

The BOOK OF JUDGES

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1:1

To the historians of Israel, history was the story of God's dealings with His own people in the context of the experiences of the nations. Their view was spiritual, dynamic and related to destiny. The key thought from the time of the Book of Joshua to that of 2 Kings was that prosperity is found in obedience to the will of God. That meant a keeping clear of all complicity with and contamination by the native Baalism of Canaan, with all its obsessive preoccupation with sex and fertility which led so relentlessly to national demoralisation and disintegration. History for the chronicler of the story of Israel was not static. It had a past and a future, and the present was never thought of as a separate or independent section. The Book of Joshua began with the words, "After the death of Moses," and tells the story of the people under Joshua's strong and noble leadership. Judges takes up the tale after the death of Joshua, for the work goes on. Men come and go and kingdoms rise and wane but the purposes of God endure and go on unchangingly. At the same time we must recognise the vital part played by the human instruments God lays His hand on. Moses made possible the work of Joshua, and he in turn made possible the work of those who followed him. This gives our daily work and our lifetime of work a great significance and brings great responsibility. We enter into the labours of others and pass on to others an inheritance which they must deal with and build on, *if* it is in fact solid enough to be a foundation (John 4:34-38; 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

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1:1-7

It seems strange in some ways that after Joshua's death no human leader of stature was ready to come forward to lead the people and the work. God's ways are not ours and it may be that we have to recognise that mighty leaders are not always an encouragement to faith and to growth in grace. It is all too easy to leave all the spiritual responsibility and burden to one man or to a few faithful souls, and for the rest to take their ease, following on and enjoying the "blessing" but not taking their rightful share of work and responsibility. Such ideas of spiritual limitation were far from the thoughts of the people. Inasmuch as the battle had been fought and the victory won (Joshua 11:23) they considered it was only a matter of "mopping up" the remnants of opposition. But spiritual victories are not so easily established, as many a young minister and missionary have found out to their cost. The "enemy", conquered though he be (Col. 2:15), does not yield his territory without a battle. Judah was to lead the conquest and he wisely sought the help and support of his brother Simeon, for individualism is seldom wise or profitable. Few of us, if any, are that strong! Two are better than one (Eccles. 4:9-10), and the first stage was accomplished with remarkable simplicity and thoroughness. The ferocity of warfare makes us cringe but the generation which has countenanced nuclear warfare and wholesale abortion is in no position to criticise any as being barbarous.

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1:8-21

When we read of the process, and indeed the specific command regarding extermination of the Canaanites, we must realise that we are being taught that sin has no place whatever in the economy of God. It is a hideous, destructive and blasphemous intrusion and faces God's judgment. That is what the Cross is all about. Read Exod. 23:23-33; 34:11-16; Deut. 7: 1-6 and recognise that the warning is to make us aware how easily sin gets a hold. In the stories of the Old Testament if you feel that the saga of the judgment of sin is terrible in its severity, remember that it is the story of barriers being removed so that the way of the Lord might be prepared for the sending of His Son for the salvation of sinners. The story in the whole of this

chapter concerns the various tribes, or sections of the people, setting about God's appointed task to possess the land, and it portrays vividly the effort and slow progress involved. They had God's promise that He would drive out the enemy then in possession (Josh. 1:2-6) and it was in the faith of that promise that they went forward. There were reverses, as a comparison of v.8 and 21 makes plain. It was not until much later, in the time of David, that Jerusalem (where the enemy had his great stronghold) became the place for God's ark (1 Chron. 16:1, 8ff. and Ps. 96). We said there was no clear leader, and that is true.; but Caleb was there, and he too leant heavily on the promise of God (Josh. 14:1-15). Present stature and drive often find their explanation in past dealings with God. We can build for the future or mortgage the future in our dealings with God.

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1:22-36

Good maps, a sense of geography and detailed study are needed to grasp the division and possession of the various territories, and that is beyond the function of these notes This chapter is introductory to the spiritual saga to follow and we must treat it as such. It is permissible and instructive to see in yesterday's passage (13-15) the wisdom and foresight of Acsah, who realised that if a stable and permanent life was to be built then living water was a necessity. Would that all believers considered this aspect of life and service before deciding where they are to make their homes, settle down and live. Think in spiritual terms. Without water life becomes a desert, burdensome and fruitless. The thing to note throughout this passage is the repeated emphasis that the people of God failed to drive out the evil inhabitants of the land. Scripture is clear: it says that they "did not". It was not a case of "could not", for God had given them the land and God does not lead His people into impossibilities. Even in v.19 where inability seems stated (although the phrase could be rendered, "there was no driving out") there is the prior statement that the Lord was with Judah. Besides this, a determined army holding the hills would certainly have the upper hand in dealing with cities on the plain. It seems that the show of strength in terms of "chariots of iron", a new experience of power, demoralised the tribes of God just as the sight of the giants had done earlier in their history (Num. 13:25-33). But the enemy's show of power is a lie. He is not greater than God nor can he ever frustrate God's designs. We must learn to trust and obey, because God is greater than all (1 John 4:4).The fact is that we are never outnumbered (2 Kings 6:11-17) and faith is the victory (1 John 5:4).

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1:22-36

Backsliding is a deep problem because it creeps up on us in our thinking, feeling, attitudes and actions so un-noticeably at times. Without doubt this is the work of the Devil although we must not excuse our own sins of omission and commission. It is all too easy to settle down spiritually. There is no suggestion here that the tribes had any idea of abandoning their God. They would have been shocked by the suggestion. It was a case of incomplete obedience and that for reasons which are not in any sense made clear. It was a failure to go on with God. Now, it is no part of the Christian's calling to be brash and brutal towards those who do not share his faith. But, while we maintain a gracious disposition, we must also retain a clear awareness of total distinctions, else we will soon be "coming to a working arrangement" with people motivated by a godless and anti-Christ spirit. We will then keep quiet about the things that would separate, cause tensions or create difficulties, not to say embarrassments. This is exactly what the tribes of Israel did. That they were aware of their spiritual disobedience is clear from the references to the fact that they made the Canaanites subject to forced labour. But no action is acceptable as a substitute for obedience (John

14:15; 1 Cor. 10:1-5ff.). God's power was toward His people but their hearts were not towards Him. Why? Was it the attraction of the ways or the women of the heathen? We cannot say. We can only watch and pray.

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2:1-5

It is an alarming thing to be confirmed by God in our own specific choices and attitudes, and this is what happened to Israel. God uses great plainness of speech reminding Israel of its identity, its existence by the grace and mercy of God, and its deliberate disobedience. Of course we always say that we were not being deliberately sinful. The answer is that we were not being deliberately *obedient*, and this leads to complications. This is the story of a "spiritual" people. It starts with a generation of men with a living faith and a personal knowledge of God's saving power (the exodus from Egypt). The next generation respects the institutions, attitudes and religious practices of its fathers but does not follow their fathers' living faith and obedience. The third generation, twice removed from living evangelical faith and obedience, sees no reason for continuing with such a radical, separatist attitude, and compromise leads to degeneration and neglect leads to national chaos. Read Prov. 14:34; 29:18. The only hope is repentance and very often the only thing that awakens repentance is national and personal pain. God spoke very clearly to His people, confirming them in their choices and showing them that having sown the wind they must reap the whirlwind (Gal. 6:7-8; Hos. 8:7). They wept, and in their tears may have pleaded that they had not realised the danger. But they had been told that whatever evil they allowed to remain in the area of their experience would be allowed to remain to torment and chastise them. When will we learn to take God seriously? Let those who love the Lord, hate evil (Ps. 97:10).

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2:6-10

We referred in a previous note (1:1-7) to the subtle dangers inherent in a situation when a mighty leader carries a nation forward, and this same message is emphasised here. So long as Joshua and his colleague elders lived among and led the people, Israel kept to the ways of the Lord. But as soon as their immediate personal influence was gone, the spiritual deterioration became manifest in a practical sense. The decay did not begin with Joshua's death. There had been spiritual declension for a time but it had been concealed by the people's conformity to outward obedience. Backsliding begins in the heart and mind, and no one may guess at it for a long time. But in given circumstances of opportunity or removal of restraint, it will manifest itself and proceed at an alarming rate, as the next passage will make plain. Today's verses are almost identical with Josh. 24:28-33. If Joshua was about 80, the same age as his colleague Caleb (Josh. 14:7), then he lived thirty years after the conquest of Canaan. This was a tremendous blessing to and opportunity for Israel to consolidate its spiritual advance. But "long ministries" do not always leave a solid inheritance behind them. The human heart being deceitful, the primary things of spiritual life and service can slip away from the heart (Heb. 2:1-3; cf. Acts 20:28-31; Phil. 2:19-21). There arose a generation that did not know the Lord, His Word, or His works (cf. Ex.1:1-8 ff). How this came about we cannot tell but the story urges us to be right and to do right, if not for our own sakes then certainly for the sake of our children and their children after them.

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2:11-15

The story is told of the man who said he was returning to church after long absence because his son was bereft of his grandfather's faith and now bereft of his father's morals. There must

have been men like that in Israel and they may well have constituted the remnant of faith who began to pray when they saw what was happening to the new generation. Of course the older generation had to accept responsibility. They had temporised with sin and with false religion, failing to see the danger to themselves and failing to recognise the hypnotic and spiritually deadening effect it would have on the rising generation. This is all very contemporary and must make the evangelical church take stock. Think of how we have become careless regarding personal holiness, evangelical witness, God-centred worship dealing with the whole counsel of Scripture, Christian entertainment instead of worship, and easy use of the Lord's day for work, travelling, business and even pleasure (Isa. 58:13-14). Think of the concessions we grant ourselves regarding relationships and of how increasingly materialistic and "this-worldly" we have become. The problem is spiritual at heart and is in fact a departing from God. It grieves God, draws His displeasure, and leads to practical complications personally and nationally, in which people start out on their chosen courses only to discover that God is no longer with them. In fact God's hand is against them. Nothing less than this will curb the proud wills of men who have grown spiritually blind. It is very solemn.

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2:16-23

It is all totally reasonable and the marvel is not the hardness of God but His compassion and forbearance in the face of such an intractable disposition. Judgment is indeed God's "strange work" (Isa. 28:21). The heart of the Almighty was moved deeply both by the sins of the people whom He had redeemed and by their pitiful cries and groanings in the midst of their painful situation (cf. Gen. 6:5-6; Ex. 3:7-10). God delivered the people from their predicament time and time again but the moment the pressure was off, and as soon as the human instrument of God's influence (the Judge) was gone, they went back to their old ways with a rapidity and enthusiasm which is very revealing. In their difficulty they reacted against the evil which was hurting them, but this is not repentance, rather self-interest. They had created a situation which they now found too costly. They were sorry it had happened this way, and they wanted out of it. But their sorrow was for their suffering, not for their sin, and that is why as soon as life was easier they had not much appetite for this business of "crying to God". Cf. 2 Cor. 7:8-11; Ps. 119:67, 71. In any crisis or season of pressure, self-interest will call us to restrain our evil propensities and inclinations. But this is not putting away the evil things from our lives. It is simply a matter of postponing our indulgence to a more opportune time. This is not only trifling with God, it is making use of Him to provide us with circumstances in which it will be safer for us to sin. This is sin indeed.

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3:1-6

The best comment on this passage is found in the last verses (19-23) of the previous chapter. Israel did not change as the result of God's dealings with her. She had "experience of God" but did not turn to God. This is important to note because there are "conversions" which are no more than psychological reactions to the consequences of sin. In like manner there can be a "turning to the things of God" which is no more than a compensation in conscience for wrongdoing which has disturbed both mind and heart. This is not the same as "choosing God", and only the passing of time and the establishing of attitudes indicating a God-ward life-choice can prove and confirm the true spiritual condition. In this situation God was active. He was angry with His people and He did three things (2:21-22). He held back the blessing He wanted to give; He allowed enemies to blight His own people; and He allowed things to reach an agony of sorrow. All this He did to test their hearts and to train and prepare

them for whatever share they *might* yet have in the future of His work. This was in *their* interest. God already knew their hearts, for nothing is hid from Him. The people needed to be discovered to themselves and to be brought to a position of real choice and commitment to God. This involved being shown by the pressures of life itself the folly of sin, its hideous anti-God nature, and how costly it makes the way of the transgressor (Prov.13:15 AV). All this was necessary also to show Israel that the essential nature of her life and calling was spiritual warfare.

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3:1-6

We will never make sense of Christian life and service unless we recognise the existence and operation of an organised kingdom of evil. The world context of our experience is evil (1 John 5:19) and the nature of that experience is warfare against the well laid stratagems of the principalities and powers of the spiritual kingdom of evil (Eph. 6:10ff). While we must face evil in all its stark reality and its personal nature, we must not be afraid of it, for the working of God allows for and incorporates the emergence and enmity of evil, and no panic measures must be sought, as we are taught in the parable of the (weeds) tares in Matt. 13:24-30. But this confidence in God will never be ours unless we recognise in a radical way the fundamental difference between faith and unbelief, between the people and work of God and the people and work of the Devil. This is what Israel failed to do in their intermingling with the evil nations and with the concessions they made to these evil kingdoms. It is never useful or constructive to be "soft" with sin or Satan. Joshua's generation had fought the spiritual battles to win the land and establish the work, but the new generation had no such experience of battle and consequently no real appreciation of the distinctions and demands of true spiritual life, service and worship. It is not necessarily a good thing to come into a work after it has been established. It is too easy to become careless (5-6) and when we "accommodate" our Christian lives to the prevailing atmosphere we are in trouble.

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3:1-6

We must be clear that Israel knew full well that she was doing what was wrong and what had been clearly forbidden by God in Ex. 34:10-16 and Deut. 7:1-5; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-18. But it cannot and did not stop there, for there is a natural attraction and inclination which draws alien strands of life and religion together in a pattern of accommodation which will always have a downward tendency. The ungodly have neither the capacity nor the desire to rise to the "heights" of the godly, and therefore if any semblance of "living together" is to be maintained the godly must yield and adjust, downward. Note the progression. First there was failure to drive out the foe, then there was intermarriage, and finally there was the adoption of their gods. There seems to have been a fascination, a powerful attraction, exercised by these pagan deities, and possibly the novelty of the practices of their worship appealed to the more sternly brought up Israelites who had been nurtured on the Ten Commandments. The exact nature of the worship of the Baals and the Asheroth need not be discussed but it certainly had carnal, indulgent, sexual and sensual elements and it is in these realms that the urge for novelty is both powerful and destructive. We need the New Testament exhortation to guard against the promptings and blackmail of the flesh which wars against the soul (1 Pet. 2:11). We also need to be told that there is no need whatever to yield to the turbulent inclinations of the flesh. It is a lie of the Devil that life and fulfilment are found only in capitulation. But Israel was enticed, and being already somewhat "soft" spiritually because of lack of warfare, was only too willing to be tempted. The heart is not only deceitful (Jer. 17:9), it is treacherous.

