Division: Judges 3:5-16 (3:5-16)

Now we come to the next part, which is the main division of the book. Here you see the results of not going on to apprehend Christ, of not pressing forward and getting more and more of what is our own in Him. You find here bondage after bondage. With painful uniformity you are told that the people did evil, turned away from God, united themselves with the people of the land, and, as a result, God sold them into the hands of one enemy after another. They are thus brought low and to a sense of their utter helplessness and absolute failure, and departure from God. When there was no help for them, He raises up for them a helper who delivers them.

I want tonight to try to see in each of these enemies, in each of these bondages, what form of evil it represents, what that is not of Christ, what it is that the enemy used that is not of Christ, that is contradictory to Christ, to rob us of what is our own in Christ; and next to see in the deliverer, whom God raises up, what element there is of Christ in him, that enables one when he apprehends it to gain the victory over the power that had overthrown and taken possession of him. You see how these two thoughts fit together; for every one surely has felt, we know, the enemy's power, the power of something that is not Christ. As the apostle says, "Ye have not so learned Christ" It is not merely what the evil is, but that it is not Christ. It is a failure in various ways to apprehend what He is.

Overcoming In Days Of Ruin: Lectures On The Book Of Judges, Lecture 6 (9)

GIDEON AND ABIMELECH:—

THE VICTORY AND ITS SEQUEL

(Chaps. 7:15-9.)

WE now reach the place where we find all this preparation resulting in a full and wondrous victory on the part of Gideon. Everything up to this point has been a slow and gradual work of God in the man's own soul individually, and then in the people's, whom He had gathered about him, in order that they might be fitted to do real work for God. You will always find that to be the case. If God is to be glorified through us, it must be through vessels sanctified and meet for the Master's use. The vessel must be prepared if He is to use it for the display of His own power. Each step in the history has marked and emphasized that. There can be no true service and certainly no true victory where God has not fitted the vessel for His use.

We have seen already how the people were depleted till but a handful remained. We have also seen how God encouraged the faith of Gideon, giving him the final sign which was a sure pledge of victory. It is the message from God Himself, given through the lips of the enemy, a message which shows that this same lesson of weakness which he had been learning in his own soul was that which struck terror into the hearts of his enemies.

There is nothing after all which strikes such terror into the heart of the enemy, as to see a sense of weakness amongst God's people. There is an old couplet which, with certain modifications, is true,

"Satan trembles when he seesThe weakest saint upon his knees."

His being upon his knees would indicate a sense of weakness, and it is only through weakness that there could be anything like strength from God. And so this cake of barley bread, uncouth simile as it seems to be, is that which witnesses of God at work, and man's utter helplessness. Here is that which speaks of the greatest poverty, of the greatest weakness,—barley. And it is a loaf of barley bread, tossed over into the camp that is going to destroy the whole power of the enemy. It is no wonder that Gideon could take courage when even out of the mouth of his enemies he finds the knowledge of the weakness of God's people; the knowledge of a weakness that has cast them upon Him, is a pledge of His victory. If I am strong, then it is simply myself that Satan has to meet. If I am weak and cast upon God, it is another matter. He knows whom he has to meet, the Lord of hosts; and that is a very different thing from meeting self-confident men, whose strength is their shame. Little wonder is it that Gideon bows in worship as this is made clear to him.

Now we come to the victory, which is easy, after these preparatory steps have been taken. It is an easy thing to do the work after our own coward hearts have been overcome. It is not hard to face the world, when we have faced ourselves. It is not hard for me to stand out against spiritual foes publicly, when I have already gone through the conflict in my own soul, and am before God, as having judged myself. I am then ready to judge others.

But still the lesson is emphasized again in that which is very familiar to us, but which must not on that account be overlooked. I mean the actual character of the warfare. They were divided, these three hundred men,—as if even that number was too great to be trusted together—into three companies. These are all armed alike and in a strange way. They had no sword in their hand, or bow, or spear; nothing but pitchers, earthen vessels, in which was a light concealed, and in the other hand a trumpet that was to tell out the note of victory.

There were lights in the pitchers. “God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shined into our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." God has shined into the earthen vessel; that is the light. God is light, and the grace of God which has been made known to us is the light that has shined in our hearts. But it has shined in our hearts, in order that we may let it shine out. But here you have the pitcher whole, with the light down in it;—and therefore the pitcher conceals the light. There is nothing to do, as we find here, but to break the pitcher, and then the light is unhindered in its shining out. The only way to let the light shine out is to break the pitcher. And you can understand that the more valuable the pitcher is, the less likely it is to be broken. And the more you realize that it is an earthen vessel, in which you hold the treasure, the more ready you will be to break it, in order that the treasure may be exhibited.

