

The Lord Saves His People

Fourteen Seminars on the Book of Judges

David Gooding

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Contents

1	The Two Introductions (1)	4
2	The Two Introductions (2)	12
3	The Two Introductions (3)	18
4	Othniel	27
5	Ehud	37
6	Deborah and Barak (1)	47
7	Deborah and Barak (2)	56
8	Gideon (1)	66
9	Gideon (2) and Abimelech	74
10	Jephthah	84
11	Samson (1)	94
12	Samson (2)	103
13	The Two Epilogues (1)	112
14	The Two Epilogues (2)	122
Appendixes		
	A. Denials of First Principles	132
	B. Table of Contents	133
	C. The Two Introductions and the Two Epilogues	134
	About the Author	

[The Two Introductions \(1\)](#)

Judges 2:14–18; 3:1–2

While the book of Judges is certainly in parts an exceedingly gloomy book, it will in fact light up our hearts with the sunshine of glory and hope, for the simple reason that one of its most prominent topics—perhaps the most prominent topic in the whole book—is the topic of salvation. Time and time again we shall be told that the Lord raised up deliverers and the Lord saved his people.

The stories of salvation come from long ago. They concern men and women in very different situations and conditions from ours, and salvation for them certainly meant something considerably less than it means for us. But as we hear from this book over and over again how God saved them out of the hands of their enemies, we shall recognise at once that the God who stands behind this book of Judges is the very same God that we know. One of the brightest glories in his character is that he is a Saviour God and delights to save his people.

If we learn nothing else, the book of Judges will speak to us and assure us that if anyone seems to have somehow got lost on life's way—however tangled the circumstance, however great the misery, however great the sense of frustration—if you are a child of God you have a God who delights to save you.

Though the book of Judges is gloomy, there is a sense in which the very darkness of the background makes the grace of God's salvation shine even more brightly. Consider the nature of the salvation that is depicted for us many times here. This is not going to be the story of some brutal thick-armed and perhaps thick-headed jailer in the Roman prison in Philippi who hadn't the beginnings of the notion of the true God, sunk in the darkness of his superstition, and God saved him. What a wonderful story that is. What reflections of the grace and glory of God, when you see somebody in brokenness, superstition, ignorance and filth getting saved from the very cesspit of sin.

I can tell you a brighter story. The story of salvation in the book of Judges, I repeat, is not of some heathen that never knew of God, lost in his superstition and getting saved at last. This is the story of the people of Israel, whose was the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law and the service of God. Men and women who had known redemption from slavery in Egypt through the blood of a Passover lamb and the awesome experience of standing beneath Mount Sinai when the Lord came down within his creation, stood upon that mountain and proposed the incredible thing that he, the transcendent Lord, would take Israel for his wife and come and dwell in the tabernacle amongst his people.

These are the people whose nation had known the thrill of the conquest of Canaan. With their own eyes they had seen the fields, grass, flowers, bees, cows, milk, olive presses and the solid houses, until their leader could say, 'Not one word of all the good promises that the

LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed' (Josh 21:45). In spite of it they got bored with God, went after other gods and forgot God for days without number. No wonder the book of Judges is a gloomy book, for the sin of God's people is more serious than the sin of unconverted pagans. The marvel is that he had any further dealings with them. How can you measure and how can you account for the patience of God that this book would reveal, when spurning his mercies and running after other gods Israel got themselves into oceans of trouble and God in his mercy saved them; not once or twice but many, many times?

I must not presume that any of us have gone away from the Lord, or that after all God has done for us we have grown cold in heart and wandered. But then, have we never? If ever the day should come when, growing cold of heart and wandering from the Lord, we bring upon ourselves difficulties and servitudes and disciplines from the Lord and we feel like despairing of the whole thing, then pray God that he will bring Judges to our minds to remind us that, however far his people get, God will do his utmost to save them.

What is more, what you may decide is a very gloomy story, even the gloomiest bits were geared to their salvation. How kind God is when his people go astray. He will not indulge them; he will order the very misery and frustrations that are the consequences of sin to warn us and bring us back to sense, to a position where he can restore to us again the joy of salvation.

An ancient book then, that talks directly to our hearts of God's great salvation. It will talk of salvation of the individual of course, and we shall be interested in it at that level. It will also talk to us of the salvation of God's people corporately, and as we hear of his deliverance of the nation of Israel our minds will go, perhaps, to all the churches from which we come, to be encouraged that the God we serve is a God that can save his people corporately

When I think again of the book of Judges, another blessing that I expect at the superficial level is to notice the references to it in the New Testament. The famous chapter 11 of the epistle to the Hebrews catalogues a whole list of ancient worthies, men and women marked by powerful faith. They stand as a gallery to encourage us in our pilgrim pathway and in the arena of our contest of spiritual warfare. From Genesis, that lovely and bright book, there are eight names—Abel, Enoch and Noah; and after the flood Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Exodus has one—Moses. Judges manages four—Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, all explicitly held up before us as examples of faith.

If called upon with limited time and space to choose men of faith from the Old Testament, would you have mentioned these four? Let me say nothing unworthy, but Barak was a tiny weakling—no bad intentions meant, but he was afraid to go to the battle unless Deborah (that magnificent woman) went with him. Obviously he was more dependent on Deborah's faith than on his own. In the end the honour of giving the *coup de grâce* to the enemy was not given to Barak at all but to another woman by the name of Jael.

Gideon was surely a man of faith, but like all the others he was flawed in his career and in his character. A man who in early days had fought against idolatry, in his later days when success had carried him on its wave he made an ephod and it became an idolatrous curse to Israel.

What about Jephthah? In another context we shall read of his good points. How sad it was then, when the great General Jephthah couldn't distinguish between brother and enemy, friend or foe, and slaughtered his very brethren in Israel as though they were his enemies.

What of Samson, with his grave moral irresponsibility and flagrant lapses? He never really delivered Israel at all, did he? When he died Israel were still in servitude to the Philistines, as they had been when he began. Samson died in captivity, the joke and sport of the Philistines and the glory of their god Dagon, whom the Philistines heartily believed had beaten Samson.

Yet, when God writes his assessment he notes with amazing generosity that there was genuine faith in these men and he records it. My brothers and sisters, you could not measure the encouragement that is to me. I need a God like that. If at this very moment he is writing the record of my life and career, I pray that he will find the same kind of generosity in his heart. I need a God who is prepared to overlook my weakness, my poor achievements, and to remember and see and magnify what grain of faith there was.

The New Testament assures us that we have such a God. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews says, 'God is not unjust so as to overlook. . .' (6:10). Those dear believers had entered the doldrums, if not the shallows, and were in danger of disaster on the rocks. They were not now what they used to be and the writer assures them that God in his justice, let alone his generosity, will not forget the better days of the past. So Judges speaks to my heart and tells me something of the God I serve, and gives me courage, in spite of all, to go on trying to serve him.

But of course the book is gloomy, there is no denying it. We shall have to spend time considering the arbitrariness of it and the near disaster. As a nation, blessed and called to such high office and role to be a testimony to the unique God among the nations, they constantly went astray with almost incredible perversity. In their behaviour they denied the very first and basic principles of salvation that they themselves professed. Let me illustrate that to you by making a list. For want of a better term I have called it 'Denials of First Principles' (see [Appendix A](#)).

The very first law of the *Decalogue* (Exod 20) given to redeemed Israel was, 'You shall have no other gods before me.' In its opening chapters Judges has to tell us how Israel, brought into the land by God as the very climax of his redemption, forsook the Lord and went after the gods of Canaan around them. Lest we should imagine that the warnings of idolatry have no voice for us, let us remember that the New Testament feels obliged to remind believers against the danger and perils of idolatry.

The first captivity. It was to the king of Mesopotamia. A little thought will remind us that Abraham was called out from Mesopotamia and made the father of the nation of Israel. Now, when their redemption was reaching its climax and they were in the land that God had promised to Abraham centuries before, Israel blows it all because of their sin and comes under captivity to the king of the very country from which Abraham came out. Did I hear you ask, 'Why did God call Abraham out anyway – why not leave him there?'

The second captivity. Moab takes Jericho, called the city of the palm trees, which dwells on the nicer features of that city. In it was installed his gracious (and certainly large) majesty, the king of Moab. What irony! With gigantic faith in God Israel had commenced the conquest of the promised land by surrounding Jericho city and its walls and all its evil inhabitants. At last they had seen those walls fall down. From that auspicious beginning they had gone on to the conquest of further reaches of the land of promise, only to find that because of their sin Moab had come up behind them and recaptured the first city. What would be the use of going on to capture further cities, if the enemy is coming behind mopping them up as soon as you advance?

The third captivity. This is a story of how Jaban, king of the Canaanites, mightily oppressed Israel. Once more the irony is that once upon a time Israel had been in Egypt and the Pharaohs of Egypt had mightily oppressed them, until they groaned in their misery and God heard them and came down to deliver them from that oppression and brought them as freeborn men and women into the land of promise. Here they are in the land and, because of their waywardness and folly and sin, they have fallen under an oppression no less bitter than that of Pharaoh.

The fourth captivity. They were in the land of promise. They had been told that it would be a land of milk and honey, not like the barren wilderness. But by this time the milk and honey were gone and the nomadic hordes of Midian and others came in like grasshoppers and devoured every bit of food in sight. What was the use of Israel singing, 'Now none but [Christ] can satisfy', or 'Now nothing but the milk and honey can satisfy', if through their folly they are starved out, though physically in the promised land? Don't say, 'It can't happen to us.' How many churches, that should have been green, cool, luscious, sweet and rich to walk in, whose fields would be a benediction from God Almighty, have become scorched, barren places where people scarcely survive for lack of spiritual food because of the folly and waywardness of God's people?

Abimelech. You might be forgiven if you think that now the world is going upside-down, or the wrong way round or something. In the artful literary style of the author of Judges, Abimelech is listed as though he was a judge and deliverer, but you will notice the irony of it. This time the people of God have to be saved from the deliverer himself! Things have got topsy-turvy when the deliverer is a tyrant. So much of a tyrant that a woman was obliged to put an end to his nonsense by cracking his skull with a millstone.

Jephthah. Famous for his diplomacy (which we shall dwell on in a later study), at the end of his victories he commits a grotesque perversion. He treats his brother-Israelites as though they were the enemy and slaughters them at the fords of Jordan.

Samson. The least said perhaps the better at this stage! He is the last of the major judges in the book, but he is guilty of the very sins from which the judges and deliverers were supposed to save the people. Right from the very beginning of his career he was immersed in these things and he comes to a disastrous end.

The Danites. Finally, for the moment, towards the end of the book comes the story of the Danites. They too had marched into Canaan's fair land under Joshua to put down all idolatry and destroy the gods of the Canaanites. See them as a tribe marching north some time later to conquer yet more. They come to the ancient city of Laish, where they slaughter all the inhabitants, destroy the city, build their own city and set up idolatry and an idolatrous priesthood.

The All Tribal Assembly. Benjamin breaks the sanctities of oath and innocent blood, which it was responsible to protect.

I told you this book was going to be gloomy! I trust that I have shown you the seriousness of Israel's sins. Their behaviour was not little peccadilloes (the kind we are supposed to commit), but sins that attacked the very foundational principles of their gospel and their existence as the people of God. We should find it incredible, if we didn't know the history of Christendom. Favoured with immeasurably more light than Judaism ever was, Christendom down the centuries has often undermined the very principles upon which the gospel of our salvation rests.

Consider briefly then, the nature of the salvation in this book—God raised up judges. The term used for these men has baffled the critics, for they were not judges in our modern sense, or they do not appear to be. They seem to be military leaders, charismatic leaders if you like, that led the people in battle against their enemies and achieved great victories and deliverances, rather than sedate and be-wigged judges sitting on the seat of the elders and executing justice for the nation. So some critics have found a problem; unnecessarily perhaps as these men were both.

Noticeable is the element in their career of being military commanders who delivered and saved the people by leading them in battle, teaching them to fight and overcome the enemy. But we should not allow that to obscure the other side of the salvation they brought. They judged Israel because if ever they were going to be delivered they had first to be brought to repentance. How will you deliver them from bondage to the Canaanite gods, if they don't see that Canaanite gods are evil? Who will fight the Philistines with all seriousness of heart if, like Samson, he is in love with the Philistines? If ever Israel were to be saved from the difficulties into which they had got themselves somebody would have to say this is wrong, then judge the people and call them back to repentance and to the observance of God's holy word. That element in their salvation was exceedingly important.

This too is a part of our salvation. On that most holy occasion when we surround the emblems of our Lord's death and take the bread and the cup of the new covenant that talks

to us about salvation, even then we are called upon to judge ourselves. How will God save me from my sinning unless he can convince me that my sinning is wrong?

As well as judging Israel by showing how their activity and attitudes were fearfully wrong, bringing them to repentance and maintaining them in a state of judging themselves before God, the judges delivered them by fighting and teaching Israel to fight. Obviously they were not going to get very far unless they were prepared to fight, and unless they knew how to fight.

In days gone by under Joshua multitudes of men and women had been skilled and ready fighters and, perceiving the issues at stake, many of them had been prepared to leave home, business, cattle and go with the armies and fight. The trouble was that now a third generation had risen up who weren't disposed to fight for anything, and didn't know how to fight. They got their blessings too easily. They had not fought for their grass in Canaan, and therefore they didn't value it. When a Canaanite came up the road they weren't disposed to fight him—why fight? When some nice young lady from the Canaanites passed by, rather more decorated than the Israelites tended to be, many of the young men decided that Moses must have been cranky. Fancy telling us to fight Canaanites—what's wrong with Canaanites? A different style maybe, but there's something to be said for it! Suppose they did do a thing or two a little differently from Moses, surely you are not going to condemn the lot? Is a little bit of fornication in the course of the rituals all that bad? They weren't prepared to fight, so God had to raise up men who were, who could teach Israel once more the art of warfare.

We shall not get very far either unless we are prepared to fight. I know that Christendom's history has been littered with disgrace of the wrong kind of fighting—brother fighting brother and sister fighting sister. It is a sad business. Many of us have been like Jephthah; but let that not obscure the fact that there is a right kind of fighting. 'Fight the good fight of the faith', says Paul (1 Tim 6:12). In our generation, any more than in our forebears', we must not allow the gospel to be compromised—just to stand by and not be prepared to fight for it. In all the thrust of modern life the basic principles of God's word call for our defence.