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3:7-11

This section gives the formulation of the pattern which is repeated with monotonous regularity throughout the Book of Judges. There are three points to note. Israel forgot God, to whom they rightly belonged and by whom alone they lived. No doubt they still believed in God but for all practical purposes He ceased to be in their thoughts (Ps. 10:4). They did not choose to retain God in their knowledge (Rom. 1:21ff). For personal reasons it was no longer convenient to have God around in any practical sense. Perhaps they felt they had advanced spiritually in such a way that they did not need to be tied to God quite so much as formerly. The second point is that evil, having once been set in motion, gets out of control and there is no predicting its development. We have here the ingress of even greater powers of evil than were already operating in Canaan. "Each door of sin and disobedience entered leads to another," and, since we cannot estimate what it will be we cannot prepare to cope with it. Evil multiplies and extends, and since there seems to be an irrational element in evil there is no saying what it will do next. Yet it is plain that the operations of evil are directly under the control of the Lord. This is not an indiscriminate international situation. God is at work. The final thing to note is that this was no short sharp rebuke but a servitude of eight years. God takes His time and the passing of years does not deter Him. Of course, if Israel had been quicker to learn and come to repentance, so much time could have been saved. Do not fail to see that God chose corrective chastisement rather than judgment (2 Pet. 3:9-10; Rom. 2:4-5).

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3:12-31

Some people never learn, and the short memories of communities and nations are not only a problem, they are a snare and delusion. People have no justification at all for the attitude that "it won't happen again." That is spiritual and moral nonsense. Given the same spiritual provocation, the same spiritual judgment will come. God does not change. The land had rest for forty years and that is plenty time for a stupor of carelessness and indulgence to settle on the people. At v.12 it is perhaps best to think of a gradual building up of the situation, a refusing by the people to heed God's cautionary words and disciplines, and then the major crisis comes. How long does God wait and by what criteria does He judge the time ripe? We cannot tell. What we are told is that God strengthened Israel's enemies because of Israel's sins. Apply this to the world situation in which the powers of Islam and Communism are strong against the work of the Christian gospel. Why should this be so? Is it because of the sins of the "Christian nations" and the careless complacency of the Christian church? Note that Israel's enemies here stem from the past. Moab and Ammon are descended from Lot's incestuous dealings with his daughters, and Amalek descended from Ishmael, the son of Abraham who should never have been born. We cannot shake free from past history, as the race troubles of the present day testify. The slave trade, and the greed and immorality of imperialism, to name but two areas, lie behind contemporary tensions. In today's story it took eighteen years before God's people began to stir themselves and to pray with earnest desire.

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3:12-31

In many ways this is a grim story but we are dealing with tyranny, suppression and war as it was fought in these days. History testifies to significant changes in the balance of power brought about by well-planned assassinations, and we are conditioned by television dramas to the picture of the folk "hero" outwitting the powers of the evil king and so delivering his people, bringing them liberty and hope. Our story does not necessarily mean that God

approves or even needs such human devices, however subtle and courageous they may be. God is never implicit in evil, yet He is never absent from any situation, and what we read here is told as being the answer to the prayers of the people for deliverance. Without doubt Ehud's venture gave Israel the psychological advantage, but there still remained the "hard work" part of the deliverance and the army was mustered in the name of the Lord who had given the victory (28). Note how spiritual battles are fought and won only when they are undertaken on the ground of God's sure victory already won. This is very important. We do not fight towards victory but from victory. This is the heart of the whole of Christian life and service. One other point remains. Ehud was left-handed and this may well have caused him to be despised by his contemporaries. Anyone "different" tends to be so devalued. This is a deplorable facet of human nature. Later we shall see that Jephthah was illegitimate, the son of a harlot. God does indeed choose and use the weak things of the world and that "weakness" often becomes the very avenue along which God works His mighty works.

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4:1-10

As the result of Ehud's exploits Israel had rest for eighty years. Then the same apostasy reasserted itself, and there is a suggestion in v.3 that it was a cruel and extreme situation that followed. This grim national predicament lasted twenty years, and we must note this because we are conditioned nowadays to quick if not immediate remedies. Britain is expecting to be out of its troubles within a few short years and even that is counted as a tremendous imposition and a denial of our 'right' to pleasure and comfort. We may have to start thinking in terms of several decades of dereliction, if not actual persecution. The same sober thinking needs to be in the minds of churchmen who are determined that schemes of reorganisation are going to avert the various crises in the life of the church. God takes time. He does not deal in precipitate or "instant" salvations. Part of the situation in Israel, and indicative of the deterioration of the spiritual life of the people, was the fact that there was no man manly enough to come forward to lead the people. Deborah, a prophetess like Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and Anna (Luke 2:36), was acting as judge in Israel. To have a woman so acting was the exception rather than the rule and this story must not be exalted into the main argument for having women elders and ministers in the church. But at the same time God makes it plain that if the men fail to be men, refusing to take their rightful place of leadership and spiritual responsibility then He will raise up women who will do His will and in the doing of it shame the men and make their failure manifest. God's work must be done in God's way, yet He will not allow His work to lapse because of man's neglect.

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4:1-10

The use of a map to identify the persecuting kingdoms would make plain that Israel was indeed "in the midst of foes" and needed to walk wisely. They were not in a position to take chances, nor are we. There is something vigorous and purposeful about Deborah in her direct challenge in v.6. Here indeed is a spiritually minded woman who discerns the pattern of God's working. Barak, in his reluctant response, seems to typify the men in Israel who, knowing that things were serious and called for action, nevertheless remained in an attitude of negative resignation, letting things slide, and hoping that someone would do something. Deborah saw the issue clearly and expected Barak to be equally perceptive, and this must have both encouraged and shamed the man who was now faced with the call of God, backed up with the assurances of God (6-7). The sad thing is that Barak had lost his assurance in God (8) and this is the spiritual deterioration that sets in when we allow unbelief to operate (Heb. 3:12-14). It is interesting that in Heb. 11:32 it is Barak who is spoken of as the hero of faith,

and this may in part be due to the fact that, when confronted by the prophetess, this man evidenced a submission of heart and spirit rather than resentment. It was a big thing indeed for a Jew to submit to the leadership and authority of a woman. But Barak recognised that God's hand was on Deborah; that she was a woman of faith and prayer; and that with her backing and support the work could be done. It is sad that at the moment of recognition and submission, with the opportunity for reinstating his own spiritual manhood, Barak allowed fear to inhibit, and in personal terms he lost out.

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4:11-24

Even if Barak's faith did not rise to trustful obedience without the support of others, it certainly overcame his prejudice, so that he took orders from and was inspired by Deborah (14) who strengthened his hand in the Lord (1 Sam.23:16). Of course, there is always the danger of trusting in the support of a visible, tangible counsellor rather than in the invisible God (cf. 2 Cor.4.18; Heb.11:27). In some ways Barak lived by Deborah's faith, and for this particular crisis such a response was sufficient. But God cannot honour such an attitude, even though he may use it, and in the end of the day, after a signal victory worked by the Lord Himself, Barak had to face the fact that the decisive actions had all been taken by women. "Them that honour Me, I will honour" (1 Sam. 2:30). "If God tells you to go alone to a work, be sure and obey Dare to stand by yourself if God is with you Yet if you are unbelieving, your unbelief cannot make God's faithfulness of none effect. He abideth faithful. He cannot deny Himself. He will still deliver Israel." (F.B. Meyer. cf. Rom. 3:3-4) We do not close our eyes to the deception and breach of Eastern hospitality of which Jael was guilty. It is never right to do wrong (Rom. 6:1ff). But compare Rahab (Joshua 2:1-16) whose actions were natural to her life and culture. We cannot and must not expect unreasonable standards from those who have not the full shining of the light of God's truth or who are only novices in the ways of God. Don't set higher standards for new converts than is reasonable. Since we have been forgiven so much, do not be harsh with others (Matt. 18:23ff.).

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5:1-11

This song is poetry not prose and must be read as such. Its purpose is not to gloat over the defeat of an enemy but to give glory to God. Barak's name is linked with the prophetess's (but in second place) for he did lead the army. Yet the previous chapter made plain that at each decisive stage Barak arrived after the work had been done. It was the prophetic word of Deborah that set the thing in motion. It was God who bogged down the chariots of the enemy in the valley (4:12, 15), as He did at the Exodus (Ex. 14:19-25). It was Jael who finished off the enemy while Barak was still chasing (4:22-23). It was the Lord's doing, marvellous in their eyes (Ps.118:23) and they gave glory to God. This chapter begins by portraying a great storm as God marched out on behalf of His people. But (2) it was when the people were willing in the day of God's power that victories were won (Ps. 110:3 AV). One of the sobering lessons of Judges is to see what lengths God had to go to in order to make His people desire Him. For years they were happy without God being too near, and preferred it that way, until their sins began to find them out and the situation of their own making became a rod of rebuke. Now there is the song of victory because God had turned their captivity (Ps. 126:1). So great was the impact of God's marching that it recalled the thunderings of Sinai when the Law was given (Ex. 19:16ff). It may have been storm and landslide and flood that swamped the enemy chariots (4:15) but it was God's doing. The people had seen grim days (6-8), for travelling was unsafe (Isa. 33: 7-9). Life was dangerous and miserable and there

was neither national freedom nor defence, because courage had gone (v. 7-8; cf. Zech. 7:11-14; Lev. 26:21-22; 2 Chron. 15:1-6; Lam. 1:4; 4:17-19). It was *then* that they cried to God.
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5:12-18

Israel had chosen new gods (8) and the miserable consequences became a tyranny until Deborah arose and by her influence galvanised the men into action. She was a mother in Israel, loving, caring, suffering, teaching, praying, holding the family together and out of a godly heart, by prayer, precept and example bringing up her children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Who can ever measure such influence which is long-term indeed? Little wonder she sang this song when she saw revival emerging from repentance which began in affliction. She saw of the travail of her soul and was satisfied (Isa. 53:11) and she was indeed a judge or saviour of Israel. But such an awakening unto life brings individuals and groups to judgment. There are always those who respond with spontaneous gladness of heart. They are a joy in the Lord. But others are not so. Reuben and his clans (15) thought deep thoughts and had impressive spiritual meditations but their meadow was too comfortable and they never got round to spiritual action, especially the hard graft of battle! Gilead, Dan and Asher were all preoccupied with business matters and the day came when God asked why! Zebulun and Naphtali hazarded their lives for the Lord's cause (Acts 15:26). In the Old Testament, as in the New, there were those who had a name that they were alive and were dead (Rev. 3:1). Remember that opportunity brings responsibility. When God is blessing we need very good excuses if we are to be absent from our rightful place.

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5:19-23

It is clear throughout this story that the battle is not being considered merely as a human one, armies of men against each other. This is spiritual warfare, as v.20 indicates (cf. Josh. 10: 12-14; Eph. 6:10ff) for the powers of heaven fought to break the bondage of the people of God and it was not a narrow margin of victory. Look back to v.12 and cf. Ps. 68:18-20 (which we often sing in the metrical version, "Thou hast, O Lord, most glorious, ascended up on high"). The thought is used in Eph. 4:8, where again the triumph of the Lord is for the blessing of His people. We must constantly be reasserting our grasp on the victory of the Lord, for it is total, cf. Col. 2:15. Now, if God be for us (Rom. 8:31), and if all things are in fact ours (1 Cor. 3:22), who can be against us? We tend to be over aware of the powers of evil ranged against us and not aware enough of the "stars", the natural and spiritual powers of creation together with the angels of God who are ministering on our behalf all the time (Heb. 1:14; 2 Kings 6: 15ff). Note the familiar words of v.21: "March on, my soul, with strength". We have good cause to trust God and to go with Him. But there will always be the startling disappointments, as in the case of Meroz (23). Their sin seems to have been that they were deliberately and provocatively non-co-operative in the midst of the actual battle when it was manifest that God was on the move. A man's day of judgment may come upon him sooner than he expected.

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5:24-31

We have already commented on Jael's actions and now we contrast her with the mother of Sisera. The first woman was involved in the triumphant battles of the Lord and is portrayed as striking a tremendous blow for righteousness and national liberty. That it was successful and productive we do not deny but again, as with modern counterparts, we question most strongly the violence and duplicity involved. Who is ever righteous enough to strike such a

blow? Sisera's mother (like Jezebel in 2 Kings 9:30ff) shows the bland assumption you usually find in evil people. There is no thought of possible defeat and they have a sympathetic, indulgent attitude to the ruthless and carnal activities that were accepted as "normal" in such a life. But even in its anticipation of the fruits of evil victory, the prince and power of evil will be confounded (2 Thess. 2:1-12). It is essential to see clearly that good and evil, right and wrong, God and the Devil are absolute in their opposition and can never be reconciled. The issue as it affects us focuses on where we are to be found. "You that love God, hate evil (Ps. 97:10). But it is in Scripture more than in experience that we see what evil is really like, and for that we need some of the vivid imagery of Revelation 17:1-6; 18:1-10. This is the spirit in which to read the last verse of today's passage. The Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2) rises in invincible glory. It cannot be otherwise, and His people are with Him.

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6:1-10

There is something almost monotonous about the story of Judges in the pattern of sin, servitude and salvation. As soon as life got easy, the people went back to their old sins. Two lessons immediately emerge: the deceitfulness and stupidity of the human heart, and the amazing grace of God that listened for the cry of His people. Of course God spoke plainly (8-10) charging the people with carelessness, presumption and disobedience, reminding them that all the good they had ever had was the result of His sheer grace. But for God they would still have been in the fearful pit (Ps. 40), in slavery to ruthless masters (Ex. 1:11) and strangers to the promises of God (Eph. 2:12). Israel had to learn one of the deep lessons of providence, discovering just what they could become and were in fact becoming apart from God's restraining and saving grace. Israel was brought very low (6) and their abject condition is devastatingly portrayed in v.2-4. They were victims in every sense. Not only was their property rifled, their personalities were demoralised and humiliated. This is what sin does; it never gives, it only takes away and reduces life to misery. The pleasures of sin are indeed for a moment (Heb.11:25); it is the paying for them that goes on for a lifetime. Read Romans 6:12-23 and ask seriously what return or profit you ever got from sinning. God's employment and service pay much better wages.

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6:1-10

Keep in mind that the people of Israel lived among a people of evil and that is why they got so involved with the things of evil. There is always a personal inspiration behind sin and that is why we must not leave out the Devil in our coming to grips with the life of faith. The atmosphere, culture, motivation and spirit of the world we live in are not neutral and if we reminded ourselves of this more often we would not succumb to the subtle pressures of advertising (for example) or to the brasher and baser enticements of so much activity that is, to say the least of it, "fleshly". Neither the world nor human nature is neutral. Consider 1 John 5:19; 1 John 2:15-17; Eph. 2:1-3; Col. 2:8,15; Gal. 4:3,8-9; Jer. 17:9, and remember Satan's technique of presenting himself and his schemes in a way that is as near god-like as he can manage (2 Cor. 11:14). Remember also the pattern of Eden (Gen. 3:6). The eye sees, the mind thinks, the emotions kindle, the will is swayed and the deed is done. Then the complications really begin. Note also, and marvel, that in this decadent situation God had His prophet ready. He was not imported from abroad but grew up and was prepared within the nation, ready for the day of God's significant action. Never underestimate God in His knowledge, preparation and wise ways. Think of how Samuel was born and grew up in a

day of apostasy. Think of how in Manasseh's evil reign (2 Kings 21:9) within one year there were born two significant babies, Josiah (a future king) and Jeremiah (a future prophet). But it is never easy for the small remnant of faith to stand in the evil day.