Beloved brethren, that is the lesson that we all know so well, and may I say, that we all practice so little? The lesson of breaking the best thing that you have. The taking of your vessel, the breaking of self in all its forms, and all its excellence, self with all the preparation and care that has been put upon it, self that is so tenderly handled. This self has now become the recipient of the grace of divine light. God has shined into the heart, now what are you to do? It is a question between the light, that has shined in, and the vessel that contains the light and may hinder it from shining out. The vessel has received the light. That is what grace has done, and the same grace exhibits itself through a broken vessel.

As long as there is no light, I do not wonder at the sinner holding his earthen vessel as very dear. A man does not want to waste what he has. He is in a scene boasting in its own excellence, and all that; it is all he has got to boast about, why should he not boast in it? Now here is something else which has shined in the heart. The excellency of the knowledge of the glory of God has shined, in the power of the Holy Ghost. That at once raises the question, which is to be exhibited? Is it now the vessel that is to be exhibited, or the glory of God? And so we are brought face to face with the question that either our vessel must be marred, or the divine glory shining through us. What can we do? God's glory is filling your soul, with the sense of His love and grace, of all that He has given in Christ. What do you think of yourself now? What do you think of yourself? Why you think of yourself, if grace really has taken possession of you in that way, as simply wanting to obliterate yourself, and get it out of the way. And the best way, the most effectual way is not to take your light out, so to speak, and to set the pitcher carefully to one side, to be used again, but it is to break the pitcher, and that is the end of it. That is what faith will do. It will break the earthen vessel, in order that the excellency of the power may be seen to be of God and not of ourselves. That is all there is to it.

Oh this self; why is it that God's people have no power over the world? This wretched miserable self. I was much struck, some time ago in reading the seventh chapter of Romans, to see how many times the first person is there spoken of, "I," " me," "my,"—forty times! Surely that was a vessel enough to prevent the light from shining out. You do not see any light shining out in the seventh chapter of Romans. “I” beclouds it all. There is nothing to do therefore as the apostle shows us, but to reckon ourselves dead. That is the practical end, the breaking of the vessel. Now it will be seen that the excellency of the power is of God.

What a comfort that is. Who can think of meeting all that we have to face in our own strength? I do not wonder, if the Lord's dear people are care-worn, oppressed with fear, when they think of meeting all kinds of things in their own strength. But, if you trust God, are alone with God, and just learn from Him that all He wants of you is to be a broken pitcher, with no strength in you at all, that is a comfort, and one is ready at once to blow the trumpet when the vessel is broken.

The apostle, in the fourth chapter of second Corinthians, is evidently making use of this history of Gideon. I have already quoted the part referring to the light; the remainder of the chapter is an illustration of how the pitcher is broken, by outward circumstances. There is first, the reckoning of faith by which self is refused, and then all the untoward events,—trouble, persecution, perplexity, even death,—are but the practical breaking of that which faith had already set aside, creature strength. As a result, he is led about in triumph, in Christ. Stones, dungeons, long years of captivity only serve to let shine the excellency of the power of God, the light that no calamity can darken.

I believe that the blowing of the trumpet is necessarily connected with the breaking of the vessel. People may try to blow the trumpet of testimony, that which is God's martial note of victory. But the first necessity, the absolute accompaniment of a trumpet testimony is a broken vessel. The testimony and the breaking of the vessel go together. God does not want the trumpet testimony and darkness. He wants the testimony accompanied by light. He wants not merely words, no matter how powerful the words may be, no matter how true and clear they

may be, no matter what trumpet ring of victory there may be in the words. He wants more than words. He wants the broken vessel, in order that the light may come to the front. Trumpet and light, testimony and life, as in Philippians. “We shine as lights in the world, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, holding forth the word of life." “We shine as lights." There is the light shining. “Holding forth the word of life," there is the trumpet testimony, that accompanies the light. The world cannot stand that. It cannot stand the feeblest company of God's people holding forth the word of life, and they shining as lights in the world.

Therefore, you find that all that Gideon and his friends had to do, was simply to stand out boldly with their light, with their trumpet sounding. They proclaimed, "the sword of the Lord and of Gideon," and Midian turned every man against his fellow, the army melted away. That mighty host fled like a flock of frightened sheep before the irresistible power of God. We, too, can put to flight the armies of the aliens. We, too, can be made strong out of weakness and wax valiant in fight, if we learn this lesson in our inmost souls. May it be a practical reality for us.

We come next to what, alas, gets only too common, as we go on with our book, and that is the strife connected with the victory, and in a sense growing out of it. The people flock to the victory, just as they will, whenever individual faith has opened the way, and it is a comfort to think that this is the case. We saw the same in Ehud's case when he blew a trumpet Israel was gathered together after him. But first he had, single-handed, to slay the king of Moab. So here, when the battle has been won, and the enemy put to flight, the rest of Israel gather together, and join in the pursuit; Gideon, in fact, sending messengers to show them that he does not want to have the credit, if we may use that word, of the victory himself. He sends messengers to Ephraim, to go down and take the fords of Jordan, in order that they may obliterate the enemy entirely.

