

JUDGES

INTRODUCTION

The book of Numbers is a sad book, because it tells of the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years after God brought the people out of Egypt. But Judges is a sadder and more solemn book—it tells of the failure of Israel after they had entered the Land of Promise, a failure that lasted not 40 years but 400. It represents the danger of backsliding after a person has received the Holy Spirit and known Jesus in His fullness—a danger most real and alarming.

The author of Hebrews warns against the same thing: "We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure" (6:11).

There is a place in the discipline of the Christian life and in the wise and faithful dealing of God with His people for both warning and promise, for both hope and fear. No one is so unsafe as he who recklessly dreams of safety without vigilance and obedience. God has planted beacons all along the way, not to discourage us with needless fear, but to save us with wholesome caution and vigilant obedience.

Judges stands in a larger sense for the declension of the Church of Christ after the apostolic age, and it represents the dark ages of Christian history. But in its personal application it may also represent the danger of retreating from the baptism of Pentecost and the deepest and highest experiences of the Holy Spirit.

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

THE CAUSE OF SPIRITUAL FAILURE

The book of Judges has a very important place in the plan of divine revelation. It expresses a great truth and teaches a deep and solemn lesson: the danger of spiritual declension after great spiritual blessing.

Began With Victory

The book begins with a record of victory.

After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the LORD, "Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?"

The LORD answered, "Judah is to go; I have given the land into their hands."

Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, "Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. We in turn will go with you into yours." So the Simeonites went with them.

When Judah attacked, the LORD gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands and they struck down ten thousand men at Bezek. (1:1-4)

This was all as it should be, and manifested the spirit of faith, obedience and humble dependence upon God. Further on we read that they even took Jerusalem and that they captured Hebron and other strongholds. They pressed down to the country of the Philistines, driving them from most of their strongholds. It seemed as if they still possessed the victorious faith of Joshua and had in their midst the same Almighty Presence of their divine Leader.

Beginning Of Failure

But we soon begin to see the first indications of the coming failure. First, the men of Judah began to pause in their career of triumph. We see the first word of defeat and discouragement in verse 19: "they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots." Soon after we read of the partial failure of the tribe of Benjamin: "The Benjamites, however, failed to dislodge the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem; to this day the Jebusites live there with the Benjamites" (1:21). It was not that they "were unable," but that they "failed to" dislodge them.

Next we find Manasseh failing to drive out the inhabitants of Beth Shan and the neighboring towns: "for the Canaanites were determined to live in that land" (1:27). Next, Ephraim becomes discouraged and fails to drive the Canaanites from Gezer (1:29). Zebulun also allows the enemy to remain in his town (1:30). Asher yields to the inhabitants living in his region (1:31). Naphtali fails to drive out the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh (1:33). And Dan flees before the Amorites of his mountain land (1:34). So there was scarcely a tribe of Israel that had not in some degree compromised with the enemy and given place to their foes, whom God had ordered to be completely extirpated (exterminated) from the land. The steps of their failure are very striking as we follow them in detail.

Tolerating The Enemy

First, the Israelites simply *let* the enemy remain. They seemed to have no fear of the Canaanites and just failed to exterminate them.

Second, we find the Israelites deliberately putting the Canaanites under their control and keeping them there for the purpose of making a profit from them and getting something out of them. This is where the world gets into our Christian lives today. We compromise with evil; we not only allow it, but we use it for our own purposes. We think there is no harm in taking money from wicked men for religious purposes and meeting them halfway. We are willing to be agreeable to the world in order to have a good influence over it. But in the end we fall completely under its power.

Third, we find the Canaanites living alongside the Israelites (1:27). Then, a little later, we find Israel living with the Canaanites (1:33). Israel began by treating the Canaanites as guests or slaves, but ended by finding that they had become their masters and conquerors.

Conquered By The Enemy

Next we see the Canaanites driving the children of Dan into the mountains. They now have grown strong enough to dictate and demand, as evil always does after we have given it standing room for a little while.

Intermarriage

Next comes the intermarriage of God's people with the enemy. They meet in the social intimacies of life. They find the people of the world agreeable and profitable, and they consent to the forbidden fellowships and intermarriages of the godly and the ungodly, which in every age have preceded a time of corruption and great wickedness. No child of God has any right to intermarry with the ungodly, and a true parent dare not consent to such a union without involving the eternal

well-being of the child. It is never safe to disobey God, and I have no hesitation in saying that I would not perform such a marriage ceremony.

Idolatry

The next step is partnership in idolatry and the forsaking of Jehovah's worship for the shameful rites of heathenism. In chapter 3 we read: "They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods. The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs" (3:6-7).

God's Anger

The culmination of all this soon came in the anger of Jehovah and His severe and righteous judgment upon His disobedient people:

In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress. (2:14-15)

What a dreadful thing it is to have God against us and to know that He who controls the breath of our lives and all the elements of destruction around us is compelled by His nature to deal contrary to us and to consume us—even as fire consumes every combustible thing it touches! God is compelled to be against sin, and while He pities the sinner, He hates the sin. While we are against God, His presence must be to us a consuming fire. We would fly from the awful blaze of His holy glance as from a lightning flash and long to hide ourselves in hell.

Given Up

But there is something even sadder than this. We read that God gave them up to the power of their enemies and allowed the Canaanites, whom they themselves had trifled with and taken into covenant, to be the thorns and snares of judgment and temptation to them.

There is nothing more terrible in all the judgments pronounced against Israel than this: "Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you" (2:3).

And later we read:

Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did." (2:20-21)

God allowed them to be filled with their own devices and tempted and tried by the results of their own disobedience. He even sold them into the hands of their enemies and gave their foes a power to subdue and enslave them (3:8), which they could have never claimed without divine permission. From that time forward, the Canaanites, Philistines, Syrians, Assyrians, Babylonians and Romans were but the executioners of divine judgment. They succeeded in their conquests and captivities by direct divine permission.

All of this represents an awful truth which the New Testament undoubtedly confirms: God's last and most terrible judgment is to allow the devil to have power over the disobedient soul and to permit temptation to overcome, torment and punish him because of his willful disobedience to the will of God and his rejection of the grace that would have saved him. The saddest thing about the condition of the sinner is that while he thinks he is free and has the power to reform and do as he pleases, he is the helpless slave of Satan, who has "taken them captive to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:26). He can never be free until he repents and renounces the dominion of God's great enemy and appeals to the blood of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to break the fetters of his captivity.

The Hardened Heart

There may come a time in the life of a wicked man when, through persistent rejection of light and right, he shall be given over, as we read in Romans, "to a depraved mind," and "to shameful lusts" (1:28, 26). He shall find within him a power compelling him to evil and possessing him with the devil just as one can be possessed and constrained by the Holy Spirit.

This explains the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. This is the last stage of impenitence and despair, and it never comes to any person until he has rejected and refused the mercy of God and has deliberately chosen evil instead of good, Satan instead of God. God punishes him by letting him have Satan to the full, or as it is expressed so graphically in Proverbs:

Since they hated knowledge

and did not choose to fear the LORD,
since they would not accept my advice
and spurned my rebuke,
they will eat the fruit of their ways
and be filled with the fruit of their own schemes.
(1:29-31)

It is possible even for the child of God to be delivered over to the power of temptation through a continuance in willful and persistent disobedience. The very things that we choose become our punishment, and through our own deliberate disobedience, we find ourselves under temptation that we cannot resist. The reason is that we are in a place where God never wanted us to be. We have brought upon ourselves our own torment. The grace of God is equal to all His will for us, and He knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation. But He has not promised His grace for self-imposed burdens, dangers or situations that are contrary to His divine purpose.

There is nothing sweeter in life than to be conscious of being so encased in the armor of the Holy Spirit that Satan cannot touch us. Every fiery shot glances off, as the shot and shell are repelled by the armor plate on the battleship, and we walk through the hosts of hell as safe and unscathed as if we were treading the courts of heaven.

But there is also an experience where we are conscious that Satan has a power over our hearts; that the fiery darts do penetrate and stain the sensitive soul; that the evil instigation does become a part of our thoughts and feelings; and that we are not in perfect victory over the power of evil. This is the meaning of the Master's prayer: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13).

This is the meaning of hell, the beginning of torment, the retribution of sin. This is something even more bitter than the wrath of God. It is the culmination of the first step of unbelief, disobedience and spiritual declension. Let us guard against the first step, and let us ask Him to save us from the causes that led His people of old into these depths of wretchedness and sin.

The Causes Of Israel's Failure

The first cause was incomplete and unfinished work. The Israelites did not thoroughly finish the battle. They entered into compromises with evil. They failed to be thorough and wholehearted in their dealing with God. Let us make sure that we give no place to the devil and that we allow the world and the flesh no standing ground. All Satan asks is toleration of a single root of bitterness, unbelief or self-indulgence. As surely as God is true, however, that single sin will destroy us in the end.

Second, the Israelites failed to recognize their temptations as God's tests to see what they would do. He allowed the things to come so that He could test their obedience. Similarly, He lets temptations come to us, not so that they may overcome us, but so that they can establish us. If we would recognize them as God's tests and rise above them to meet His higher will, they would become occasions for grander victories and higher advances.

But third, the real secret of their failure was the lack of a true, personal and independent hold upon God as the Source of their strength. There is one passage in the opening verses of Judges that explains the situation: "The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel" (2:7).

Here we see the cause of the whole trouble. The Israelites leaned upon Joshua and Joshua's immediate successors more than they leaned upon God. They got their ideas and inspiration from human leaders, but they did not stand personally rooted and grounded in God. When the shock of conflict came, they failed. Indeed, their own language on a previous occasion shows that they did not really understand their own helplessness and their utter need of Jehovah.

Self-Confidence

In the closing chapter of Joshua we read that when that great leader had gathered the people together at Shechem and given them his parting charges, they answered with unreserved assurance, " 'We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God. Joshua said to the people, 'You are not able to serve the LORD' " (24:18-19).

What Joshua meant was that they could not in their self-confident strength do anything but fail and sin. But they had not learned the lesson, and confident in their self-sufficiency, they did fail and sink into the depth of sin and misery. The triumphs of Jericho, Beth Horon, Hebron and Gibeon ended in the tears of Bokim (Judges 2:1-5) and captivity by their foes.

Thank God there is another side to Bokim, the place of which the inspired prophet said, "No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah" (Isaiah 62:4). Bokim is the place of weeping; Beulah is the place of love and joy. Bokim means failure of our strength; Beulah means married to Him and kept by His power from stumbling and from failure.

Let us go to Bokim and learn our helplessness. And then let us go forth to Beulah and, leaning upon His love and strength, go forward singing: "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57). "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

The first part of the book of Judges (1:1 through 2:5) establishes the historical scene for the narratives that will follow. It begins with victory but is soon followed by indications of coming failure. It describes Israel's incomplete conquest of the Promised Land, and the Lord's rebuke for her unfaithfulness to His Covenant. While Israel was under the leadership of Joshua, they had generally conquered and occupied the land of Canaan, but large areas remained to be possessed by the individual tribes. Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord continually, and "there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

From verses 19 through 34 in the first chapter, how many tribes failed to drive out the enemy Canaanites from their land? Name the various reasons why it was relatively "easy" for these tribes to slip into failure? One tribe was actually driven into the mountains and not allowed to come down; which one was it? Incidentally, this tribe's name is not listed among the others in the book of Revelation—do you wonder why?

Finally, describe the effects that intermarriage and idolatry (forsaking the worship of Jehovah) had on these tribes. What comparison of the above can we make with the people of today? And what does this mean to God?

Judges 2:14-3:30

SINNING AND REPENTING

In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands. Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. (Judges 2:14-19)

This, in a few sentences, is the story of the whole book of Judges. It is a story of sinning and repenting. It is a picture of the Church and the Christian in a state of deep declension. It is a declension more deep and dark because it followed a condition of the highest spiritual blessing. It came not as the wandering in the wilderness did, after their deliverance from Egypt, but it came after their victorious entrance into Canaan and their enjoyment of the life and victory and the fullness of God's blessing.