Therefore we must learn to fight and this book will teach us some lessons in the art of spiritual warfare. I don't need to tell you that we fight on an altogether different battlefield nowadays. Israel fought with slings and stones and swords. The weapons of our warfare are not physical but spiritual. Indeed, our blessed Lord forbade us to fight with the sword, either in defence or in the propagation of the gospel. What disaster has stained the pages of the history of Christendom when professed Christians forgot that and took out their armies to defeat the Turks or the Jews or the Catholics or the Protestants. God save us from the same mistake. 'The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual' (2 Cor 10:4). That doesn't mean the warfare is less tough. We need to learn the art of spiritual warfare and we shall be able to use at least some of these stories as models for our thinking.

In any warfare, if we are to be effective, we shall have to correctly reconnoitre the enemy. We shall at once perceive in the book of Judges that the enemies against which the major judges proceeded are led by a different nation each time. Some combinations recur, but the

leading nation/enemy is different. Whether Mesopotamians, Moabites, Canaanites, Midianites, Ammonites, Amalekites, who were in part Ishmaelites, or Abimelech who turned the people of God into enemies, as he supposed; or Jephthah who fought Ammonites mainly and Samson who fought the Philistines; we shall have to ask ourselves what were the chief characteristics of the enemy and how were they best to be met in battle?

We shall also ask questions about the qualifications of the deliverers. Why did God choose this man or that woman and not some others? In our hearts we want to be deliverers, don't we? What qualifications would we require to be deliverers amongst the people of God?

Finally, we shall learn lessons about strategies and tactics. The common theme is that they fight some kind of battle or other, but the crucial strategies and tactics are different each time. For example, Ehud brought a message to the enemy—a dagger that went through his belly. God killed this man through his belly, which was appropriate for apparently he was very large. That is not every man's strongest point, nor yet his weakest. Interestingly enough, Abimelech was killed through his skull. The person who killed the Canaanite general by hammering a tent peg through his skull was a woman, and it was also a woman who got rid of Abimelech by casting a millstone on to his skull.

Ehud used messages, thus representing diplomacy. Jephthah is marked by his very skilful and knowledgeable diplomatic exchanges with the leaders of Amalek, using long arguments from history; and only when diplomacy had been exhausted did Jephthah go to war. Even at a superficial glance it is evident that crucial tactics and strategies are different on each occasion. We shall surely want to ask why this particular strategy and tactic was used against that particular enemy—why was it especially suited to the occasion? As we ask that kind of question and perceive the answers, we shall be provided with thought models that will help us in our spiritual war against the enemies that we still face.

The Two Introductions (2)

Judges 1:1–4; 2:6–11

The book of Judges is largely occupied by stories of the major oppressions that Israel suffered, and by the deliverances that God wrought for them through the hand of the major judges.

At the beginning of the book there is an introduction. When we look at it we find that it is virtually two introductions, each one of them headed by a reference to Joshua.

1. 1:1–2:5. *'After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel enquired of the LORD, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?"'* (1:1).

2. 2:6–3:6. *'When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land'* (2:6). Two long passages of introduction then, standing at the beginning of this book of Judges.

The function of the first introduction

1. It sets the context of the era of the Judges

Our first task is to understand what these introductions are saying and to decide, if we can, why there are two passages of introduction and not simply one. We also notice that they serve two different purposes. The first introduction is concerned with the period that immediately followed the death of Joshua, which the opening verses of ch. 1 explicitly tell us. The opening verses of the second long passage of introduction (2:6–7), inform us that it is concerned, not with the period immediately after Joshua's death, nor indeed with the period belonging to the elders who survived Joshua—the second generation, but more particularly with their descendants—the third and following generations after the death of Joshua.

To put it another way, the first introduction is concerned with that period immediately after the death of Joshua when Israel entered the second phase of their conquest of the land. The conquest of the promised land of Israel, as we shall have to remind ourselves many times, was in two very distinct phases. The first phase was under the leadership of Joshua, that brilliant general and captain of the hosts of the Lord. The second phase came after his death, when Israel and their individual tribes attempted to enter into their inheritance.

The first introduction is concerned with that second phase of the conquest, its successes and its failures. The second introduction is not so much concerned with the second phase but what happened subsequently, how its weaknesses and limitations set up difficulties and temptations for the generations that followed and ensnared them in sinful and perverse ways.

So let us concentrate on the first passage of introduction — the second phase of the conquest. I want first of all to step backwards in time and sketch in the historical background of the conquest of the promised land. Let us think for a moment of the programme and of the task, as God brought his people from Egypt through the wilderness and at last into the conquest and possession of the promised land, the great climax of their redemption — the land flowing with milk and honey. The subject of the great promises made to Abraham and to his seed are now at last to be fulfilled. Consider the glory that this represented for those ex-slaves from Egypt. Their noses had been kept hard on the grindstone of their slavery and their brick-making in the brick kilns of Egypt; now at last they stand on the threshold of this glorious inheritance with its luscious grass, fields, houses, wine vats, olive presses. What moments of delight and rapture were to be theirs.

We can't help thinking of ourselves, for one person's joy sparks another's. As we imagine Israel with glittering eyes entering their tremendous inheritance, we think of our own — of that glorious inheritance, 'imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you' (1 Pet 1:4). Indeed, when we come to the New Testament we shall find that the writers deliberately take this story of Israel's entry into their inheritance and offer it to us as a model that we may use to help us imagine and grasp the wonder of the inheritance into which God has, is now, and will yet bring us. This is made easier for us of course, by the way subsequent generations looked back to the event. In the hands of Israel's poets the glorious inheritance of the land of Canaan came to signify their inheritance at a deeper level. Listen to the Psalmist, for instance,

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. (Ps 16:5–6)

He is using figurative and metaphorical language, but the source is the time when Israel came into their literal inheritance. The wise surveyors among them were commissioned to get out their measuring lines and measure out the inheritance that was given to each man. The responsible leaders cast lots and the land was divided amongst Israel by lot; that is, by God's providential ordering of the falling of that lot. As the Psalmist thought of it he began to think not just of grass, cows and bees, honey, milk and wine presses, but of all that other large inheritance that God had given him.

Centuries later still, the prophet Daniel, overwhelmed by the solemnity of some of the things in the distant future he had seen in his visions, was comforted by the angel, or rather by the man above the river, 'Go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days' (12:13 KJV). When they came into the land of Palestine, each man had a lot as a sacred gift of God. The subsequent poets and prophets of Israel looked forward to a coming day when each of them too would have a lot with his or her name on it.

Let us who are redeemed by the blood of Christ listen to the comfort of God's holy word, 'And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified' (Acts 20:32). My imagination goes on to wonder what your inheritance is going to be like — in your name, unique to you in the eternal yet to be.

I am conscious of the commentators at this point, so I must be wary! We have an inheritance, a promised land, a Canaan. But what is it a picture of? The innocent among us, following Sankey's hymn book, will say it is a picture of heaven. That's our promised land, and our Jordan to be crossed by our timid feet is the river of death itself.

Then the learned commentators spoil it all! They say, 'No, of course not. Canaan is not a picture of heaven. When the Israelites got there they had to fight their way through, and surely there will be no fighting in heaven.' What then is it a picture of? They say, 'It is a picture of our present inheritance. Already are we there, we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places.'

But then, if Ephesians 1 reminds us that we are already seated with Christ in the heavenly places, Ephesians 6 reminds us that in those same heavenlies there is a stern and severe battle to be done against principalities, mights, powers and dominions, and the world rulers of this darkness. That sounds very convincing, doesn't it?

Unfortunately for the theory, Peter says something else. He says that we have an inheritance that is imperishable and undefiled reserved in heaven for us, and we are being kept until we get there (1 Pet 1:4–5). And here is Paul telling us that already we are seated there in Christ Jesus. What shall we do when apostles take two differing points of view? The answer is that you take both! Why not? An inheritance is waiting for us in glory, and we have an inheritance to be entered into and enjoyed now. No fighting there when glory comes, but real enough fighting now for those who would enter into the enjoyment of their inheritance.

A problem. Let us think then, not only of the historical background of the conquest of Canaan but of the moral problem facing God Almighty when he brought Israel into the promised land. When they came to the borders of their inheritance they did not find Canaan empty. It wasn't just waiting to be occupied, as a man might build and furnish a house for his son and daughter-in-law and all they have to do is turn the key and walk in. It was occupied by the Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites and others. It is important to remember that they had been there for centuries. But centuries of eating the milk and the honey had not prevented them from becoming some of the wickedest people under the face of the sun. Long since God had decreed that Israel's entry into the land should coincide with his judgment on those corrupt and degenerate civilizations.

Here was a problem. If God felt so severely about Canaanite society and all its sinful ways that in the end he must judge them and cast them out, how would he guarantee that Israel wouldn't eventually behave in the same way? You say, 'Feed them with Canaanite grass, milk, honey and all that kind of stuff and surely they will behave themselves.' But centuries of Canaanite occupation had proved the very opposite. Indeed, you will hear Moses' concern as he leads the nation to the borders of the promised land. He pleads with them, 'Mark how God is turning the Canaanites out—the very land is spewing them forth for their corrupt way of living. Do be careful when you get in that you don't follow their ways, lest the land spew you out as well' (Lev 18:24–28). It's unthinkable that God should turn the Canaanites out because of their sin, and then let Israel in to misbehave just like the

Canaanites; saying in effect, 'Israel are my blue-eyed boys and it doesn't matter how they behave.' Bringing Israel into the promised land raised a moral problem for the Almighty.

I am going to heaven, but I am reminded of where Satan was when he fell. In the Bible there is the solemn story of the angels, attendants in the very presence of God, who kept not their first estate (Jude 6). It would be an idle thought that God would simply be able to take human beings, translate them to heaven and just being there and eating its celestial grass and milk would guarantee that they would remain sinless. We have a Christian gospel and every believer is eternally secure in Christ, already raised in him and seated in heavenly places, but there is a moral side to our gospel as well. How will God have people who once were sinners in his presence, without them turning to sin and rebellion as previous occupants of the heavenly places have done?

I am not altogether allowing my imagination to run riot. Two epistles of the New Testament call upon us to remember the fate of those angels that sinned. Peter in particular was faced with corrupt and false teachers in the early church who taught that God's grace meant that it didn't really matter how you behaved. You could live loosely and cover it if you must by saying that you are a carnal Christian. Grace is grace, so it doesn't matter how you behave. Faced by that perversion of the gospel Peter and his fellow Jew remind us,

God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment. (2 Pet 2:4)

I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:21)

Paul does not say, that *you*, but that *those* who live in this corrupt unregenerate manner have no inheritance, either now or hereafter. In our modern hedonistic societies we shall need to give heed to these warnings, lest we give the impression that salvation by grace is a licence for careless living.

It is to be noticed that God not only determined that Israel's entry into the promised land should coincide with his judgment upon the Canaanites; he made Israel the executors of that judgment. God-given though it was, if they would enter into their inheritance under Joshua their leader, they had to traverse the land and execute the judgments of God upon the Canaanite civilizations and peoples, and they were warned not to compromise. As they fought their embattled way across Canaan and saw some of the beautifully civilized cities, the wonders of their technology and the colourfulness, to say nothing else, of their religious ceremonies, I suspect doubts arose in some of their hearts. Are they all that bad? Why does God insist on driving them out? But they had to be prepared to stand with Joshua, share the divine view of sin in those corrupt societies and be prepared to exercise judgment.

Under Joshua's leadership they had to go forward as the united armies of Israel. When they conquered a city some of them weren't allowed to occupy it and settle down and leave the others to go on with the rest of the conquest. Remember the famous case of the two-and-a-half tribes who wanted to settle down on land that they had conquered on the eastern side of Jordan, Moses grew furious with them. 'No you don't! You must be prepared to go with all the rest of the army and fight your way through the whole of Canaan; there's no stopping still until the war is won.' So the army went round, breaking the back of

Canaanite opposition. When the victories were won Joshua could say (maybe with some exaggeration), 'Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed' (Josh 21:45). There were some notable exceptions that they hadn't conquered, but the spirit of the thing had come true. Thus far the battles of the Lord had been won and Canaan subdued. Then Joshua died.

Now they were to split up. Each tribe was to appropriate the great victories that Joshua had won for them and enter individually into its own inheritance. It is with that second phase of the conquest that the first introduction is concerned. Joshua had won his resounding victories and broken the power of the Canaanites but that doesn't mean the Israelites were able to walk into their individual lots without any fighting. You misread the Canaanites, if you think that is so. In the intervening years, while the armies were moving round the country with Joshua, the rascally old Canaanites had slipped back again. Wouldn't you, if you were a Canaanite? They reoccupied some of the cities that had been burned down and built them again. 'You're not coming in here,' they said. And Israel had to fight again. That is not belittling the victories that Joshua won. In the second phase individual tribes had to learn to appropriate the victories, and that meant still fighting Canaanites.

As we think of that, our minds run ahead of us to greater things. How is our own great inheritance achieved? Surely it was in two phases. We think now of our greater than Joshua, our New Testament Jesus and his great victory. The issue at stake was not over a few Canaanites or a few acres in the Middle East. It was the conquest of principalities and powers, might and dominions; a victory that has disannulled him that had the power of death, that is, the devil (Heb 2:14). Alone at Calvary he stripped principalities and powers and made a show of them openly, triumphing over them (Col 2:15). His victory broke the dominion of sin and removed the sting of death; broke even the dominion of the law plus its penalty, and forever set us free.

We thank Thee for the blood,
 The blood of Christ, Thy Son.
 The blood by which our peace is made,
 Our victory is won.
 Great victory o'er hell and sin and woe;
 That needs no second fight and leaves no second foe.¹

We stand in the confidence of him who said, 'In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world' (John 16:33). There is still one dark enemy that raises his head from time to time and his name is Death. We are assured that death one day shall be swallowed up in victory—'But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor 15:57). 'The Lion of the tribe of Judah . . . has conquered' (Rev 5:5), and we will be in heaven. From one point of view we are there already.

Does that mean there is no fighting for us to do? The devil has been disannulled, hasn't he? Yes he has, but he is not out of a job yet. He isn't giving up that easily. In this second

¹ Horatius Bonar, 1808-89. 'No blood, no altar now.'

phase of the conquest there is fighting to be done, if we would enter upon the enjoyment of our inheritance. We would be false to our charge to encourage our young people to think that trusting the Saviour is going to be sheer hedonistic happiness all the rest of our days. There is blood, sweat and tears, and relentless war. There are many battles and glorious victories to be won in the life of the believer and in the church. But the war won't be finished until the Lord comes. Experience will suggest that positions which were fought for and won in years gone by somehow have a way of slipping back and the enemy comes in behind. Gains that were made by our fathers are lost by their grandsons.