Here is where jealousy comes in. There is none on the part of Gideon, but Ephraim shows his envy of the man of faith. You remember, away back in the book of Joshua, that Ephraim began to show this jealousy as a tribe. Joshua was of the tribe of Ephraim. Though as leader of all Israel his tribal connection was not prominent, yet, no doubt, Ephraim's pride was fostered by it. When the tribe got their portion, they objected to it. The reason why, they said, was because they were a great people, and they had not a sufficiently large portion for themselves; they being such a great people. That is the lesson that Ephraim teaches all through his history. He is a great people. But Gideon was not a great man, and you will find that a man who does not realize, who does not feel that he is great, is not going to be drawn into conflict with a great people.

Joshua's answer to Ephraim at the time we have referred to was a significant one. He says, “if you are a great people, go up into the mountain and hew down for yourselves. You are a great people. Go up and overthrow the enemy, with his chariots of iron." Let your greatness be shown in work, not boasting. That was his answer to Ephraim then; but from that time on, the tribe of Ephraim was always jealous as to its position in the nation of Israel. It always envied those who did anything for God. We find them repeatedly putting themselves forward all through Judges and in David's time till the jealousy bore its proper fruit in the division of the kingdom.

No doubt the tribe had received as a cherished tradition, the promise that Ephraim the younger should take precedence over the elder Manasseh. So it would be specially galling to see the initiative taken by the feebler tribe. But God's ways are the opposite of ours, and all excellency and pride of man must be humbled. In fact, Ephraim's precedency is an illustration of this, for he was the younger, and so when he was put over the elder, as Reuben the first-born was displaced, it emphasized God's sovereignty, which exalts the lowly and abases the high.

But now this has become a recognized fact, and Ephraim counts upon his headship as a right. Manasseh, on the other hand, answering to his name, is the figure of one who does not dwell in the past, but “forgetting " that, presses forward in the energy of a present faith.

If we look more deeply, too, we will see the far-reaching spiritual lesson to be learned from Ephraim's envy. He stands for fruitfulness in the child of God. We might say, in a general way, for works. But works can never lead, they follow. Judah, praise, must ever be leader—praise based on and flowing from the truth of God and His word.

But how easy it is for works to seem the more important. It is the strife of Martha with Mary, that which is so common in the Church today. Especially where faith has waned, will works be considered paramount, and thus exalted from the place of service to that of rule, which they can never occupy.

Wherever self is put forward there is jealousy, discontent and uselessness. The lesson of Gideon is self put aside; the warning of Ephraim is self put to the front, and so they chide with Gideon, and ask why they were not called up to do the fighting and to overthrow the enemy from the beginning. Gideon might very properly have replied, “the enemy is a common enemy, and had overwhelmed the whole land. Why did not you overthrow him? Why did not you drive him out? God raised me up to do it, and I have through His power done it. But why did not you do it instead of finding fault with one who has?"

Do you know anything of the spirit of discontent, of envy and jealousy, dear friends? That cannot bear to see God use others. Paul had not one particle of that.

When the gospel was preached, no matter by whom, Paul could rejoice at it. And when Christ was preached, even of contention, not in sincerity, he could still thank God that it was Christ that was being preached, for in some way or other God would get glory out of it. Here is Ephraim, though, they are just simply jealous, because God had used a more spiritual instrument than themselves. Jealousy is a proof that God cannot use you.

If you are jealous of another, if you are envious of the spiritual state, spiritual power of another, it is simply the proof that God cannot use you. You would not be jealous of another, if God could use you; and the thing that jealousy teaches first of all, is to go on your face in the very dust, and own to God that you are not a faithful instrument. The man who envies his brethren, should rather criticize himself. That is what Ephraim should have learned, but did not.

Yet we see Gideon in grace speaking to them in a way that showed he had learned his lesson from God. How good it is to take the lesson I have learned from God, and apply it to my relations with my brethren. What a blessed thing it was that Gideon could turn around to them and say, "what have I done in comparison of you; are not the gleanings of Ephraim better than the full vintage of Abiezer? God has delivered into

your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and what was I able to do in comparison of you? Then their anger was abated toward him, when he said that." That seems a rather sad way to cool their anger—to praise them; and yet it shows the un-jealous spirit that Gideon had. He had not fought the enemy, he had simply in his weakness proclaimed the power of God; he had not done any great thing himself. He had set himself aside. Ephraim had taken the fords, and had captured the princes. In God’s sight surely Gideon’s work was far more valuable than Ephraim’s, and yet in his own sight, dear brethren,—mark that,—in our own sight, our service is less than that of others. A beautiful lesson we learn in this dear man, whom God had raised up for His people—a self-emptied man.