The Dark Ages

Its historical parallel is the story of the Dark Ages in the history of Christianity, when for centuries the Church sank into apostasy and worldliness; and for a thousand years the light of truth and holiness was almost wholly blotted out—and this after the story of Pentecost and the light of apostolic days. It has its individual parallel in the experience of the child of God, when, after the baptism of the Holy Spirit, he falls back into spiritual declension and disobedience and returns to a life of sinning and repenting. It is a far sadder experience because of the light and the power he has known before. The lessons of this book may well warn every one of us to give all diligence to "hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (Hebrews 3:14).

Othniel And Ehud

Let us look at the first two examples of God's dealing with this sinful people. The first is the story of Othniel:

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died. (Judges 3:7-11)

Next, is the story of Ehud:

Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and because they did this evil the LORD gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.

Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a foot and a half long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing. He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man. After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way the men who had carried it. At the idols near Gilgal he himself turned back and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king."

The king said, "Quiet!" And all his attendants left him.

Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his summer palace and said, "I have a message from God for you." As the king rose from his seat, Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly. Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it. Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, "He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the house." They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead.

While they waited, Ehud got away. He passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah. When he arrived there, he blew a trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went down with him from the hills, with him leading them.

"Follow me," he ordered, "for the LORD has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands." So they followed him down and, taking possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab, they allowed no one to cross over. At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not a man escaped. That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years. (3:12-30)

These two incidents, following each other in direct succession, illustrate the progression of evil and at the same time the progression of God's grace.

Repeated Sin

We cannot fail to notice here the aggravation of repeated sin. We read in Judges 3:7 that "the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD." And we read the same thing in verse 12: "the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD." In the second passage, however, we see that the effects of their sin were much more serious than in the first instance.

After their first disobedience we are told that God sold them into the hands of the enemy, and they served them eight years. But in the second instance the Lord not only gave them into the hands of the enemy, but He gave "Eglon king of Moab power over Israel." And this time they served the enemy 18 years!

Here we find God working on the side of Israel's enemies, giving them power to afflict His people. We see that the effect of continued sin is to prolong the period of our chastisement and fix the habit of evil until it becomes almost permanent. It is an awful truth that evil men and women grow worse and worse, and the power of sin to hurt them and to hold them increases with every repetition. It was not merely that God prolonged the Israelites' captivity by His arbitrary will, but it seems as if they themselves had been so paralyzed by their sin and judgment that they did not even think of turning to Him for help for 18 years.

It would seem as if God always listened to Israel when they cried to Him. But the saddest effect of their sin was that they forgot His former mercy and failed to lift up to Him their penitent cry. Over against their sin, though, is the mercy of a long-suffering God! The moment they turned to Him in prayer and penitence, He heard their cry and sent them help. How striking is the expression, "Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer." His mercy was instant, and His deliverance was complete.

Then, when He restored them from their captivity, the duration of the blessing was in proportion to the length of the judgment. When He saved them from the captivity of Cushan-Rishathaim, eight years long, He gave them rest for 40 years. When He saved them from the captivity of Eglon, 18 years long, He gave them rest for 80 years. It would seem as if His mercy was graduated in contrast to their sorrows and their sin. The days of blessing were more than four times as long as the days of punishment and pain.

Has God caused you to look back at some dark chapter of backsliding and spiritual loss? If so, take comfort from the story of Israel's sin. Turn to God in true-hearted repentance and obedience, and He "will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm— my great army that [He] sent among you" (Joel 2:25).

How beautiful to observe in the story of Simon Peter that when the Lord restored him after his threefold sin, He gave him a threefold blessing and commission—as if He would put a mark of honor over against every scar that the disciple had brought upon himself. "Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble" (Psalm 90:15).

That is the mercy of God. But how much better and sweeter is the grace of God that is able "to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy" (Jude 24).

A Dependence On Human Leaders

There are some further lessons in connection with these incidents that are well worthy of our careful attention. Notice how all through this period the people were dependent upon human leaders. Indeed, this seems to have been their bane throughout the whole period. They were faithful to God as long as Joshua lived, but they had no direct dependence on Joshua's God.

Theirs was a reflected goodness, derived from the circumstances and the people that surrounded them. They were true to God while their judge led them on to victory and ruled over them afterward. But when he died, their hearts, like the sapling that has only been bent, sprang back again to their natural willfulness. The writer has so well expressed it: "the people returned to ways even more corrupt . . . following other gods and serving and worshipping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways" (Judges 2:19).

Here we see the whole root of bitterness—a superficial experience, influenced by persons and circumstances, while our natural heart still remains and we are not personally united to the Lord Jesus Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit for ourselves. The promise of this dispensation, thank God, is not that we shall have Othniels and Ehuds, Joshuas and Calebs to lead us, but that the Holy Spirit shall be poured out "on all people" (Acts 2:17), and "no longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jeremiah 31:34).

Patterns To Follow

We are, therefore, to look for our spiritual examples not in the condition of the people of that time, but in the spirit of the leaders. These men were patterns of what each of us may be today in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Othniel we see, according to the literal meaning of his name, the lion-hearted man, the man of faith and holy courage. We have heard of him before. It was he who, at Caleb's challenge, had dared to assault the stronghold of Kiriath Sepher (Judges 1:12). As a reward for his victory, Othniel won the hand of Achsah, the daughter of Caleb, whose name means "grace." And with her he received a dowry of special grace and blessing.

Othniel stands for the faith that in the first lessons of our Christian life dares to take the victory and receives the fullness of grace. And then, later, when others need our help, we are prepared to lead them into the same victory that we have won.

There is a story behind every story. There is a life behind every public record of triumph and distinction. The Othniel who led Israel to victory against the mighty emperor of the East was not the creation of a moment or the accident of a great occasion. He was the outgrowth and development of a long-past history, when as a young man he met the crisis hour of his own life and dared to believe God and overcome his enemies in the strength of the Lord. He won the blessing that enabled him to meet the greater occasion and to stand as the first of Israel's judges and conquerors.

His story is an example of what we will encounter. There will come a moment when we meet life's issues all alone, and as we stand true and triumph over self and sin, God's mark is placed upon us. He puts us aside for the day when He will need a brave leader and a chosen instrument for some of the great occasions of the world's history. And it will be found true again, as it ever has been true, that "the LORD has set apart the godly for himself" (Psalm 4:3).

A Divinely Appointed Judge

The implication for us from the second account is not quite so clear as the first. Ehud stands before us, apparently, in the light as a secret assassin. By deep subtlety, and in the disguise of a friend, he gains access to the presence of Eglon, the oppressor of his country. He then tells the king he has a secret message for him. The king grants him a private audience, and Ehud tells him it is a message from God. Then swift as the lightnings flash, he pierces him to the heart with the hidden dagger, and strikes down the life of his country's oppressor.

Many commentators have tried to excuse Ehud's act, or at least to exonerate God from all responsibility for it, by calling attention to the fact that it is not said, as in the case of Othniel, that the Spirit of God came upon Ehud. They seem disposed to apologize for him or to make him responsible for his own act, leaving it as a doubtful thing. But a candid reader cannot fail to notice that the inspired writer made no such attempt to evade responsibility. He frankly speaks of Ehud as the deliverer whom God raised up to save His people. He further recognized his whole career as that of a divine leader and judge.

How then shall we justify his act of apparent murder? Surely, the answer is plain. It was not Ehud's act; it was not an act of private vengeance or even patriotic fervor. The answer is found in Ehud's message to Eglon: "I have a message from God for you" (Judges 3:20). He was acting as a divinely appointed judge and executioner of God's sentence against a wicked and condemned man. "I have a message from God for you" is his solemn word as he suits the action to the word and strikes down the bold and impious transgressor at his feet. He was simply acting as the judge upon the bench when he sentences the murderer to his doom, or as the public executioner when he fulfills the decree of the State and takes the life that has been forfeited by law for a public crime. Ehud acted by divine command and in the divine name.

His victim stands before us as the type (foreshadow) of our spiritual oppressor. And Ehud stands as the example of the faith that meets the enemy, not in its own name or strength, but in the name and strength of Jehovah, triumphing even as He did.

An Inspiring Lesson

There is an inspiring lesson in this attitude. Is it not our privilege to identify ourselves with God in all we say and do, to go forth in victory in His name? Is not this the meaning of that strong expression, "whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17)?

Is it prayer? As we pray let us identify ourselves with Him until it shall not be our prayer, but God's prayer in us, and we shall know that the answer must be given. Is it temptation? As we are tempted let us meet the devil as a conquered foe. Standing in the Person of our victorious Lord, let us say to him, "I have a message from God for you. He bids you flee. Get behind me, Satan, in the name of Jesus." In that mighty name we shall cast out demons and tread upon serpents and scorpions and upon all the power of the enemy.

Or is it service? Are we called to speak for our Master to our fellow men? Let it be not our message, but His; not our ideas and opinions and pleadings, but the word from the throne, delivered to men with the authority of God. Let us look into their conscience and say in the name of our Master, "I have a message from God for you." Our words will be clothed with power, and the Holy Spirit will convict men of sin and righteousness and judgment and seal our message with precious souls and lasting fruits.

This is the true spirit of ministry: "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11).

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

"And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel" (Judges 2:14) "Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the hand of those who spoiled them. And yet they would not hearken unto their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods," (Judges 2:16-17a) And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel; (Judges 2:20a) "I also will not henceforth drive out any from before them of the nations which Joshua left when he died; That through them I may test Israel," (Judges 2:21-22a) **Is God giving the Israelites the rope (freedom) to hang themselves (prove their guilt) when they are to stand before the Judge? Are we in a similar situation today in proving our loyalty to the one and only true God?**

Judges 3:31-5:31

SHAMGAR, DEBORAH AND BARAK

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. (Hebrews 11:32-34; compare with Judges 3:31 and 4:14-15)

The darkness of night allows us to see the stars. Similarly, it seems that the darkest times of national and church history are always occasions for the best types of genius and character to shine. The long, sad story of the judges revealed a Deborah and a Barak, a Gideon and a Samson, an Othniel and a Jephthah. The times of Ahab and Jezebel were made illustrious by the ministry of Elijah and Elisha. The dark night of the Middle Ages was made luminous by the testimony of a Wycliffe, a Luther and a Knox.

The story of divine mercy and Christian faith is written on the dark background of human sin and crime. We are to look at a few of these stars of the night as they shine in the firmament of the book of Judges.

Shamgar And An Oxgoad

The story of Shamgar (Judges 3:31 and 5:6) introduces us to a humble farmer in Southern Palestine. His only weapon was the implement of his daily toil and his battlefield was a country road, but he stands forever illustrious among the heroes of faith and the saviors of his country.

One day he was following his simple plow and oxen and carrying in his hand the rude oxgoad—a long, wooden rod that was often tipped with a piece of metal and was used for driving draft animals. Suddenly, he found himself confronted by a large group of Philistines—possibly the precursors of another invasion of Israel. Seizing his oxgoad by the small end and turning it into a formidable club, he suddenly charged his foes. As they turned and fled before his fierce attack, he pursued them with such resistless fury that before the day was over 600 of them lay dead around him. Doubtless it was

more than human prowess. But like David's battles it was one of those times of supernatural inspiration, when God Himself took possession of His chosen instrument and one was able to chase a thousand, and send dismay into the hearts of a host of enemies. Doubtless this battle was a crisis in the history of the country, and stayed some greater invasion. For as these men went back to tell the tale of their strange disaster, their neighbors began to think that if one man could do such wonders, it would scarcely be safe to meet an army of such men.