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6:11-18

How graciously kind and patient is the Lord God Almighty, and how ordinary in His working at times. He finds Gideon at his daily work, a man of natural valour who had become totally dispirited because of life's circumstances. There is just the faintest suggestion that Gideon thought the angel was being sarcastic, and no doubt the man was feeling sorely his, and his people's, humiliation. Something of the essential dignity of belonging to God's people was already stirring in him, and it is good for us to remind ourselves of who and what we are (1 Pet. 2:9-10; Eph. 2:19-20). God is the lifter up of our heads (Ps. 3:3 AV). Gideon's question in v.13 moves from enquiry to criticism and to pronouncement. Now, it is good to look to the past, as the Psalmist did (Ps. 44:1ff) but it must be in faith. We can become fixed on the past and Paul says we are to forget the past, the good as well as the bad, and press on into the future with God, for this is far better (Phil. 3:12ff). Whatever Israel's past had been, the "glory" had certainly departed and some at least knew it, grieved because of it and were beginning to awaken to repentance and hope. But this can sometimes be accompanied by a strange irrational reaction which can be expressed in terms of resentment against God (13). Note that it is not until v.22 that Gideon realised he was speaking with the Lord. God has usually been actively answering our prayers, needs and fears before we begin to notice.

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6:11-18

The angel speaks as the Lord and we are to see this as a "theophany", an appearing of God to man, rather than just a "vision". There is something totally sovereign in this and while it is permissible to "dream dreams and see visions" we must never try to "produce" them. Let God do what seems good to Himself but remember that at various times God chose to make Himself known in this way as "the angel of the Covenant" (cf. Dan. 3:25,28; Gen. 48:15-16; Ex. 33:14; Isa. 63:9; Josh. 5:13ff). It would be a good exercise to take a concordance and look up the many references to the active "angel of the Lord", recognising the existence and ministry of angelic beings, but at the same time seeing that in this story of Gideon it was the Lord Himself who was speaking to the man face-to-face. It was Gideon's weakness and demoralising sense of hopelessness that necessitated the miracle. It was a concession to weakness rather than a token of spiritual superiority. Not even the massive reassurance and promise in v.16 broke through Gideon's hopelessness and yet the Lord did not lose patience with the man. Keep in mind that the people were not totally without the ministry of God's word, as v.8 indicated, and Gideon himself had three personal assurances given to him (12,14,16). Why should there be continuing reluctance? Was the man making excuses? Did he hope that God would change His mind and send someone else? Is it not encouraging to realise that God's mighty men were not and are not perfect?

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6:19-24

Gideon's doubt about himself maintained its power because of his doubt about God, His word and His stated intentions. He asked for a sign (17) but a sign does not always strengthen faith or dispel doubt. The story goes on to tell of further requests for miraculous guidance. Note carefully how devastating was Gideon's reaction to the "sign" of fire. It was darkness rather than light, for he had to be reassured that he would not die. Did he feel all the life and

strength ebbing out of him as he realised he was face to face with God? It was at his own request! It is far better to allow the Lord to decide by what means He will deal with us. Gideon, in immediate reaction to a shattering experience, drew the wrong conclusions and he does not seem to have had anyone to counsel him and lead him to clearer thinking (cf. Judges 13:15-25). Why is it that we tend to impute to the Lord unworthy motives? Does not His patience and care indicate that His plans are full of grace, if we will only take time to consider them and to wait for Him? God spoke peace to His man's heart. Think of Jesus' words in John 14:1-3, 15-18, 27, and Paul's words in Phil. 4:4-7, and in Col. 3:15. God is the God of peace and He can keep us in peace if we let Him (Isa. 26:3-4).

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6:25-27

Gideon had built an altar to the Lord (24) and that is always a good sign because it signifies the repairing and restoring of fellowship with God, cf. 1 Kings 18:30. This is something that is vital before we go out into active service in the name of the Lord to cast down the powers of sin and evil. Gideon had begun to have new and better thoughts about his God and in using the name Jehovah-shalom (the Lord is peace) he would no doubt recall the name Jehovah-jireh (the Lord will provide - Gen. 22:14) and Jehovah nissi (the Lord my banner - Ex. 17:15; cf. Song of Solomon 2:4). God did not wait long to put His plans into operation and that very night Gideon realised that his great crusade of spiritual service had to begin right where he was in his own home. It is amazing how many spiritual problems *and* solutions begin right there because it is there we have allowed things to slide away from God. It may well have been that the spiritual weakness and declension of the home had caused the demoralisation of the son's whole personality and the hindering of his usefulness to and availability for God. The young man was very tentative and there may have been several reasons. He was aware of the influence of the townsmen and perhaps not sure if his father had the strength of will to act against them. On the other hand Gideon may have been acting out of caution, not seeking confrontation with parents, and this is wise. Too many young converts "blast" their families with their new-found spirituality. The Bible says plainly that Gideon was afraid (who would not be in such a venture?) but he had begun to obey. He was going to be surprised.

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6:28-32

There is simply no calculating the beneficial results when the people of God begin to break their involvements with sin and put an end to their spiritual compromise. Gideon had obeyed the Lord and in private had taken his stand on the Lord's side. He must have waited with anxious heart for the reactions that were bound to come in the morning. The men were the first to see what had happened. The altar of Baal and the Asherah (an image or totem pole representing the female counterpart of Baal) had been cast down. Keep in mind the fact that much of the idolatry of that day was exceedingly sensual; sexual indulgence is no new thing and its significance is unchanged down through the centuries: it always goes hand in hand with spiritual declension and brings God's judgment as well as human complications. The reaction of the men was indignation even though their whole spiritual history should have caused their consciences to burn with conviction (Ex. 34:12-16; Deut. 12:1-8ff). By the miracle of God's grace Joash, who seems to have been something of a leader in this "Baal movement", was the first to come to his senses, to a place of repentance, and to a new commitment to God. Remember, as we pointed out yesterday, that there now stood in full view of the people a new altar to the Lord. There is mighty power in the evident consecration of a life. In the night Gideon had stood alone, but in the morning his father stood with him. The Lord's cause had increased its manpower by one hundred per cent and more was to

happen. But at this stage it was a dangerous crisis of faith, for the Devil had been challenged. In the night time, quite alone, Gideon had won the victory after a long struggle; now other men began to stand in that victory. It all has a New Testament sound about it.

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6:33-35

Note carefully in yesterday's verses the wisdom of Joash as well as the courage of newly awakened faith. He did not make excuses for his son's actions against Baal, for that would have given the initiative into the hand of the enemy. This is something we need to watch in certain situations. If we are too concessionary we may well undermine our position and subject ourselves to psychological blackmail. Joash does not say that he will execute anyone who takes action. Rather he is protesting that it would be for them a blasphemous impiety to suggest that Baal was not able to deal with a young upstart like Gideon, and that they should hold their hand and wait to see their god (Baal) and their position vindicated. The fact that no vindication would come upon this open rejection of their god would shake their confidence, undermine their chosen position and leave them open to the convicting and converting power of God. This is in fact what happened, and when the Midianites and their allies came raiding the land, the call went out by the power of the Spirit, and the power of evil was broken in the whole nation. Two further things are to be noted. First, the timing of the whole thing was perfect. The attack by the Midianites was due to come at that time of year (cf. v.3,11). But the Lord was working in anticipation for the times and seasons are in His power (Acts 1:7). We underestimate God! He is never late. The second thing is the matter of the open challenge to Baal. There can be a foolish flying in the face of the Devil which is not faith but rather presumption and carnal, unthinking demonstrativeness which goes beyond the measure of faith (Rom. 12:3). There is a challenging of the Devil that is not wise and serves no purpose in God's scheme of things (Jude 9). Watch and pray.

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6:36-40

Timing is important, and in face of evil we must learn anew the confidence of God. In the parable of the weeds or tares (Matt. 13:24-30,36-43) the servants of the Master were moved by panic firstly because they felt the enemy had stolen a march on them, and secondly because they imagined all sorts of disastrous consequences. They would have launched into ill-considered action which, although it seemed spiritual and dedicated, would have had the result of damaging the crop, hindering the harvest and causing loss to the Master. On that occasion the way to deal with evil was to leave it alone in the assurance that God was and always is greater than evil and compels evil to serve His purpose. The same kind of confidence, quiet and assured, must mark our attitude and actions at the times when evil has to be confronted and put to flight. This is where Gideon hesitated. It may have been that it was the sight of the Midianites advancing that shook Gideon's faith, even though he was "clothed upon" by the Spirit of the Lord (34). The Spirit of God had taken hold of Gideon for a specific purpose; had put him on like a coat so that you could scarcely distinguish between the man and the Spirit (cf. Gal. 2:20); and Gideon was certainly a transformed man. Yet at the same time the story goes on to tell of his continuing doubts and fears, even though there had already been confirmations and vindications regarding God's call, purpose and endowment. This must be considered tomorrow.

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6:36-40

We have to see here Satanic doubt seeking to hinder and misdirect the work of God. Gideon had already had signs, encouragement and support beyond his hopes. Why then this doubt of the specifically stated and confirmed purpose of God (36)? It is the immature and insecure child and not the grown and stable spiritual man who asks and needs constant "signs" to reassure him and to enable him to go on. Those who contest this interpretation point out that the sign was given. Yes, indeed. God came down to Gideon's weakness and accommodated Himself to it, but this glorifies the greatness of God's humility and patience. It does not honour Gideon nor does it excuse his doubting. It does not seem permissible to quote Isa. 66:2 and to speak of Gideon showing the caution of faith which we hinted at in a previous reading. There is a caution that comes from doubt rather than from the confidence of faith. We have often observed with regard to the story in Mark 4:35-41 that the faith of the disciples would have been stronger by far if they had weathered the storm without the miracle. Signs tend to lead to further requests and indeed to a dependence on them (which seems to have a similarity to drug addiction), and certainly in Gideon's case they seem to have left a flaw in his spiritual character which manifested itself sadly and disastrously for Israel later in the story (8:27). It is not wrong to read the signs of a situation, for in the New Testament we are commanded to do so (Matt. 16:1-4; Lk. 21:25-31). We are to use our minds and our understanding (1 Cor. 14:20; Eph. 5:17), rather than our emotions, remembering that ultimately it is the Word of God which must mould, constrain and compel us to obedience (Rom. 12: 1-2; Lk. 16:27-31).

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7:1-8

Signs and wonders do not necessarily lead to faith (John 12:37) and just as Gideon had been putting God to the test (Heb. 3:7-13) so now God puts Gideon to the test. The man's eyes and heart were still too much focused on men, evidences and statistics, and God set about reducing his army to a mere three hundred which, humanly speaking, was a hopeless situation. It was when the armies were virtually set for battle that the Lord spoke indicating that the issue was in danger because of sheer confidence in the flesh. God was concerned not only with this one battle but with what followed, and "human success" could effectively have turned the hearts of the people to "self" idolatry which would have been no better than the earlier "Baal" idolatry. It must have shaken Gideon when two-thirds of his army admitted that their hearts were not really in this "holy crusade". It was best that they should go for they would only have been hindrances. But God was not yet finished with Gideon who had to learn, among other things, that initial spiritual enthusiasm is not necessarily an indication of commitment, capacity or continuance. In the second test most of the men seem to have forgotten that they were in the front line of spiritual warfare, and they allowed their natural thirst to take precedence. If they were thus minded before the real battle began, they would only contribute confusion and distraction later. It was best that both these groups should go for their attitude is infectious. It was necessary also to make the army so small that the victory and its glory would be God's alone. Perhaps big congregations and successful ministries are more dangerous than we think. It is not by might nor power but by God's Spirit that the work is done (Zech. 4:6; 1 Cor. 3:7) and God says that His glory He will not give to another (Isa. 42:8).

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7:9-14

God's dealings with Gideon are searching and the man is challenged regarding his continuing fearfulness. We tend to think of Gideon in terms of that vague phrase "inferiority complex", but subsequent developments in the story, already referred to, seem to indicate a latent spirit of "vainglory", for Gideon eventually made himself a virtual "god" and this seems to indicate that all along he was far too conscious of and centred on "self". This may have originated in his earlier years of personality humiliation by circumstances and may well have become acute in the process of the "lowly" local lad making good and becoming a national figure. One famous evangelist of the twentieth century said with sadness, "There are few men God can trust with power." In today's verses God presents His man with an ultimatum and yet still condescends to his weakness. We must not fail to see the crisis of faith for Gideon. Was he prepared to trust God or had he to see and hear from unbelieving men the things that would set him on the road of obedience? Gideon took the softer option God offered and we see how God, being determined to work His salvation for the people, accommodated Himself to the man's hesitation. This is not to suggest that we should ever go blindly on, prompted by feelings that may well have no reasonable faith in them. There are many "spirits" seeking to influence our ways. There is also a tentative going forward that waits all the time upon the Lord for confirmation, as we see in the story of Jonathan in 1 Sam. 14:6-13. There are times when the obedience of faith requires us to feel our way, step by step, hemmed in by frustrations and denials, as in the case of Paul and Silas in Acts 16:6-10. There are other times when the way is made plain and confirmed by God by numerous indications. To doubt then is indeed disloyalty and to falter is sin.

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7:9-14

The whole point of this story seems to be to confirm to us the mighty, gracious and perfectly timed providence of God who rules and over-rules in all circumstances, as He furthers His perfect purposes (Eph. 1:11; Dan. 4:17; Rev. 9:15; 10:6; 17:17). Gideon must have been astonished by the vastness of the army of the enemy against his mere three hundred but, even more astonished by the conversations he overheard. The dream was being told in the night and not, as is usual, in the morning. The men talking were at the very spot and at the exact time that was right for Gideon to hear. The humble barley cake was as good a symbol of Gideon as could be imagined, but the amazing thing is that the Midianites recognised what it was all about. The enemy was more afraid of Gideon than he was of them. They were persuaded that God was with Gideon, working mightily unto total victory, while the man himself was dithering in doubt. This was a mighty lesson to Gideon persuading him that he was not in charge. This was God's affair and by the power of His sovereign Spirit the work of preparation was totally accomplished and, in the battle, that same Spirit would work in perfect demonstration of the might of that God who speaks and it is done. Read 2 Chronicles 20:1-17 and then recall the Captain of the Lord's host who is ever present to lead the people forward (Joshua 5:13-15).