Nor must we think it was mere flattery in Gideon. He sincerely believed it, and set at its real value the work of Ephraim. He does not touch the point that he had taken the initiative. I suppose one who was so near to God had in a sense so far forgotten himself that he saw only God. How good it is when self is eclipsed.

Nor is it wise or right to depreciate the work of Ephraim, Oreb and Zeeb—" Raven " and "Wolf "—the princes of Midian had fallen at their hands at the fords of Jordan. These names suggest the destructive character of that world whose "prince" spares not. But the fruits of the Spirit overcome the hosts of this world, and the "principalities and powers" who lead them. When “works " are in their true place—at the Jordan, the river of death—they do their work most effectually.

But the Manassite cannot linger, but presses forward, to make a complete victory. He crosses over Jordan, and follow after the fleeing host, "faint yet pursuing." What is the connection between theme two words? I think we might almost read it, "pursuing them, because faint." It is still “out of weakness made strong." It is the very faintness and helplessness of the man that leads him to press on, for it is God who is working in him. Like one of the old worthies, in David's day, whose hand clave to the sword, Gideon has lost sight of all but God and will never rest till he has overthrown the whole power of the enemy.

In bodily weakness, he asks the men of Succoth and of Peniel for food. They were Israelites, and those who were to share in the victory, but oh! the shame of the answer that the men of Succoth and Peniel give. What a contradiction to their names. Midian, you remember, is the world and its power, and Succoth means "tents;" it is a pilgrim word; and surely men who dwelt in tents ought to be perfectly willing to help to overthrow the power of the world. And Peniel means "the face of God." Men, who are looking upon the face of God, surely would be ready to give all assistance to take captive the kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna. How their conduct gives the lie to their names. But both of them reply, "Are these men in thy hands, that we should tell thee."

They mock Gideon, and so you find that he had no gentle words for them, as he had for the men of Ephraim. It is a very different thing. Ephraim had taken the field against the enemy, but the men of Succoth were holding were holding back, and were really on the side of Midian. No one can be neutral in a time when the lines between Christ and the world are dawn. "No one can be neutral without being on the side of the enemy. "He that is not with me is against me," says the Lord. So these men were really as much the enemies of God as Midian; more the enemies, because they were the professed people of God.

But he goes on without their help, and God gives the whole host of Midian, and Zebah and Zalmunna also, the kings, into his hands, and he executes judgment upon them.

To Gideon belongs the honor of destroying not the princes merely, but the kings of Midian. I suppose there being two would suggest the duplicity, the variety there is in the world, and the varied forms in which Satan presents himself.

Zebah, “sacrifice," would in this connection suggest not, of course, the way of approach to God, but that " slaughter" which the world delights to inflict on the people of God, without mercy, as Zalmunna, " shade," or " refuge denied " would intimate. Therefore, upon them would be visited a like slaughter without mercy to shelter: “For he shall have judgment without mercy that hath showed no mercy." This victory over Midian is made the pattern for the final overthrow of Israel's enemies, both in the prayer of the suffering remnant (Psa. 83), and in the accomplishment as predicted by Isaiah (chap. 9:4).

After this, Gideon returns to those false people of God. People who professed to belong to God, and yet were neutral in a day like that. He takes the briars of the wilderness to teach the men of Succoth. The briars and thorns speak of the curse that has been brought upon this world because of man's sin.

How many of God's people get lashed with the briars and thorns of this life, because they are neutral in the question between Christ and the world. Do you occupy a neutral place between God and the world? You will get the thorns on your back. You will be taught by thorns, if you will not be taught by the word of God.

How many a blighted life, how many who should be pilgrims dwelling in their tents, have in reality to be taught by the thorns and the briars of life which they have brought upon themselves. What a bitter way to learn—instead of beating out the wheat and being fitted as the Lord’s instrument, to learn by sad experience and alienation twin God. And so these men reap the result of their own folly in this time of neutrality.

The enemy thus is fully overthrown, and Gideon, the hewer down, has hewed down the high things that exalted themselves against the knowledge of Christ. He is a mighty victor. We have one more part of his life to look at, and that is a sad one. “Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou and thy sons, and thy sons' sons, for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian. And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my sons rule over you. The Lord shall rule over you." There was a constant tendency in Israel to have a visible ruler, someone like all the nations, who would lead them forth to battle, and reign over them in times of peace. That desire at last was gratified when Saul was put over them. Here you have the budding out of that desire in the wish that Gideon should rule, but he had learnt too much of God's authority to usurp authority for himself; and it is beautiful to see that the man who had been belittling himself all along continues to do so, and refuses to take the throne that had been vacated by Zebah and Zalmunna. For, brethren, if one is going to be king, he is going to take the place of the world's king. If one is going to rule the people of God, he is not going to take Christ's place, and be Christ's representative, but he is going to take the place of Satan, and be his representative. And I think that Gideon in a certain sense realized that the only throne which he could occupy would be the throne vacated by Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian, and he would not be a king of Midian over God's people, a worldly ruler. God shall be their king, he says.