Shamgar represents in some very striking ways the spirit of Christian faith and victory. Here we see a man standing in the ordinary walks of life, and meeting an emergency as it comes to him without stepping aside from the path of ordinary duty. He does not need to mount a pedestal or be placed in some illustrious position to be a hero. He simply stands in the place where God has put him and there becomes illustrious through the force of his own personal character and conduct. He does not go out of his way to find a mission, but he meets the events that come to him in the ordinary course of life, and turns them into occasions for faith and victory.

People In Secular Callings

He represents the men and women who stand in secular callings, and who find a pulpit and a ministry just where God has placed them, amid the tasks and toils of daily life. He stands for the businessman at his office, who finds a thousand opportunities for fighting the battle of the Lord and doing good to his fellow men in the course of his routine.

I know a humble shoemaker in a New England town who finds in his little shop every day a dozen opportunities for preaching Christ, as well as living the gospel. God has used him to lead many of his customers to the Person who transformed his own heart and life. I know a captain on a passenger ship who preaches the gospel in his plain and modest way to tens of thousands of his passengers every year. His cabin has been the birthplace of hundreds of precious souls for whom he lies in wait with ceaseless, watchful tact and love. I know more than one businessman whose office is an object lesson of Bible texts and divine messages, and who never meets a caller without some hint of eternal things, and who never writes a letter without some little enclosure which can speak for God and salvation.

Our Present Resources

Shamgar did not have to wait until he had a sword or a spear or a battle-bow to fight. He took as a weapon the thing that was in his hand and turned it against the enemy. Similarly, God wants your real resources just as they are, to be used for Him. He is asking you, "What is that in your hand?" (Exodus 4:2). Moses' rod, Dorcas' needle, Shamgar's oxgoad, David's sling and stone, Joshua's ram's horn, the lad's five loaves and two fishes and the widow's little can of oil are all that He requires for His mightiest victories and His grandest ministries. Give Him what you have, be faithful where you are, do what you can and He will do the rest.

If you want a field of labor,
You can find it anywhere.

Shamgar's victory may seem small compared with Gideon's. If we just look at numbers, we could say that was true. But we have to see the larger picture. God used it to prevent a major invasion and to render needless some more costly victory afterward. Likewise, the little things we do, the faithfulness with which we meet some trifling opportunity, may prevent some greater disaster or be the occasion of some mightier blessing than we can see at the time.

It may seem a small thing for a woman on a dark and stormy night to dash along the railroad track and signal the rushing train to stop before it reaches the broken bridge, but that single act of heroism saved a hundred lives. It may seem a little thing for a small group of heroes to hold a pass against an army, but that was the key to the whole battle.

It may be a trifling thing for a quiet English girl to find a ragged street urchin and induce him to go to Sunday school by giving him a suit of clothes. Then, when he did not show up, she hunted him up weeks afterward and gave him another suit of clothes, only to find that he did not come to church. Refusing to be discouraged by the boy's deception, she found him a third time. Her patience triumphed and that boy was won for Christ. To most it was a small thing; they surely felt the boy was not worth pursuing. But the day came when that act of tireless love was God's first step in the evangelization of China. That boy was Robert Morrison, the pioneer of modern missions in the Far East.

These are the little things that God loves to glorify! God help many of us to watch for these wayside opportunities and win these battles of faith and fortitude.

The Ministry Of A Woman

Our next illustration is the story of Deborah and Barak. Here we are introduced to a new instrument in the work of God—the ministry of a woman.

Deborah stands before us in strong contrast to the customs and prejudices of her time. She is called to lead in a national crisis, to stand in the front of both statesmanship and war as the head of the nation. This is an unqualified recognition of the part women play in ministry. With such an example, backed up by so many honored successors, let no man deny the place of women in the history of nations and the ministries of Christianity.

At the same time, the story of Deborah is as clear in limiting as it is in permitting the ministry of women. It gives no encouragement to the "new woman" in her absurd attempt to usurp the place of men. A mannish woman is an outrage upon her own sex and a caricature of the other sex. She falls between two fires, for she falls short of manhood and she falls out of womanhood. Christ has established the natural and spiritual law that the head of every woman is the man, and the head of the man is Christ (1 Corinthians 11:3). This is the type of womanhood that Deborah represented.

Though she knew that she was called by her spiritual qualifications to lead her people to deliverance from the enemy, Deborah took particular pains to find a man to be the executive officer of her plans and the leader of God's hosts in the divine campaign. Her chief business was to put Barak in the front, and then stand by him with her counsel, prayers, faith and wholesome reproof.

Deborah was a practical and sensible woman. Her name signifies "the bee," and she possessed the sting as well as the honey. She knew how to stir up Barak by wholesome severity as well as encourage him by holy inspiration. He is a very foolish man who refuses to be helped by the shrewd, intuitive wisdom of a true woman. While her head may not be so large, its quality is generally of the best; her conclusions, though not reasoned out so elaborately, generally reach the right end by intuitions that are seldom wrong. A woman's place is to counsel, to encourage, to pray, to believe and preeminently to help.

This was what Deborah did, and in this Deborah was the type of woman's scepter, which is that of yieldedness and love rather than dogmatism and defiance.

Man's Helpmate

We see in the story of Barak a man of weak and timid faith, losing much by his diffidence, and yet used of God and lifted to a more divine faith by the inspiration of Deborah.

Barak shrank at first from the unexpected call to lead an army of 10,000 men against the large army of Sisera. He finally consented when Deborah agreed to go with him, but his timidity cost him the honor he would have won and his sharp and penetrating monitor, Deborah, plainly told him: "But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman" (Judges 4:9). There were really two women in this case, and Barak was sandwiched in between them, with Deborah in the front and Jael in the rear.

Despite his hesitancy, even poor, weak Barak became one of the heroes of faith who shine in the constellation of eternal stars, upon which the Holy Spirit has turned the telescope of the 11th chapter of Hebrews.

Yes, God can use the weakest instruments, and He generally does choose the poor in spirit and the temperaments that are naturally the opposite, to clothe them with His supernal might.

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

Look at Isaiah when God called him to his splendid ministry. How little he thought of himself. "Woe is me! ... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips," (Isaiah 6:5). Yet God used him to unfold the majestic visions of messianic prophecy.

Look at Jeremiah as he shrank back into his conscious nothingness, and cried, "LORD, ... I am a child," (Jeremiah 1:6). But God took that trembling reed and made him a pillar of strength and a fenced, brazen wall of resistance against the kings, the prophets and the priests of Israel. He was the grandest figure of the last days of Jerusalem.

Yes, God can take us in our weakness and nothingness and make us strong in His might to the pulling down of strongholds.

Deborah's Message

Barak was not always weak. There came a time when he responded to the inspiring call of faith and became a hero. Deborah's message to him is all alive with the very spirit and innermost essence of the faith which counts the things that are not as though they were.

"Go!" Deborah cries, as she rouses him by a trumpet call from his timorous inactivity. "This is the day," she adds as she shakes him out of his procrastination. "The LORD has given Sisera into your hands," she went on to say, as she counted the victory as already won. "Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?" (Judges 4:14), she concludes as she commits the whole matter into Jehovah's hands and tells Barak to simply follow on and take the victory that is already given.

Is it possible for faith to speak in plainer terms, or language to express with stronger emphasis the imperative mood and the present tense of that victorious faith to which nothing is impossible?

Cooperating Instruments

Another lesson we see here is that of mutual service. This victory was not won by any single individual, but God linked together, as He loves to do, many cooperating instruments in the accomplishment of His will. Deborah represents

the spirit of faith and prophecy. Barak exemplifies obedience and executive energy. There were the people that willingly offered themselves—the volunteers of faith. There were the noble men of Zebulun and Naphtali who jeopardized their lives—the martyrs of sacrifice who are the crowning glory of every great enterprise. And there was Jael, a poor heathen woman out on the frontiers of Israel, who gave the finishing touch to the victory. She struck the last blow through the temples of proud Sisera (Judges 4:17-24). And high above all were the forces of nature and the unseen armies of God's providence; for the stars in their courses fought against Sisera, and the flood of the Kishon rolled down in mountain torrents and swept the astonished foe away.

Still again, we see the curse of neutrality and the pitiful spectacle which seems always to be present—the unfaithful, ignoble and indifferent ones who quietly looked on while all this was happening. They not only missed their reward, but justly received the curse of God's displeasure and judgment.

And so in the Song of Deborah (5:1-31), we hear of Reuben's enthusiastic purposes, but ultimate debates and doubts, so that he does nothing. We see her sarcasm strike the selfish men of Gilead who abode beyond the Jordan; the careless Danites, who remained in their ships. We see the men of Asher who, secure in their naval defenses, lingered by the seashore and took refuge in their ports and inland rivers. But above all the echoes of her denunciation, rings out the last awful curse against the inhabitants of Meroz, a little obscure city that probably had taken refuge in its insignificance, because its inhabitants had refused to come up to the help of the Lord against the mighty.

God's mighty warfare is raging still. Let us beware lest we, too, hide in vain behind our littleness and meet at last the same curse the city of Meroz received because they refused to help fight:

"Curse Meroz," said the angel of the LORD.
"Curse its people bitterly,
because they did not come to help the LORD,
to help the LORD against the mighty."
(5:23)

In these last days, when millions are dying without the gospel and the coming of our Master waits but a few short years, perhaps we shall hear Him say, "Curse the servant who refused to use his single talent and his single pound—because it was so small—to help the LORD against the mighty."

The final thing we see in this scene is a pattern page from God's book of remembrance. Some day we shall read the other pages and find our names recorded either with the inhabitants of Meroz and Reuben or with the victors of faith who stood with Deborah and Barak in the battles of the Lord. Will we shine like stars in the night now, and then like the sun in the kingdom of our Father?

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

Shamgar, whose name means "cupbearer" and his achievements are allotted only two verses in the Bible to tell his story. Yet with the simple tool that he carried for use in directing oxen, it is stated about him "and he also delivered Israel." **What does this tell us about God's ways, and how does it affect us as ordinary people? Can God use us in ministry with just the simple resources that we now have?**

In becoming the leader, also a prophetess, in Israel, and later becoming known as a Judge, did Deborah usurp the place of any man by her leadership role? What is a woman's place under God? Regarding Barak who was called to head up Israel's troops to destroy the enemy, did his timidity cause him to lose the honor? What is the great difference between the faith of these two people? Is this a sharp lesson that we should heed? What is the principle thinking of Deborah as she sings her famous song? Do you consider her heart statements to be a mighty warning for us today? Here consider the close of chapter 5, when she sings: "Thus let all your enemies perish, O Lord! But let those who love Him be like the sun when it comes out in full strength." Finally – so the land had rest for forty years.

Judges 6:1-7:7

GIDEON, OR THE STRENGTH OF WEAKNESS

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."

The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands." (Judges 6:12, 14; 7:2)

The strength of weakness leaning upon God, and the weakness of human strength—this is the paradox; this is the spiritual truth that Gideon's life illustrates.

We see this principle illustrated in Gideon's call. While Gideon was hiding behind his winepress and seeking by stealth to thresh a little wheat for his family without being discovered by the Midianites, the angel of the Lord suddenly appeared before him with the startling greeting, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior" (Judges 6:12). Gideon felt anything but a mighty warrior. He must have looked it, too, since he immediately began to apologize and explain to the people the helplessness and distress of his people.

But the answer came as the Lord looked on him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you." (6:14). Gideon questioned God, saying his clan was the weakest in Israel and that he was the least in his family. Again the Lord told Gideon that He would be with him. And Gideon finally understood that it was not his strength that would save his country but God's. It was the strength of faith that is always the strength of weakness, because it is the strength of God.

A Paradox To The Natural Mind

This is the story of grace and the secret of supernatural power. It is a paradox to the natural mind. "When I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10) is the proper inscription of every victorious saint.