2. The Varied Success of the Individual Tribes²

If then we must fight, we look back with a certain fellow feeling for the Israelites. How did they get on? As we read the first introduction there is much about them that we can admire. It was a formidable task when Joshua died and each tribe had to go off by itself and enter its individual inheritance. While they had been fighting as a whole army there was safety in numbers, but now they had to go down that dark valley not knowing who would come round the next corner. Cities, impressive in their ruins to this very day, must have sent a chill through some of their hearts.

Who should go first? The All Tribal Assembly gathered before the Lord. They were wise men and women who did not take it for granted that they could enter a city here and a vineyard there in their own strength. It wasn't a hobby when you had nothing better to do. They waited on the Almighty as to who should go first, and who second. They went in dependence on him and his direction, so that they might fight their way into the enjoyment of their inheritance. What glorious progress was made and what victories won.

You would like to tell yours too, wouldn't you? Looking back through the years to when you were first starting out, taking your first nervous steps in the Christian pathway, what formidable giants stood in the way! Of course you can recall victories, the memory of which stirs your hearts even now. You might count them small in the light of all your subsequent successes, but at the time they were big; they shaped the rest of your career. It is a real gospel we have and a real Saviour who lives to direct the battles of his people.

But we must be realists. Though the Lord was with them we are told, 'Judah...took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron' (Judg 1:19). I value the realism of the historian—Judah *could not*. The Lord was with him, so why couldn't he drive them out? The Israelites had not yet come out of the Bronze Age into the Iron Age and, faced with the advanced technology of the Canaanite chariots, they could not drive them out. This verse is an encouragement to me, for if I had read that their entry into the inheritance was one unqualified and unvaried success I should collapse in despair.

Do you have that fellow feeling? Have there never been enemies that you couldn't drive out? You wanted to drive them out, you waited on the Lord as sincerely as any man or woman can wait on the Lord, pleaded with him for victory, but you were not able (and perhaps you are still not able) to record complete victory. Notice the subtle difference

² No. 3 is in the next chapter.

between verse 19 and verse 21. The children of Benjamin *did not* drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem. The Judahites failed to drive out some of the enemies, for they could not; whereas the Benjamites simply did not.

What do I do about the enemies that I can't yet drive out? What I don't do is give up the struggle, or give up faith in the Lord and the promise of his victory. One day he shall give me the victory, even if he makes me wait and allows me to compass the fortress of my besetting sin many days on end, like he made the Israelites wait as they went seven days round the walls of Jericho until the walls fell down. All that is required of me is faith in the Lord and that I make no covenant with my enemy nor come to terms with him, but press on in the belief of final victory even through the anguish of defeat. Let it not be said of me that I didn't drive out the enemy.

All the more shame on Benjamin, for an earlier verse has told us that Judah went up against Jerusalem (Jebus in those days), fought against it, smote it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire. Poor old Benjamin must have been pretty weak-kneed. Victory was almost handed to him on a plate but he didn't drive them out.

What would you think of Manasseh if it were said of him that he couldn't drive out the inhabitants, so he made servants of them and made them tributable (vv. 27–28)? Was that a good thing to do? Well, I don't know! If you can't drive out Canaanites I should have been disposed to try and control them. Here is a man whose weakness is his pride, and because he is so proud what he does is done with perfection. You would be wrong to suppose it is all Godliness and love for the Lord. There is a little streak of pride underneath it, self-seeking and ambition that will show now and again in certain desperate and ruthless moves. When a man can't drive it out, he finds that it dogs him. Is he allowed to harness it and say, 'This old Canaanite streak of pride makes me such a perfectionist and I will go on being as perfect as I can, even though the motivation underneath is not all it should be'?

Asher gave up the struggle (v. 32). He didn't even begin to drive them out and simply went and dwelt among them. Worse still we read of Dan (v. 34). The Amorites pushed him up the mountain and wouldn't let him come down. What an unfortunate tribe he was; seated astride that mountaintop in the promised land, singing his hymns but a virtual prisoner of the Amorites, unable to face the foe.

God forbid that it should happen to us. If we are careless about fighting our spiritual battles and give in to the foe, the foe will eventually master us.

The Two Introductions (3)

Judges 2:15, 20–23; 3:1–6

We have already begun to study the first introduction to the book of Judges; our task now will be to complete that and briefly survey the second introduction.

We noticed in particular the moral problem that confronted the Almighty when he brought Israel into the promised land. By the time of the conquest the iniquity of the Amorites (as God had phrased it to Abraham centuries before, Gen 15:16) had now come to the full, and God intervened to bring his judgments upon them and remove them from the land. It was unthinkable that, having thrown out the Canaanites because of their sin, God should then permit the Israelites to enter and misbehave in the very same way.

We notice therefore that God did two things, among others. He warned the Israelites that if they behaved in the manner of the Canaanites then the very land itself would spew them out, as it had spewed out the Canaanites before them (Lev 18:28). Moreover, by making them the executors of his judgments upon the Canaanites, God began to teach his ancient people certain exceedingly important moral lessons. As they followed Joshua their deliverer and general in his campaigns against the enemy, they were at every turn obliged to come to moral decisions. Were the Canaanites as bad as God said they were? Was their sin as ugly a thing as God said it was? Was it really necessary to drive them out ruthlessly and without compromise? Or could they rightly take the view that the Canaanites were not all that bad, and that one could conveniently make covenants with them?

And then we noticed that there were two phases in the conquest of the land. There was the first phase during the life of Joshua, when Joshua led the united armies of Israel around the country breaking the back of all Canaanite opposition. After the death of Joshua there followed the second phase of the conquest. Each individual tribe had to go into the lot (that particular part of the land assigned to them) and appropriate the victories that Joshua had won, drive out any Canaanites that had come back and reasserted themselves, and so enter their inheritance. In both phases of the conquest of their inheritance the Israelites were obliged to fight; fighting that involved them in the question of whether or not they agreed with God in his moral judgment upon the Canaanites.

Finally in that second phase we observed the record given by the Spirit of God as to how the various tribes fared as they went off to enter their inheritance. Even at this distance we rejoice with them over the record of their many victories; and knowing our own hearts we sympathise with them in the defeats, failures and weaknesses that some of them showed.

We must now listen to God's response to their efforts; in particular God's protest against his people's unfaithfulness and their many compromises with the enemy.

Just before we do that let us remind ourselves of a third thing we noticed already. There are two phases in the conquest of our inheritance and in both those phases we too must be careful not to compromise in any way.

The first phase is the great victory that Jesus Christ our Lord won at Calvary, as a result of which we receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among them that are sanctified (Acts 20:32). We are not required to fight in order to receive the benefit of our Lord's victory: we receive forgiveness and justification by faith and an inheritance in glory simply by the act of repentance and faith and trust in the Saviour. But if you will observe exactly how we are brought into the benefits of our Lord's victory, you will remember that when we come to Christ we are required to identify ourselves with our blessed Lord in his death, burial, and resurrection. The great victory was won for us at Calvary, but we are asked to consider what was taking place at Calvary when our Lord fought the great battle against sin and Satan and malevolent powers. It was nothing other than that Jesus Christ, the great Lion of the Tribe of Judah, had prevailed as the Lamb of God who bore the judgment, the condemnation of God, against our sin. If we would enter into that victory and be blessed by its results, we must be prepared to be identified with what went on at Calvary. It means agreeing with God that we were all so hopelessly corrupt, so irremediably guilty before God that we had to accept the judgment of God upon our sin.

We profess in our baptism to be buried with Christ. Why? Because we died with Christ under the judgment of God. Why die? Because God's holy law had pronounced the sentence of condemnation upon us. So we shall not have to fight in order to merit the benefits of his salvation, but we shall have to fight in our day and generation for the doctrine of salvation, as men and women did in the past. As in the apostolic day, there are men to be heard in our day who will tell us that we are mistaken — man is not really so bad as all that.

A year or two ago, a book came into my hands entitled *Christ Among Us*.³ It was, you might say, new-look Catholicism. It developed the thesis that the heart of Christianity is union with Christ. Salvation is by grace, the grace of God, and not by our works. What is the grace of God, but God himself? The very heart of salvation, said the book, is union with Christ. As Christ lives out his way and his life in us, we become progressively more like the Saviour until at last we shall be completely like him in glory. I danced for joy!

And then I came across a chapter about what happens when we die. It said, when we come to die, few of us will feel we have ever done anything worthy of damnation. I wondered if I had seen it aright — few of us will feel we have ever done anything worthy of damnation? We all have done things worthy of damnation! Right to the day we die, suppose we lived to be ninety-nine, it will be true of us that all have sinned in the past, and all have and do come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Not done anything worthy of damnation? That is precisely what we have done. I said, 'What a curious book!' Then I plucked up courage and read the next sentence — and none of us will feel that we are so good as to merit entering heaven. At this point I nearly put the book on the fire, and would have done if it

³ Anthony Wilhelm, *Christ Among Us: A Modern Presentation of the Catholic Faith for Adults*, New York: HarperCollins, 1967; 6th rev edn, 1996.

had not cost me so much! For all its talk of being saved by grace and union with the Saviour it was undercutting the two basics of the Christian gospel: repentance and faith.

Of course, it is no new thing. The Galatians in their innocence imbibed the doctrine that it was possible to earn justification by gradual progress in spiritual development. All that kind of thing ultimately presupposes the idea that the death of Christ was not necessary because we weren't all that bad and the unregenerate man can do things that are pleasing to almighty God. All he needs is care; and by the help and grace of Christ gradually he will improve enough, and when he is improved enough he will merit acceptance with God. That is a denial of the gospel, and we shall have to fight with our own generation lest, with the very best will in the world to be kindly and Christian, we fluff the gospel at this basic level. The gospel requires us, as it required the Israelites, to stand identified with our Joshua in the execution of the judgments of God. Ourselves first, and all other men, must accept the divine judgment—we are all worthy of damnation.

Praise God we have a glorious gospel to preach. Salvation is identity with Christ in his resurrection, and this is the thing that will keep heaven eternally clear of sin. We accepted the judgment of God on us, identified ourselves with Christ in his death, burial and glorious resurrection. We have been given the very life of Christ as a gift, not as something we merit. United indissolubly with him, his life will keep us eternally from sin.

We must not compromise over this first phase of the conquest, nor are we allowed to compromise in the second phase. If I would enter now into my spiritual inheritance, from time to time I shall find my way barred by the enemy. Though his power is disannulled, Satan is not finished with his antics. Nor are all his hosts, nor the countless enemies within me, and I shall have to learn persistently to fight.

Therefore, we listen intently as God now in ch. 2 begins to chide his people for their lack of faith. As he speaks we hear the very frustrations of God at the unreasonableness of it. He said, 'I brought you up out of Egypt—I did the redeeming, and brought you into this land. I gave you the victories and said that I would never break my covenant.' That was true on God's part. Then he said, 'On your part I asked you to make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land, but you have not hearkened to my voice. Why have you not hearkened?'

We must be careful to see exactly what God is saying to his people. We saw earlier that many of them scored victories and made progress in the enjoyment of their inheritance, while others failed. But God's Holy Spirit helps us to distinguish those who did not drive out the enemy—because for the time being *they could not*. 'God was with them,' says the historian, 'yet at that moment they could not drive out the enemy.' God isn't blaming them for it. But he also records that with some of them it wasn't so much a question that they could not, but *they did not*. The Asherites didn't even attempt to, they just went and lived among the Canaanites and didn't raise a finger to fight. What God is complaining about is not that some of them were not able to drive out the enemy, but that they made a covenant, settled down, agreed to the status quo and gave up the fighting. But there was no need to give in. However long God allowed the battle to go on before he gave his people ultimate

victory, he had promised that he would never break his covenant with them. There was no need to stop fighting, for ultimate victory was assured. One can sense the frustration of God coming out in his word to his people, 'Why have you behaved like this?'

As we Christians read of that covenant, we too need to hear the message. The covenant under which we stand with God is vastly superior. Not a two-party covenant, as was Israel's, but a one-party covenant. What a delightful thing it is to come to the Lord's Supper. I have had a hard week with the Canaanites, Perizzites and Gidingites (a tough kind of enemy!). Here I am, down in the mouth, defeated once again by enemies that I vowed I would destroy and thought I had overcome. Should I give in and say, 'What's the use of fighting? All these conference speakers—what holy men they are, but they don't seem to face the enemies I face, and their enemies aren't as deeply entrenched as mine are!' And then I see the cup that stands on the table, the cup of the new covenant. I take it with both hands, for it says, 'I will put my laws on their hearts and write them on their minds' (Heb 10:16).

Courage, my brother and sister, in the face of those Canaanites, for the holy covenant is signed in the blood of Christ and guarantees us ultimate victory. I know the battle can be long and tedious and frustrating, but you don't have to give in. God is a realist, he asks us to diagnose, to discern ourselves, and to confess our failings. In that very moment he bids us to come and eat, take the cup and be reassured of victory as we go forth.

Why then would any of us give up the fight? Someone may say, 'You don't know what muddles I have got into, and how far I have got.'

I recall an experience in my younger days and a man who in his youth had been a very acceptable preacher, but in his early business experience he had been tempted to do some shady deal. Looking around him he observed other Christian men who did similar shady deals and he had fallen for it. There had begun a great slippery road downwards and he hadn't attended the preaching of the word of God for thirty years. An illness began to beset him, his career went wrong and he began to get psychological disturbances. In his misery he passed by a certain meeting place and saw the name of yours truly on the notice board. In those days I was a new broom that swept clean! Curiosity (if you like to think it so) caused a desire in his heart to come and listen to the gospel again. I was preaching on the way that Peter denied the Lord and fell. The Lord brought him back again—thirty years gone and wasted, but the covenant stood and the Lord brought him back.

3. The Four Incidents⁴

Says God, 'Why would any of you ever give in and make compromises with the enemy?' As we listen to the Lord, perhaps we should take a few moments to consider that other feature in the first introduction. Against the background of the lists of enemies and cities and countryside that the Israelites did or did not conquer, there are four particular stories; to use the technical term, four *anecdotes*, but they are real historical stories.

1. Adoni-bezek (1:4–7)
2. Othniel and Achsah (1:12–15)

⁴ No. 3 of 'The Function of the First Introduction' from previous chapter.

3. Caleb (1:20)
4. The house of Joseph (1:22–26)

We ask ourselves why the Holy Spirit has chosen to include these four anecdotes in this list of campaigns, victories and defeats. It seems to me that each one of them raises a particular aspect of the question of the judgment of God.