If Israel had always remembered that God was sufficient, and that He alone should have been their king, how many bitter lessons it would have saved them. But they did not remember, and so they were willing for Gideon and his son, and his son's son, to be their rulers for all time. Gideon has faith to decline it, and refuses to have either himself or his son ruling over them. But in a little while it crops up again, and the very thing which the people desired is what they get a little later on.

But we come to something else that Gideon could not stand. I suppose one of the greatest temptations with men is the desire for power. There is one thing greater, and that is the desire for privilege—outward nearness to God. Something different from that which is enjoyed by anybody else. Gideon asks for the gold that had been gathered as trophies from the defeated enemy, and out of it he makes, not exactly a golden calf, as Aaron made of the gold that had been brought from Egypt, but a priestly ephod.

The ephod would be a witness that he was in a place of exclusive and peculiar nearness to God. If you trace it back, you can easily see how, if he had not judged himself, and kept himself in a low place, the very fact that God had been dealing with him so closely, would give him a sense of special nearness to Him, a sort of priestly position. He already had his altar, and God had already told him to offer a sacrifice upon it. More than that, he had brought out, at the very beginning, a special sacrifice which God had accepted. Were not these indications that God wanted him to be priest for the people?

After all, he might reason, was not the greatest sin of the people apostasy from God? They did not so much need a civil as a religious ruler, one that would maintain them in relationship with God. Thus Gideon might deceive himself and think that he was doing only what was God's will, to bind the people more closely to Him, by a visible priest. He would thus be forgetting that God had a visible priesthood on the one hand; and on the other, that the subtle attraction of idolatry in that golden ephod was even stronger than the desire for priesthood itself on the people's part.

Let us put it practically: you have had a low time before God; He has brought you down and has made you learn the nothingness of yourselves; He has broken the earthen vessel to pieces, and you have had a wonderful, an amazing experience—an experience of nearness to God, which other people look upon with wonder. They say, He has had a wonderful season with God; he has been alone with God. He must be a wonderful man. Ah, brethren, there is the snare—that you think you occupy a place of special priestly nearness to God, and that you want to be now in some sense a go-between between those whom, perhaps, you may have led in victory, and God who is their King. You refuse the kingship, but you want the priesthood.

I am persuaded that the rise of the clerical spirit, the distinction between the clergy and the laity amongst the people of God, has been not so much a question of spiritual authority, as it has been a question of spiritual priesthood. In the clerisy of the day, which we see all about us, it is more the office of the priest, in spite of refusing the name, than it is any spiritual authority and rule. Let me illustrate it in the simplest kind of way. Here is the Lord's Table, with the emblems of His Body and Blood upon it. Where will you find, dear friends, the simple untutored Christian, who would not shrink with horror from the thought of a layman breaking the bread and passing it to the people of God? That is the minister's work, the clergyman's work, and no un-ordained man should touch it. In that thought you have the element of priesthood just as clearly as you see it in Rome, where the priest consecrates the wafer and dispenses it to the people.

That marks the rise and growth of the priesthood. It is a spiritual leadership which the people are willing to recognize, and a special nearness to God, which will do away with the need of all being so near. Thus the great snare comes, which has changed the entire character of the Church, its worship, and its ministry. All Israel went a whoring after the ephod, and so you will find when a special, privileged class of people, perhaps men of special faith, and men that have been specially used of God are recognized, that the danger is to put them in a priestly class of nearness for themselves, nearness to God. Let us apply it to ourselves, brethren. Ministry, ministerial gift, the gift of preaching the gospel, or anything of that sort, has absolutely nothing to do with the ephod. Let us always remember it. Let us remember that the gift has nothing to do with the priestly functions, which belong either to Christ alone, the unique and peerless High Priest, who is ever ministering before God, for us, or, if to any man then to all His people alike without the slightest distinction amongst them. "He hath made us kings and priests."

One verse toward the close of this chapter (8:28) tells how completely Midian was overcome: “Thus was Midian subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted up their heads no more. And the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon." Evidently it was a work of God, far-reaching in its effects, even after the energy of faith which had marked its beginning, had ceased. His enormous family and many wives is not suggestive of that spiritual vigor which is seen in men of faith—even in patriarchal days—and surely Abimelech, son of the concubine, is too closely connected with this grossness to overlook the lesson suggested. Ease and self-pleasing give birth to many a fruitful source of evil later on.