God comes to the sinner and by a word of sovereign grace pronounces him forgiven, and that word makes him what it declares. He comes to the sinful person and says, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you" (John 15:3), and that word creates the fact of his sanctification. He comes to the struggling Jacob and by a word transforms him into conquering Israel. He comes to the stormy Boanerges, and he is henceforth the gentle John rising above all human probabilities and natural causes. Grace speaks and it is done, and faith counts the things that are not as though they were. And because of this we see Gideon, the trembling fugitive from his foes, stand panoplied (protected) the next hour in the strength of God, the mighty victor.

We see this principle in the test of Gideon's faith as he is transformed from the natural man to the man of faith. But how weak his faith is, and how slowly it develops into maturity and confidence.

First, Gideon asks for a sign from his supernatural visitor that he may know for a certainty that it is the Lord. So Gideon prepares an offering and brings it to the angel. As Gideon presents the kid and unleavened cakes, the staff in the angel's hand touches the offering and immediately fire flares from the rock and consumes the meat and bread.

No sooner had Gideon's test been granted than he breaks down with a cry of fear: "Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!" (Judges 6:22). Gideon is reassured by the comforting message of the Lord: "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die" (6:23). So he builds an altar to God and goes forth to take his first step of faith and obedience.

This begins at his own home, his father's house, for there altars to Baal and an Asherah pole (a symbol of the goddess) are erected and the worship of the false gods of the Canaanites is carried on beneath his own roof. God commanded Gideon to tear down the altar and cut down the pole and use the wood to build a proper altar to Him, offering up his father's second bullock.

Still we see the timid man and the trembling faith even in his obedience. He takes 10 of his servants and, waiting until night, did as God told him. In the morning his neighbors look with astonishment and anger upon the wreck of their shrine and the evidences of Gideon's bold rebellion. They soon find out who the guilty party is, and their cries are loud and unanimous that he should die.

But Joash, Gideon's shrewd father, tactfully turns aside the anger of the people by suggesting that if Baal was a true god he would deal with Gideon himself. "If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar" (6:31). The father's brave attitude turns the tide, and God sustains His obedient child, as He always will for those who trust in Him.

No sooner has Gideon begun his task than the devil also begins to stir up his forces and resources. The Amalekites and Midianites assemble a mighty army of 135,000 men and pitch their camp in the valley of Jezreel. Then the Spirit of God comes upon Gideon, and he blows a mighty trumpet call to summon the people of his city, and his clan gathers around his standard. From Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali volunteers pour in, until Gideon stands at the head of an army of 30,000 men.

A Reassuring Sign

Again we see that Gideon's faith began to falter, and once more he came to Jehovah for a reassuring sign. God was gentle with his trembling servant; He saw the true purpose of obedience, and He gave him time to be sure. He always does. When God commands us to take any important step, He always will grant us all the certainty and all the strength we need.

Gideon suggested that he would place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If the next morning the fleece was wet with dew and the floor around it was dry, then he would know that God was going to save Israel by his hand.

The next morning Gideon went to the barn. He picked up the fleece and wrung a bowlful of water out of it. The ground all around was completely dry.

Still Gideon shrank from going forward. Once more he asked God to give him a sign—that the token of the previous night be reversed. The fleece should be dry and the ground wet with dew. Again God delivered the asked-for sign.

There was one good thing about Gideon's second request. He was willing to have his sign turned upside down. Sometimes when we are asking for guidance, we want it all one way, and this is usually the reason why we are so often misguided. We are biased in our preference. We want the dew always in our fleece, and we are not willing for it to be dry. But Gideon's will was so fully surrendered to God that he was ready to take His answer either way. As a result, God could teach him.

We Have The Bible And The Holy Spirit

It is different for us today. God does not direct His children by this type of sign. He has given us His holy Word and His Holy Spirit to show us the way we ought to go.

We should be careful in resorting to deciding things by chance, or by opening our Bibles at random. We should shy away from a presumptuous and superstitious dependence upon omens and portents that have led so many astray.

In the Bible we have a standard of right and wrong upon which we can always depend for general principles to direct our actions. In the voice of the Holy Spirit, we have the special guidance that we need in particular circumstances. But there are certain conditions that we must always observe: "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way" (Psalm 25:9). The yielded and willing heart will find His way. The selfish will, the heart that chooses its way and then comes to God to have Him endorse it, will be very likely to go astray.

We know from reading the New Testament that the apostles, when there was an important decision to be made, gathered and prayed and waited for the Lord's direction. So the wise man today will always bring to every question not only the general principles of the holy Scriptures and the special whisperings of the Holy Spirit, but also a sanctified judgment and a calm, deliberate consideration of all the circumstances and providences concerned. He will then hold these humbly before the Lord in prayer, suspending all action until impressions become absolute convictions. At that time, he can go forth with certainty and rest to follow the path that has been indicated and leave the results with God.

Listen And Obey Along The Way

Next, we see the principle of our text illustrated in the selection of Gideon's men. It was a good thing for Gideon that he was weak and timid enough to wait at every point for God's next word. It is quite possible for us to receive a command from the Lord and then to go forward blindly to obey it and really find ourselves at last out of step with God's order. Even though we were seeking to obey Him, we were failing because we did not stop and listen along the way for His further orders.

God guides us step by step and day by day. And it is necessary for us at every moment to listen and obey. Had Gideon gone out with his 32,000 men and all the trappings of a large army—floating banners, blaring trumpets and patriotic enthusiasm—he would surely have been defeated, and all God's promises would have failed. But he wisely waited for his Leader to point every step of the way.

We do have a manual of instructions in the Bible, but we also have a living Lord, a Leader to help us carry out our instructions. Let us walk closely with Him. For while with one breath He says, "Obey everything I have commanded you," in the other He says, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

This is the mistake the Church has often made: it has taken a set of doctrines and rules and bound them up in a volume of instructions, principles, rules, creeds, confessions and doctrinal principles, and then gone forth to carry them out itself. We have no hesitation in saying that even the Bible without the Holy Spirit is not sufficient for the true Christian.

Sifting Out

As Gideon waited on God, another message came: "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands" (Judges 7:2). So God began to sift them, and as Gideon watched, his splendid army melted away until two out of three had gone back at the bidding of their fears.

Similarly, God tests us and lets us retire from the tasks for which He knows we are inadequate. God lets us abandon them because He sees that we are afraid and would fail. But had we dared more, we might have had more.

But even the 10,000 men that were left were still too many for Gideon to accomplish his task. So there was a second test, and God thinned the group even further. How solemn it is to know that in every step we take, we are weighing our own lives, writing our own record and fixing our own place of service and reward!

Gideon brought his men to a brook and simply watched while they drank. Most of them, intent only upon drinking, knelt down and drank as a dog would, lapping the water with their tongues. They never gave a second's thought that the enemy might be waiting to attack them. These men would not do for God's work, so He put them aside.

But there were a few, 300, who drank in a different fashion. With eyes alert, they brought handfuls of water up to their mouths. They satisfied their thirst, but they also remained alert against a surprise attack. These are God's men, and Gideon set them aside while the others went home with the timid ones.

How solemn, how true this is for you and for me! God is always bringing us to the valley of decision, to the test place of life. He gives us some blessing, some water from the fountain of love and prosperity, and He watches to see how we will drink. Often, we become so absorbed in the blessing that we forget everything else. By doing that, we show where our hearts really are, and God cannot trust us in His enterprises.

Perhaps He gives you money, and immediately you become absorbed in business or pleasure. Then when He calls with a sudden emergency, you are not ready. Perhaps He gives you a friend, and that friend becomes more to you than Christ or the call to duty. Perhaps it is some special service that is the test. He lets you disciple a new Christian or gives you a special position, but you become so absorbed in the task that you cannot hear His voice or watch His hand or be adjustable to His will. As a result of your failure, He has to set you aside, not from heaven, perhaps, but from His highest will. He says, "Go home, drink all you want to. Sleep on now, and take your rest, the opportunity is passed."

Weighed In The Balance

Oh, how the days are telling! Oh, how God is testing! Oh, how unconsciously to ourselves, each of us is being weighed in the balance! God help us to "be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15-16).

God does not give us notice of these tests before they come. This is an examination where the questions are not submitted to the candidates beforehand. We understand it all afterward, and how we wish that we had watched. The testing is not only for rewards of glory, but it is for the sake of higher service here. "If a man cleanses himself from the latter [from ignoble purposes], he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2:21).

I heard a phrase that well illustrates Gideon's story. It was the expression, "out and out." God wants us to be "out and out." Gideon's men were "out and out." First, they were picked out from the 32,000. Then they were picked out from the 10,000.

So today God is picking out a people from even His professed followers. And from these—yes, even from the consecrated ones—He is picking those who have not only received the Holy Spirit, but have followed Him through all the tests and all the deaths, all the way, so that He can say of them, as we read of the followers of the Lamb in the day of His appearing, "and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers" (Revelation 17:14).

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

In studying this portion of Scripture, we are asked to grasp the great paradox regarding: The strength of weakness leaning upon God, and the pitiful weakness of human strength. **Is it entirely clear to you that one position only makes the difference—that of faith?** And on God's part, it is His undeserved grace and supernatural power. As taught here, "Grace speaks and it is done, and faith counts the things that are not as though they were." This lesson has been entitled "A Paradox to the Natural Mind," as it gives us the secret to supernatural power. **As you review this encouraging story of Gideon from a weak and insecure person to the great leader he became, set down the steps that occurred from his lack of faith until his will was fully surrendered to God. Today, do we need signs from God similar to Gideon's fleece? What do we have now that teaches us the way we should go in our daily walk? Are there steps in seeking the perfect will of God? Will the heart that is proud and willful or one that operates in the flesh, rather than the spirit, find the true way—the way of peace?**

Judges 7:8-8:21

THE WEAPONS OF OUR WARFARE

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. (2 Corinthians 10:4)

The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled. (Judges 7:20-21)

This is the crowning illustration of the supreme lesson of Gideon's life, the strength of weakness. In the weapons of Gideon's warfare as well as in Gideon and his followers, we see how God can use the weak things of this world to confound the strong. We see how He uses the things that are not to bring to nothing the things that are (1 Corinthians 1:27-28).

Gideon's Fears

Before the assault we again see the timidity of Gideon. As God sends Gideon forward for the final attack upon the Midianites, He recognizes the fears of His timid servant. He tells Gideon,

Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying. Afterward you will be encouraged to attack the camp. (Judges 7:9-11)

We see that God encourages the trembling faith of His child by giving him another sign. Stealthily, Gideon and his servant creep down to the edge of the Midianite camp, arriving just in time to hear one of the soldiers telling his friend about a dream he had. "A round loaf of barley came tumbling into the Midianite camp," the man said. "It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed" (7:13).

The man's friend immediately interprets the dream. "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon, son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands" (7:14). That was enough to satisfy Gideon that God was already working. The enemies' fears are prophetic of their fate.

Likewise, God is working for those who trust Him. He can fight our battles for us in the hearts of our enemies and strike fear in them before the conflict begins. Let us have the faith to recognize our unseen Ally and the forces and resources that are waiting at His command to assist those who trust and obey Him.

The person you want to see accept Jesus as his Savior, and to whom you may speak the final word that leads him to a decision has no doubt been under a preparation for that word through a whole chain of divine providences with which you have had nothing to do. And when you pass on, God still has other agents and influences to take up your work and carry it on to consummation.

When Elisha stood at Dothan surrounded by Syrian armies, it seemed to his frightened servant that all was lost. But there were armies in the sky and on the mountain tops ready to fight the battle for him.

In Gideon's case we see faith that reckons on the unseen and steps out into the darkness alone with God to find that He is just as able to turn the Midianites against each other as to strike them down by His sword. Indeed, He was already beginning to melt their hearts like wax and prepare them by their dreams for the panic and disaster that was to follow.

It mattered not that Gideon had only 300 men and that the enemy had 135,000. It did not matter that their weapons were lamps, pitchers and trumpets, for they did not need to strike a blow in this great battle. Jehovah was going to turn the Midianites against the Amalekites, while Gideon's army stood waving the torch and blowing the trumpet of victory, shouting, "For the LORD and for Gideon!" (7:18). These simple and apparently foolish weapons are fitting for our warfare, which "are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4).