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7:15-25

His unbelief having been routed, there was little Gideon could do but worship. But bowing before incontrovertible facts is not quite the same as bowing in faith. However, now that the inhibitions and confusions of unbelief had been dealt with, Gideon's capacity as a military commander, strategist and expert in psychological warfare began to operate. He assumed leadership and was not afraid to tell his men to follow and copy him. The plan was set for the

beginning of the middle watch when one lot of sentries would have now lapsed into deep sleep and the new sentries would still be clearing their heads and eyes. The camp of the enemy must have been shattered by the crashing of the pitchers, the blaring of the trumpets and the brightness of the lights surrounding them. Over all this would be the shout of the name of the Lord. The terror and confusion in the camp of Midian was total. There was no cohesion at all and they massacred each other, fled in total rout and were pursued by Israel. The powers of evil had been put to flight and the victory of God set His people free once more. Note how quickly the kingdom of evil disintegrated. Granted there are times when the powers of evil and their human instruments band together in unholy alliance with evil intent, as in the case of Herod and Pilate (Lk. 23:12), but when the time for confrontation comes, evilly inspired men do not stand in loyalty to each other. Evil associations have the seed of their own destruction in them and at times we must stand still in faith to see Hell's strategy falling to bits before our eyes. Of course we must be equipped to stand (Eph. 6: 10 ff) and that is the attitude of faith. Doubt is dangerous. So is complacency, and spiritual blindness is a dangerous disease.

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8:1-3

We are dealing with spiritual warfare and with the advance of God's purposes, and this always involves a revealing or exposing of where individuals and groups stand in relation to God. Ephraim, the leading tribe, was very conscious of having been left out and seems to have resented the fact that Gideon and God had dared to succeed without their assistance. But Ephraim had fallen into spiritual sloth like the rest of the nation and, since they claimed to have prior place, their fall was greater and with less excuse. But even more, God was the one who had chosen Gideon and given him his instructions, reducing his army to a mere three hundred. Ephraim, next door to Gideon's own tribe, had not stirred until it was clear the war was won. They could have volunteered but did not, and they lost out when God worked His victory. They came in *later* at Gideon's summons (7:24-25) and, being fresh, did their part by capturing the two princes of Midian. Gideon flattered them for their "great work" so much more significant than his own dispersing of a rabble army in the night, and Ephraim was appeased *for the time being!* They were trouble makers, as the later chapters of Judges make plain, and people with such a spirit can never be kept sweet for long, not even by flattery and fuss. In this passage Ephraim chided Gideon sharply, rebuking him for not causing their precedence to be proclaimed publicly. Some say Gideon was not in a position to humble their pride as Jephthah did later (12:1ff) and therefore used the soft answer that turns away wrath (Prov. 15:1). But Gideon's strength had been proved in battle. If he had then given glory to God and stood his ground against his mean-minded critics he might not have fallen into the snare that trapped him later in this chapter.

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8:4-13

Gideon had faced the powers of evil and had conquered. Then he faced assault from within the camp of Israel, assault inspired by a wrong and evil spirit of pride. This battle he side-stepped, leaving behind his back men who would yet prove a danger to Israel. Now we see him and his valiant three hundred "faint yet pursuing", determined to see to completion the work God had entrusted to them. The exciting victory had been won but not yet consolidated and it was here Gideon met one of the most demoralising experiences. Many who should now have gathered to his side failed to do so. They were truculent and had no gratitude for the amazing transformation accomplished by God through Gideon. Of course these tribes, east of Jordan, would be the most likely targets for Midianite reprisal if Gideon's victory was not

total and long term, therefore in sheer self-interest they would not take sides. Neutrality and unwillingness in spiritual issues are never good signs and Matthew 12:30 (note the context) is not cancelled out by quoting Luke 9:50. There is a time when alliance with God's appointed man is the basic indication of loyalty to God (Ex. 32:26). The men of Succoth lived in a place of hallowed spiritual association (Gen. 33:17-20) and this highlights their graceless indifference to the needs of their fellows, especially since Gideon did not "requisition" them as he might have done but made only a modest request. The spirit we show in dealing with others is a good indication of the spirit that is in us.

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8:14-21

All spiritual situations have a history. In the settling of the tribes of Israel in Canaan some chose to stay east of Jordan (cf. Joshua 1: 12-18, and chap. 22). Perched thus on the perimeter of the land and its work, these tribes were vulnerable to the influences as well as the attacks of the enemy. Certainly at this time of spiritual awakening they showed their backsliding of heart not only by their refusal to answer Gideon's call but also by their cynical denigration of the man and his work under God. This is never a good sign and always a dangerous attitude, for God is not mocked (Gal. 6:7-8). The only thing for Gideon to do was to see the work through to its completion and then return to confront these leading men publicly before the inhabitants who were under their jurisdiction. This is a strong lesson to those who tend to speak and act scornfully in respect of a work that is manifestly of God. They are not allowed to do their nasty work and then slink away into obscurity when it has been made plain that their words were inspired by unbelief and their attitudes dictated by Satan. Did not Jesus speak of everything secret being made plain and shouted from the housetops (Lk. 12:2-3), and of people giving account of their idle words (Matt. 12:36)? Did not Paul speak of people receiving back the deeds done in the body, good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10 AV)? Remember that there is passive as well as active resistance to God and His work. A negative attitude is a dangerous thing. It usually goes deeper than we realise. Fighting against God has a price, as these men found out, cf. Acts 5:27-42.

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8:22-28

It is a temptation to concentrate on the magnificent words of v.23 spoken by Gideon the successful general (but remember his earlier vacillation) in the face of the adulation of the population. People like a flesh-and-blood spiritual leader, partly because it saves them some of the bother of having direct dealings with God. It is a comfort (but not always a good one) to know there is someone right there to keep us on the straight and narrow path. Whether they knew it or not, the people were exposing Gideon to Satanic temptation, just as our Lord was exposed when the crowds tried to make him a king (Jn. 6:15). But Gideon was not quite so spiritual as his words suggest. Give the man credit for them. This was his position, as far as he knew, but he was not the first or last man to repudiate the position of leadership while holding on to the power of leadership. Gideon declined the public status of king but he requested and took all the trappings of kingship. He did not take a public throne but he saw to it that he had the total and unqualified submission of the people. Some say the ephod (27) was an idol (17:5; 18:14; Hos. 3:4), and others suggest it was a copy of and a counter-attraction to the high priest's ephod which was regarded with great veneration (Ex. 28: 6-14). Whatever it was, it was set in Ophrah, not the national shrine at Shiloh, and it seems that Gideon was seeking to guarantee his spiritual power among the people by means that can only be described as carnal. The results were disastrous to Gideon and to the nation. Manipulation never works. It is essentially dishonest.

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8:29-35

The dangers inherent in the situation spoken of yesterday did not become obvious for a long time. Indeed, to begin with it seemed that the whole venture was being blessed by God, for Midian was subdued for forty years. But all was not well. Gideon had become a law unto himself and his romantic and domestic situation was in direct disobedience to the Law of God in Deut. 17:14-20. He had made himself a "special case" and, exercising the "liberty" he had given himself, he took a Canaanite woman of Shechem as one of his "wives". The son of the concubine was destined to become a problem and already Gideon's chosen attitude and way of life was laying up a store of trouble for the next generation. When will we learn to live for the future and to do right by God for our children's sake, even if we are too far gone to do it for our own generation? Think of the tragedy contained in the words of Hezekiah in Isa. 39:5-8. That was a man whose life had been spared (Isa. 38:1ff) and who responded with contemptuous indifference and disobedience. How we need to pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart". Now read the prayer in Psalm 139:23-24.

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8:29-35

The problem with all great men and good men is that in due time they must die. It is often true that, "The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones," as Shakespeare says in *Julius Caesar*. This seems the case with Gideon. Having made himself spiritually essential to the people and having by example encouraged them to be less than honest with God, as soon as he was dead his influence collapsed and there was no "follow-through". The promptness of the return to idolatry is not to be wondered at, although the massive ingratitude to God is not thereby excused. Gideon had made himself something of a "god" to the people and the people had played the "game" with him (27). Now they simply discarded Gideon's seemingly "spiritual" god for the Baals who had always exercised a fascination for them. Without minimising the achievements of Gideon (and he did deliver the nation from its enemies) it must be recognised that he did not bring about a spiritual regeneration. Indeed by his own private spiritual ambition and by his moral declension he sowed seed that came to fruit after his death. We do well to consider not only what we are presently doing, but to look back to assess what we have in fact done and what direction we have set for the future. Remembrance of human leaders is not necessarily a dynamic for holy living, unless that remembrance fixes the heart on the goodness of God. We neither despise nor devalue the work done on a merely human level, because it is not only Christians who stand against moral wrong. Indeed more Christians should be involved in the business of social righteousness (Titus 3:1). But without spiritual regeneration it is a short-term cure.

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9:1-6

We now begin the story of the rise and fall of Abimelech, the 'bramble king' (15 AV and RSV), a vivid story which illustrates the slow but sure working of divine retribution. Gideon had tampered with idolatrous worship centring on himself and he had indulged in polygamy. Now the consequences recoiled on his house and nation. Abimelech was never raised nor called by God to be a judge or leader, let alone a king. He had neither the right nor the qualifications for the throne and besides, Gideon had made plain there was to be no family succession (8:23) and there is no real indication in the story that any of his sons other than Abimelech wanted to be king. No doubt Abimelech, like many another ruthless man, was essentially insecure and this may have stemmed from the facts of his birth, for he was the son

of Gideon by a half-pagan concubine. (Did Gideon in his lifetime ever think that his incidental association with this woman would have such long term destructive results?) Abimelech was the kind of man who was prepared to say and do anything to achieve his end, which was power. He appealed to the partisan spirit of the men of Shechem, raised the necessary money from evil sources, and took the first opportunity to murder all his possible rivals. This could not have been a sudden impulse and, since it was a long planned coup, it reveals something of the lovelessness of the home and family of Gideon. How are the mighty fallen!

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9:7-21

The best-laid schemes can go wrong, for the Devil never has the total competence that God has. Jotham escaped and it is amazing what God can do with one young man. From some precipitous crag above the city Jotham recited in a clear, carrying voice his parable and its significance, and brought home to the men of Shechem that they had God to deal with (Heb. 4:13). In the parable all the good trees, olive, fig and vine (symbols of Israel's life) are fruitful, productive and useful (as Gideon was) but the bramble or briar is not so. It gives no shade, no fruit and no useful wood. Moreover it is liable to burst into flames with fire that rages and ravages. The contrast between the murdered sons and the new king Abimelech is made plain, although there is clear suggestion that Gideon's other sons had private reasons of comfort and indulgence for not wanting to take over leadership. Leadership brings a burden of responsibility as well as demanding labour. That is why many Christians prefer to be irresponsible. Anyone less suitable than the "bramble" is hard to imagine and (15) there is already a suggestion of threat and danger. The people are challenged. Is this their answer to the goodness of the God who delivered them? Is this their choice to walk contrary to God and to give allegiance to a man who has shown himself unworthy? What can come of this? Do men gather grapes from thorns (Matt.7:16)? The trees spoke well! Should we leave the appointed place of fruit and blessing to go the way of the enticing voice of evil?

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9:22-41

Jotham, having spoken well and truly, was wise enough to run and hide, knowing that God does not always deal with evil immediately. Time is part of God's providential working, and this is something we must learn. Three years went past and it seemed that the evil Abimelech got stronger and stronger so that even well-planned rebellion against him was crushed. Of course, God is usually dealing with more than one situation at a time and this is why we tend to get confused in our thinking. The various camps of evil must be allowed to develop and to come out into the open, so that their judgment is seen to be just. We must always hold together the two strands: the inescapable outworking of sin and the active operation of God's judgment. In this way divine sovereignty and sinful responsibility are held together without qualifying either. On the one hand we see how evil divides itself and therefore cannot ultimately stand. There is no coherence in the Devil's kingdom. On the other hand we see the astonishing patience and longsuffering of God as He allows evil its opportunity. It is the world of the double-agent and the double-cross, and if we did not believe in the sovereignty of a good God who saves His people to the uttermost it would be a veritable Hell on earth. That is exactly what we make life when our pride causes us to take the reins and drive ourselves and others contrary to God's good and utterly acceptable will. Think well about your allegiances and alliances.

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9:42-57

Abimelech was clever, competent and courageous. The Devil's men often are and it is often only afterwards that we realise that their inspired capacity was altogether evil. It helps sometimes to remember that we do not fight against mere flesh and blood. Never forget the lesson of Eph. 6:10ff. It helps to keep us from anger with people and to see their pathetic yet responsible bondage to the evil one. When we read these stories of the intermingling movements of judgment on evil, we begin to see the wisdom of the counsel in Rom. 12:19 and 1 Pet. 4:19. Too often we try to deal with situations that are far beyond us. In our story we have details that are brutal and gruesome, but that is history, and our generation is no more refined! What must Jothan have thought and felt as he viewed the apparently irresistible regime of the evil monster Abimelech? Where was the God whose righteous word he had spoken and into whose hand he had committed his very life? God was where He had always been: on the throne, and also immediately present, working out His righteous purposes. "The mills of God grind slowly ...". Think of the words at the end of the chapter, for they signify a retribution that had operated with simplicity and certainty right from the beginning. There is poetic justice in the ignominious end of the human fiend at the hands of a woman. God is not mocked.

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9:55-57

Ponder these verses carefully for their message is repeated throughout the whole Bible. God is not mocked (Gal. 6:7) and the day of reckoning for evil men comes *in due time* (Deut. 32:35). Men's evil is recognised for what it is and yet God over-rules (Gen. 50:19-21; Phil. 1:12-14; Acts 2:23). We must learn to stand by faith. The ability of God is never in doubt but His methods may well baffle us. While we must have total confidence in Him and wait His action and intervention, we must not prescribe the methods (Dan. 3:16-18). Learn well the message of Faber's great hymn:

"Workman of God: O lose not heart,
But learn what God is like;
And, in the darkest battle-field,
Thou shalt know where to strike.

"Thrice blest is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field when He
Is most invisible.

He hides Himself so wondrously
As though there were no God;
He is least seen when all the powers
Of ill are most abroad.

"Ah! God is other than we think;
His ways are far above,
Far beyond reason's height, and reached
Only by childlike love.

Then learn to scorn the praise of men,
And learn to lose with God;
For Jesus won the world through shame,

And beckons thee His road.

For right is right, since God is God,
And right the day must win;
To doubt would be disloyalty,
To falter would be sin."

Think of Habakkuk's great word about the hiding of God's power (Hab. 3:4) and then read Cowper's hymn, "God moves in a mysterious way." Why should we ever be discouraged and demoralised (Ps. 43)? Why indeed?