1. *Adoni-bezek*. He was a dark Canaanite, a rogue and a rascal. In our terms, an unregenerate man. Many commentators, particularly if they are Christian commentators, understandably feel disturbed at the apparent brutality of Joshua and his armies when they took this man and cut off his right thumb and right toe. When Adoni-bezek felt the pain, there was borne in upon his conscience that this was the intervention of God Almighty. These were the providential judgments of the real God on his sin. He recalled seventy other kings whose right thumbs and right toes he himself had cut off. 'There they were,' he said, 'without their thumbs, trying to pick up bits of bread under my table!' Men who had once been kings and Adoni-bezek was laughing his heart out at their misery. Before he died God's judgment caught up with him. Thank God it had the effect of making him aware of the ghastliness of his sin.

According to this particular principle of divine judgment, you get what you have given others. Solemn, isn't it? Shall it also be a principle of God's eternal judgment? What shall hell be like for some people if they get there what in life they gave to others? We wonder how long Adoni-bezek lasted without his thumb and right toe. Without his thumb he would be unable to fight, and without his right toe he couldn't walk as well as before. In those last years before he went out into eternity to stand before his Maker, let us hope that God's temporal judgment brought conviction of sin to give him time to get right with God.

As we think of the seriousness of God's eternal judgments, we thank God for the clear assurance of his word that for those who trust in Christ there is no condemnation, no penalty of sin. But it is to be observed in holy Scripture that, as we live our lives in his kingdom and family, God still disciplines us, even as believers. Take the famous case of Jacob. In his early days he deceived his father in order to gain the blessing by unworthy means and later he found himself deceived by Laban. Let us remember the words of our blessed Lord, '*For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you*' (Matt 7:2). 'If you refuse to forgive somebody when he repents, our Father that is in heaven will issue the same treatment to you,' says Christ. You will suffer temporal discipline that otherwise you might have avoided. The struggle against sin is a serious thing. We are free from its penalty, but God will not allow believers to go on living carelessly. If we will not discern and judge ourselves he will discipline us to bring us to our senses and to repentance.

2. *Othniel and Achsah*. We come now to a much happier thing. As we shall be thinking about Othniel subsequently, we may pass it by briefly now. Notice simply that in this experience of

Othniel and Achsah we have the principle illustrated, *'For to the one who has, more will be given'* (Matt 13:12).

Said Caleb, 'He who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will give him Achsah my daughter for a wife' (1:12). Challenged by this offer, Othniel fought and took the city, and got the fair lady and the inheritance that came with her. He found that she was no ordinary lady—a chip off the old block, she was after all Caleb's daughter. Having an inheritance already she couldn't be content with it. 'You've given me this lovely inheritance,' she said, 'but it is rather dry! Can't I have the upper and lower springs as well?' What can you say to a girl like that? Caleb could face giants, but he couldn't face her and gave her the upper and lower springs.

It has a kind of snowball effect. The more you have the more you get and the more you are given. It is a principle that our Lord observed. It is worth fighting—as the old hymn puts it, 'Each victory will help you some other to win'.⁵

The converse is true: 'But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.' It is perilous to stop fighting. You may think you have got enough already and you can afford to rest on your oars. My brother, my sister, be careful. If you are not making progress, one day you will wake up and find that you haven't even got what you thought you had.

3. *Caleb*. How lovely to see that after forty years and more he reaps the benefit of the stand he took in his early days. He had come in with the spies; his feet had stood on Hebron's ground. In all the innocence and straightforwardness of faith he had taken God at his word—*'Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you'* (Josh 1:3). So Caleb claimed Hebron. 'Here I stand,' he says, 'one day this is going to be mine.' To his great grief the nation wouldn't have it. For forty years he was obliged to wander with them in the wilderness. But it wasn't in vain, God honoured the stand he took in his more youthful days and when at last they entered Canaan they gave Caleb Hebron, even as Moses had promised.

Your earlier decisions are not in vain, your determination to believe the Lord and claim what was not as yet in your grasp; you will not be made ashamed. Only follow the Lord and you shall reap the benefits later, if not now, in the grand inheritance to come.

4. *The house of Joseph*. This is a success story. The commentators are divided in their opinions over the tactics they used to conquer the city of Luz. The Lord was with them, so the only difference of opinion occurs over the method they used. They saw a man coming out of the city and made a covenant with him: *'Please show us the way into the city, and we will deal kindly with you'* (Judg 1:24). So he showed them the entrance and they kept their bargain and let him go. They entered into Luz, captured it and re-named it Bethel. What a glorious victory it was—and then the man went out somewhere else and built another Luz all over again!

You may well disagree with me over my feelings. What did it matter? All the Israelites had to do was to drive out the Canaanites, it was none of their business what the Canaanites

⁵ Horatio R. Palmer, 1868, 'Yield not to temptation.'

did afterwards. The Josephites drove them out of Luz. They did the same thing with Rahab; got her on their side and she helped them with the conquest and capture of Jericho. But the two things are not altogether equal. Rahab got converted and became an ancestress of Christ, she didn't go and build another Jericho somewhere else.

As I read the story it raises a warning, even about our successes. In our personal lives or in our evangelistic campaigns we need to beware of unnecessary compromises. Why did they need to compromise? You will inevitably pay the price of a compromise, even if it brings success in the short term. Unnecessary compromise in unworthy methods is to perpetuate the same trouble somewhere else.

5. *God's rebuke at Bochim (2:1–5)*. For his people's lack of faith in his covenant and oath, which led them to make covenants with the Canaanites, instead of persisting in their efforts to drive them out.⁶

The function of the second introduction

To outline God's response to Israel's failure and compromise.

A basic cause of (but not excuse for) their forsaking the Lord

So now we turn to the second passage of introduction that runs from 2:6 to the early verses of chapter 3. We have already thought of it and I do not propose to deal with it now in very great detail. Only to repeat that it deals not with the time immediately after Joshua, nor with the second phase of the campaign, nor the second generation of worthies, but with the third.

The weakness of the third generation. It stands as a warning that in any great movement of God's Holy Spirit a peculiar peril attaches to the third generation. The second generation that outlived Joshua had known the Lord and his great acts. They were not so spectacularly great men and women as Joshua had been; they came short in some things that Joshua didn't, yet they were good men and women and they knew the Lord. The third generation—not so. They had their grass, butter, cows and olives very cheaply; they never had to fight for them. They had their liberty very cheaply; they had not known *the Exodus* or the experience of Jericho and what you get easily you value lightly. They went after other gods because they didn't know the Lord. That is the peril of all third generations.

You see it in the early churches. What first disappears very rapidly from the writings of the early Church Fathers is the clarion crystal-clear note of the gospel. Religion, yes; but the first thing to go is personal regeneration, a personal knowledge of the Lord. No church is immune from the problem. Often one has seen grandfather spectacularly converted, son converted—grandson? He comes to the meetings, but is he converted? You see it in great movements of God's Holy Spirit. Dear Charles Wesley with his marvellous revival. With so many of those that look to him as their fountainhead today, the thing you miss is the very thing that Charles Wesley stood for—the need for personal regeneration.

⁶ This is in the handout but Dr Gooding did not deal with it in his talk.

God's anger; God's mercy; God's providence

In the course of his denunciations the historian points out a recurrent pattern. Because of their going away from God the people intermarried with the Canaanites; they departed from the Lord, came under his discipline and into bondage. Then the Lord would raise up a saviour, but when the saviour and judge died they went back again, only worse. The writer now prepares us for what we shall find when we come to the subsequent history.

So let us just look once more at the list of major judges that we considered earlier. I have chosen just a few details from each story. You will see how carefully the historian selected his facts and put them together to illustrate not only that there was a recurrent falling away from God, but that each time they fell away the situation became worse.

Othniel fought against Mesopotamia. The secret of his success was his wife. The enemy he fought had gained their strength because the Israelites had gone after foreign wives, married the daughters of the people of the land and become so hopelessly compromised in idolatry that God had to bring his judgments upon them. Who better then to rescue them than Othniel, whose relationship to his wife was spectacularly wonderful?

Samson was the last judge and the last so-called deliverer. Now it is not the people who are going after the daughters of the Gentiles, it is the deliverer himself going after the girls of the unregenerate. The judge is guilty of the very sins from which the people had to be delivered on the first occasion. If the secret of Othniel's success was his wife, the secret of Samson's downfall was his wives (if we can call them wives).

Ehud fought Moabites, some Ammonites and Amalek. He brought a message to the enemy and put a dagger through his belly. Eventually he took the fords of Jordan and killed the enemy.

Jephthah fought the Ammonites. He sent messengers to the enemy and eventually he too took the fords of Jordan, but with this ironic difference. When Ehud took the fords of Jordan and slaughtered all those who tried to come across, the people he slaughtered were the enemies of God and of his people. When Jephthah took the fords and slaughtered those who came across, the people he slaughtered were his own Israelite brethren. Things have taken a sorry turn when the deliverer can't distinguish between the enemy and his own brothers. This has happened multitudinous times; brothers have slaughtered brothers in the name of the so-called battles of the Lord.

Jael. In the third story the final victory is won as a woman by the name of Jael kills the enemy commander by driving a tent peg through his temple.

Abimelech. Similarly, in the story of Abimelech another woman smashes the skull of the commander of the opposing forces by dropping a millstone on his skull. With this ironic difference—in Jael's case it was the skull of a Canaanite enemy that got broken; in the other case it was the skull of a member of Israel, of the man who claimed to be a deliverer but had turned himself into such a tyrant that the only way to get rid of him was to smash his skull.

This is an interesting book. Its very structure is telling us that, though God in his mercy raised up saviours for his people, each time they went astray they went worse than they did before.

Othniel

Judges 3:7–11

We come now to the first of the captivities recorded in the book of Judges and happily to the *Main Deliverers*. The first deliverance that God gave his people was through Othniel his servant.

As we shall have to do in the course of our studies, we may well begin this time by asking where Israel went wrong and how it was they came into this bondage. The simple answer to that question at the superficial level is that they went and married men and women of the Canaanite nations around them. If I were better qualified and if I were talking to a different audience, my first lesson to be drawn from this passage is to be very careful whom you marry. But being the experts on all these things I leave the sermon to you!

The enemy: Cushan-rishathaim, the king of Mesopotamia

In the deeper sense, if we asked the question, where did Israel go wrong and what was the nature of the bondage that they suffered in consequence, then we shall notice that the Lord sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. As we noted earlier, though Israel were now in the promised land, they came into bondage to the king of that very country from which Abraham centuries before had been called by God in order to start the Jewish nation. Before the call of Abraham, as we know, there was no Hebrew nation in our Old Testament biblical sense. God called Abraham out in order that through him and through his seed all the nations of the world should be blessed. This is where the nation began. We are now to read how, from first going astray, they denied the very basic principle upon which their nation was founded.

They were brought into bondage to Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia, Hebrew Aram-naharaim—Aram of the two rivers, the two rivers being the Tigris and the Euphrates. Abraham and his forebears originally lived in Ur of Chaldees, but we are told that they migrated northwards and came and dwelt in Haran. They were in Haran until Abraham's father died, in that northern part between the two rivers. The name is interesting because it means a crossroads. It was part of the route that the caravans would take coming northward from these parts, instead of going across the desert and then down through Lebanon into Palestine.

The call of Abraham from Mesopotamia

We are to think then, in the first place, of Abraham's call and why he left Mesopotamia, so that we might subsequently see what was so sad and so wrong that Israel's weakness opened

them to conquest once more by a king of that very same country. What was wrong with Mesopotamia, its culture and its civilization? You do not need me to remind you that the culture of those parts of the earth in Abraham's time was exceedingly advanced. There was much that was beautiful in art, engineering, architecture and the way of life amongst those people. We should be quite mistaken to think that they were some form of savage; uncultured, uncivilized and brutal. Here was the very flower of civilization, whose products in art and architecture charm our hearts still as we visit them either in-situ or in the museums of the world. What was wrong with the culture and civilization that Abraham had to be called out from? The answer that Joshua gave in his famous speech to Israel was, 'Your forefathers dwelt there and they served other gods' (24:2).

That was the flaw in this ancient culture. Brilliant civilization, but based on foundations that were fundamentally a false interpretation of the universe, and therefore a false interpretation of the significance of human life. Here were cultures that had long since given up belief in the transcendent Lord and in his place they had come to deify the forces of nature—the elemental forces that nowadays we call atoms and winds and storms and things. Deifying the sexual and aggressive urges within their own hearts, a culture that had a beautiful mythology, but was fundamentally false in its interpretation of man's relationship to the universe.

As we think of those things we think of our societies too. We must not necessarily imagine that idolatry is a thing that is now forever past, belonging to societies whose crude images are to be found in our museums. Our modern western world is marked by an idolatry even more severe than that of the nations from which Abraham came. If men get rid of the idea of the transcendent Lord who is over and above his creation—he made it, he sustains it, but he is other than his creation—then of course they are left with no other gods than the forces of nature herself. For what you would mean by gods are the ultimate powers that control things, that control human life; and if there is no Creator Lord then the ultimate power in this universe is certainly not mankind.

Our struggles with science have made astounding advances, but of course we are not in control. Though we live in societies and cultures that are exceedingly advanced in their knowledge and technology, we still pay the price of an idolatrous interpretation of the universe. If indeed the ultimate forces of the universe are the atom and the molecule and the virus, then we sit in a terrible prison house under forces that we cannot ultimately control. One day they will destroy us—that is bondage indeed! As we contemplate this, we hear the point of the cry and protest of the real God as he talks to his ancient people and illustrates in these stories what happens to people when they forsake the living God, often imagining that they are striking a blow for freedom. 'The God of our mothers and fathers crimps and confines our lives; get rid of the idea of God and we will have freedom in life. We can do as we please; morality won't ultimately matter, here we will find freedom!' What a delusion it is. If you get rid of the true and living God, you transport yourself into a prison house.

According to some theories our world got going in the first place rather mindlessly! It all came about by endless accidents, and by another series of colossal accidents it will all end. And here you are, with your beautiful sense of aesthetics and wonderful logic and foresight, able to look forward and use your imagination to plan what life could be like. One day a

mindless virus will enter your body and land it with the worms and the dust. The irony is that it won't know it has done it—would you call that freedom?

How then was Abraham converted from his original idolatry and what made him turn his back upon the undeniable beauty of those civilizations? Stephen explains it in his speech recorded by Luke:

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him 'Go out from your land and from you kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' (Acts 7:2-3)

It was no negative 'don't do this, don't do that, and don't do the other' that converted Abraham. Brought up in the brilliance of that ancient but defective civilization and culture, one day he met the living God. The magnificent glory of the real God took hold of his heart and made him a pilgrim, unsatisfied until he should reach the eternal city. I don't know what it was that brought you to the Lord. Was it an unconquerable fear of damnation or the prodding of conscience? Let Peter remind us what brought him to the Lord:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence. (2 Pet 1:3)

The magnificent sight of Jesus Christ, come down as God's Son into our sorry world to make known the glory of God, got hold of his imagination, heart, love and faith, and made him too a pilgrim in this world. He would not be satisfied until he should reach the inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Pet 1:4). Have you caught sight of that glory?