The Pitcher

The pitcher was a clay vessel. It did not need to be strong or beautiful. If it had been made of iron or of brass, it would have been useless. Its fragility was its best attribute, because it was of no use until it was broken. How well it represents our bodies, vessels of clay as it were, through which God is pleased to work and about which He says, "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" (Romans 12:1). "Offer yourselves to God, and offer the parts of your body to Him as instruments of righteousness" (6:13). These members of our body are represented here as weapons. Our hands, feet, lips, eyes, ears and physical senses are all weapons to be used against evil and for the Lord.

Gideon's vessels had to be empty. Similarly, God requires our bodies and spirits to be given to Him exclusively and to be emptied of all our willful, selfish and absorbing desires, ready at any moment for His use and service. Then, when they are filled with His indwelling life and broken like Gideon's pitchers so that the light may shine through, God will use them in their weakness for the revelation of His glory and the accomplishment of His plans.

We need not be troubled about the breaking of the pitchers. God will do that or, at least, will allow it to be done. The circumstances and trials that come to us will furnish the occasion for the victory of His grace. I have seen a child of God standing unmoved amid intense provocation when the natural impulse would have been to speak out and take action and resent the wrong in a manner that might have seemed to the world more dignified and becoming. But instead there was nothing but the flushing crimson of the brow, the starting tear in the eye, the self-suppression that cost a moment's effort, and then the gentle silence and a sweet smile. I have seen a strong man broken down by that victory of love and led to seek the grace that enabled that Christian to triumph over unkindness and to let the light of God's love flash through a broken vessel and shine out because of the cruel wrong. I have seen some worker for Christ stand in silence and misrepresentation and wrong and wait for God to vindicate, and in the waiting days exhibit the patience as no self-vindication could ever have done. And then in the end I have seen the worker come forth with God's own Spirit of Christ and glorify God by that silence the seal of approval and a vindication that human words could never have afforded.

God lets these things come into our lives so that we may reveal the light of His grace and the Spirit of Him whose agony in Gethsamane and shame upon the cross were but the background on which the glory of His grace shone out with a luster transcending even the transfiguration light.

The Lamps

Gideon's lamps represented not only the light of truth and the source of all light, the Holy Spirit, but they also stood for the light of the indwelling Christ. The lamps were inside the pitchers, and Christ must be in us if we would shine. I have heard that travelers in the Arctic can take a piece of ice and shape it so that the sun's rays can be concentrated to start a fire. Unfortunately, the same is not true for human hearts. We must be on fire for God before we can set others on fire.

Thou must thyself be true,
If thou the truth would'st teach.
Thy heart must overflow, if thou
Another heart would'st reach.

In speaking of the true seed of the kingdom, Christ says the good seed are the children of the kingdom. And so again He says, "You are the light of the world," (Matthew 5:14). It is not what we say, but what we are and what Christ is within us that constitutes the strength of our testimony and the power of our life. It is the life of Christ within shining through the broken vessel in a suffering saint, a feeble instrument, that most honors God and most effectively works for His kingdom and glory.

The Trumpets

The trumpet represents the gospel message. A trumpet is just an artificial voice proclaiming a loud and startling message of alarm, or warning, or of command. How perfectly it represents the message of the gospel. The trumpet was not used as a musical instrument. It had no fine inflections of tone or sweet cadences of elocution (effective public speaking). No, its sound was loud; its summons was meant to arouse and to move.

The word from which "preaching" comes is based on this figure: the trumpet of the herald. When Christ sent out His disciples to preach, He did not say, "Go, and give eloquent orations and artistic speeches." No, He said, "Go, and proclaim as a herald the glad tidings of salvation."

Likewise, our message should be as clear and as urgent as the herald's trumpet. And it should be so simple that no one can misunderstand it. This was what John the Baptist said he was, "a voice." There was not much honor in being a voice to express another's thought and message.

This is the chief business of the missionary of Christ. Let us not be misled by our own reasonings. Let us not be led into believing that we are sent overseas simply to gather about us bands of little children and to train them in the truths of Christianity, thus gradually preparing a Christian community, giving up as hopeless those who are more mature in years and more steeped in sin. God sends us to these sinful and hardened lives—to men and to women, to homes and families, to the cannibal chief and the stone age savage. We are to flash before them the light of the living Christ and proclaim in their ears the message of God, believing that He who spoke to Midian's myriads in their dreams and filled their hearts with fear, can still speak to the hearts of men and arouse them to repentance and obedience by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let this be the aim of our work and the claim of our faith, and we shall still find that the weapons of our warfare are as mighty as Gideon's. We need not be "ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16).

The Battle Cry

The battle cry of Gideon's band is full of instructive meaning. "For the LORD and for Gideon!"—what a startling battle cry! There was no waste of words, but there could be no heightening of emphasis. The very words were almost as startling as the blast of the trumpet, loud and long. "For the LORD and for Gideon." How they must have rung out over the midnight air until they echoed back from the hills and ravines! And what shrieks and groans of the terrified and wounded men answered them!

These were fitting watchwords, linking together the two great principles of divine operation and human cooperation. God comes first, for the battle is the Lord's. It is He who strikes down the enemy. It is He who uses and prepares the instrument. It is He who turns foes upon each other and fills their hearts with fear, deciding the battle before it even begins. It is He who is still present in all His unchanged omnipotence, who looks for opportunities to show Himself upright in behalf of those whose hearts are perfect toward Him.

It is He who saves us. It is He who sanctifies us, who is our Healer and Deliverer in temporal distress. It is He who, as the God of providence, still works in the events and circumstances of life in answer to His people's prayers. It is He who sits upon the throne—an everpresent God, making all things work together for good to them who love Him (Romans 8:28). It is He who by the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment (John 16:8).

He can break the hardest heart. He can change the most stubborn will. He can break down the iron walls of Hindu caste and bring tribes and nations to seek and acknowledge Him. He changed the persecuting Saul into a humble apostle of Jesus Christ. He can prompt the hearts of men to lay their treasures at His feet for the needed resources for the work of the gospel and the evangelization of the world.

He does not need our religious tricks or our shameful compromises with the world in order to gain the favor of the rich and win the popularity of the crowd. Christianity is supernatural power. And the same God who led Israel with pillar of cloud and fire, who spoke at Pentecost through the tongues of flame, who opened Peter's prison door, is waiting to work the greater wonders of His grace for us. Oh, for the sword of God! Oh, for the faith to claim it! Oh, for the proof of the promise, "Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this" (Psalm 37:5)!

The Sword

There is Gideon's sword, too. There is a place for man's obedience as well as for man's faith. So Gideon must be true, and his 300 men must be adjusted and ready. They must follow him just as closely as he followed Jehovah. His command was urgent, "Watch me, . . . Follow my lead" (Judges 7:17). There must be perfect unity and precision of action.

There is not much for us to do; but what He does ask us to do, we should do, and do it exactly as He says. And then, when the victory is won, there is still something to do. The foe must be followed up and pursued; the battle must be completed; the enemy must be cut off in its retreat. In the case of Gideon the enemy was cut off at the fords of the Jordan by the very men that had been rejected the day before. The 9,700 who had been sent home because of their failure at the testing waters, were permitted to come in at the finish and cut off the fleeing foe. And so there was a part for all.

This was the part of Gideon and this is the object of our obedience and fellowship in the gospel. God, teach us to trust as if all depended upon You, and to obey as if all depended upon us.

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

Please memorize 1 Corinthians 1:27-28 and 2 Corinthians 10:4; these will be a bulwark of strength for all your battles with the enemy of your soul. Indeed how great it is that this simple, uncomplicated message of Gideon and his warriors teaches us invaluable truths directly from God, and its principles may be used throughout our lives to walk in the fullness of God.

Judges 8:22-9:57

SELF-RENUNCIATION AND SELF-AGGRANDIZEMENT

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. (Galatians 5:15)

The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson—because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian."

But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you." (Judges 8:22-23)

One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. (9:8)

These various passages constitute a composite picture representing with peculiar vividness the nature and malignity of self.

Self-Renunciation

The first thing we see is self-renunciation. This stands out in the last chapter of Gideon's life. After defeating Israel's enemies, Gideon, by the world's standards, deserves the honor of a crown. But he had the grace and humility to refuse it. As a result, his life ended as it began. It started in nothingness and ended in self-abnegation.

That is not the case with all Christians, though. Some start with God's glorious blessing, then they begin to heap upon themselves honor and glory because of His blessing. In the end their lives become consumed with self-consciousness and fleshly pride.

Saul is an example of this kind of person. His life began in modesty, but it ended in stubborn pride. He stands as a monument of humiliating failure and irretrievable ruin.

The same thing can happen to some noble Christian enterprise we decide to undertake. In the beginning, when it is weak and dependent upon God, it is blessed. But when it becomes strong and successful, it is apt to rise into self-sufficiency and end in world conformity and selfishness. This has been the bane of Christianity in every age.

Peter crucified with downward head became Peter the Pope and Prince of Christendom. And Prelacy (episcopal church government) has followed Papacy as far as it dared, and now ecclesiastical pride in a thousand new forms threatens the purity and simplicity of the Church of Christ with the same peril.

A republican form of government does not save a people from the kingship of human selfishness. The spirit of social preeminence, political bossism (dictatorial authority) and personal ambition runs through all our institutions and social life. Similarly, the Church has lost her power because the disciples are still disputing who should be the greatest. Christ's answer is forever unequivocal and plain, "whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matthew 20:26-27).

Nothing is more important today than to guard the Church of God against the preeminence of men. No wise Christian worker will want to throw the shadow of his own personality too strongly across his work, or become necessary to the success of his cause. God wants no Popes, whether they be on Caesar's throne, in St. Peter's Palace, Episcopal Sees, Salvation Army Dictators or Christian and Missionary Alliance leaders. Let the secret of our strength be the simple apostolic rule, "you have only one Master and you are all brothers" (Matthew 23:8). "Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:10).

Selfishness Leads To Ruin

Set off against self-renunciation is self-aggrandizement. If we see self-renunciation in Gideon, we soon find the opposite in his son. The story of Abimelech and the parable of Jotham stand out forever as portraits of self in its most subtle and destructive forms. Abimelech was the illegitimate son of Gideon, born of a Shechemite mother. He seems to have been ostracized in some measure from the family and lived at Shechem with his mother's relatives, while the other 70 sons of Gideon dwelt at Ophrah, their father's home.

After Gideon's death the spirit of selfish ambition seized Abimelech, and playing on the clannish jealousies of his Shechemite relatives, he persuaded them to crown him as their king. He took the devil into partnership with him by going into the idolatrous temple of Baal-Berith and taking out of the treasury money with which he hired a bunch of mercenaries as the nucleus of his army. With these he attacked his father's home and murdered all his brothers except Jotham, his youngest brother, who succeeded in escaping. After this, he assembled all the people in the valley of Shechem for his coronation.

There, in the historic Vale of Ebal and Gerizim, with glorious pageantry the coronation ceremonies were opened. Suddenly, Jotham appeared from an overhanging crag about 800 feet above the valley and shouted at the crowd, "Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you," (Judges 9:7). He then proceeded to tell them the parable of "The Thornbush King" (9:7-20), startling the crowd and the king with his sudden apparition and strange and sarcastic message which all could not fail to understand, and then, just as suddenly, he disappeared into the mountain recesses.

Jotham's parable was a portrait of the meanness and fleshliness of selfishness. At the same time it told in unmistakable language the sequence of events that were sure to follow the crowning of Abimelech as king.

After Abimelech had governed Israel for three years, the prophecy began to unfold (9:22-57). Abimelech and his Shechemite friends became estranged and became more and more obnoxious toward each other. Treachery met treachery and hate met hate until it culminated in a revolution against Abimelech by the men of Shechem. This was followed by warfare until the Shechemites were murdered by the thousands and their city razed.