That brings us to the end of Gideon's life. It is important, too, to notice, that while apparently he has set at rest the question of kingship, by raising the question of priesthood, he has actually raised again the question of kingship, as you will see immediately in what follows. How solemn it is to trace these occasions of evil. You find, for instance, that Nicolaitanism which means “conquering, the people," is practically the outgrowth of that loss of the first love which marks the loss, by the saints, of the sense of their priesthood before God. Conquering or ruling, the people is clerisy, but that ruling of the people comes from the loss by the saints of access, to Gods own holy presence.

Gideon dies, and we read in the thirty-third verse what we have so frequently, that one almost wearies of its reiteration, " It came to pass as soon as Gideon was dead that the children of Israel turned again and went a whoring after Baalim and Baal-berith their god, and the children of Israel remembered not the Lord their God who had delivered them out of the hand of all their enemies on every side." Departure from God means too, of course, the continuance of all the wretched fruit of that departure, bondage and degradation. But here we do not seem to have bondage to any power outside. The internal condition is what is dwelt upon.

The priesthood has been developed, but not according to God's order; in fact, entirely outside of that order. Disobedience produces its fruit, and you find now Abimelech, son of Gideon, rising up to take the place of his father. It is not as priest, for the people have turned to Baal and there is no desire apparently for priesthood, so quickly do men depart from God. But he rises as king, and his very name, which was given to him by someone (perhaps by his mother to show his relation to the great man of Israel, and to cover the shame of his birth), shows, therefore, how the subtle spirit was at work whether it found expression or not, “My father was king." That is the very thing that his father was not. His father refused to be king, and said God alone should be their king. And yet here is the son of his father who declares that his

father was king, and, furthermore, in the strongest way declares that his son also is going to be king.

He sets himself to exercise authority over the people of God, and in order to do so he builds his throne upon violence. There must be violence if there is rule of that kind; if there is the rule of man, it must be by violence. Therefore, he slays all his brothers, all the many sons of Gideon, with a single exception. Having thus cut off all rivals, he goes to Shechem, the town of his mother, the town according to nature, which is significantly in that-very tribe of Ephraim, which is always, as you know, reaching out for rule, and gets the men of Shechem to endorse and recognize him as king. Then it is that his brother Jotham, the one who had escaped, propounds his parable, which is most striking, and embodies the whole lesson of this chapter. This parable on rule and government explains all that occurred, and shows what human government always is in the house of God (chap. 9:7-21).

You have in the parable a picture of what government, or rule, is. The tree itself is a picture of government. You remember that Nebuchadnezzar was a great tree, head of the Gentile kingdom. The mustard seed grew into a tree.

The trees of the wood ask for a ruler, and they naturally turn to those bearing. First comes the olive; they ask it to be king over them, and the olive's answer is that of all the other trees, "Shall I leave my fatness, wherewith they honor God and man, and go to we over the trees?" In other words the olive that fruit-bearing is its work, and not ruling. The fig-tree arid vine return the same answer. When we apply the parable to the government of God's people, it is beautifully simple.

Who is going to rule over God's people? Naturally, the saints turn, of course, to the who are bearing fruit to God. Here is one, for instance, who will represent the olive. The olive with its oil suggests energy and illumination, the power and fruits of the Holy Ghost. They say to those who are manifesting the fruits of the Sprit in their lives, "Brethren, do you be rulers." Or, singing out one particular brother, who is full of faith and the Holy Ghost, they say, "You take charge, and be governor of God's people." He says, "Ah, brethren I am too much engaged in the this of God, to attempt to rule His people" "I am too much engaged in the blessed communion of the Holy Ghost, in that which refreshes the people of God, that which is an honor to God (for God is honored and glorified by the fruits of the Spirit in His people), too much engaged with bearing fruit to be a ruler or lord."

The fig-tree represents more particulars all that gracious nourishment and healing which is ministered through fruitfulness to God. The fig-tree producing sweet, wholesome fruit, says, " If I am to rule, I must stop being fruitful and I would far rather provide food 'for the people of God, than I would govern them." And so if the Spirit of God has empowered one in any way to bear fruit that nourishes and refreshes, heals and sustains the people of God,—suggested in the pastor and teacher who would exchange that kind of a place for any preeminence over them as master or lord?

The reply of the vine is only another lesson of the same kind. The vine, perhaps reminds us more particularly of the gospel ministry, that ministry which emphasizes the precious blood of Christ, of which wine is a type. Here is an evangelist, one whose delight it is to hold up the cross, the finished work of Christ and the people say, "He is the right one to rule; give us a good evangelist to rule over and govern us, to take charge of the saints." Ah! He says, shall I leave that which refreshes God, as well as man? Shall I leave that which cheers the fainting heart of the dying saint, brings peace to the guilty conscience, and glory to the grace of God? Shall I give up my ministry of the gospel of His grace for an empty honor of ruling over the people of God?