In my youth I would sometimes be asked to come along and address Christian rallies of young people. I would travel one hundred and fifty or two hundred and fifty miles. These sessions would be scheduled to last, say, an hour and a half. When the first fifty minutes had gone by with all sorts of introductions and entertainments of various kinds, then the Chairman, feeling it wise to forewarn the people what was coming, would announce that they had asked Dogsboddy from Ipswich to come and speak. He was going to be given ten minutes and the Chairman would be on hand to pull his tail if he dared to go any longer. It would soon all be over and we could get back to the real good entertainment.

I don't serve a God like that! If God is so boring I don't want him. I don't want a Christianity that is made up of second-rate entertainment borrowed from the BBC. I want the real God in all his magnificent splendour. God save us from perverting the minds of our young people by representing to them in the form of our Christian services that God himself and his word is a bore, a bitter pill that must be covered with much sugar to make it palatable.

Abraham was given a vision of the glory of God, told to come out and to journey towards a land that he was to receive for an inheritance. In the first place that promise

referred to the geographical land of Canaan. But, commenting upon these things, the writer to the Hebrews observes that Abraham lived all his life as a pilgrim and a stranger, and owned not an acre of the land except the little bit in which he buried his wife Sarah. The land was to be his, but not now; so in a sense he never did receive the fulfilment of the promise. What kept him from going back to Ur of Chaldees? He was a wealthy Sheikh and I suspect his carpets were very comfortable, but living in a tent wasn't nearly so sophisticated as living in Ur of Chaldees. What kept the man as a pilgrim and a stranger? He had opportunity to go back if he had wanted to, but he didn't want to go back. He looked not merely for Palestine,

He was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God . . . they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Heb 11:10, 16)

When at last Abraham gets home, it would be interesting to observe his reactions as God shows him the glories of the city. Just suppose you saw Abraham's face fall and he said to the Lord, 'It cost me a lot to forsake Ur of Chaldees and be a pilgrim all my life; I don't think all that much of this city!' 'If that could ever happen,' says the writer to the Hebrews, 'God would be ashamed of himself, be ashamed to be called Abraham's God.' To be somebody's God is by definition a claim to be of absolute power and absolute love. If Abraham should find himself dissatisfied with the glories that God has prepared, God himself would feel ashamed of himself. It isn't going to happen. 'God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.' All the rapture and delight and sophistication of that holy society to which we journey is built upon the only true foundation—faith in the living God.

What is worldliness?

If we interpret these ancient stories and apply them to ourselves, we might conveniently sum up our enemy as the New Testament term *the world*. Ur of Chaldees and Haran in Mesopotamia were not early samples of Sodom and Gomorrah, they were beautifully ordered civilizations. When we think of the term, the world, in the New Testament, I am sure we have all found it a little difficult to understand at times and even more difficult to explain. How does it come that the term means something bad? After all, in another sense, God made the world and God loves the world. How then, in other places in the New Testament, does it have a bad and a sinister meaning? We are warned not to love the world. It is difficult when we try to avoid this world. What is worldliness?

The first thing the New Testament warns us about the world in this sense is not so much its badness but its temporariness. 'Do not love the world' (1 John 2:15). Why not? Because 'the world is passing away' (v. 17). Though it may last many millions of years, this present world is temporary; it was never intended to be anything other than temporary. It was designed by God in all his great generosity to be a stepping stone upon which we might be placed as creatures of God, so that he would make himself known to us and give us the opportunity to rise in creation and become his sons and daughters. When our spiritual

training is done he will elevate us into his immediate presence and the unspeakable glories of that eternal world.

Thank God for this lovely world in which we find ourselves, but what a tragedy if we got so absorbed with it that we treated it as if it were eternal. How many men and women will miss the glories of heaven, not because of lurid vice and self-indulgence but because they mistook this world for the goal and gave it all their love, made it their objective and forgot it was a stepping stone towards eternity? 'Do not love the world or the things in the world . . . the world is passing away.' Use it but don't abuse it; use it as those who know it is but a temporary stepping stone to bigger things. It is a sad record written over Demas, one-time fellow-worker of the Apostle Paul, 'Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me' (2 Tim 4:10).

There is a deeper sense in which the term *world* carries a sinister meaning in the New Testament, and we may illustrate it for ourselves if we recur to our ancient story for a moment. In this first bondage the Lord delivered them into the hand of the king of Mesopotamia who, if you will believe it, rejoiced in the name of Cushan-rishathaim. Of this at least I am certain, nobody christened him Cushan-rishathaim, because in Hebrew Chushan-rishathaim means, *Chushan*—of double wickedness; *rishathaim*—being the dual of the Hebrew word for wickedness. Scholars suspect it was the crafty Jews that called him this name. In Aramaic he probably had a very respectable name, but the Jews, wanting to vilify their enemy, just slightly changed the vocalisation of the word and therefore dubbed him Cushan-rishathaim, double wickedness. But there he stands, and the Holy Spirit in his record, following his usual simple methods, repeats that loud sounding name time and time and time again. Three times perhaps and more, they had to fight the king of Mesopotamia, 'king of double wickedness.'

As we hear it, we cannot avoid remembering what the New Testament constantly tells us about this world. Our Lord warns us it is under the domination of an exceedingly cruel and sinister prince. In the last chapters of the Gospel of John more than once our Lord recurs to the fact, 'The prince of this world comes' (14:30 KJV). Worldliness in its full-blown sense is something that its sinister prince engineered and brought about. It is a state of civilization, a state of heart that the devil himself has induced in mankind and developed into a worldwide culture and way of looking at things. Paul reminds us that in our unconverted days we 'walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience' (Eph 2:2). We are meant to take the words seriously. The prince of this world has organised a world system of thought and values, such that God says. 'Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God' (Jas 4:4).

How has he done it, this king of double wickedness? We know the story starts with our forefathers in the garden of Eden. As Satan came to Eve one sunny morning in all his guile and sophisticated arguments, into that beautiful creation that God had given them, he said,

'It must be torture to live in a beautiful garden like this and not be allowed to eat of any of the trees whatsoever.'

'Oh no,' said Eve, 'you are exaggerating; we can eat of any tree we like, except one.'

‘That’s God all over,’ said the devil, ‘wanting to restrict your joy and your pleasure and your liberty, and your self-development. He knows how lovely that tree is and wants to keep you down.’

‘But God has told us that if we eat of that tree we should surely die,’ said Eve.

‘You don’t believe that old-fashioned stuff, do you Eve? God knows that in the day you eat you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil, you will arrive at your adulthood—none of these childish legends about God and death and punishment and things. You will rise and be as God.’

As usual, the argument that Satan uses is half-truth. But they found out too late that part of it was true—they ate the tree and found that they were ‘as God’ in one sense. ‘You don’t need God and his word and all these threats of death and things. This is life—grab it woman!’ said the devil. And she took it, deceived into the philosophy that life is for satisfying your physical appetite, your aesthetic appetite, your intellectual appetite, and leaving God and his word on one side.

That is the lie of it. Satan ruined our race, not by inducing in Adam some evil temper. Nothing like that. Multitudes will be in hell, not deceived by the nasty things but by the lovely things, thinking that life is all the beautiful things, but without God and his word. Turning upon Satan in the wilderness our Lord answered the lie, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”’ (Matt 4:4). It isn’t life except it is also by the word of God. Satan has deceived our whole world full of men and women by this. Of course the world is beautiful, but they now have it in their head that in order to enjoy it they must leave God out and live for this world.

Here is a bright young lady, and if you dare approach the subject that she needs to be saved and invite her to come and hear the gospel, she hasn’t time. She isn’t interested in religion or God; she is interested in music. She is persuaded that interest in God would diminish her enjoyment of music. What a lie! Who made the dear girl’s ear, who gave her a sense of music? What a potent and sophisticated lie it is, that to enjoy the life of music you must leave God out. The result has been what the Bible calls ‘the world.’ Listen once more to John,

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. (1 John 2:15–16)

James tells us,

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (Jas 1:17)

With his deliberate love and carefully planned giving, it was meant to return service and sacrifice from me to the Father. All those gifts that God has to give were meant to build a friendship between the Father and me that will grow up into adult sonship and last eternally when this little world is done.

What the prince of this world has done is to suggest that if I were to be obedient to the Father and serve and love him, it would confine my enjoyment of life. So he has got me to turn my back upon God and put a great gulf fixed between us. Now the world holds all my attention and the love that should go up to the Father is now spent totally and completely on the world. Instead of the Father being my goal and objective, the world and its system becomes my ultimate goal. It is not merely that I enjoy nice things, but my desires become unhealthy. I desire the gifts of God but not the giver and things become my great objective—my house, my furniture, my wife, my children's education. These become the ultimate goals in life and instead of leading me to the Father they can lead me from him. They so fill my heart with love that I have no love left for the Father. 'The desire of the eyes, the desire of the flesh, the pride of life' (1 John 2:16)—mark now how the value system changes. The ultimate values are the length of your Cadillac, or the size of your bank balance, or your career and status in politics. These become the absolutes, the standard by which we judge things. Or it could be that the prince of this world is chaining us into his world system by our weaknesses and miserable pleasures, drugs and perversions.

Should our consciences suffer a pang or two now and again, then 'the prince of this world' turns into 'the god of this world' and engineers any form of religion that happens to be to our taste, other than that which brings us to know the true God. So we have theologians telling people that they can't believe in the Incarnation. It was invented in a day when people believed in the possibility of divine intervention, but nobody (not even Christians) believes in the possibility of divine intervention in our world nowadays. 'We cannot accept the doctrine of the Incarnation; if the incarnation were true that would be the biggest ever intervention of God in our world, so we can't believe it.' Why not? In the name of Christian theology they tell us, 'God cannot, does not, and will not ever intervene in our world.' It is the brand mark of theology that comes from the god of this world who is concerned to make us think that our world is a closed shop. We can close the door and lock it, and not be afraid of interference from any god outside. That is the world.

When the New Testament talks of these things it doesn't say, 'Don't do this, don't do that, don't do the other,' it says, 'Love not the world.' Worldliness is a very sophisticated thing—it is not so much in the things that we do and have, as an attitude of heart towards the Lord. Hear the loud lament of our Lord as he stands outside the church at Ephesus that was once so brilliant and devoted, 'You have abandoned the love you had at first' (Rev 2:4). If God gives us too many material benefits all at once they can make our hearts so full as to rob the Lord of our love, time and devotion. The key to this matter is our heart and our love.

Where did Israel go wrong?

We can then understand the fervour with which God denounces the sin of his ancient people. Where did they go wrong? They lost their love for God, 'they whored after other gods' (Judg 2:17). God uses this lurid term to bring home to his ancient people what was involved. The transcendent Lord had come down into the wilderness to see and woo Israel, as a man woos his wife. Having accepted his love, Israel grew unfaithful and cold in heart to the Lord and gave her love and favours to other gods.

We shall not throw too big stones at those Israelites, for James says to us:

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (James 4:4)

If the people went wrong because they lost their hearts to the Canaanite girls who drew them after their gods, how apt and suited it is to see how they were put right. The man who led them out of their slavery to the king of Mesopotamia was Othniel. We have already been told the secret of his success. It was not just in abstaining from the Canaanite girls—it never will do to be solely negative in matters of the heart—it was the positive incentive of a holy and a glorious love that took hold of Othniel's heart and made him the man he was. Said Caleb, 'He who attacks Kiriath-sepher [which was full of giants] and captures it, I will give him Achsah my daughter for a wife' (Judg 1:12). Othniel looked at the giants—enough to make the blood run cold; and then he looked at the young lady—that was another story! He had only to look at her once to see that she was a chip off the old block. It was Caleb written large in his daughter. Caleb, eighty-six years old and more, still chasing giants, capturing cities and entering into his inheritance. In love for Achsah he found courage and ambition and took the city.

In your warnings to young folks about not marrying the unconverted, do tell them that it is a marvellous thing to marry a good Christian girl who is on fire for the Lord. She will encourage her husband to go out and fight and she will fight along with him. In the battle of the Lord, how many men have been made by wonderful women, prepared for the sacrifices because they share the same objectives and ambitions. Don't forget to preach the positive side, because there are some people who will need to be told many times and even so they still seem to escape the point of the sermon!

Love in the right place then; and as we noticed in our previous study, the thing snowballed. He got the city, then he got Achsah, and getting Achsah he got the inheritance. Achsah encouraged Othniel to ask her father for an extra blessing, an extra present. Then the academics get a bit worried, they say the Hebrew text has gone astray and it should be altered. It began by saying that Achsah told her husband to ask, but as it stands it says that when Dad came along it was Achsah herself who asked. Some of these critics are so academic they seem not to know the ways of ordinary life! Achsah wasn't the last woman who told her husband to ask for a washing machine and then when Dad came along she asked him herself! Achsah said, 'This inheritance is beautiful but it is as dry as dust; would you not give us the upper and the lower springs as well?' (v. 15).

What an inheritance God has given us—Leviticus, for instance. 'But that's as dry as dust!' Well of course it is absolute folly to the unconverted—the whole of your salvation is folly to the unconverted and to the unspiritual Christian. To make it work and to make it enjoyable you will have to ask for 'the upper and lower springs.' We need God's Holy Spirit to open our eyes to its realities:

Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the

immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe . . . that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. (Eph 1:18–19; 3:16–19)

It is no good just being negative, hoping thus to escape worldliness. The only victory against worldliness is a heart filled into all the fulness of God. Motivated by such things, Othniel went out to war and fought and his hand prevailed, which reminds us, as we come to the end of our study, that this matter will involve us in a war to the end of our days.

Our foe is dastardly cunning. Says John, 'I write to you, young men, because . . . you have overcome the evil one' (1 John 2:14). We come back to where we started. If only God's word had been deeper in Eve's heart when that sophisticated tempter confronted her! But he made out that if you listen too much to God's word it will make you a bit cranky, cramp your style and stop your enjoyment. So the minimum of the word of God, please, and then we can get on with enjoying ourselves! Rather, see our Lord in the desert, who, having the powers to make the stones bread, declined, saying to Satan, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matt 4:4). Thank God for his victory. 'The ruler of this world is coming', he said. 'He has no claim on me' (John 14:30).

Who shall measure the fight and the heat of the battle, when the Son of God and heir of all creation came down and, in obedience to his Father's will, hung naked on a cross? They laughed at him for his faith in God as he hung abandoned at Calvary. Do you know what sustained him in those terrible moments in his battle against worldliness, when the prince of this world came and mocked him?