Abimelech pressed on against his enemies, ravaging with fire and sword until at last he brought his foes to bay in the stronghold of Thebez. Some of this city's people managed to escape to a tower and there made their last stand. Abimelech led the final attack, and as he approached the tower, one of the women defenders dropped a rock on him, crushing his skull. Not wanting his enemy to say that a woman had killed him, Abimelech called for his armor-bearer and told him to kill him with his sword.

Thus, God repaid Abimelech's wickedness. Truly, as Jotham prophesied, fire had come out from the bramble of Abimelech to consume the men of Shechem and, at last, Abimelech.

The Fruit Of The Carnal Nature

1. The Flesh

We see the origin of self-aggrandizement in this account. It is born of the flesh, even as Abimelech was born of the strange woman of Shechem. Self in all its forms, however subtle and disguised, is the fruit of the carnal nature, and it is the root and center of the sinful life. It is no use to cut off our sinful acts, habits and propensities until we strike the very heart of evil, our self-life, where the little "I" is exalted and made king and everything else made tributary to our own will, pleasure and honor.

2. Human Selfishness

We see, too, that self lives on the selfishness of others and uses the same principle in them for the gratification of its ends. Abimelech appealed to the men of Shechem by ties of race and blood and by the inducements of their own self-interest. And so self-aggrandizement becomes a web of countless coils woven and interwoven with the selfishness of others, until hand joins hand, and a thousand chords of mutual self-interest bind together political parties, commercial monopolies, criminal confederacies and the baneful associations of evil men which so largely constitute human society. Each is bound to the other by his own selfishness, and the man who knows best how to play with the selfish passions of others makes them all tributary to his own needs, while the devil sits supreme as king over all. When you see a man appealing to the selfishness of others you may be very sure that he is selfishness incarnate.

3. Devilish Partnership

We see self in partnership with Satan. Abimelech went to the house of idols and got the means for his unholy war from the temple of Baal. The devil is always ready to advance the funds to carry out any scheme of human selfishness. He is a liberal investor in selfish trusts and sinful monopolies. You can always get money for a political campaign and a whiskey trust even when missionary societies are threatened with bankruptcy. Millions and millions of dollars are being thrown away every day in Satan's investments and sin's cooperative societies, and the cause of Christ is languishing by reason of the selfishness of its followers. The devil has his providences as well as the Lord, and the man who wants to plunge into the depths of Satan will find plenty of capital waiting his call and wonder often at his own success.

4. The Instruments

We see also that the devil not only provides the means but also the men. Abimelech soon found a group of rascals ready to follow him and do his bidding. Unfortunately, there are plenty of such men still to be found. They swarm on every side waiting for employment. They are recruiting by thousands; a hundred to one they can be found on every corner, as compared with the volunteers we seek for Christ. They are the peril of modern society. Some day they will rise in myriad swarms, like the Vandals who swallowed Rome, and in the dark tribulation days will capture this world for Satan. And selfishness is ever ready to use them as its minions, and things that some men would not do themselves, they are willing to let these sons of Belial do. There are many that sit in the high places with kid-gloved hands and polished manners who never perhaps shed a drop of human blood, nor soil their feet and hands with the grosser forms of crime; but they are murderers and criminals all the same, and they do not hesitate to use the basest tools to carry out their purpose. Some day they will stand red-handed and pale with agony as David in the hour when God proved him guilty of another's crime.

5. Its Cruelty

Next we see self unmasking itself and sinking to the depths of cruelty to accomplish its purpose. Abimelech never stopped until his hands were drenched in the blood of his own brothers. Sixty-nine of his own father's children, boys that played with him in childhood, he butchered on the very stone where the angel half a century before had accepted Gideon's offering. Perhaps Abimelech had no idea, when he began, of committing fratricide, but he did all the same.

When a burglar enters the house of his victim, his direct object is not to murder, but he is armed for the worst, and if murder is necessary to accomplish his design or to protect himself, he is not going to shirk it. Likewise, when we start out on the pathway of selfishness and sin, only the mercy of God can keep us from doing evil. Well may we all thank God that we have not been allowed to go further than we have.

6. Shortsighted

The sixth thing we see is the foolishness and shortsightedness of selfishness. How vividly, Jotham brought this out in his exquisite parable of the Thornbush King! The olive tree did not want to be king because it would cost too much to leave the fatness of its fruit and the richness of its soil for the empty honor of waving over the other trees.

The fig tree, too, had no desire for a glory that would rob it of its sweetness. The vine was too sensible to sacrifice its luscious grapes and its reviving wine, which even God appreciated and which was a blessing to man, for the sake of a brief preeminence over the other trees. The only shrub that was willing even to consider the proposition of royal honors was a thornbush, which had no fruit to sacrifice, no blossoms to lose and no real business in life but to be a nuisance and torment to others.

So the bramble entered into negotiation with the trees. It expressed a little courteous surprise and skepticism about their sincerity in appealing to it, and almost suggests that they would not have come if they could have gone anywhere else, and then adds, with a touch of sarcasm, "If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade" (Judges 9:15a).

The thornbush meant business. If it was to be king, it insisted on the complete subjection of all the other trees under its thorny scepter. If a thornbush could smile, this one must have smiled at the mention of its own "shadow." But in the next phrase we see that it spoke out its honest thought and intention, "if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon" (9:15b).

We see how little attraction supremacy had for the olive tree, the fig tree and the vine. They had something better to do than rule over others. They had a mission of beneficence, sweetness and service.

A man anointed by the Holy Spirit, fed on the sweetness of Christ and bearing fruit for God and man, is not craving after self-aggrandizement. Empty glory can never fill the human heart; vanity and pride are no substitutes for the joy of the Lord, the fullness of the Spirit and the sweet rest we find at Jesus' feet. A life of holy service for others is much more delightful than receiving and seeking their honor.

Let us not be so foolish as to waste our lives in the same pursuits as the thornbush wasted its life. The society queen is earning a broken heart. The ambitious political leader is laying up for himself the disappointments of a baffled ambition, and perhaps the curse of an evil conscience and an avenging God. God made us for Himself and for the ministry of love. Let us give no place to self, which is but a sapling out of Satan's root. A thornbush by nature, self has been a curse to us as it will be to everybody else.

7. Self-Destroying

We see the evil fruition of self as it works out in the destiny of others and then reacts in our own destruction. Abimelech's life was the historical fulfillment of Jotham's parable. For a little while the thornbush king seemed like an olive or a fig tree. His thorns were not yet fully grown. For three years Abimelech seemed to do well.

Similarly, self hides its sting for a while, and under its nice manners and winning smile, it almost looks like an angel. But when the test comes the sheathed claws appear. The slumbering serpent awakes with its poisonous sting. The men of Shechem had harbored a serpent in their bosom who was going to sting their lives to death. What an awful picture of treachery and destructiveness!

Abimelech oppressed the Shechemites, and they attempted to dethrone him. In turn they were consumed and destroyed by his vengeance. And in the final turn of the wheels of retribution, Abimelech was killed.

How true are the apostle's words, "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Galatians 5:15). A selfish spirit is a torment to everybody and at last the greatest curse to itself. Like the scorpion, it spends its life in stinging others, and then at last gathers up itself and with one last effort stings itself to death.

So many a woman has destroyed the honor and purity of others and then has hurled herself into the dark abyss. So many a man has gone on corrupting innocence with his heartless selfishness and then become himself the avenger of his crimes.

It is not possible for selfishness to make anybody else happy, and it is still less possible for it to make its possessor happy. It is a thornbush by nature, and its end will be the crackling thorns and the consuming flame.

One of Aesop's fables illustrates this point. A fox fell off a cliff. He reached out and grabbed a thornbush to break his fall and found that it had injured him worse than the fall. He turned to it in anger and disappointment and reproached it for its deceitful cruelty. The bramble honestly replied, "How can anybody expect to catch hold of me, when the business of my life is to catch hold of others?"

May God open our eyes to see the curses of selfishness! If there is one thing in us that seeks for honor and glory, it is a thornbush. And it can only bring us misery and the flames of judgment. Let us repudiate it and follow the life of holy service, finding our rich reward in the sweet, divine joy of holy usefulness.

Two Pictures

How can we be saved from the curse of selfishness? Let us gaze on two pictures.

1. The Curse Of Eden

Let us look back at Eden's gate and see the thornbush. It is the symbol of our curse; it is the fruit of sin; it is the first outcome of man's sad fall.

Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
(Genesis 3:17-18)

The thornbush still stands as a representation of man's sin and God's curse. Will we make it our king? Will we join hands with Satan, whose own fall began with selfishness and pride? God forbid! Let us turn our backs on it and seek the Tree of Life in the midst of the paradise of God.

2. The Cross Of Calvary

Then let us take another look and gaze on Calvary. What is this that lacerates our Savior's brow and wreathes His gentle face with such a rude, tormenting crown? It is the old thornbush again—a crown of thorns. What are those drops of blood that stain His face and the tears that mingle with them and flow down His cheeks? They are the brambles of my

selfishness; they are the thorns of my pride. It was this selfish "I" that I let not only crush my fellows, but even murder my Lord. It was not only for our sins He died but also for our selfishness. And in that death we die.

That is the secret of victory over self. "We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14).

We see, too, the vision of hope in that thorny crown. We see the thorns of our selfishness fastened to His cross, and we know that we as well as our sin are dead indeed. The people we were now no longer exist. They have been nailed to the cross with Christ Jesus. There they hang on the bowed head of our Redeemer. We are new men and women, born out of heaven and united with the risen Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

And now, like Christ, our place is to live the life of self-renouncing love, and win the highest place by forgetting all about place and seeking only to serve and bless. Blessed Master, help us thus to cease to be, and let your Spirit be in us instead of us, so that it will be truly no longer us living, but Christ living in us.

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

Gideon made an ephod (Judges 8:27), presumably on the pattern of that described in Exodus 28. It was not exactly an idol but it ended up being worshipped by the people. **Are there things in this world that have religious connotation that have ended up being worshipped?**

The men of Shechem and Abimelech made an evil compact with one another. After Abimelech killed all his brothers except Jotham, the men of Shechem made Abimelech ruler over them. **After he was made leader how did God frustrate their evil plans?**

Judges 9:22-24

How should we react when wicked men attain great power and try to engulf us in their bramble bush?

Judges 10:1-12:15

JEPHTHAH, OR THE FAITH THAT LEADS TO FAITHFULNESS

We read that "a group of adventurers gathered around [Jephthah] and followed him" (Judges 11:3). Because Scripture calls these men "adventurers," we can be sure that they were not the "cream" of society. They were the outcasts of society, and men who had been thrown as waifs (stray people) upon the current of life and left to sink or swim. And they naturally gravitated to a stronger center like Jephthah. Such companions are not usually conducive to the development of high, moral character.

How often do we hear people complaining that others have led them astray? But in the Bible we read that the lives of many of God's noblest people were molded through the very influence of uncongenial associations. Joseph grew to honor and obeyed the Lord despite the godless people around him. David, in his exile years, was surrounded by the outlaws and outcasts of Israel. But through the power of their own personality and the grace of God, these men became transformed into his noblest followers and friends and, afterward, were made the princes of his kingdom.

That is how the Lord Jesus takes us. We were a company of poor, worthless sinners, and things that were despised; but by the transforming power of His grace, He lifts us into His own likeness and crowns us with His own glory.

But we have to go back into the world, into a society of evil men. Instead of letting them draw us down, it is our task to lift them up to the mounts of blessing, where God has set us, in order that we may be the lights of a dark world and shine the brighter through the very darkness that surrounds us.

I once heard a story of a Methodist preacher in England who was arrested and put in jail because of his street preaching. He prayed so loudly that the authorities were glad to get him out. There is no place, and there is no society where we cannot live the life of Christ and receive the glory of His indwelling. There is no depth of sin and misery so great but that He can lift us up, and turn our sorrow into joy and our curse into a blessing.