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10:1-17

We would deny it as our theological position and yet there is an inbred tendency to work on the principle that "God will forgive; that's His business." This chapter records a startling refusal by God (13-14) and also reveals the immensity of the forgiving heart of God (16). The chapter begins with a mention of two judges whose work spanned forty-five years. Nothing is said of these years but we must not forget them. It is reasonable to suppose that most of Gideon's battles had been during the first twenty years of his rule and the remaining twenty years were a time when the spiritual life of the nation became dull and moribund. Children were born in that atmosphere and all up to the 18-20 age group had grown up in the troubles of Abimelech's years. There is no mention of any prophetic voice raised to interpret to that generation the events of their day. After Abimelech the next forty-five years seem to have had nothing critical and no sharp judgments to bring the nation to its senses but there was certainly, at least in the ruling class, an increase of wealth (4). When we come to v.6ff the people born in the middle of Gideon's time were nearly 70 years old and their sons and grandsons had grown up in an easy indifference to spiritual things which inevitably brings moral declension and social chaos. Israel had to suffer the strictures of armies; in our day we suffer the strictures of economics. The situations are alike; living, spiritual religion was three generations away and the older generation had brought into being a society without a soul. This must be studied.

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10:1-17

The parents had introduced their children to a "dead and dull God" but since man cannot live by bread alone the new generation found itself other gods that were readily available (6), all of them sensual and sordid, depraved, preying on children, appealing to the basest of human passions. There is no limit to the hideous nature of the things that rush in to fill the gap in the human soul when God Himself is excluded (Matt. 12:43-45), and the story goes on from generation to generation. We cannot escape historical consequences (Ezek. 18:2; Ex. 20.1-6). The frightening thing is that once a trend is established it may take a very long time to check it, let alone change its direction. In this case the degeneration lasted eighteen years becoming a scourge to the whole nation. Only then did the people cry to the Lord (10) but it seems to have been "easy" repentance as in Hosea 6:1-3 with more of self-pity than a true repentance which forsakes sin (2 Cor. 7:9-11). God spoke sternly, rubbing salt into their wounds by reminding them of how little they had responded to His goodness, and how often His gracious forgiveness had been turned by them to further opportunities to sin. God startled them by refusing to hear and answer their prayers.

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10:1-17

We do not like it when God is stern and deals with us as we have dealt with Him. In v.14 God tells the people to appeal to the gods they have chosen to live for, to seek help among the worldly blasphemers with whom they have indulged in all manner of activity that has denied the name of their God and their heritage of salvation. It is a solemn thing to face the fact that you have lost God. Take seriously such passages as Jer. 7:16-19; 11:9-14; 14:11-12; Zech. 7:11-14; Hos. 4:11-17. We tend always to think only of the effect of sin upon *us*, but what of God's reaction? Think of Gen. 6:1-7 and the agonised grief of the heart of the eternal God. But here in our passage at v.16, the people having accepted and submitted to God's comprehensive rebuke and rejection, and having cast themselves in repentance on His mercy, the heart of God could bear the anguish of His people no longer and He took action to save them. What a God! He sees and hears (Ex. 2:23-25; 3:7-9) and in all their affliction He is afflicted (Isa. 63:9). His heart is stirred and recoils (all churned up within Him) and He declares He cannot and will not let them go (Hos.11:1-3,7-9). Behold what manner of love ... (1 John 3:1 ff). He will heal their backslidings and love them freely (Hos. 14:1-7). What a God!. But remember that God's grief over the sin of His people cost Him an infinite price. That brings us to the cross.

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11:1-4

We have described the national situation and atmosphere in the previous readings and in 10:15-18 we saw Israel looking to God but the political leaders looking for a military leader and finding none. This is how we are introduced to the sad background history of Jephthah, the illegitimate son of a harlot whose father subsequently married another woman. Jephthah, though taken into the family, was never allowed to forget what they considered as his shameful origin and this was the attitude taken by people who themselves were so miserably hypocritical and shameless that God had refused to hear their prayers. It was little wonder that the cast-out son became a bitter and rebellious delinquent. He was both despised and rejected by men who were not slow to tell him what he was. Compare this with the scarcely veiled slur on Jesus in John 8:18-19, 41. God upset the plans of Israel, for Jephthah was a chosen instrument for God's glory. This does not mean God overlooked the man's wild life nor the sins of the nation. Everyone's secret sins are in the light of His countenance (Ps. 90: 8), especially the sin of pride which was keeping Israel from seeking help from the one man with courage and capacity enough to lead them to war. When they did eventually go to ask they found that God had been preparing His man. But make no mistake, Jephthah was not chosen nor was he useful just because he was a misfit, a rebel and a leader of men. That could all have made him an instrument of destruction. He was laid hold on by the God who chooses the weak things of the world (1 Cor. 1:26-29). He was chosen simply because he was chosen, and that was true of all Israel (Deut. 7:7-8).

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11:5-11

It is amazing how a prolonged spell of trouble can bring even stubborn people to their senses. This does not necessarily mean they are brought to repentance and a change of heart. It may simply be the operation of self-interest to remedy a situation they had begun to find intolerable. However, much more may issue as the situation develops, and some very plain speaking is recorded here. There is a time for the soft answer, as there is a time for gracious submission (Prov. 15:1 and Rom. 12:14-21), but there is also a time for blunt confrontation (Gen. 50:15-21 and Acts 16:35-39). Think of the gentleness of Jesus' words to penitent

sinner compared with his biting terms when addressing the Pharisees and "that fox, Herod". It could not have been easy for the elders in Israel to appeal to a man who was only half an Israelite, who had been ostracised for years, and who had made a name for himself as a brigand. They showed no reaction when Jephthah spoke in v.7 except to ask him to be their leader (head) in war. But Jephthah would not settle for this and demanded that in success he must be made their civil head (v.9 a different word from v.8). If we are so disposed we may rightly criticise the man for his seeking to guarantee position and power after victory. We may also criticise the elders who were prepared to accept one unpalatable situation in order to get out of another. There are two lessons to learn. The first is to examine *ourselves* to ascertain the motives that impel our personal decisions. The second is to see how God reverses human prejudices and judgments. God is no respecter of persons. Read Luke 14:7-11; 18:9-14; 1 Cor. 1:18-29; Phil. 4:10-13. This takes a lot of learning.

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11:12-28

It is impressive to see this warlike captain engaging in such comprehensive, well documented diplomacy before instituting any attack. Both Jephthah and the king of Ammon knew their history, but while the Ammonite drew out a selected incident to justify his actions, Israel's leader recounted the whole story. This is wisdom. In any tense and difficult situation or confrontation never be taken in by the immediate appearances. Go back over the history and do so in relation to the word and purposes of God. This is the touchstone. The Ammonites had not done right by God's people or God's work, not so much in opposing it but in refusing to co-operate even on humanitarian levels. Their own words and actions condemned them, marking them out as being of a spirit contrary to God and to righteousness, and this was being made manifest in their present attitudes of antagonism and opposition. However genuine our motives are, if people do not want to believe us, they will not believe (17), and no matter how long we exercise patient submission there will be no change. Indeed evil men will strengthen themselves in their attitudes of arrogance and opposition, believing us to be too weak and fearful ever to take action. Indeed, like the king of Ammon, men of a wrong spirit will begin to think that righteousness belongs with them. But, since God rules over all and is the judge of all wrong, there comes a time when men and nations are brought to judgment. Our passage tells us it has happened before and will happen again. This is realism. But Ammon did not heed. This is the folly and pride of unbelief.

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11-29-33

Jephthah's capacity and success did not stem from natural qualities but from the Spirit of the Lord. There is something sovereign and immediate about it, yet we must not fail to see the hidden background of the man's life. In 11:11 we find him dealing with God in public consecration to his God-given task. In yesterday's passage (12-28) we see evidence of a man steeped in the story of the God of Israel. Possibly in his early unfortunate childhood he had been taught the stories of God's mighty works in Israel, and it seems that he had made this a matter of study for himself, for there is a breadth of knowledge and understanding of God's purposes that compares in measure with Stephen's recital of the same in Acts 7. Jephthah's personal rejection and hurt, while it no doubt gave a hard cutting edge to his personality, had not blinded him to the fact that the issues of life were far greater than his mere experience. He had studied his Bible, grasped its message and thrilled to it. And it had been a profound spiritual experience as his later words (35) make plain. But in today's passage (30-31) we have words that are ill-advised. It was a moment of high excitement when human thrill tends to over-rule all other considerations. Watch and pray, for there *is* a Devil.

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11:34-40

Who can say why Jephthah vowed as he did? Was it the man's background (he was half Canaanite) causing him to seek to bribe God? His knowledge of the Books of Moses seems detailed but he may have been selective, thrilling to the histories but not very interested in the Law where human sacrifice was forbidden. He seems to have known Numbers 30:2 but not Lev. 18:1-5, 21. Living by isolated texts is always dangerous. We must learn what God is like and we must learn to live by the theological principles that are expounded in the *whole* of scripture. We must keep faith with God and that is not necessarily the same as keeping faith with our own acts and words of consecration. There are vows which should never have been made; vows made in ignorance and under hideous stress; vows made while the mind and heart have been beguiled by the Devil. Are we to stand by these without qualification? Are we to be more faithful to our own errors than to God's good will? But at the same time read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7. There is a breaking faith with God that is sin indeed. Keep close to God. That is safety.

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11:34-40

The rights and wrongs of the story of Jephthah's vow will be debated until the end of church history, and in doing so the character of the man and the quality of his home and family life get obscured. There is no reason to believe that the vow was made in public. It was between the man and the God he worshipped and trusted (11,30,35). His daughter discovered the situation only in v.36 and she seems to have shared her father's attitude to "the Lord, the Judge" (27). There is no mention of Jephthah's wife but there was grace in the home and it is wonderful to see a daughter encouraging her father to be true to God. Here is a man who, having committed himself to God, felt he had to see it through no matter how difficult, costly or radical it was. He gave up his daughter, and that is more costly than yielding a boyfriend or girlfriend and more painful than admitting you have been in the wrong. The man felt he could do nothing else. He had been blessed by God, his life revolutionised; he had been called back from obscurity and rejection to lead God's people, and he vowed he would never allow personal feelings to take priority over God's calling and service. He was shattered when he realised he had involved his daughter. But, having opened his mouth to the Lord, he felt he could not go back. We may still think it was a wrong vow but we cannot fail to admire such an attitude of consecration.

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11:34-40

What an impact the whole thing made on Israel. Honesty with God and resolution in obedience and loyalty constitute a powerful witness and give a spiritual lead to church and nation. This man (some think of him as a Robin Hood type) had moulded a band of robbers into a loyal army, possibly because he knew, shared and understood their bitter feelings. But, in returning to help those who had rejected him, he showed by example that bitterness must not be allowed to become the dominant factor in life, for that leads only to destruction. It may have been to stand by that example and to impress on his men the priority of spiritual obedience that he felt he could not go back on his vow. Dare we ever suggest to people that it is right to trifle with God? Granted the vow was secret, but what a man is in secret always shows. Still, the father had no right to deal in this way with his daughter's life. There are some people on the mission field because a parent "gave them to the Lord for missionary service", and then blackmailed and pressurised the children right through life so that the

"parent's vow" would be kept. Such pressure is not faith, nor is it honouring to God. Here, the daughter concurred gladly, willing to follow her father's example. How right we parents need to be. The vow was wrong, as we have already said. It was rash and should have been remedied as soon as possible. It is never right to go on doing wrong. People say, "Now that I have committed myself, it would not be fair to go back on it." Fair to whom? Are you on the right track?

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12:1-6

Jephthah may have vowed wrongly. Others never vow at all but of course this does not excuse from responsibility. In due time those who have slipped spiritually and who have contracted out of rightful spiritual duty will expose themselves. This was the case with Ephraim who had already given evidence of a miserable spirit (Chap. 8). They came to Jephthah when he still knew the agony of his daughter's death and was possibly suffering waves of reaction. The men of Ephraim may have pleaded that they were not aware of this but, if they were as spiritual as they imagined themselves to be, they would have known the gracious restraint of God. Those who smite another when he is "down", wounded and struggling, will inescapably answer to God. Ephraim came because of a spirit of pride that could not bear to see anyone successful or in leadership except themselves. This is a mark of insecurity as well as that kind of pride which, like the Devil, aspires to godhead. Think of how the Pharisees said Jesus did His mighty works by the inspiration of the Devil (Matt. 12:24). These men of Ephraim, who regarded themselves as the "senior" men, felt they should get their place and the honours of it, even though they had forfeited both by spiritual backsliding. Ephraim had indeed a place of supremacy (Gen. 48:8-20) but, as a later generation had to be told by Jesus (Matt. 21:43), position is not held automatically. It can be forfeited by sin (Ps. 78:9-11,67ff). But spiritual "have-beens" are notoriously touchy, conscious of position, and sharp to react to any suggestion they are no longer "first". Lord, is it I?

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12:1-6

Pride is a terrible curse and it has a blinding effect, as well as operating as an intrusion into God's work. Everyone involved in and making progress in spiritual life and service is vulnerable; the Devil will see to that. There are always situations that stir pride and there is constant need for that "death to self" which is our only safety. Think of the humble birth and lowly life of our Lord Jesus, and of His "self-emptying" that He might be among us as one who serves. Read Phil. 2:5-8 and Luke 22:24-28; cf. John 13:1-17. The thing that should amaze and humble us is that we have been given a place in the service of Christ (Eph. 3:7-8; 1 Tim. 1:12-14; 1 Cor. 4:1-7). Pride is dangerous and while there is a time for humble submission there is also a time, as Paul made plain, for it to be brought out into the open and judged, cf. Rom. 12:14ff, 1 Cor. 9:3 and Gal. 6:17. This is the essence of the story of Jephthah's dealing with the Ephraimites. A raging cancer of evil was threatening the establishment of peace in Israel and, having challenged the authority of the judge, it had to be dealt with. The "shibboleth" test was a technical procedure to expose the camouflage of wicked men. It is sad that such tests have often been made the test of acceptability in spiritual circles. Grace and truth are the marks of Christ (John 1:14) and when either is missing can Christ be there?

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12:7-15

After Jephthah we have a sequence of names in a crowded passage but a mere twenty-five years of history. We are not told a great deal about that quarter century except that life, with all its complications, went on. Do not be deceived into thinking that these seasons were either empty or insignificant. "The slow watches of the night" belong to God every bit as much as the "high days" when there seems to be so much going on. We all tend to be fascinated by the exciting things of life, but if the truth be told they appeal more to our emotions, and indeed to our "flesh" than to the spirit. Note here the clear reference to polygamy and to the wealth and influence that were part of the national situation. But the carefully planned "connections" being made with outside, and no doubt evil, nations through these marriage treaties are not nearly so innocent as may seem. Granted there were not immediate cataclysmic judgments from God but that does not mean the Almighty approved. His longsuffering is astonishing, as 2 Peter 3:8ff makes plain. But the confusing of spiritual and moral distinctions and the setting of the pattern of national life that is the inevitable result create a situation that could be likened to the rising of the tide. There comes a point when God speaks and acts, as in Gen. 6:1-7. The sad thing is that society cannot see why such disaster has come. People often look for explanations too near the immediate events. They forget history.