'You fool,' said Satan, 'I offered you all the kingdoms of the world if you would fall down and worship me, and you refused. Now you hang naked, ruined, your career at an end, going down to death vilified and traduced as an impostor.'

In that holy heart there surged again and again, 'All that the Father has is mine.' As he stood on the verge of Gethsemane he repeated it over to his apostles—'All that the Father has is mine' (John 16:15). After they had sung a hymn they went out into the darkness and to Calvary. 'But take heart; I have overcome the world,' said he (v. 33).

May the Lord help us in our admiration for our deliverer to learn his art, his tactics and his strategy. We talk so easily of our love for the Lord. How often did Christ say to men, 'I love the Father'? I have come across only one occasion. As they left the cosiness of the upper room and clattered down the steps into the darkness of Gethsemane and Calvary, said he, 'I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father' (14:31).

One day God will entrust us with heaven itself. But first he waits to prove whether it would be safe for him to put too much of heaven in our hands, lest heaven itself draw our hearts away from him. Life's trials prove where our hearts lie. Given the whole world on the one side and the Father on the other, what would we choose? We shall only be safe in

heaven if we can honestly say, 'By God's grace I choose God, though it leaves me with nothing else.'

Ehud

Judges 3:12–30

Now we begin the story of the second captivity and therefore also the story of the second deliverance. Previously we were looking to see where and why it was that Israel had gone wrong. In what particulars had they so weakened themselves that they were no longer proof against the attack of the enemy? The Scripture merely repeats what it said before, ‘And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD’ (v. 12). We should notice, however, what is happening in this and subsequent chapters.

In the first and second introductions to the book we noticed how the Israelites failed to cast out all the Canaanite peoples, allowed them to dwell among the Israelites and sometimes made covenants with them. In response to that God said that he would not cast out the surrounding nations—the nations that the Lord had left (3:1). If we pay close attention to that remark, we shall observe that the nations that Joshua had left were some notable pockets of Canaanites way up in the north of the country, and in particular the surrounding nations that were not in his remit to conquer at that time. The Philistines in the southwest had apparently not arrived in the country by the time Joshua was conducting his campaigns. We read of Joshua’s attack on the cities that eventually became Philistine cities, but no mention of Philistines. You won’t find Philistines mentioned at this phase in history until you come to the end of the book of Judges. There they appear as the beginnings of a very big enemy.

The enemy: Eglon, king of Moab

In this study we are to read of Moab, whose territory lay outside the land that Joshua sought to conquer. Through compromise with the Canaanite nations within the land, Israel is too weak to resist the attacks that begin to come from the nations outside the boundaries of the land. In his providential disciplines God strengthens the Moabites from across the Jordan to come and attack, oppress and subdue Israel.

We must now turn, therefore, to reconnoitring the enemy. I would quieten your fears, if you have a funny feeling that I am going to say that the Moabites are a type of something, and you don’t like *typology!* Do be comforted, for I am not going to say that the Moabites are a type of anything. Let’s just leave them where they are and say they are Moabites. But having said that, Moabites in the ancient world were not vastly different from certain nations in the present world. Over the course of history all nations have developed their ideologies, their particular phases of religion, philosophies, habits of mind, and a national character gradually builds up.

I have to speak with great care here, with one eye on the psychologists. They have warned us how dangerous it is to put people into stereotypes and pigeonholes, and condemn every American because of one tourist that you happen to have met in Yorkshire! We should take them one by one and not cast them into some stereotype called 'Americans'. I grant the psychologists what they are saying, but I would want to maintain that, while we should avoid the extreme of stereotype, on the other hand there is such a thing as recognised national tendencies and features. You would hardly expect the Spanish to turn up on time to a lecture, but if a German were late you would think it was signalling the end of the European Union! It is a simple fact that nations living together, bounded by their particular geography, their course of history and their ideals and ideologies, do develop what can generally be called a *national characteristic*. In that sense we all know what we mean when we say that someone is a typical German or a typical Irishman. I suspect some of you know what you mean by a typical Englishman!

The origin of Moab

What is a typical Moabite? We must not merely think of these ancient nations as museum pieces. They were living people, living nations, the last word of modernity in their day. They had their ideas and values, their religion and philosophies. If we try to come to some concept of what a typical Moabite was we are at a great advantage, for in the ancient records of the Old Testament the Holy Spirit himself from time to time characterised some of their leading and continuing characteristics. He informs us of the origin of Moab and of his half-brother, Ammon (Gen 19:37–38). It is a very sorry and sad story. Moab was the son of Lot by his incestuous union with his own daughter.

In his early life, Lot had left Ur of Chaldees along with Abraham because presumably he shared with Abraham the vision of 'the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God' (Heb 11:10). But by various decisions and steps that he took, that we cannot now describe, Lot went first to Sodom amidst all its unmentionable filth and self-indulgence and finally ended up in a cave living very much like a caveman. Worse perhaps than the kind of life he had led in Ur of Chaldees.

Abraham, for sure, had had his problems about perpetuating his seed, and he and Sarah were not blameless in the means they used to produce the promised offspring. But we had better pull a veil of silence over the method that Lot and his daughters used. It was a sad exhibition of self-indulgence and gross fleshliness. As we pass by it, we recall the generous estimate of the New Testament. The Holy Spirit refers to Lot as a righteous man (2 Pet 2:7–8), meaning presumably that Lot was a man like Abraham, justified by faith. When God brought the judgments upon Sodom we listen with great relief as the holy angel said, 'Escape there quickly; for I can do nothing till you arrive there' [Zoar] (Gen 19:22). Not one truly justified man or woman will ever be lost—'But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his"' (2 Tim 2:19). Lot's story abides in Scripture to remind us what can happen to a genuine believer that sows to the flesh and inevitably reaps corruption (Gal 6:8).

Balak and Balaam. In the course of the subsequent centuries a whole nation grew up from Moab, Lot's son and grandson. That nation comes to prominence in a very well-known story in the book of Numbers chs. 22–24. Israel had been pushing their way across the wilderness, through the weary heat and the desert conditions, when Balak king of Moab hired Balaam the false prophet to use occult powers, curse and thus destroy Israel. Balaam's effort failed, but rascally Balaam got himself another device. He taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel as he taught them to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication.

It was a dastardly trick. Here were Israel's young men trying to be pilgrims, disciplined and self-denying, but the desert was taking a weary toll of their strength. Natural cravings would be high when all unannounced there flittered across their path some girls of Moab—a little bit brighter than the Moses-tribes were used to.

'Would you care to come to tea,' they said.

You couldn't resist that, could you? So off they went in their droves. They got into the house, and then something odd happened.

'We have a little ceremony before we have our dinner—would you like to join in?'

'Well, I don't know if we should,' said the Israelite boys.

Because there stood their idols, and by definition worship of their idols involved sexual impurity. 'We are not allowed to do that in our religion!'

But the bright young thing smiled: 'You don't have to be inhibited by all those old rules,' she said.

The deed was done. Balaam taught Balak to cast the stumbling block; to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication—religion enforcing self-indulgence.

You might think that it is such a lurid story as to be altogether irrelevant to our modern age. But we should remember the words of our blessed Lord as he addresses some of his churches in those letters recorded in Revelation:

I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practise sexual immorality. (Rev 2:14)

In the ancient cities of the New Testament world many of our fellow believers would have been tradesmen belonging to various trade guilds. They would hold their business dinners and if you wanted to prosper in business you went along. But the trade guild would be under the patronage of a pagan deity, god or goddess, and at the beginning of the proceedings the food would be taken and offered to the patron deity. Should a Christian sit there and participate? At the dinner party, seeing it was a Greek city, there would be plenty of ladies and they would not be the wives of the businessmen. They would be provided by the host under the normal customs of that part of the world. The host would have felt that he had failed in his duty if he hadn't provided each male guest with a lady or two. Should a Christian go? It is business; he can't afford to fall out with the guild. Apparently there were some in the church who said it was all right. But the risen Lord said, 'If you don't repent I shall come and fight against you with a sword of my mouth' (v. 16).

Well now we move on some centuries and come to the prophet Jeremiah. Let's hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in his estimate of Moab, who has had things very easy politically, socially and economically.

Moab has been at ease from his youth and has settled on his dregs; he has not been emptied from vessel to vessel, nor has he gone into exile; so his taste remains in him, and his scent is not changed . . . We have heard the pride of Moab—he is very proud—of his loftiness, his pride, and his arrogance, and the haughtiness of his heart. (Jer 48:11, 29)

Eglon, King of Moab. Now when we come to Judges 3:12–30, we shall find two features of the king of Moab that may interest us. The king of Moab was a very fat man, and if you had been at ease from your youth, perhaps that is not to be wondered at! When Ehud came to him he was sitting in his delightful summer parlour in what he was pleased to call 'the city of the palm trees'—the name that had been given to Jericho, the city that Joshua and the host of Israel had taken when they came into the land. They had destroyed it in the name of God and pronounced a curse on it and on anybody who should rebuild it. The king of Moab looked at things a little differently. He founded a very pleasant city down there in the heat, with the shade of the beautiful palm trees, its watercourses and summer palaces. The city of palm trees, they called it, and how pleasant life was for His Majesty as he sat there, a very fat man taking his ease in the noonday heat. When at last God had him killed, he killed him through his belly. And lest we should think that this is some exotic detail to which we needn't pay heed, let me quote from the New Testament:

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. (Phil 3:18–19)

As I read these characterisations by the Holy Spirit, they present a fleshly, carnal man, in the sense of physical and sexual indulgence, pride and arrogance and those other horrible works of the flesh. I cannot leave this catalogue until I remind you on the other hand of the grace of God, even with such people. One of the ancestors of our Lord was Ruth the Moabitess. It reminds us of what Paul said to the Corinthians, as he sketched in the lurid character of self-indulgence that was to be found in many a Greek city:

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:11)

With such material God is producing the pearls that will beautify the eternal city. But when we think of Moab here in Israel's day, it was a nation that deceived and overcame Israel, inducing them to take part in its religious worship marked by sensual, sexual activities in the name of their gods. As we think of that we shall ask ourselves a basic question, as we did before. How is it that the word *world*, that originally seems to indicate something good, very often in the New Testament comes to indicate something sinister? And the term *flesh*, that originally means something perfectly good, made by God,

constituent of our bodies and personalities—how has it come to represent something bad, evil and wicked?

What does the Bible mean by ‘the flesh’?

As part of the human constitution, flesh was indeed originally something exceedingly good; but when man sinned and fell and the line of communication was broken between his spirit and the Spirit of God, man in that sense became dead. He was no longer king in his own castle, so to speak. Instead of his flesh being under the control of a spirit in touch with the Father of spirits—its good, God-given appetites under the control of a mind and conscience informed and controlled by a spirit in fellowship with the Father of spirits—man became spiritually dead. He was very often a prisoner of the fleshly appetites that surged up within him; now perverted, out of control and dominant. Instead of serving him, becoming his master.

So in the New Testament we read, ‘For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot’ (Rom 8:7)—with the inevitable result that the mind of the flesh is death. What a terrible master that flesh can be, we hear from the lips of Paul himself as he cries out in desperation born of many years’ experience:

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom 7:18–20, 24)

Let us take a moment or two longer therefore, to think of the glorious victory that Christ himself has won for us in this very thing. Paul says to his readers,

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you . . .
So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. (Rom 8:9, 12)

That is good news indeed. Once we were in the flesh; as human beings we had no other ground of existence. The real me was in the flesh, inseparable in that sense from my fallen nature. The great miracle that Christ has performed for all who have trusted him—those who have consented to be identified with him in his death, burial and resurrection—is that the roots have been cut. We are no longer *in the flesh*. What are we in then? We are *in the Spirit*. Thank God for it, my brothers and sisters! You are in the Spirit and simultaneously the Spirit is in you. You don’t have one without the other. Every believer is in the Spirit and the Spirit is in him or her. You will see the glorious results when the Lord comes. What is going to free you from the burden of that fallen flesh? You say, ‘When I rise to meet the Lord I am not going to have that bad old flesh any more.’ Very good! How are you proposing to get rid of it? You say, ‘It is the worms and the coffin that are going to do it.’ What blessed worms! Wouldn’t you suggest that they got eating a bit earlier—start now?

It isn’t like that. When the unregenerate rise to meet their maker the same sinfulness that characterised them on earth will characterise them then. That is a very solemn thing to

ponder. It is not merely that for all eternity they will suffer the wrath of God; they will suffer the consequence and the development of their actual sin. As C. S. Lewis in modern times has made us feel, and shudder as we feel it, the man who was lustful on earth shall not somehow find that resurrection has freed him from his lustful fallen nature. Hell will be a hell because that lust without restraint will have turned him into a monster of sub-humanity. And the woman without the Saviour eaten up with pride now shall be for eternity what she chose to be, imprisoned in the awful yearnings and burnings of the pride of a fallen and rebellious flesh.

How do you propose to escape it? Thank God there is no more penalty for the believer. More than that; if you have trusted Christ and consented to the judgment of God—that God executes you and you are dead and buried with Christ—then something wonderful has taken place. The flesh is around you on every hand, but the real you is not in the flesh but in the Spirit. It is true already—Oh, what glory! You are in Christ, joined with Christ, the root and spring of your redeemed personality is the blessed Lord through his Holy Spirit. When the Lord comes the true you will be seen as a redeemed, regenerate new creature in Christ Jesus.

But if we are not in the flesh the flesh is around us and it is all too possible for a believer to live after the flesh. While there is no penalty for the believer there still are consequences. If you indulge your fleshly appetites and ‘bite and devour one another’ (Gal 5:15), be careful. You say, ‘Why should I be careful? There is no penalty; I can bite my fellow believer’s head off and tear him to bits with my sarcasm, my pride, my jealousy and selfishness. I will have you know there is no condemnation to me because I am in Christ Jesus—what in the end does it matter?’ It matters because, ‘if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed one of another.’ God is not mocked; whatever a person sows that shall he reap. Sow wheat and you will reap wheat, sow barley and you will reap barley. No good coming to the Lord and saying, ‘I didn’t mean to sow wheat. I meant to sow barley, but in a silly moment of pride to beat the other farmer I went and sowed wheat and I can see it coming up now. Lord, please change the wheat to barley!’