Still, He uses "the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Corinthians 1:28-29). And so the day came when Jephthah's brothers were glad to send for him to be their deliverer, and Jephthah had the high honor of returning good for evil, and saving the people that once despised him.

This is the way that God loves to vindicate us—by making us a blessing to those who hated and wronged us. His promise is, "I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you" (Revelation 3:9).

When Jephthah responded to their appeal and came to their aid, we see in his very words and acts the spirit of godliness and a lofty faith. We are told explicitly that all his words to the people were "repeated . . . before the LORD" (Judges 11:11). He spoke as if he were in Jehovah's presence. And when he sent his challenge to the enemy, it was

couched in the language of the loftiest faith. He repelled their claim to some of the land Israel possessed by reminding them how they had treated Israel in the wilderness and had forced a conflict. Then God had taken their land and given it to His own people and destroyed the power of Og and Sihon, their giant kings. "What right have you to take it over?" (11:23) he finally asked them. "Whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess" (11:24). Jephthah refers the impending conflict once more to Jehovah God.

The battle was not the Israelites' but the Lord's and such faith can never be confounded. It was not long before Jephthah returned in triumph from the slaughter of his enemies. His country was delivered, his claims vindicated and his enemies destroyed.

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

The Spirit of God strengthened Jephthah with supernatural valor and energy for defeating the Ammonites. **The Spirit also endued him with wisdom and knowledge but did all this prevent Jephthah from erring in his vow to offer as a sacrifice whatever comes out of the door to meet him (Judges 11:31)? What do you think of Jephthah's vow and should it have been carried out? Is this sacrifice sanctioned by the Mosaic Law and acceptable to God?**

Did spiritual wisdom prevent Gideon from erring when he set up an ephod in the city of Ophrah? What do you think is the motivation behind Jephthah and Gideon to do such things after being so blessed by God?

Jud. 8:27 1 Cor. 12:4-11 Gal. 2:11-14

What does Judges 10:16 say about our Lord?

Judges 13:1-16:31

SEPERATION AND STRENGTH—A LESSON FROM THE LIFE OF SAMPSON

Samson's life had a bright beginning, full of promise and possibility. We see God choosing a human life and revealing a high and mighty purpose for a human career. But we also see all this hindered and defeated by earthliness, selfishness and sin.

What more could God have done to show His purpose of love and blessing? Twice He sent His angel to announce the birth of Samson. Time after time He manifested His supernatural power in the life of His servant and the mighty possibilities which He was ready to accomplish if He could only have found an obedient and faithful instrument. Yet all this was brought to nothing by the disobedience and folly of the man whom He had sought to bless and use.

It is a very solemn and awful thing to think how we can hinder God's purposes of love for us. This is an important lesson. Despite the fact that we may have been born to Christian parents who brought us up to fear God; despite the fact that our early days were overshadowed by the Almighty and our consciences felt the touch of heaven and heard the whisper of His calling on our lives; we may, by our willfulness and folly, destroy all this. Sad will be the day when we hear our Master say, as He said of Jerusalem, "how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37).

We see in Samson's story the necessity for a life of separation and consecration if we would become the vessels of the Holy Spirit and the instruments of God's highest blessing.

The Nazarite, under the Mosaic institutions, was the peculiar type of a life of separation. He was set apart from his childhood to be dedicated to the Lord and separated from all earthly and sensual indulgences. Just as the priest represented the idea of nearness to God, the Nazirite represented the idea of separation to God.

This is one of the profoundest principles of God's whole plan of redemption. From the very beginning God purposed to separate a peculiar people to Himself. We see this in the separation of Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Israel and others down to the Church of Christ, which just means the called-out ones. The word *ekklesia* means "the separated ones." Man's failure to meet God's ideal has been the cause of all the failures and disasters of the past.

The awful wickedness that preceded the flood was brought about from the intermingling of the holy seed with the people of this world, the intermarriage of the children of God with the daughters of man. And today the same cause is about to produce similar effects. There is a melting away and a breaking down of all barriers between the Church and the world, and the end of it is going to be conditions as shocking and terrible as those of Noah's day. The progeny (descendants) of such frightful and monstrous unions will once more bring upon the earth a deluge—not of water, but of fire—and the godless will be swept away.

God must have separated vessels. He will not drink out of the devil's cups. We must be His and His alone. We must bear His monogram and be His peculiar people.

If you who bear the name of Jesus are still playing with the world, receiving its attentions, intermarrying with its people, allowing it to invade the very Church of Christ and in the name of religion turn God's holy sanctuary into a place of social entertainment and sometimes indecent exhibitions that would even disgrace a theater, you are opening the

floodgates for a coming judgment. You are contaminating the Body of Christ with the poison of your sin. You are draining the fountains of spiritual life and power and, in effect, repeating the story of Samson. And the end can only be the same as his—blindness, bondage, paralysis and death. " 'Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.' 'I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty' " (2 Corinthians 6:17-18).

We see in Samson a picture of the supernatural life and power that God can give to a consecrated human body. There is no reason to suppose that Samson was a physical giant. The Philistines could not understand his supernatural strength. If he had been like Og or Sihon or Goliath—men of gigantic stature—they would easily have comprehended it. But he seems to have been a man of ordinary appearance and his power was entirely superhuman. It did not come through brawn or bone, but it was because of the divine life that possessed his being and filled his frame with the very strength of God.

Just as the electric wire, when filled with current can turn the huge wheels of a mighty factory, so a human frame may be so possessed with the Holy Spirit that the feeblest may be like David, and David like the angel of the Lord.

There is no doubt that David attributed his stupendous exploits entirely to the abilities that came to him from Jehovah. His battles were battles of faith, and he could literally say, "He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze" (2 Samuel 22:35). We have seen the power of demon possession in a human body so that such a person had the strength of a dozen men. Why should not the Holy Spirit be able to give the same power to a human arm?

So still, God is able to put His strength into a human frame if it is wholly separated unto Him. He could endue us with the power to resist disease, to persevere under the influence of a harsh climate, to endure hardship and suffering and to go through life, like Moses, with unabated strength until our work is finished.

The Holy Spirit has this for His separated ones in these last days. It is part of the purchase of Christ's redemption and the partnership of His resurrection and ascension power. And if we are empty of all that hinders and open to His unrestricted life and power, He will dwell in us and fill us with His great power. That power is "for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 1:19-20).

But not only was Samson an example of physical power, but also of God's supernatural working in the circumstances and providences of life. When Samson was ready to faint from thirst after his victory over the Philistines (Judges 15:18-19), he cried to God, and God opened a fountain of water from which Samson could drink until he was satisfied.

There is a realm of natural forces and providential surroundings where faith may still claim the interposition of our Almighty Lord in all the emergencies and circumstances of life. While the Spirit dwells within us as the Source of every needed grace, the Son of God is reigning at His Father's right hand. He said to His disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. . . . And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18, 20). This mighty Christ is able to do anything for us that we really need in the line of His purpose for us and the work He has committed to our hands. Are we proving all the power of Jesus' name and all the possibilities of the Spirit-filled life?

We see, too, the withering touch of earthliness and sin. Very gradually did the poison insinuate itself into Samson's life; very gradually did he allow the snare of temptation to weave its meshes around him, until at last he was a bound and helpless captive in the power of his destroyer.

His first offense was a visit to the enemy's country. He had no business in going down to Timnah to start with, except as God might send him as a soldier or as a judge. But he went, and then he looked, and then he loved, and then he longed, and then disobeyed his parents' counsel, and then he took the fatal step that linked his life with the daughter of his enemy.

Yet God did not forsake Samson immediately. Again and again He showed His power through His servant over a number of years and helped him out of a multitude of troubles. No doubt God often spoke to Samson and warned him of his folly. But Samson continued down the same self-indulgent path, getting deeper and deeper into sin. At last we find him at Gaza in the house of a prostitute, Delilah, who represents the world's delights and abandonment to selfish pleasure.

Even there an instinct of self-preservation and peculiar sacredness seems to have lingered with Samson. This evil woman, Satan's masterpiece of temptation, had been urged by the enemies of God and of Samson to find out the secret of his strength. They offered her a bribe of \$3,000, which in those days was worth 10 times that sum. Using her female charms, she begged Samson to tell her his secret. "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me?" she said to him (Judges 16:15). At last, Samson gave in. It was his heart that betrayed him in the end.

Perhaps you have found yourself in a similar situation. You never intended to yield your principles, your virtue, your conscience, but this person convinced you to do just that. And in one impulsive moment, you were lost. That is how Samson fell. So it is that the lost sheep ever goes astray. It is just a foolish sheep. It wanders, it forgets, it dallies and it perishes all the same.

Evil is wrought by want of thought
More than by want of heart.

Oh, how tragic is the picture of Samson's last temptation and fatal fall! Oh, how the fingers of the devil felt for his very heart, closer and closer, until at last they stole his secret and crushed out his life. He knew there was danger, and he played with it, day by day, putting it off and still holding the citadel. But each day letting the enemy come nearer and nearer. First, he told Delilah that if he were to be tied with seven fresh thongs then he would be as weak as any other man. Then she betrayed her true character, and he might have seen the fiend (demon) in the fond lover, as she called his cruel foes. Hastily, Samson sprang to his feet, tore his bonds asunder and drove them from his presence in dismay. Next, he told her it actually took new ropes. Again, in the test, the cords tore asunder and she fell, hysterically weeping, and told him that he did not love her, and pleaded for his confidence. And then his heart was touched, and, how near he grazed to the very edge of the precipice! One trembles when one hears him talk of his Nazarite locks and tell her he would be helpless if she braided his hair into a loom. Now she thinks she has him, and, again, the ambush of men is sprung upon him, and again Samson springs through the meshes of his snare and, perhaps, seizes the pin of the loom to beat them from his presence. How narrowly he has escaped! If he had but taken the warning! Oh, if he had but listened to the throbbings of his heart when the Spirit knocked. But a woman's tears and a woman's hysterical pleadings at last conquered Samson's own weak heart. God's hour of longsuffering had reached its margin, not through Samson's triumph, but through Samson's failure. The man who might have been a lighthouse on the shores of time must become a beacon on the sunken rock and the dangerous reef, warning others to avoid the place where he was lost.

In the end, the strong man bowed, the surrender was made and the secret was told. Doubtless, he extracted from her the most sacred pledge, and she vowed she would never tell it. Doubtless she swore all that he wanted—she would keep his secret. But she had him lulled to sleep and the locks were shaven. The bribe had been taken and the enemy was upon him. Samson rose, as before, and shook himself as at other times, and thought he was as strong as ever. He knew not that the Lord had departed from him. The awful progression was completed. Lust had been conceived and brought forth sin. And sin, when it was finished, brought death (James 1:15).

The Retribution

Samson's retribution was as terrible as his sin.

1. He lost his strength; and spiritual paralysis always follows surrender to temptation and compromise with evil.
2. Next, he lost his liberty. He was bound and helpless in the hands of his foes. When once we yield to the enemy, we have no power to keep from yielding again. Our defense is departed from us, and we are given over "to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done" (Romans 1:28). Eternal sin is the most terrible part of eternal punishment.
3. Samson lost his sight. When we yield to sin and to Satan, our spiritual eyes are blinded, and we cease to know the difference between right and wrong. Our once clear conceptions of God's will are blurred and blotted out, and we wander in the darkness not knowing what we stumble over.
4. He became a sport and spectacle for his enemies. They used him to grace their entertainments, to be a public mockery at their revels, to honor false gods and put to shame the very name of the God he loved. And the most terrible part of Samson's punishment was to hear the shouts of his enemies as they boasted of the triumphs of Dagon over Jehovah and the defeat of Samson and Samson's God. All the while, though, Samson knew it was his sin and folly that caused this shame to the name of Jehovah—the name he, above all men, was sent to uphold.