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13:1

Hidden deterioration goes on working and then the visible collapse comes. Perhaps there were voices raised in Israel to warn the people of the consequences of their sins, but they would be despised and branded as "Jonahs" or "Jeremiahs" by an over confident generation. Go back to Judges 2:16-19 and see the pattern; then emphasise in today's verse the word "again". How slow people are to learn. Now go to 1 Cor. 10:1-13 and learn the New Testament application of these stories. It is always true that where there is no vision the people cast off restraint and perish (Prov. 29:18). What happens then is that all the treasured heritage and standards of the past simply disappear and a nation finds itself spiritually and morally bankrupt with scarcely enough awareness of God to call on Him. But there is even more in such a situation than at first meets the eye. In 1 Cor. 10: 14-22 Paul speaks of an involvement with spiritual evil that is latent in moral and spiritual idolatry. In Gal. 4:3,9; Col. 2:8 and Rom. 6:20-21, he speaks of these elemental spirits of the universe, the bondage they exert and the price they exact from individuals and society. Half the time people do not know the danger they are exposing themselves to. It is not safe on any level to turn from God to a so-called "permissive society" and from the religion of "revelation" to humanistic ethics whose motivation has nothing of God in it.

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13:2-7

God delivered the nation into forty years of retributory, disciplinary and restitutionary punishment. During that time, when it seemed God had given them up, there was a child born who was to turn the tide in the nation. Every birth is significant and that is why we must learn to pray even before children are conceived not least to ensure that the child will have parents who are walking with God. Think of all the children who became important figures throughout the Old Testament, especially Samuel whose story is similar to Samson's in its beginning (1 Sam. 1) and Jeremiah who had to be told of the divine predestination that was his cradle (Jer. 1:4ff). But the story of a child begins with its parents, and it seems that this un-named wife took the soreness of her heart to the Lord in prayer. This took time, for it would be natural for her to wait on, expecting her marriage to be blessed with a child. But no

casual birth would fit this situation of national darkness and need. A God-given child was to be marked out from the beginning, intimation was to be given miraculously to the parents, and so the faith and expectation of the remnant of faith was to be quickened. The woman took it seriously (whereas Sarah laughed in unbelief, Gen. 18:11ff), and her words might well have been, "Be it unto me according to Thy word" (Lk. 1:38). God's future servant was already set apart to be ready for God (cf. 1 Sam. 1:11; Lk. 1:13-17).

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13:8-25

It is noteworthy that the angel's dealings were with the woman and not the man and the explanation seems to be that the man was far less alive to God than his wife was. Without pressing things too far, we observe that Manoah, like so many men to this day, was simply not around when things began to stir spiritually. When he was told that God was planning big things, he immediately took his place of leadership as the head of the woman and he prayed. But, just like the unbelieving men at the resurrection, he would not accept the woman's testimony as authentic (Lk. 24: 9-12) and he asked for further instructions which, in fact, had already been given. God heard the prayer. He always does, and He appeared again to the woman. Still (11) Manoah tried to assert his spiritual leadership, but the more he spoke the more he revealed that he was quite out of his depth. This was a man who had drifted spiritually and his wife was very aware of the fact (22-23). Note in v.13, 16 and 18 that there seemed a significant reluctance on the part of the Lord when it came to trusting Himself to this man (cf. John 2: 23-25). Manoah certainly seemed agitated in his anxious persistence as he tried to "get in on" this movement of the Spirit of God. But this was manifestly carnal. The man thought he was suitable, competent and deserving, but his reaction from the extreme of insistence to the extreme of pessimism (15-18, 22) marked him out as a man of sentiment and self-awareness rather than a man of faith, discernment, commitment and participation in the business of God's work.

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13:8-25

This fascinating story bears re-reading not least to grasp the fact that the parents, though greatly significant in the whole plan of God, were in fact forerunners of the real work, just as John the Baptist was an advance herald whose work was to prepare the way for one who was greater (Lk. 3:1-6ff.; John 1:19ff; cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12). This means that, for some, the whole of life is concerned with preparation, demolishing, digging, building, ploughing, harrowing and sowing (Jer. 1:10), and never seeing the actual results. This takes faith and is the necessary attitude of all who are called to serve (1 Cor. 3:5-15). Other men labour and we enter into their labours (John 4:38), and in due time we leave a legacy for others to inherit and work on from. This gives great spiritual point to the man's plea in v.8. Since God has come near and called us to this holy service we need to be taught what to do. The man was perhaps more aware than we think of his own tendency to pursue an erratic course. We have already remarked on how he was floundering in this new spiritual situation that had overtaken him, and certainly he seems to have been the kind of man who always needs to be rescued and assisted back to spiritual stability. Perhaps he was incapable of becoming a mature man in faith. This is sad. He seems to have been a man always tossed about (Eph. 4:14) and never really getting anywhere. Read quietly Psalm 37, especially v.1-7, 11, 16, 23-31, 34, 37, 39.

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14:1-4

Samson, the promised child, was now a man and was manifesting more of the father's inconsistency than the mother's loyalty and stability. Samson had a tremendous start to life. God was in it from the beginning (Gal. 1:15; Ps. 139, especially v.13-18) and no doubt Samson had been told and taught (the two words are not synonymous) the spiritual truth of his Nazirite separation unto God right from childhood. In 13:25 there is an indication that it seemed at first that this young man was going to be the full answer to the prayers of his parents and to the hopes of the nation. But in today's verses we begin to read of that weak self-will and propensity for indulgence that was going to siphon away the real spiritual drive and potential of a man who could have been great. It would be easy here to lay blame at the door of the parents and suggest they had spoiled this "special" child just because he was so special and it may have been that they had held rigorously to the technical and rather negative prescriptions of the Nazirite vow but had failed to minister the law of God in all its gracious prohibitions and prescriptions. However, we can read v.3 as a rigorous challenge for there is no real indication in the chapter that the parents ever gave their blessing to the marriage. That is not an easy thing to do and remain Christlike and free from bitterness. Sometimes it has to be done even though we cannot prevent the wrong action being taken. God Himself did not frustrate the wedding. It took place, but it should not have done. Be careful not to assume that a course of action is right simply because it works out smoothly *at the time*. The years that lie ahead may tell a different story.

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14:1-4

Decisions that have already been made and actions that have been taken have to be lived with because it is not always easy or even possible to change direction. Samson's decision was based on immediate attraction and potential satisfaction on an emotional and physical level. His words in v.3 indicate a strength and determination already too much for his parents to control or even guide, and a self-will that would not bow even to God. He did not ask if the plan pleased God; nor if it would help and encourage him spiritually in the life to which he was called by God. On the face of it seemed that even God was powerless to deal with His wilful servant, but that is referred to in v.4. God's purposes are always bigger than men's sins but this does not mean He needs sin to bring about His plans nor that He ever approves or consents to wrongdoing. Sin is sin and God will have no part in it. At the same time He will never allow sin to call the tune nor will He allow sinning men and sinning saints to pass out of His gracious and governing hand. What we see here is Samson, a chosen vessel, moving over into God's second best for his life. What we also see is human sin intermingled with God's sovereign purposes, yet God is neither the author of sin nor a contradictor of His own holy laws. God does not need sin nor can sin ever be excused or justified. The only sane course is to have nothing to do with things that God cannot and will not bless.

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14:5-9

We now begin to see the baffling contradictions in Samson, this man who had been raised up to be God's deliverer. There is light and dark in his story as well as greatness and sheer pettiness in his character. Here is a servant of God striding along the road, going deliberately to do what God cannot bless, and thus putting in peril the work he was raised up to do. We cannot help seeing in the fierce assault of the lion the design of the Devil to bring the work to a sudden end (1 Pet. 5:8; cf. Lk. 22:31). But just as Peter in the Gospel was told of God's overshadowing protection, so here the Spirit of God came mightily on Samson and he slew the

lion We must be careful here not to draw wrong conclusions. The Spirit of power for service does not come upon a man regardless of the kind of life he is leading. Even we who are indwelt by the Spirit (John 14:16-17; Rom. 8:9-11) may not and must not presume. Wrong living grieves and quenches the Spirit (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19) as Samson's story will yet demonstrate. But here we see the sovereignty of God who will not allow presumptuous sin to stand in the way of His purposes. We need to pray with the Psalmist (Ps. 19:13) for in spite of this deliverance Samson was to pay the price of his disobedience. At a later stage the man went back to view and perhaps to re-live his great exploit, usually a dangerous procedure since we tend in retrospect to think of **our** achievement and not of God's mercy. Samson broke his Nazirite vow by touching the dead body (Num.6:1-8), and already he had begun to be a deceiver, for he kept the fact from his parents. This may indicate his brash confidence regarding marrying this woman was more superficial than he allowed even himself to think. Samson's story is quite a mirror!

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14:10-20

Samson had a great capacity for making trouble and that is scarcely a commendable grace. He was a man of considerable physical stature and presence as v.11 indicates. The men of the city felt it wise to have thirty of their own kind to act as attendants to the bridegroom. Samson was very full of confidence, his uneasy conscience regarding unfaithfulness to God being suitably subdued, perhaps by "good intentions" regarding future consecration. He seemed to have forgotten that the great access of courage and strength in the killing of the lion had come directly and sovereignly from God. He was a "big" man and challenged the Philistines to a wager. The mean-mindedness of Samson is seen in the fact that no one without specific knowledge of the killing of the lion could possibly answer the riddle. This is "one-upmanship" of the worst kind. The men of the city were naturally resentful, became threatening to Samson's wife, and as she badgered her husband he got bored with the whole thing and told the answer. Here is part of Samson's essential weakness. He was a shallow, self-centred person, impetuous in the extreme and while good at starting ventures, especially if they were exciting, he did not seem to have the capacity to see them through to the end. This may all stem from his past. As a child and a youth he may have been made humanly and spiritually precocious by the constant emphasis on his God-ordained calling. Think of the story of Joseph in Gen. 37. He was called. But he was vain. He had to learn, and it was a painful process.

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14:10-20

Note how this chapter begins and ends with exciting and successful exploits, but do not draw the wrong conclusions, as Samson did. Like many another man he assumed that because some signal successes marked his activities there could not be much wrong with him spiritually. That is very dangerous reasoning. God is longsuffering but His patience is meant to lead to repentance (Rom. 2:4). If it leads to complacency then the time of reckoning comes (2 Pet. 3:8-11). Samson yielded to his woman's cloying flattery, while she never seems to have thought that her man could have overcome his enemies single-handed. The men probably boasted their triumph before Samson just as he had flaunted his superiority before them. None of it is very manly! All of it forgets God! Samson's metaphor in v.18 does not seem a very complimentary way to refer to his new wife, but then Samson had little respect for anyone except himself. Of course he was angry at his defeat and tended to blame the unfaithfulness of his wife. There seems to have come upon Samson not only a wave of powerful anger but, by the Spirit of the Lord, a resolution to have done with these pagan

associates. It may have been that he was moved by an awareness of having been exposed in a humiliating situation of weakness. This *could* have led to true repentance but Samson was too angry to be moved deeply in a moral and spiritual sense. Time will tell.

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15:1-8

Samson's radical return to his father's house (14:19) was impressive but short-lived. He had undergone a real revulsion against sin and its humiliating circumstances but the lure of the woman drew him back again (2 Pet. 2:19b-22 is not too strong a statement). The pleasures of sin (Heb. 11:25), having once kindled the emotional-physical element in the personality, exercise a powerful long-term influence and can only too easily in a variety of "springtimes" (corn harvest) re-awaken a young man's fancy. Samson had either forgotten the earlier humiliation or was beguiled into believing it would not work out like that a second time. What he was setting out to do was to re-start something which had been forbidden by God's law from the beginning. It would be folly here not to see clearly the deliberate stratagems of the Devil, not simply against Samson but against the whole people and work of God. After all this was happening in the context of the beginning of a revival which was to deliver the people of God from their bondage and to restore them to fellowship and service in the heritage of God's salvation. Men and women who are chosen vessels need to be prayed for, especially at the outset of their work. They need also to be counselled, challenged and warned. They may resent it and hate us, for it but we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:20).

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15:1-8

Samson always seemed to operate single-handed and this may have been due to the low morale of Israel, there being no-one else prepared to venture against the power of the enemy. It may also have been due entirely to the independent and wilful spirit of Samson. Had he been in fellowship with others he might have been a far greater man, not least because of the balance the others would have brought him. This whole incident is typical of a situation that is spiritually degenerate. Having abandoned his wife in a rage right after the wedding feast, Samson left himself open to the father's action. However, as the father had made no move to return the dowry, there was nothing to suggest: the marriage had ended. Efforts to patch up the mess failed because Samson felt insulted. Perhaps he should have seen the goodness of God in breaking off a disastrous alliance that should never have taken place. What Samson did *see* was a legitimate occasion to smite the Philistines, the enemies of God's people. This he did with great thoroughness, and had the added satisfaction of seeing a terrible judgment coming on the man who had cheated him of his wife. The lesson we draw from all this does not concern the morality, or otherwise, of the intertribal warfare of these old days but rather what we see of Samson's capacities and limitations. He was a man who was at his best in the swift clash of crisis situations. It was the immediate battle that thrilled him. He had no long-term vision. He lived for the moment: that was his tragedy.

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15:9-13

This is very revealing. God was stirring in the nation which had degenerated because of its deliberate and persistent sins (13:1). There was evidence of God's working and every encouragement to men to rally to the fight. Of course, as was to be expected, the Devil was neither indifferent nor slow, and his mighty army advanced to put an end to Samson whom the enemy recognised as the danger man. The Devil is wise, accurate, and discerning and

tends not to waste time with people who are irrelevant. Think of Satan's persistent attitude of enmity to Jesus as indicated in Lk. 4:12-13. The attitude of Judah here is typical of those who want peace at any price, even the price of selling their birthright, always a dangerous attitude (Heb. 12:15-17). They saw nothing of God's moving for salvation, only difficulties and dangers which were disturbing their moral and spiritual sloth. They were quick to negotiate peace with the ill-tempered Philistines. Their attitude to Samson was far more reserved. They would not give their active co-operation and were quite willing to sacrifice God's man to ease their own situation. Judah was doing the work of a Judas. Little wonder Samson did not trust them. But, having got their oath that they would not stab him in the back, he went forward to God's work alone. However plausible people's excuses may be, it is a great sin to hold back loyalty and support from a man who is manifestly called by God to lead.

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15:14-20

It is amazing how wicked men are always quick to celebrate their triumph, often before their victory is won. Nothing but Samson's confidence in God could have enabled him to stand and wait for the onslaught without fear or doubt. It was not without hurt! If Samson was human (and his amorous exploits indicate deep sensitivity and longing as well as weak indulgence) then his wounded feelings at the hands of Judah must have been sore indeed. This is an aspect of fruitful spiritual service that is seldom reckoned on, and it would be a good exercise to trace this kind of costly hurt in the experience of such men as Jeremiah and Paul. To be left to get on with it unaided, unencouraged and in fact betrayed, is a cruel experience. Jesus knew a lot about that. In Samson's case it may have been the awareness of how Judah had been deceived into craven fear of the powers of evil that roused him into powerful indignation against the enemy. It certainly clears the thinking, curbs waywardness and inspires holy dedication when you realise that wicked men are in fact operating as the dupes of the Devil. It also lets you see what your target is, and helps you to bear with the culpable weakness of those who should be your allies in holy endeavour. How we need to keep Eph. 6:10ff in our minds and hearts and to be deepened in our discerning of good and evil (Heb. 5:14; 1 John 4:1). We must also keep in mind that having used a sinful man once for mighty work, God is not in any way obliged to keep on using him. There is such a thing as being "castaway" (1 Cor. 9:27).