Says Paul, ‘Do not be deceived: God is not mocked . . . For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption’ (Gal 6:7–8). As believers we should be very careful. We go out into the streets in wonderful unity to preach the gospel to the unconverted and tell them that we have got the answer to our difficulties in Christ, then we bash each other on the head and tear each other to bits in the church and reap the inevitable results. What are we to do then? Says Paul again, ‘Put to death therefore what is earthly in you’ (Col 3:5). That’s very deliberate, isn’t it? It doesn’t happen automatically. We are to wage our war, an incessant and unrelenting campaign, and put to death the sinful activities of the flesh.

Ehud’s message from the Lord to Eglon

After that long diversion, with that in mind we turn back to our story. The deliverer was a certain Ehud. He was a Benjamite and a left-handed man (Judg 3:15). He was chosen from among his fellows to lead a small party from time to time to come and offer the king what they were pleased to call *a present*. It was a tax that the king of Moab demanded, and the

general theory was that if you gave him a little he wouldn't want a lot. But they had to keep giving a present to this fat man Eglon, king of Moab.

There came a time when Ehud felt, in the name of God, he had had enough of this. Giving the king of Moab a present didn't get rid of him; it only perpetuated his rule and dominion. So Ehud made a dagger. When a man does that, even a child can see there is going to be death somewhere. (Have we got the message? We put to death the works of the flesh—we mortify our members in that sense.) I admire the sense of the man; it wasn't a mighty great battle sword, which would have been distinctly difficult to wield in that close confine. He made a nice little dagger.

If I might be allowed to say something to my younger brothers and sisters, for you are experts already in swordplay. Though we have the whole Bible at our command, how convenient a thing it is to make a few daggers from it, to be hidden surreptitiously and used in time of need (Eph 6:17).

If you are witnessing to somebody, would it be good to say:

'The Bible says, "Prepare to meet your God"—I can show it to you. . . no, I can't find it just at the moment'?

'Never mind that one; it says in Jeremiah, "He that believes in him is not condemned."'

No, that's no good! You have got to be skilled with your sword and able to rip it out instantaneously without any hesitation, even if it is only a small one.

Ehud made himself a dagger and put it on his right thigh. It was a providential mercy that the man was left-handed. If he had walked into the presence of His Majesty with a sword on his left thigh, when he went to get it the king would have known in an instant what was up and called his soldiers in at the double. But this man was left-handed and had the dagger on his right thigh underneath his cloak. When he stretched out his hand to his right thigh the king would have thought he was brushing a mosquito away or something, and wouldn't have known what was coming next!

So all equipped he joined the party going to give this present to the king. On their way home he sent the rest on and he himself turned back. What a critical point it was; he turned back by the carved images that were by Gilgal (v. 19)—at the quarries where the Moabites had put their boundary stones and carved them out with religious zeal, because in the ancient world boundary stones were objects of religious piety. They used their knives with all the skill they knew as craftsmen to make religious objects that appealed to their aesthetics and sensuality.

At this point we have to observe that when we talk of *the flesh* we are not always talking of lurid things. In religion that doesn't know the Holy Spirit, there is that which is utterly fleshly and carnal. It is very elevated flesh, aesthetically beautiful, with enchanting music, but not necessarily spiritual at all. Simply something that makes it appealing to the flesh. Saul of Tarsus found religion very attractive and built himself up a character second to none in the law of Moses, but he wasn't empowered or motivated by the Holy Spirit of God. It was one exercise of carnal flesh from first to last. His religion was but enmity with God, and when he met the Saviour he demonstrated it.

So Ehud had to turn back by the carved images that were by Gilgal, which was famous for the use of the knife and where Joshua had made knives of sharp stones to circumcise the

Israelites and cut off their flesh (Josh 5:2–9). It was a turning point in the campaign. Was it to be a religion geared to self-indulgence, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to teach the people to commit immoralities and fornication; or the law of Moses with its stern moral demands to cut off the flesh as a symbol of purity and self-control? So we have the right and wrong use of the knife, if you will allow me the phrase. Moab's use of the knife in their religion, Israel's use of the knife in their God-given religion.

When Ehud went back into the king's parlour he said, 'I have a message from God for you.' Now the tactics are getting dramatic, aren't they? When Eglon had asked everyone to go out Ehud repeated it, 'I have a message from God for you.' (He didn't say, 'I don't like your way of life, King Moab; my style would be different.') The fat old king got up and stood as best he could on his feet. As he got up you can see what he was exposing and at that moment in went the dagger, right through his belly and out the other side.⁷ Ehud meant to put it in; he didn't say, 'I'm sorry, this is going to hurt a little bit!' No, in it went and the whole ghastly mess came out. Then he locked the doors and ran off.

He summoned Israel and they went down and took the fords of Jordan. How resonant with memories was that place. It was where Israel had first come into the land to take Jericho. They arrived when Jordan was in full flood and the priests had to stand with their feet in the water. Then God did his miracle and they walked down to the riverbed and came up the other side. Joshua ordained that there should be a permanent memorial and the stones were still there to recall the whole episode. Now Ehud stands at the fords and the Moabites were not going down to the riverbed; they were tripping across the fords and Ehud and his troops despatched them as they came. So Moab was subdued, and there we leave this very ancient story.

There is just one other story I would like to tell you and that is a story from the New Testament, written by one who claims to have been a Benjamite. 'Look out for those who mutilate the flesh,' says Paul. 'For we are the circumcision . . .' (Phil 3:2–3). What is he talking about? Well obviously, the right and the wrong use of the knife! By the time Paul was speaking the rite of circumcision was no longer a holy thing, calculated to help Israel in her approach to God. It had become a rite in which man boasted that he could keep the law and be righteous before God by his own merit. 'I was like it once,' says Paul:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (vv. 4–6)

The use of the knife in religion; instead of cutting off the flesh it made the flesh confident in itself. So disgusted did Paul become with that manner of religion that he now calls it 'the concision' (v. 2 KJV)—a veritable mutilation, a wrong use of the knife. Religion being used to flatter man's pride; by his own effort he can merit his own righteousness. It stands in contrast to the true circumcision. Says Paul, 'We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of

⁷ See the first paragraph of the next chapter.

God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh' (v. 3). And how well Paul had used his knife,

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (vv. 7–9)

Every believer will be found in Christ when the Lord comes, but that does not mean there is no battling for us to do. Paul goes on to tell us how he follows hard after the Lord Jesus, seeking to attain that to which he had been called, 'I follow after, if by any means I might attain to the out-resurrection⁸ of the dead' (v. 11). Not merely to the physical resurrection that shall take place when the Lord comes, but to the resurrection in its fullest extent. When the Lord comes we shall rise to meet him and at long last we shall be like him. 'So vivid and real is that goal set before me,' says Paul, 'that even now I follow after it, so that daily I may come into closer conformity with the Lord Jesus.' How can it be done?

That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (vv. 10–11)

Written across the whole of history is God's way of making men and women holy—going down with Christ into death and up to share his glorious resurrection. Apart from it we are powerless against the flesh. Mere religion would be in danger of flattering the flesh; the true way of salvation is to be dead with Christ, buried with Christ, raised in union with the risen Lord to walk in the newness of life imparted by God's Holy Spirit. But there are some heretics going around and they teach a very different thing,

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. (vv. 18–19)

They mind earthly things; they set before the believer a wrong goal of self-indulgence and self-flattery. Look out! When Ehud walked into Eglon's presence and said, 'Your Majesty I have a message from God for you,' a few seconds later there was a dagger through his belly. 'If in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you' (v. 15). There are some that purport to be Christians but their god is their belly and the knife will have to go in. This is true Christianity.

The great miracle has happened, we are in Christ and no believer will ever be lost. We are no longer in the flesh; we are in the Spirit and the Spirit dwells in us. On that great day we shall be found in Christ, but true Christianity is a pilgrimage. There must be progress,

⁸ The Greek here uses an emphatic form for the word resurrection: 'out from among the dead.'

something that calls upon us to strain every nerve to know Christ and the power of his resurrection by being conformed to his death. Recipes that tell us we can indulge ourselves and it doesn't really matter are dangerous recipes indeed. They come from men whose god is their belly (v. 19).

Moab was subdued, and one day we too shall find our Moab completely subdued:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (vv. 20-21)

Deborah and Barak (1)

Judges 4:1–16; 5:3–23; Psalm 68:7–18; Ephesians 4:7–18

Some of you were wondering exactly what translation I was using when I described that dramatic moment when Ehud put his dagger through the belly of King Eglon. The fact is that the Hebrew at that point is exceedingly difficult; Christian translators have found it to be so ever since the time of the Old Latin translation. The Old Latin, in despair, didn't translate it but simply transliterated the Hebrew. Translators have debated whether it means, as I said, that the dagger came out behind—it went all the way through the poor man's belly and came out the other side. Or whether it means that the insides of his stomach came out—'the dirt came out,' some translations have it. Others say, 'No, he pushed in the dagger and he himself went out of the upper chamber'—that is, Ehud escaped out of the upper chamber. This is perhaps not the time for me to attempt to discuss all those difficulties of translation. I think the point is made in the double sense—God had the man killed through his belly.

The enemy: Jabin, king of Canaan, and Sisera, the commander of his army

We shall find a very different story now when we come to this next captivity, with a man killed not through his belly but through his brain. So let's begin the story of the next captivity and the next deliverance. In reading this story we are particularly blessed, because in ch. 4 we have one account of this battle in prose, which gives us what some historians like to call *the sober facts*, and in ch. 5 we have another account given in a song by Deborah, the inspired prophetess. That gives us not simply what you may call the bald facts, it puts the battle into its *historical context and true spiritual dimensions*. With the insights of an inspired prophetess Deborah informs us not merely of what the human fighters were doing on the ground, but how the spiritual powers of the heavenlies were involved in this particular struggle. It was not only Barak and his associates who fought, but the Lord himself came down and fought as the kings in their courses and the stars in their courses fought on that memorable day.

It is not surprising that that tremendous battle, involving the very powers of the heavens, found echoes centuries later in the inspired poetry of Psalm 68:7–18. In verse 7 you will notice how the psalmist repeats the introductory ideas that Deborah herself had used, with the march of God out of Sinai through the wilderness and into the promised land, leading Israel on her mission among the nations.

From the case histories in the Old Testament we decided that the men of Moab and its king were marked by self-indulgence of the flesh. Their religion also promoted the sensuous and the self-indulgent. But now when we come to this third captivity we shall find an

enemy of a very different sort. It is true that different nations in the ancient world had much in common, but then, like modern nations, they also had much that was different. When we come to the enemy in chapter 4 we shall find it is composite—it has a number of elements in it and it is an exceedingly sophisticated enemy. We shall read of Jabin, the king of Canaan who reigned in Hazor, and we shall read of Sisera, his commander in chief who dwelt in Harosheth of the Gentiles.

Immediately one little straw in the wind will help us to see differences. If there is any truth in the fact that when God goes for his enemies he goes for their strongest point, then we noticed that Ehud killed Eglon king of Moab suitably enough with a dagger through his belly. Sisera, who lived in Harosheth of the Gentiles, was commander in chief of the iron chariotry of that advanced technological nation, the Canaanites. He was not killed with a dagger through his belly but with a tent peg through his brain.

So let us think together now of this combination of enemies. I am almost tempted to apologise to you, for it will be complicated. Sometimes in life our enemy is obvious, but not always. We face a foe ultimately who is the acme of sophistication; scheming, deceitful, requiring careful discernment, infernally wise and cunning in his tactics, and of such impudence that he did not hesitate to assail the incarnate Lord and tempt him in his days in the wilderness. The New Testament talks to us about the craftiness of Satan, of the wiles of the devil and all his minions. Therefore you will have to be patient with me, and I with you, as we try to reconnoitre this enemy.

1. Historical enemies

As the living God led all the Israelites into the land, Jabin I, the Canaanite king of Hazor, led a great confederacy of kings against them, to thwart the purposes of God to establish Israel in the land (see Josh 11). Joshua with the united armies of Israel attacked and defeated him. In Judges chapters 4 and 5 we read of a revival of Canaanite power. Jabin (presumably Jabin II) mightily oppressed the Israelites, with the result, so Deborah tells us in her song, that the nation of Israel became fragmented, the people were leaderless and unarmed.

Jabin was the head of a kingdom that had made its entry into the Iron Age. They had learned all the latest technology and in consequence had a battery of 900 chariots of iron. They so oppressed Israel that there was scarcely a sword or shield found among them. What could the Israelites do? It was like attacking a lion with your bare hands.

To see the significance of this second stage we had better go back to the first and listen not merely to the bald record of the facts in Judges 4, but to the context in which the inspired prophetess put it as she uttered her prophetic victory song. She wasn't content just to describe the immediate surroundings of this particular battle that she had won in phase two against Jabin, she began her beautiful prophecy by calling attention to the historical background.

LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. The mountains quaked before the LORD, even Sinai before the LORD, the God of Israel. (Judg 5:4–5)

Poetry though it is, it shouldn't lead us into any unbelief. With prophetic insight Deborah is describing that earth-shaking incident in history at Mount Sinai when Israel, the ex-slaves from Egypt, came to its base. It wasn't that Moses, being cunning in these things and a religious genius, gave them the benefit of his right reflection, which we have then to believe was somehow inspired (we don't know how). The story is that the Lord, transcendent above space and time, came into our world and stood on Mount Sinai, so that under the feet of its Creator poor little Mount Sinai shook to its very roots. Could this tiny little midge of a planet support the wonder of the transcendent Lord entering into space and time? Israel heard his voice, though they saw no form from the top of Mount Sinai, and received from the very mouth of God his revealed will for them in his laws and covenant.

I pause here because some forms of scholarship would rob us of this very thing. They would say it is merely a poetic way of saying that Moses was a bright religious leader with some fantastic moral ideas, and that is what inspiration really means. That is not so. The law was written with the very fingers of God; God has spoken into our world and intervened in history. He chose the Israelite nation as the special vehicle to receive his revelation and to witness to it among the Gentile world. Inspiration is nothing less than that.

In her prophetic song Deborah shows a fine understanding of what was involved. She pictures the Lord coming down on Mount Sinai, making his covenant, revealing himself to Israel and leading her armies along the wilderness to take possession of a promised land. It was a unique movement in the history of the ancient world. It is not to be compared with those other fine things, like the efforts of the Greek philosophers to use their God-given intelligence to think about moral issues and the origin and the end of the world. This is unique. It is not man using his brains—this is revelation in the fullest and strictest sense of that term, given to Israel at Sinai.

Now they come with the Lord at their head into Canaan with all its dark superstitions. These were brilliant nations, advanced in their technology but darkened in their mind through the ignorance that was in them. As they entered into the land Jabin I got together a bevy of Gentile kings to resist the Lord and this new phenomenon in history—little did he know its significance, of course. Joshua, the mighty commander of Israel, fought and overcame this confederacy.