His Restoration

In the end, Samson was repentant. In his humiliation, bondage and sorrow, he awoke at last to the meaning of his life, and he asked God for one more chance to be true. To prove his sincerity, and the deep reality of the death of self, he was willing to sacrifice his life in his last exploit. He asked of God that he might die in the service of his country and in the destruction of his enemies.

He was like the Roman nobleman who plunged full armored into the chasm at the city gate, which none but he could fill. He was like the soldier, who, having betrayed his colors, asked only that he might once more lead the forlorn hope on the battlefield, and die with his colors in his bloody hand—his life laid down in the midst of his enemies.

Our service is never worth anything until our life goes along with it and everything is laid down, even life itself if God requires it. Samson had sought only his own pleasure his whole life. But in the end he died to self and, in doing so, accomplished the noblest achievement of his life.

One day in the height of a great national carnival, while hundreds of thousands of Philistia's nobles are crowding the galleries of the vast amphitheater, God takes him at his word. All are waiting for Samson to come forth and make sport for them in his blindness. But Samson's strength is given back to him for one last achievement. Gripping the mighty pillars, which support the immense building, with one stupendous effort he tears them from their foundations and with a crash of thunder and 10,000 cries of terror, the building is in ruins and the proud boast of the Philistines is turned into a death shriek of despair. Samson is victor in his death and accomplished more by dying than he had done in all his 20 years of living.

Let us learn from this story to die to self and sin. If we can do so, then we will be like those individuals of the Old Testament "whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies" (Hebrews 11:34). Let us see in Samson's death the type (foreshadow) of a greater than Samson, whose death

accomplished also the destruction of His enemies and ours, and taught us both how to live and how to die. He died for us that we might live, but He also died for us that we might die. In the power of His cross, with its holy sign translated into every fiber of our being and every service of our life, let us go forth to live for Him who died, in "the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

Samson's life is the epitome of a mixture—the strength of iron, and the weakness of clay. Our Bible teaches us a strong delineation between "holy" and "profane." In today's culture we have come to think of "profanity" (or things profane) as swearing (i.e., taking God's name in vain), but the true meaning is much stronger than this. God strongly teaches us that whatever is not holy (which is all that is of His nature) is profane. Following are some Scripture verses to help you to see that God indeed hates mixtures: Neh. 13:17; Ezek. 22:26; Ezek. 44:23; 1 Tim. 1:9; 1 Tim. 4:7; 1 Tim. 6:20.

When we are in situations where we are in need of God's mighty power to accomplish His will at the time, and are "empty of all that hinders, and open to His unrestricted life and power," is there any reason to think that the power that God works in and through us is limited? Memorize Philippians 4:13. This kind of power is given by God for what reason? (Ephesians 1:19-20). Are we proving the strength of Christ's power in our daily lives and in our calling of ministry to Him? Have you experienced not only death to sin, but death to the self life? Read all of chapter 6 of Romans.

Did Sampson accomplish any abiding work for Israel? What do you think his best quality was? (Heb. 11:32) Do you think it was the slavish subjection to the domination of his passions that lessens our respect for his character?

Judges 17:1-18:31

RELIGIOUS COMPROMISES — THEIR FOLLY AND FRUIT

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24)

The remarkable incidents of Judges 17 and 18 illustrate with great vividness the principles found in Matthew 6:24. They contain the story of Micah and are a medley of sin and crime that condemn with the bitter irony of truth the follies and sins of the dark ages of the judges. And they apply to the social and religious abuses of our own times.

Dishonesty

First, we see a picture of dishonesty. Micah, a young man of the hill country of Ephraim, stole 1,100 shekels of silver from his mother and, for a time, hid the money from her. Finally, alarmed by her angry curses, he confessed that he had taken the money, and he gave it back to her.

This a common happening—dishonesty and crime beginning at home with the first penny stolen from mother's drawer. From this the person goes on to lead a life of lawlessness and crime.

Absolute righteousness even in the smallest of things is essential to all religious character. We find a lack of righteousness today in society's concepts of right and wrong. There are men and women who can speak of deep religious experiences and extraordinary public services, who yet seem to be unable to appreciate the absolute necessity of strict integrity and uprightness in the matter of property, debt and business transactions.

Passion

Next, we see a picture of passion. When Micah's mother found that her money was missing, she became angry. She cursed so loud and long that it seemed to be the only thing remembered about the transaction. Her curses made such an impression on Micah that he didn't get over it until he had restored the money. The moment the shekels were returned, she forgot about her passion, and even about the crime of her boy. She fell into another passion of delight and blessed him as extravagantly as she had cursed him before. "The LORD bless you, my son!" (Judges 17:2) she said. The old lady had a little streak of religion running through it all, and probably thought that she was a very good sort of woman. It never occurred to her to sit down, and tell her boy about his wickedness and lead him to true repentance. All she could think of was that she had got the shekels back.

How like many a mother, alternating between the passionate love and the passionate anger, which are both alike natural, animal and devilish!

False Consecration

As we continue in the account, we see a picture of counterfeit consecration. "I solemnly consecrate my silver to the LORD for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol" (17:3). What a strange medley of religion and idolatry! Micah's mother had plenty of "religion," but it was not good because it was mixed.

Notice, though, in this woman's consecration, how she betrayed herself by an act of insincerity in the midst of her pretended sacrifice. "I solemnly consecrate my silver to the LORD," she said. Yet when it came to actually giving up the money, she only took out 200 shekels and kept the rest for herself. She was the grandmother of Ananias and Sapphira. She was not even honest in the little religion she had.

Ritualism

We see too a picture of ritualism. Micah made the image and set it up in his idol temple, where he performed a whole ritual of idolatrous worship. He "had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some idols and installed one of his sons as his priest" (Judges 17:5). It is all a piece of man-made religion.

Now here is where the emphasis lies. Micah's religion was all manufactured according to his own patterns—not God's. And this is the essential defect of all forms of false religion—they are man-made.

God's command to Moses was that he should do all that was told him according to the patterns shown him on the mountain. Christ's command to His disciples asserted the same notion: "Therefore go ... and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). But Satan has tried to institute into the Church a whole system of theological teaching and ceremonial worship that God never revealed or commanded and to change the whole divine system of the Church into a piece of human machinery that he could manipulate at will.

How much of our religious work today is entirely human? Our revivals are gotten up by careful organization and artificial mechanism. Our worship is sustained at an enormous cost by trained performers who belong to the world, the flesh and the devil on six days, and for a consideration give a few hours to the Lord on the Sabbath. And much of our so-called religion is what Scripture describes as "teachings . . . taught by men" (15:9) and as things that "are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings" (Colossians 2:22).

After Micah had set up his "temple," he felt as if something was lacking. He wanted God to recognize his man-made church to give it a touch of authority and sacredness. One day a young man from Bethlehem came by Micah's house and stayed with him a few days. Micah, discovering that he was a Levite, asked him to come live with him and be his priest and take charge of the temple and service that he had recently fitted up. He offered him a salary of 10 shekels a year, his clothing and his room and board.

The young man accepted and was installed as the hired preacher in Micah's church. Micah had just enough of God in his man-made church to justify his calling it a religious institution. He said with delightful self-complacency, "Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest" (Judges 17:13).

In the same way men and women today are making up their various religious programs, wanting only to get ecclesiastical recognition, to get some Levite with real apostolic succession to countenance the thing. It does not matter whether God approves or disapproves.

Alas, it is only too easy to get ecclesiastical recognition for any form of doctrine or medley of so-called worship. I have seen men with liberal minds and attractive personal qualities go forth as teachers, winning the confidence and acclaim of many Christians. Their creeds are so tactfully phrased that they are accepted by Unitarians, Jews, Spiritualists—as well as Christians. These men, if they are tactful enough in pointing their phrases and prudent enough in guarding their expressions, could stand as representatives of the most conservative of the churches and be recognized as true Levites.

And I have seen men who, with the wild license of modern theological thought and the passion for freedom and originality, have literally excised (removed) every supernatural thing from the Bible. These men can laugh away the Pentateuch and the books of Isaiah and Daniel and yet somehow these same individuals manage to secure the highest places in our theological seminaries. They are recognized as star lecturers at our Christian conventions. And no one seems to challenge their positions.

The Evils Of Compromise

Finally, we see a picture of the sad fruits of religious compromise. The sequel of the story of Micah is ironic and most tragic.

The tribe of the Danites was seeking a place of their own where they might settle, because they had not yet come into an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. So the Danites sent five warriors from Zorah and Eshtaol to spy out the land and explore it. (Judges 18:1-2)

This band came to the house of Micah and spent the night. They recognized Micah's young priest, and after finding out what he was doing there, they asked him to inquire of God about whether their mission would be successful. The priest told them, "Go in peace. Your journey has the LORD's approval" (18:6).

They continued on their journey, and finding a prosperous land, they returned home and urged their people to arm for battle. The army set out, stopping first at Micah's house. There they stole his priest and his gods.

When Micah found out what had happened, he and his clan went after the Danites. "As they shouted after them, the Danites turned and said to Micah, 'What's the matter with you that you called out your men to fight?' " (18:23). Seeing that he was overmatched, Micah turned around and went back home. The Danites marched on with their booty and invaded the city of Laish, utterly destroying this peaceful people. They then set up their own idolatrous shrine and seat of worship, which became in succeeding years the most corrupting influence in the religious life of the entire nation.

Thus we see Micah's sin and folly bearing fruit. First, in his own suffering and loss, and the ruin of all his cherished hopes and plans, and the very loss even of his religion. Second, in the cruelty and wrong which swept away a whole defenseless community. Third, in the long-continued and baneful influences which it started and kept in operation throughout all the centuries of Israel's history.

These are the effects of religious compromise and the sin of Micah in every age. First, they lead to the bitter disappointment of the worshiper. The day will surely come when the devil will steal the worthless religion that he gave his wretched follower and leave him nothing but scorn and despair. Secondly, superstition leads, and always will lead, to cruelty and crime. False religion becomes a persecutor and a destroyer of the rights and liberties of men. Thirdly, the leaven of false religion becomes a corrupting principle in all the future history of a people. Micah not only corrupted his own family, but he laid the foundation of evils that lasted to the latest age of their history and corrupted the whole nation, leading eventually to the captivity of the race and the sins and sorrows of threescore generations.

When we defile the streams of divine truth and life, we poison a whole generation. When we plant weeds with the wheat, we leave behind seeds of thorns and thistles for the eternal burning. We may think it is a very innocent thing to play with "higher criticism" and toy with ritualism, but doing so will undermine the faith of our children and our children's children. We are kindling the fire that will burn up our altars and homes. And we are pioneering the awful procession of anarchy, socialism, immorality, crime and the horrors of lawlessness and wrong that will usher in the days of Antichrist and the catastrophe of the world.

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

Does this story strike a strong note of warning regarding the "enticing" offers of the enemy of our soul, as we walk this pilgrim way?

Judges 19:1-21:25

Briefly consider the shocking series of incidents recorded in the last three chapters of Judges—all of which grew out of a single unholy relationship. These chapters tell the story of a licentious woman destroyed by the wickedness she pursued, and of a sinful man who allowed her to draw him into her wicked life, and who, through her influence, became unfaithful to his high calling as a priest of the Lord. Out of their relationship grew a crime that involved all the tribes of Israel in a destructive civil war—a war that destroyed three armies and nearly one whole tribe.

We see from this that even the smallest sin can produce the most disastrous results. How solemn and true is the verse in James: "Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:15).

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

Was the nation Israel ripe for such a calamity? Were the tribes of Israel justified in wiping out almost every woman and child in the tribe of Benjamin? Conclude this powerful teaching from God's holy Word by stating how this history lesson, accompanied by man's falling from God's desire and direction, has affected your understanding and thinking. Will you be able to warn others who have ignored this type of holy instruction? May the Holy Spirit be your Strength, Wisdom and everlasting Guide. Remember always the very last verse of Judges:

"In those days there was no king in Israel; *everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" (Judges 21:25)