Who then, is to rule over them? If those who are bearing fruit for God will not be rulers over His people, who really is to be the ruler? Ah, the lesson, dear friends, of government, is the lesson of service, and he rules best who serves best. He is really, practically, a head of the people, who is at their feet serving them; the ones who bring them the precious fruits of God's grace, the olive, the fig, the vine, these are the ones, and the only ones, by their service, who rule or lead the saints of God.

The spirit of rule is the spirit of service. The moment it passes into that of rule merely, it passes away from that of service and of fruit bearing. The moment you get away from fruit bearing, you get emptiness, and that is what you have here. A bramble-bush is elected to be the ruler of the trees, and the bramble's answer is a very significant one, "If I am to be ruler, then you have either got to bow to me, or fire will come out and burn up all the trees, from the cedar of Lebanon, in its height, down to the smallest of them." It is rule or ruin.

What is a bramble but a mere fruitless thing that instead of giving its energy, sap and vigor to bearing fruit, has shriveled up and turned in upon itself? Just as the thorn, it is the curse of the earth, an abortive branch. That which might have, if it had opened out, been a branch and borne much fruit, has shrunk up and centered upon itself. So the bramble, nothing but a thorn-bush, figure of a self-seeking, self-desiring man, becomes now a ruler. This rule is of that character which says, You must bow to me, or be burnt, no matter who you may be.

What a lesson as to what rule is amongst the people of God! How it searches our hearts, as we think of it; how it makes us realize how easy it is to become mere brambles, and to seek a place, not at the feet of the saints, but over their heads. Beloved brethren, he rules who does as Christ did, ministers amongst them. "Whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am among you as He that serveth." Do you want saints to look up to you? Ah, you are a bramble, if you covet that. The people who are looked up to are those who do not take the place, but who are seeking to bear precious fruit for God, and for the blessing of the saints. Let us be occupied with that fruit-bearing in our own souls.

Let us not be seeking a place. Let us not be like Abimelech, wanting to step into the empty chair of some predecessor, which his father had actually refused. Let us not seek to be Abimelechs in any sense of the word. Whether it be one or a dozen, it makes no difference; the principle is the same: wherever there is a spirit of succession, wherever there is the thought that there are certain who are rulers, and who are going to be rulers in spite of anything in themselves or in the saints, rest assured it is the bramble,— simply that which has no fruit for God.

Rule does not talk about itself, about its own dignity and its own authority. Rule is weakness which God takes up, and in its weakness stands for God at whatever cost. This is a lesson that not one of us can afford to overlook. It is a lesson which the Church of Christ has failed to learn, and for that reason has been broken to pieces. It is the great lesson of clericalism in every shape and form, which has come up to mar the peace of God's people.

If you will read the history of God's people from the very beginning, you will find that it is the man-appointed leaders of the people who have made trouble,—those who have intruded themselves into the place of leadership, not of fruitfulness, but of leadership. They are the ones who have brought in the distress and the dishonor to God, and the corruption, alas, that has marred the history of the Church from the apostles' times.

Is it not striking that Abimelech has the name of the Philistine kings? He bears the name that the kings of the Philistines bore, handing down the title from father to son, as also Pharaoh of Egypt. That is the spirit of Rome, the carnal, worldly religion, that must have the ruler named after his predecessor. If there is no succession, there is no rule; and so the very ruler of the Philistines is called Abimelech. “My father was king, and I am king after him." It is the spirit of succession which Rome boasts in; apostolic succession she calls it. Alas, in Protestantism, today, how much of that apostolic succession people will claim too, which, after all, is only the bramble coming up to claim a place of authority.

Why is it that amongst the saints of God a spirit like this shows itself from time to time? Is it not 'because of this forgetting of our priestly place? Is it not because we forget we are all priests, and forgetting that, we naturally pass under this distinction of clergy and laity, until we have it full blown, as you see it in this case?

I will not go into the details; though they are very interesting and profitable reading, and show us how this prophecy of Jotham's was fulfilled to the very letter. Fire comes out from the men of Shechem and consumes Abimelech, and fire comes out from Abimelech and consumes the men of Shechem. The men of Shechem receive a rival to Abimelech. They receive him in a halfhearted way, and then thrust him out to meet Abimelech, who puts him to flight. The men of Shechem are still at enmity with Abimelech, and he is put into open conflict with them, and overthrows them. When they flee to their tower, he brings branches of these very trees, brings the parable of his brother, we might say, and sets fire to the door of the tower, and burns up those who had sided with his rival.

Then Abimelech goes after another man to another city, and there is seeking to do the same thing, to burn out those who had found shelter in the tower, when a woman's hand with a piece of millstone— feebleness using that which is a simple instrument of daily toil, daily humble toil of a weak woman—makes an end of him. She takes the millstone and throws it out, crushing Abimelech, and all his power with him. It is done by the hand of a woman.