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15:14-20

In the second half of this passage it is touching to see the mighty Samson wearied and exhausted and suffering agonies of dejection. Virtue had gone out of him (Mk. 5:30) and, like Elijah in a similar situation, he had no more capacity to affirm that "his life was hid with Christ in God" (1 Kings 19: 3-8 and Col. 3:3). This is when Samson needed someone to be by his side (Matt. 26:36-41; 2 Tim. 1:15-18; 4:11, 15-17) but there was no one. It was the Lord Himself who stood by him. Perhaps in allowing Samson to sink so far, God was seeking to awaken him to an authentic sense of dedication and to see that there is much more to the life of faith than the occasional "mighty works" of crusade against the powers of evil. We have in these verses an exposure of the man's own sense of weakness, God's nearness, care and provision, and a testimony to the true worth of Samson, namely the twenty years of his beneficial leadership of Israel. Twenty years is a long time of service and it must be weighed over against both his early and his later sins. It must also be set over against the brief but enthusiastic "seasons" of active service that seem to be the limit of some Christians' dependability. When you think of what God did through this man in spite of his indulgent,

emotional self-will, just consider what might have been done if he had really given himself to God in dedication, instead of remaining so selfconscious of his calling and capacity.

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15:14-20

Read also Exodus 3:1-12; 4:1-5 and consider these words spoken by Rev. James Philip some years ago at the Port Stewart Convention:

“The record of Moses' commission is in Exodus 4, where we have the story of the rod that was changed into a serpent and back. There is great significance in this, and it gives untold encouragement. Look at the circumstances. Moses was objecting to God's call on the ground that the people would not listen to him. He was no doubt thinking of the time before when he had tried to be his people's deliverer and had miserably failed ... He is in fact pleading his ineffectiveness in the past as an excuse for not going forward now in the Lord's name. This is answered by the miraculous sign of the rod. It was a wonderful assurance to Moses that natural weakness, failings and disabilities are no bar to effectual service for God. They can be transmuted and transformed and made vehicles of power in His hands ... Perhaps you have been saying .. 'He did not have the kind of nature I have, the terrible weakness or flaw in his temperament that is mine, that twist that makes it at times almost impossible to keep my feet, let alone walk with God.' Listen: the story of the rod has something to tell you. That problem in your life which you have wept over and wrestled with for so long - when it is thrown down and left to itself becomes like a serpent which stings and bites and from which you flee in terror. But God says, 'Take it up in My Name; lay hold of it for Me, and not only will it be under My control, it will become an instrument of power in My hand.' “

That sermon would have helped Samson! Paul, whose sore thorn in the flesh was the very means by which he was usable to God in such vast measure, would have said his hearty, "Amen". Let it speak to our hearts. God knows what we are and has called us to be His. Nothing we are is an insuperable barrier and all we are can be laid hold on and channelled for holy service. But it does involve a dying to self.

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16:1-3

This chapter tells us a lot about Samson, God's man for that generation. We like our heroes to be "big" and worthy of our adulation, but at the same time we tend to make excuses for them and to have sympathy with them in their manifest transgressions. A wrong thing is never right, no matter how important or holy the man is who does it. Some seek to ease the charge against Samson by emphasising his long rule (15:20) and by suggesting that this incident came at the end of his time and the other stories at the beginning of his rule. Does that help? Should not the mature man of experience be more resolutely prepared for sudden assaults in the realm of his "old sins"? Let him that thinks he stands take heed (1Cor.10:11-13; Gal. 6:1-2). Was the fall sudden or was it the fruit of something secretly entertained and trifled with for long? In going to Gaza Samson may have been venturing out on holy crusade and we need to realise that sudden temptation, at the instigation of the Devil (1 Pet. 5:8) can come to us in high and holy moments, especially if inwardly and mentally we have been slipping. Remember, of course, that we are not dealing here merely with personal moral defeat but with Satanic intrusion into the holy purposes of God to imperil them. It is part of the Satanic design to keep our minds clouded as to the real issues at stake. The bravado of God's man was emotionally exciting. After all, we all like to see the hero "doing it again" but we are

foolish indeed if we do not see how he was tempting God. He was far too sure of himself, his capacity, his spiritual stature and importance, and he enjoyed his victories far too much.

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16:4-9

As we begin the final sad section of Samson's story, let us ponder some questions. Does sanctification become harder or easier as the life of faith goes on? It is harder, because the issues are greater and the man or woman of faith is dealing with God's affairs in a fuller way than at the beginning when sanctification was more a matter of personal dedication and purity. Is it ever safe to allow oneself a degree of latitude on the ground that we are now so "established" in God that there is no question of our turning away? It is never safe, particularly because few ever learn fully the lessons of the past. Is it ever safe to boast, even to ourselves, about our spiritual perception and integrity? No! This was Samson's undoing and it deadened his conscience to spiritual issues. He was being drawn further into the web of deceit, although he did not realise it until too late. It may be that the one fierce, stupid, irresponsible lapse in v.1-3 was the thing that stirred the feelings of Samson and induced him to enter and to prolong what he knew to be a trifling liaison with Delilah. Of course, could it not be that this man struggled and battled, in the realm of his emotions, with his treacherous personality and won time and time again? We may not know of his victories. We know only of his defeats because they were public. The amazing thing is that God was able to do so much with a man like this. God has indeed chosen the weak things of the world (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

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16:10-17

How could this man of God possibly ignore all the clear warnings he was given? He was trapped more by his weakness than by the strength of his feelings for the woman. He met successive crises but he worked himself out of them and escaped, failing to see that increasingly he was being weakened and trapped by his own inordinate and fascinated lust for this woman who was doing him no good,. It seems that he was enjoying the "contest", all the while quite sure that it was going to do him no permanent harm. On one level he seems to have recognised the possibility of being "weakened", but he never for a moment thought this would happen to him. Keep in mind the fact that the women in Samson's life may have been the result of spiritual decline rather than the cause of it. Note also how long these contests went on with seemingly no diminution of Samson's strength. But may we not say that this is mere natural strength stemming from his past spiritual vitality rather than the strength that comes from a close walk with God? Think of it this way: a man of eloquence and utterance in the Word of God may go on preaching impressively and acceptably long after he has declined from true spirituality of heart before God. His preaching will impress and may even deliver him from the bondage of critics. But it will not work deliverance for others. The Philistines were frustrated, not confounded.

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16:18-22

Go back to v.17 for that was Samson final opportunity for restoration. Had he added words to the effect that he had denied his Lord and that he was leaving her and going back to his former way of life in faithfulness to God, the day would have been saved. Did Samson expect either understanding or sympathy from this woman who had been so manifestly "outside" his life as far as fellowship of the deepest level was concerned? Did he expect Delilah's "conversion" so that she would now stop nagging and tormenting him? Did he expect her to

side with him (perhaps she also considered it a temporary affair) against all her natural, social and national tendencies and loyalties? How can a man be so blind, and a "spiritual" man at that? This is the sad and alarming effect of unconscious spiritual deterioration. It proceeds to take us over and blunts our spiritual sensibilities, and it does so to the extent that we continue our religious duties and persuade ourselves that it is with us just as in past days. But it is not so. "The Lord may be gone out on feet so noiseless, that we are not aware that His Spirit has glided along the corridor, and through the doorway, whispering, Let us depart." (F.B. Meyer) Read Hosea 7:8-11; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Heb. 10:32-39. After all, what does it profit a man if he gains the world and loses his soul, together with his usefulness to God?

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16:18-22

We need to read along with this story such passages as 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:1-5; Rev. 3:1-6. There are other passages of more solemn moment such as in the story of Saul but these are not appropriate here for they have no note of restoration. In today's passage there is a very wonderful element in v.22. This is not merely physical restoration but the recreating of a godly man's life and his fellowship with God. We will never know what these weeks and months (perhaps years?) cost Samson. He was totally and publicly shattered. He may have heard even his own people saying (as we tend to say when people go astray) that they had seen it coming; that they had never believed him to be the spiritual giant his reputation claimed; that they had always had doubts about him. The Devil would see to it that "Christian" jeers as well as Philistine contempt would scourge the sinning servant of God. Of course the Devil's objective was to destroy both Samson and the work of God and so establish his own hellish authority. But God had other ideas. His grace is greater than we ever know until we are in a position like Samson. For a long time he lived with his regret, shame, sense of failure, agony of soul and feeble hope. He knew now that the Lord had left him and that it was totally deserved. The amazing thing is that he was not bitter, nor did he blame anyone but himself. Blind Samson, grinding at the mill, grieved over his sins as only a saint can. The story is not finished.

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16:23-31

There is a double "turning of the tables" here. Samson, who had so often made sport of the Philistines and their women for his own wilful pleasure and gratification, was now dragged from prison in his blind misery to raise a laugh for the celebrating Philistines. There is rough justice in it, but the Samsons of the world do not like the laughs to be at their expense. There was also a devilish laughter because the powers of darkness seemed to have triumphed to the shame of Israel and Israel's God. But it is never wise to make final assessments too soon. Right to the crisis moment Samson was like a temple without God (20), with no signs of God's presence or vindication. But there had been a radical change of heart which God saw, even if people did not. Do not forget Samson's shame, and if you must, accuse him of a feeling of vindictiveness against the Philistines. But do not forget the issue is between God and the Devil, not just Samson and the Philistines. When the man began to pray, to call upon the Lord and to say, "Let me die" he may well have been forsaking and dying to all the self will and gratification of his whole life. What a setting right of thoughts and attitudes can take place in a very short time. Lord, remember me (28). Think of the dying thief after a lifetime of evil praying the same prayer, and it was answered (Lk. 23:42) just as Samson was answered. What a God we have!

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16:23-31

The end of Samson was a mixture of glory and tragedy. His story could have been so different. But we must not allow ourselves to be crushed, if penitence and desire kindle in our hearts. Here is a prayer:

“O Jesus, full of pardoning grace,
More full of grace than I of sin,
Yet once again I seek Thy face;
Open Thine arms and take me in,
And freely my backslidings heal,
And love the faithless sinner still.

"Thou know'st the way to bring me back,
My fallen spirit, to restore;
O, for Thy truth and mercy's sake,
Forgive, and bid me sin no more;
The ruins of my soul repair,
And make my heart a house of prayer.

"Ah! give me, Lord, the tender heart
That trembles at the approach of sin;
A godly fear of sin impart,
Implant, and root it deep within,
That I may dread Thy gracious power,
And never dare offend Thee more." (Wesley)

A great corrective and inspiration is found in reminding ourselves of the privilege of serving the Lord. Consider 2 Cor. 4:1-7; Gal. 1:11-17; Eph. 3:7-21; Phil. 3:7-14; Gal. 6:14; 2 Tim. 2:1-13.

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17:1-6

With monotonous regularity the situation slides back into apostasy. The heart of man is indeed sick (Jer. 17:9; Mk. 7:14-23) and all who are engaged in Christian work must be prepared to meet this devastating regression to unbelief and practical apostasy, not only at the beginning of their work but even after long years. Of course, a mighty tree does not fall in a moment; its inner strength and vitality have been destroyed over a spell of time. It is not the storms of experience that bring people down but the "fifth column" of secret sin that undermines so that in crisis there is collapse. Some examples of this are now presented to us. The consecutive history of Judges ends with Samson, and what we now read gives a picture of the life of the nation during these years of backsliding punctuated by seasons of spiritual awakening. It may be that we have now to learn why these "revivals" were not more permanent. In the last verse of today's passage we have the root of the matter. There were no objective, authoritative standards of belief or behaviour. In religion and morals every man was guided and governed by what his inclination, convenience or profit happened to be at that time. No one acknowledged commitment or loyalty to anyone, and anyone who interfered was resented. It is astonishing that such a situation could be found in a people who for generations had borne the name of God. The explanation must be sought.

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17:1-6

In 2 Tim. 2:2 we have a key to our understanding of the failures in the Book of Judges. It is not enough to do exploits for God which confound the evil powers. That may be exciting and satisfying, but if we do not build a church there is nothing permanent and the "revival" remains a superficial movement in the general direction of God. Too much of our own "consecration" tends to be like this. There is little to choose in our passage between Micah and his mother. The son should not have stolen the money but the mother made it plain in the family that the cash was "dedicated" to make an idol. Neither of them seems to have heard of the Ten Commandments. Both of them seem to be more superstitious than religious; curses and then blessings to counteract the curses while proceeding with dishonest activity do not signify a very high form of religion. Only part of the money (4) is in fact used for the image, and hypocrisy is thus added to the situation (Acts 5:1-4ff). Some people have a very low idea of God. Having made his son a priest, Micah had his own little world of religion and was no doubt assured that it was safe to live however he pleased. His "insurance" was in order. Unfortunately for Micah it was not accepted at "head office". This is a charade of religion. It had no connection with and made no contribution to the life of the fellowship in Israel. It was in fact dangerous.

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17:7-13

The Levites, having no tribal territory of their own, depended on other tribes' hospitality, and this explains why the man was spoken of as being of the tribe of Judah. The Levite seems to have been searching for a new place of work and he does not seem to have been too scrupulous about the exact spiritual nature of his service. If he had been, he would have had no dealings with Micah, his silver idol, and his privately ordained son (5). However, the "terms" were good (10), the position respectable and the work not too demanding, and the Levite accepted. Note very carefully that God simply does not come into things except as some remote being who, by mechanical means, can be prevailed on to look favourably on people and give them "blessings". In these closing chapters of Judges we have a picture of how far religion had degenerated because of the abandonment of God's law and revelation. Religion had become mere superstition and had fostered a strange confidence in respect of God (13) on the part of people who were walking contrary to God's will. There was no conscience in the nation, no awareness of the divine, no sense of awe, reverence or submission. People were ruled by their own human assessments, assuming that since God was in His heaven all would be well with them in the world. The devaluation of God that is evident in these passages is quite alarming. God is very much an "outside" reference, neither invited nor entitled to interfere in people's organising of their lives. This is a downward route.

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17:7-13

Two further lessons are to be drawn from this passage. Such was the spiritual degeneration of the nation that this Levite, set apart by God for holy service and to be provided for by the people (Num. 18:21ff; Deut. 18:1-4), is wandering the country because no provision had been made for him. The servants of the on-going holy work of God were being left destitute. Now, the New Testament makes plain the principle of "maintaining the ministry" (1 Cor. 9:13-14) and demonstrates that spiritual blessing incurs material responsibility. Therefore, when for example missionaries have to struggle on with a pittance of an allowance while others have "silver shrines", there is something very far wrong with the spiritual heart of the church. On the other hand it could be that the Levite (provided for under the Law even when the Law had

been forgotten) had succumbed to the spiritual degeneration that was general in the nation. He had become something of a spiritual "gipsy", wandering the country because he preferred it that way, and never staying long enough anywhere to do a real work of establishing spiritual worship and building up the people of God in holy instruction and godly living. Micah had his private chapel and a "first class" priest; the Levite had a "good living"; both were content and felt sure that God would be impressed, as no doubt the neighbours were. But God was not in it. This is false confidence. Read Isa. 66:1-2; 1 Sam. 15:22; then read Isa. 1:1-20. Walking God's way in the fellowship of obedience is the only way of blessing (1 John 1:5-2:6).

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18:1-20

When the condition in v.1 exists and there is neither spiritual vision nor government, the nation can only drift, and since there is no real objective in life, drift will become degeneration and ultimately destruction. It is all very frightening because, on the personal as well as the national level, the direction can be so established it is almost impossible to change. To deal with an outburst of sin is one thing, but to deal with a trend and disposition is quite different. You can slam on the brakes of a motor car with fairly immediate results, but you cannot stop a ship in that way; it takes time! The tribe of Dan had no doubt basked in the glory of one of its sons, Samson (13:1-2). Perhaps they needed that kind of boost because they had not fared very well in their allocated territory (1:34). In Joshua 19:47-48 we have the brief account which is elaborated in Judges 18. The tribe of Dan, having been restricted so long, now gives expression to their territorial ambitions. They spy out a small neutral state in a quiet but prosperous backwater, set their campaign in motion, take over the territory, re-naming the capital city Dan, setting up a private shrine there. We may say that this was just typical of the times and part of the inter-play of international politics and policy. But in the long term it was very much more, as is evident from 1 Kings 12:29ff. when Dan became a national shrine and sanctuary which split the nation. Time is a great element in revealing the true spirit of people's actions.

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18:1-20

It is amazing how God gets dragged into things by people who have but scant regard for His person or His laws. Would the men of Dan in v.5 have gone home if the answer had been different or would they have looked for another priest with "better" news (1 Kings 22:5-9)? The wording of the Levite's answer in v.6 is quite orthodox but non-committal. But this was simply the priest's opinion! The city of Laish (7) was very much at ease, having no real problems and quite content to keep itself to itself. But that does not signify security. When crisis came the city had no deliverer, just as many people discover they have no faith and no "god" when their private little world is assailed by sickness and bereavement. Micah himself is another example of those people who make wrong assessments of spiritual condition and prospects. He was so sure he was in the line of blessing (17:13). But what he prized most (his idols), and what reassured him most (the fact that a man of God, as he thought him stood by his side) were taken from him in one swift moment and he was left with nothing. His gods and his priest had let him down. Micah would not be likely to blame his own sinful backsliding. Backsliders just don't think like that. After a natural but formal protest the Levite was quite happy to go on with the Danites to his new promoted post. Self-interest can be powerful "guidance".

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18:21-31

It was a miserable day for poor old Micah. He had made his own gods, paid his own priest, and laid all his plans for many days (cf. Lk. 12:13-21) and it was all taken away from him. He had exchanged the living God of Israel's salvation for his own little puppets and now all he was left with was his own weakness (22), fear and humiliation (24-26). Would he pray when he got home or would he just be sorry for himself? Read and ponder Hosea 14. In the second half of our passage, do not fail to see that the tribe of Dan was every bit as reprehensible as Micah and the Levite. The idolatry, which was personal and private with Micah, was now established publicly and with full organisation by the tribe of Dan. They set up a religious system on their own, separating themselves from the main stream of the work and worship of God, and setting the scene and atmosphere for the disastrous division of the kingdom and its fatal result many years later (1 Kings 12:25-33). Sometimes people "separate" themselves because of pride, or boredom, or a desire to have power and to rule over others. It is often the action of people who are essentially "little". Here it may have stemmed from earlier years of insignificance, together with a forgetfulness of God. Note that neither Micah nor Dan abandoned the God of Israel's salvation. Like a long established society which mingles Jehovah, Baal and Osiris, they simply wanted a more convenient and less demanding God. But the House of God at Shiloh, which they had abandoned, stood over against them to rebuke their actions. In immediate history Dan became a centre of apostasy. In the end, the name of Dan is not found in the list in Rev. 7:4-8, and some say it is because Antichrist is to be born of that tribe. A wilful persistence in standing over against God is a solemn thing.

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19:1-15

This chapter, which should really be read as a unit, is grim material. Together with the following chapter it not only reflects the life of Israel in bygone days but also depicts all too vividly the circumstances and life of our own generation. It links darkly with Romans 1:18ff. and shows the depths of depravity to which society in general and individuals in particular can sink apart from the grace of God. When a nation rejects God, people begin to do evil and to condone evil almost in principle and for the sheer devilish delight in doing wrong in the face of all convention and authority. Where there is no vision (Prov. 29:18 AV) and no fear of God (Rom. 3:18) there is indeed no restraint upon human hearts, and these hearts bring forth all manner of evil and uncleanness, drunkenness, impurity, cruelty, selfishness, and ruthlessness. These become the sinful marks of society, and sin when it is finished brings forth death (Jas. 1:15). One of the most alarming elements in such a situation is that society begins to accept the bestiality of human nature as "inevitable" and is no longer shocked by it. Until the social conscience is aroused *and* convicted, as it was in chapter 20, there is no hope. It was a sense of impending judgment and the proclamation of that message that shook the nation. But we do not like preaching judgment. Why should this be?

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19:16-30

In the grimness of this story remember how the earlier section of the chapter makes plain that casual, extra-marital relationships had become accepted by parents as well as being practised by the younger generation. God's pattern and standard has always been one man married to one woman for life, and no amount of humanistic sophistry or psychological indoctrination can change that. Nor can the consequences of "indulgence" be controlled and confined to "acceptable" levels (acceptable to whom?). If the first half of the chapter portrays

"acceptable" and even romantic, "happy-ending" immorality, the second half makes plain the sinister and powerful potential for eruption in a situation conditioned by such attitudes. When such "outbursts" are manifest it is wise to consider what might happen if this evil spirit should burst out and ravage society. What we are dealing with here is not people whose inner personalities have been warped, conditioned or overlaid by "tendencies" that they scarcely understand or want to understand. But we are dealing with people in whom lawlessness has become the motivation of life and who have given themselves over to the baseness of mind, emotion and will that Romans 1:18ff speaks of. These are people who are forever seeking new forms of gratification for the senses and appetites and, as a group, they seem to have been able to exercise influence to the point of fear, causing others to yield to their will. The men in the house who, having handed over the girl, then resumed their merrymaking followed by a good night's sleep, are no better than the rest. Turning a blind eye solves the immediate situation. But daylight comes.

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20:1-17

The sin spoken of in the previous chapter left a permanent scar on the conscience and memory of Israel for generations to come (Hos. 9:9; 10:9) and was used by prophets to urge Israel to look to the pit from which they had been dug (Isa. 51:1 AV). It would be a foolish person indeed who would protest that he would never sink so low (1 Cor.10:12). We need to remember what we are by nature apart from the grace of God and we need to remember that there is a Devil who waits his time (1 Pet. 5:8). At the end of chapter 19 we see how the theory of social wickedness came home to the specific awareness of one man who immediately protested to the whole nation, and was heard. This chapter tells of the awakening of the conscience of the nation as a result of a terrible crime against humanity. The gentler voices of preaching and providence had failed to bring this to pass but now, without being involved in or making concession to evil, God spoke loudly through this hideous event that was the inevitable fruit of the lustful choices of a decadent nation. The grisly story told by the Levite united the people in a reaction of horror and righteousness in which they resolved to separate themselves radically from the guilty tribe of Benjamin (v.8-11 AV; 1 Cor. 5:3-5). This attitude is often criticised as being judgmental but, in the face of God-defying sin and God-rejecting sinners, we need to be judgmental. The only alternative is to be sentimental. Mark them and avoid them (Eph. 5:5-7).

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20:1-17

Let this story prepare us radically for the conflict with sin and evil. The first necessary action is to identify the elements of the situation and then to take a clear and positive attitude of non-alignment. But that is not enough. There must be a united testimony against the people who have sinned as well as against their sin (9-11). Then wilful, arrogant sinners, who stand their ground contrary to God even when virtually the whole of the nation testifies against them, must be challenged openly. Do not fail to see that there is something diabolical in the attitude of the Benjamites. They had not the slightest intention of giving ground on this issue and, being positive, competent and even expert in certain matters, they gathered support to themselves. There will always be those who, for various reasons, will choose to support iniquity, while at the same time protesting their own spirituality and loyalty to God. Again, do not fail to see that we are reading of those who, although part of the people of God by profession and choice, were in fact working against God, doing so from inside (Phil. 3:18; Jude 4; 1John 2:18-19). This is something far more sinister than opposition and persecution from outside the faith. Note the final practical lesson we must learn. The Benjamites sided

with the men of Gibeah to support them in their wrong. This is always a temptation. Loyalty to friends and family must *never* take priority over loyalty and obedience to God, however painful and costly it proves to be.

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20:18-28

Spiritual battles are not easily fought and won, and however earnest we may be in a new surge of dedication to God we are not wise to think, let alone assume, that all will now be well. One thing we have to learn is that evil, given its opportunity through the careless attitudes and lives of God's people, entrenches itself, takes possession of territory and people, and is not prepared to yield without a fight. In the successive defeats at the hands of the Benjamites Israel learned just how far they had drifted from vital spiritual life and service. They had not sinned Gibeah's sin but by their worldliness, carelessness and spiritual ease they had created the atmosphere in which sin could multiply and evil assert itself. Here are people who had been awakened to righteousness by the Spirit of God, but they were still powerless in face of evil's determined resistance. Think of Jesus' disciples in Mark 9:28-29. They were powerless because prayerless, and prayerless because they were so turned in on themselves in proud spiritual ambition. In today's verses we admire the courage and resolution of the men of Israel. Their spiritual quickening was genuine for they refused to give up the fight and their defeats drove them all the more to seek the Lord. When we read in v.23, 26 of how they wept and prayed and sat before the Lord, we are seeing the desperation and determination of true repentance worked in their hearts by God's grace through the terrible events of national history.

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20:29-48

The last verse of yesterday's reading is needed by way of introduction for it indicates several truths about the battle. Whether or not men could see it, the earlier reverses had been necessary for Israel to be prepared for victory and to establish that victory. It was made clear that God's timing had been the dominant factor and that timing had allowed the sin of Benjamin to be made manifest and beyond excuse, so that God's total judgment was seen to be both necessary and justified (Ps. 51:4). Had Israel not learned these things by their reverses they might not have been so resolute in dealing with this evil cancer that threatened the present life and future service of the people of God. We must be realistic! As the story proceeds we see how the evil Benjamites had reached the stage of feeling they were invincible and when the killing began again (31-32) perhaps the army of Israel was tempted to feel that things were hopeless. Never underestimate God. He does not let things run on in order to allow evil to triumph, but only to bring evil to judgment. Note in the plan of the battle that Israel had now a far more realistic attitude to the strength of the powers of evil, and they set about the business of righteousness with a real degree of careful planning. This is a healthy attitude. After all, if the Devil plans his stratagems carefully and, like a good general, always has an alternative plan in hand, should not the children of light be wise (Eph. 6:10ff.)? It is not a sign of spirituality to be "slap-happy" about holy endeavour. The issues are too great.

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21:1-25

This chapter makes grim reading at first and we will react against it if we do not see in it the radical attitude to sin and the need for "death to sin" as expounded in Romans 6. The need may not always be evident to us but the principle is established by God. Remember also that

we are dealing with the life and experience of the people of God, *not any people*, and the ongoing purposes of God's salvation are all bound up with this "holy" people. This being so, some would see the whole of the Book of Judges as being the story of Israel's failure in the land of promise. They had been brought so far in God's victorious purposes with tremendous possibilities opened up for them for both consolidation and advance. But over and over again the potential was not realised, mainly because "self" took the place of God. They forgot who they were, who had made them what they were, to whom they belonged and owed their duty, and the destiny to which they were called. To be God's particular (chosen) people and to serve His glory were the only reasons for their existence. But they forgot God. Their story became one of spiritual barrenness interspersed with brief periods of spiritual revival. It is like the story of too many Christians - one long fluctuation with the peaks diminishing and the troughs deepening. The end of that process is to drift and be carried away from God with our brokenness obvious, as it was in the case of Israel. Of course, the Book of Judges does not finish the story as far as God and His purposes are concerned. He goes marching on, but for us there is the possibility of wasted lives and shrivelled characters. We must learn to redeem the time (Eph. 5:16 AV). Neither the days nor the years can be recalled. But redemption is costly; there is a price to pay

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21:1-25

We do not try to establish the rights and wrongs of the attitudes and actions of Israel, nor to dismiss the whole thing as being an example of how things were done in these far off days. The last verse shows the prevailing spiritual atmosphere and the inescapable moral anarchy. Now, when a people are adrift from God they are in no condition to make spiritual assessments or decisions. The terrible crime of chapters 19-20 had aroused the nation to justice and judgment, and no one rested until Benjamin had been brought to justice. But there seems to have been no sense in the tribes that they shared guilt for the state of the nation (cf. Daniel's great prayer in chapter 9 of his book). Here in verse 3 we have a reaction in the face of the virtual extermination of one of the tribes which seemed to be a contradiction of Israel's whole history. This tradition of inheritance and identity was so important in the thinking of this backslidden people that they could not countenance any change in it and these schemes were set in motion to remedy the situation. There seems to have been no reference to the will of God or to the long-term consequences and complications. It seems their concern here was to keep the letter of their vow, while breaking the spirit of it. It seems that there had been a reaction in Israel to the grim events engulfing them, but that is not repentance. The only safety is to walk with God, for it is in His light that we see light (Ps. 36:9).

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21:1-25

"The writer traced lawlessness to the lack of authority. The truth is that Israel had lost its living relation to its one and only King. Uninstructed zeal, even in the cause of righteousness, often goes beyond its proper limits, and does harm rather than good. The terrible slaughter of the men of Benjamin continued until not more than six hundred of the tribe were left. Then another of those sudden revulsions which characterise the action of inflamed peoples occurred. Israel is seen suddenly filled with pity for the tribe so nearly exterminated. They realised that the unity and completeness of the family of Jacob was threatened by their action. The sad part of the story is that, to remedy the threatened evil, they resorted to means which were utterly unrighteous. Wives were provided for the men of Benjamin by further unholy slaughter at Jabesh-gilead, and by the vilest iniquity at Shiloh. It is impossible to read these last five chapters without realising how perilous is the condition of any people who act

without some clearly defined principle. Passion moves to high purpose only as it is governed by principle. If it lacks that, at one moment it will march in heroic determination to establish high ideals and purity of life; and almost immediately, by some change of mood, will act in brutality and all manner of evil. Humanity without its one King, is cursed by lawlessness."

(G.C. Morgan)

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