Now look at the contrast with Jotham. He cannot join in all this conflict and strife, so he flees to Beer and dwells there. Beer is "a well," and he dwells by the well, while the people of God are in their unseemly strife over authority. He drinks of the fountain of the word of God, from whence alone come sustenance and refreshing.

So, for instance, while bishops have been fighting with bishops, and pope with pope, as to whose pretensions to pre-eminence shall be allowed, the saints of God have been glad to betake themselves to the retirement of the word of God, and there drink of a stream of life and love infinitely superior to all the Abimelechs in the world. As fruitful boughs growing by the well, there has been even something for those who need it; the branches hang over the wall.

We have been speaking of human government and rule. If there is anything abhorrent to God, it is that spirit of human rule. But is there then no government in God's house? Is there to be no authority, or is the thought of authority so repulsive to the people of God? If it is a question of somebody else's authority against mine—the clash of two human wills, the one against the other,—if that is all, you might as well be openly under human authority. But if it be the order and government of God's house, exercised in the power of the Holy Spirit according to the word of God, woe be to those who disregard it.

Why is it that we ought to be so jealous of any human intrusion into the place of authority and government? It is because it is displacing Christ's authority. It, is because if one man takes the place of rule, of leadership, of control, amongst the people of God, he is usurping Christ's place just as really as Gideon usurped the priest's place, or Abimelech the ruler's place.

Christ is the ruler of His people. How does He rule them? By His word by His Sprit, according to His truth. How do we show our subject to Christ, and to His government? Beloved brethren we show it by subjection to His word. People may talk of obedience to Christ, but obedience to Him is Shown by obeying His word. They may talk about recognizing His headship here. We have His precious word, and all the truth that word unfold to us, which is the command of our Ruler and of our Lord. I am to obey that word, whoever brings it to me no matter if he is like the little messenger boy who brings a dispatch which conveys an order from the president to a general on the field. The messenger boy is nothing, but he brings the message, and if the general were to despise the boy so much that he would not read his message, he would be despising the one who sent him. So it is in the house of God. Whoever brings me the word, the will of Christ, a message from Him, the Head and Lord of His people, am I to discard it because I despise the instrument? Ah, I despise Christ if I do that. No, dear brethren, true government means Christ's government, and He governs through His word, and he brings His word to us through any instrument He may see fit to use.

The Lord honors that which is truly government in His house, and He honors it in this way too, that those whom He can use, who are best acquainted with His mind, those who are least in contradiction to that which is the established order of God, are the ones He would naturally make use of for His government.

Pardon me if I speak of something further. I refer to leadership amongst the people of God. There is no question that the leadership of Christ will be more frequently exercised through the elder brethren amongst the saints. That is because it is consistent with God's order. Nature itself teaches obedience to, and respect of those who are older, particularly of parents. And in the family of God it is but right and proper that the order of God should be recognized as far as possible.

But that means, of course, that the elder brethren are abiding in communion with Christ, and can be used as channels for Him to send His messages to His people. It is not because of what they are themselves, but simply because He would make use of that which is according to His order, even in nature itself, to lead and guide His people, but if you see the elder saints amongst the people of God not abiding in Christ, not being filled with His word, not walking in separation from the world, can we expect that the Lord will use such as His instruments? Oh,

how often it must be, I might say, that He is compelled to make use of that which is less according to what He would prefer—youth instead of age—because age is unprepared.

It is a word for our conscience. I am speaking simply of What is abstract and general, but it is a principle if the greatest importance. If we are going to be used of the Lord in bringing His truth to His people, in this matter of the order of His house, we must be in fellowship with Himself. Then there will be necessarily that obedience to, and, that respect of the Word and the authority of Christ; and respect, too, for the one who brings it to us, not because of anything in the person himself, but because we recognize such as watching for our souls as those that must give account. We recognize such as those who are abiding in Christ; therefore, they are giving us not human will, but the will of the Lord Jesus.

I would commend this ninth chapter of Judges to your prayerful study. It is just here where rule goes to pieces. You will find it reasserts itself with a much sterner hand in Jephthah, whom we look at next. You will find that it fails more disastrously under Samson, and finally crumbles into nothingness at the close of the book. Take this ninth chapter of Judges, and see how the spirit of succession comes from that of priesthood, and how this spirit of succession must rule or ruin. It must rule at all costs. That is self-will in the things of God, and see how it brings in anarchy and strife and confusion. Let us learn this one lesson—that we are to bow to the Lord Jesus Christ, Lord of His Church, as well as Head of it, Lord over us all, and whoever is near enough to Him to have His word, we bow to that word, beloved; we bow and own Christ's authority in His house. But there must be a walk with God. Nothing can take the place of that, and where there is that, there will be the fullest rule, the freest exercise of oversight; but Christ will be all.

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