When we come to this later period and (presumably) another Jabin, Canaanite power in that particular part of Palestine had revived, centred on a number of fortresses. Jabin II's headquarters was at Hazor. With Israel going after other gods they took advantage of their sin and declension and once more mightily oppressed the children of Israel.

We noticed in an earlier session how that denied a first principle of Israel's existence. In Egypt Pharaoh had oppressed them. Now, redeemed and delivered and in the promised land, ironically enough they were oppressed with a bondage as bitter as any they knew in Egypt. They had become more fragmented—the nation was in bits and pieces, afraid to go down the main road, creeping by the hedges and the lanes. There was scarcely a sword for attack or a shield for defence in the whole nation of Israel. What a sorry state for a nation that believed it was chosen of God to carry this supremely important role among the Gentile nations, to be a witness to the unique revelation given them at Mount Sinai and ultimately to introduce the Messiah of God into our world. Our Christian gospel is based on those holy

prophecies concerning Jesus Christ of the seed of David according to the flesh; but at this particular juncture they are so much under the power of the Canaanites and their technology that they can hardly chirp a word, so disintegrated and disanimated have they become.

How did Israel come into that state of affairs? ‘They chose new gods,’ says Deborah (Judg 5:8). Entrusted with the revelation of the unique and transcendent Lord at Mount Sinai, they went off and chose other gods. It sounds fantastic, but perhaps we should remember the word of Paul to his Corinthian believers,

For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Cor 11:2–3)

Not only loyalty in behaviour, but loyalty in mind and intellect. It is possible as a believer to live morally, and intellectually to hold doctrines that are traitorous to the revealed word of God. Satan is not merely concerned to trip us up into lurid sin, such as Lot and his daughters in their cave. If there is such a thing as revelation, both at Mount Sinai and now through Jesus Christ our Lord and his apostles, because of the vast issues at stake Satan is concerned with the Christian’s mind.

So let’s look at some prominent features of the enemy. Jabin has an interesting name. In the ancient world names were very often significant, and particularly the names of kings. His name may have been Hebrew, although perhaps it was Canaanite and therefore this is a nearer approximation in Hebrew to the Canaanite term. In Hebrew it appears to mean ‘He perceives’ and is likely to be some reference to the divine, or at least the claim of the king to have divine wisdom as the appointee of his Canaanite god.

Be that as it may, they were an advanced nation. They had 900 chariots of iron. Think of the technology involved in getting the iron ore, learning how to smelt and fashion it and produce their equivalent of our tanks. Over the centuries the Canaanites also developed as merchantmen; this very frequently goes with technology of course. So much did they become the merchants of the ancient world that the term *Canaanite* came to be a synonym to mean *merchant*. Centuries later the prophet Zechariah informs us that in the glorious age to come there shall not be a [Canaanite] in the house of the Lord (14:21).⁹

The king had a general—we have already noticed that he was killed through his brain, not his belly—he was a hard-bitten old general, commanding his chariots. At least when you meet him he is not covering his feet in the upper chamber down there in the cool of Jericho, like that other chap! He was a stern military commander in charge of this great battalion of chariots. An interesting thing is told us: he didn’t live in Hazor but in Harosheth of the Gentiles. Of course that might simply be an innocent little circumstantial detail, but let us notice another thing that may suggest that living in Harosheth of the Gentiles might indeed be a clue of some significance. Notice for instance how the Holy Spirit talks of these people in the ancient world. All men were sinners by definition, and yet in the ancient histories

⁹ The translators have trouble to know whether they should translate it simply ‘Canaanite’ or ‘merchants/traders’.

when God talks about the Amalekites he is liable to refer to them as *the sinners, the Amalekites* (1 Sam 15:18). Or again, not all nations, but many around Israel, were uncircumcised. When you come to the stories relating to the Philistines, many times the Holy Spirit will refer to them as *the uncircumcised Philistines*, or even simply as *the uncircumcised* (Judg 15:18). So, by definition all nations outside Israel were Gentiles, but it is noticed that Sisera lived in Harosheth of the Gentiles (4:2 KJV).

Even when we come to the New Testament we shall read of Galilee of the Gentiles (Matt 4:15). There is nothing mysterious about that; it simply records the ancient situation where the Hebrews at one of the extreme parts of their land found themselves living cheek by jowl with people that were Gentiles, non-Israelites. In our Lord's time the Jews that lived up in Galilee were somewhat despised by the people who lived in Judaea. In Judaea they were true-blue Jews and proud of it. Jews up north were a very doubtful crowd, with all that mixing and living dangerously near to the Gentiles—in Galilee of the Gentiles. Not only had they a very curious accent but they could so easily get defiled by the Gentile way of living. Perhaps then it is not altogether insignificant that it is noted that Sisera lived in Harosheth of the Gentiles.

I want immediately to call your attention to certain ways that the New Testament has of talking. In the Sermon on the Mount our blessed Lord appeals to believers not to behave as Gentiles. In the first place he wants us not to pray like the Gentiles do, but to pray as genuine people of God—as children of God, as sons who know their Father. Then he appeals to us not to behave like the Gentiles do—not so much in our spiritual exercises but at our material occupation. When it comes to the matter of food and drink and clothes, we are not to be like the Gentiles. There is a typically Gentile attitude to material goods. 'Don't you be like that,' says our Lord. 'You are sons of the Father, and your Father knows what things you have need of. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"' (Matt 6:32–33).

In Ephesians 4:17 Paul is appealing to his fellow-believers at Ephesus not to think like Gentiles think; not to have a mind-set, a world view or value system like the Gentiles have. You will recall the words of our Lord's famous prophecy and its telling implications. He said that after his death and resurrection there would be a time of gospel opportunity for the nation of Israel, and when they refused it the judgments of God would come upon Jerusalem. It was the holy city, the city of the great King (Ps 48:2), with all the values that it stood for. The temple of God was there, standing for revelation and the self-revelation of God and his intervention in history. Now he was telling them that Jerusalem should be downtrodden of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24). Not surprising, when Israel herself had gone over to behaving like the Gentiles and living according to their values. We have never been Israelites, but we need to heed the warning and not carry on in our old way of thinking.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and

strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph 2:11–12)

So then, let's come to the actual story. We will allow Deborah to take us back to Israel's original entry into the land and the first stage of the conquest. With prophetic inspiration her mind is going back to the great theophany on Sinai when God gave them the law. Then, how God, with that revealed law in the ark, had Joshua lead them into the Gentile stronghold. 'The Gentiles raged and the peoples (the nations) imagined a vain thing' (Ps 2:1)—that they could actually stop the Almighty. Under Jabin I the kings of the earth gathered themselves together to resist Joshua and this invasion from the outside.

Now come over the long centuries to Acts 4. The apostles have recently been let out of prison and come back to their own company with their report.

And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed"—for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.' (Acts 4:24–28)

The leaders of the people, together with the king and governor, had gathered together against the Lord and his Anointed (Ps 2:2)—the supreme self-revelation and intervention of God in history in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. Apostate Caiaphas with the Gentiles Pilate and Herod stood together and vainly imagined that they could cast off the bonds of the Lord and nip this movement in the bud. The risen Lord defeated them and burst their bands asunder. Hear the apostles praying to the Lord to give them victory and stand with them and vindicate them as the apostles of the risen and triumphant Lord,

And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. (vv. 29–30)

As Christians then, the great victory of the first stage of the conquest is very significant for us. The Supremo of the universe says, 'I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill' (Ps 2:6). Then the point comes to us, as it did to Israel in the second phase, 'Is all that true?' Imagine yourself living in the days of Barak, and Deborah is issuing a few prophecies.

'It is nice poetry Deborah; we will put that to a cantata! The music will be nice, but you don't mean us to take it literally do you? All that about Sinai—haven't we got to demythologise it a bit? And Israel, the vehicle of the divine revelation, custodian of the revealed oracles of God—they are scattered and oppressed by that brilliant nation of technologists, merchantmen and army generals, with no sword to attack or shield to defend, and there is very little interaction among the tribes.'

Believers also have allowed themselves to be overawed by so-called scholarship and advanced technology until they feel naked against the vast oppression of the brains of Gentile men.

2. Spiritual enemies

First of all we shall think in our own Christian terms of the Gentile attitude to God's salvation and to his purposes. The New Testament warns us of the workings of Satan through unregenerate and carnal men. Ephesians 4 is dealing with the topic of the risen Christ, who has given gifts to men—apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers and evangelists, 'until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (v. 13). That is, the revealed doctrine, until we all come to believe exactly the same thing.

The enemies are vigorous. 'They lie in wait to deceive,' says Paul, 'with the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness' (v. 14 KJV). John warns us about the same thing, 'So now many antichrists have come' (1 John 2:18). How will you know an antichrist when you see one? By his doctrine! How will you distinguish a genuine gift from a false gift? By its doctrinal content and whether the spirit involved will confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh—that 'Jesus Christ is Lord.'

We face now an enemy that is not merely concerned with people's bellies, but with people's brains. Not merely with the indulgence of the flesh, but with what they believe. This is a spiritual universe and what people actually believe about God is the most important stronghold of all. Satan may have his red light areas in our modern cities to attract some, but perhaps he is far more active in circles where men use their brains and think. He can pervert their minds from the truth and sidetrack believers by his cunning craftiness. 'In the very bosom of the church at that time,' says John, 'there were these false teachers. They were *anti-Christ*. They were not of us,' he says, 'for if they had been of us they would have continued with us. They went out to manifest that they never were of us—they are antichrists.'

Colossians similarly warns us, 'See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ' (Col 2:8). The battle is for men's minds. Paul therefore pleads with us not to think like Gentiles do, in the darkness of their minds, alienated from the life of God that is in them.

The battle

With that, we come back again to the Old Testament story. We have begun to compile an idea of what the enemy is like and what he is at. What were the tactics that these ancient warriors used to defeat Jabin and Sisera? Let's concentrate first of all on Deborah and Barak.

She [Deborah] sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, 'Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, "Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. And I

will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand"?' Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.' And she said, 'I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.' Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. (Judg 4:6–9)

So, with the promise that Deborah would go with him, Barak was eventually persuaded to go up to Mount Tabor. I must pause here to warn you that when we try to reconstruct the tactics used in this campaign, the matter can become somewhat complicated! Barak was told to go up to Mount Tabor with ten thousand men. Out came Sisera with his nine hundred chariots of iron. Scholars disagree about what happened next. The part of the tactics that we do need to get hold of at this stage is simply to notice what a hair-raising thing Deborah told Barak to do. It was a bit risky to go up Mount Tabor with ten thousand men, but at least if they got on to the mountain they would be moderately safe. Sisera came with his chariots round the foot of Tabor—a magnificent and mighty flat plain, ideal ground for chariotting—but the chariots would not be able to come up the mountain very easily, so Barak and his troops would hold an advantage.

Hear now the spine-chilling thing that Deborah in the name of God told him to do—go down the mountain! It looked like absolute suicide to take men with scarcely a sword between them down from the mountain on to the flat plain. The Canaanite chariots would run circles round them and churn them to mincemeat. What a foolhardy bit of tactics it was!

I should imagine when Sisera saw them coming he smiled and said, 'This won't take long!' But Deborah happened to be a prophetess and a woman in touch with God, and a tactic that seemed utter folly and weakness turned out to be the power and the wisdom of God to their salvation. As Deborah now explains, 'From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera' (5:20). Of course they did, because of what was involved in the battle. Was Israel the chosen servant of the transcendent Lord of eternity, who had revealed himself in Sinai and put early Israel on its childhood road to be a vessel of his self-revelation to the Gentile world, or not? The Lord came down to the battle and the very stars in their courses fought against Sisera. God opened the heavens and there came such a deluge that within minutes the little river Kishon became a mighty torrent, swamped the ground and made it a quagmire. In that situation iron chariots were the very last bit of armament you would want. Seeing what had happened, Sisera got down off his chariot and ran away as hard as his two legs would carry him.

You can say I am fanciful if you like; but as I think of that apparent folly proving to be the very wisdom and power of God, as more than human powers involved themselves in that battle, I can't help thinking of another battlefield. Is there a transcendent Lord; has he revealed himself? Was Israel his chosen vessel to show his revelation to men and point the way to the Messiah; is Jesus the Messiah? There came down one from that excellent glory and Caiaphas said he was a fool. 'You, a king!' said Herod. He had never heard anything so ridiculous in all his life. Christ, the weakness and the folly of God—God incarnate nailed to a cross. Why did he come down? Why didn't he stay on his Mount Sinai or in his more

elevated heaven and thunder from there upon his enemies? God incarnate came down; he was delivered up into the hands of sinners and nailed to a cross.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor 1:22–25)

When our blessed Lord came down from his glory and the powers of hell gathered round his cross he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it (Col 2:15).

Deborah and Barak (2)

We noticed in Judges chapters 4 and 5 that the enemy described there is very different from the one we met in chapter 3. No longer some flabby self-indulgent king of Moab, but a hard headed, hard-bitten general of the Canaanites. A military general with the latest of the then available technology in Palestine, and it contrasted vividly with the primitive state of the Israelites. The Canaanites had emerged into the Iron Age and Sisera was backed up by nine hundred chariots of iron that he had at his disposal. You may also care to envisage the industry and eventually the commerce that lay behind that technology and the army weapons.

In talking about these things as being enemies of the people of God, I would be careful to explain that I am not saying that intellect itself or technology is somehow wrong, or even that merchandise is somehow wrong, other than it generally costs me too much! Intellect is our God-given gift and we are to love the Lord not only with our hearts and our souls and our emotions and our physical strength—we are to love the Lord our God with all our minds. In the things of the Lord, not to think as hard as we can is sin. We must beware of the notion that we need to put our brains into retirement and that to simply worship the Lord with our emotions is somehow superior. That is not so. Indeed, in that precise context, when the Apostle Paul comes to discuss the question of spiritual gifts, he appeals, 'In evil be children, but in intellect [understanding] be grown-up mature people' (1 Cor 14:20). When it comes to the assessment and proper ordering of spiritual gifts, never do we need to think more and use our intellects more.

There's nothing wrong with technology either. I enjoy my Volkswagen car and you your Mercedes Benz and we are grateful for the technology that has made X-rays possible. There's nothing wrong with commerce. Besieged by the rain of Northern Ireland we are very grateful for tomatoes from the Canaries that can be brought to our very doors. Yet these passages are saying that these things can become enemies of the people of God. They do so when they come under the control and the motivation and the ambitions of the typically Gentile mind with its attitude to intellect and commerce and material things.

We reminded ourselves earlier of the warning of our Saviour that we are not to pray as the Gentiles pray; not to have the attitude to material things that the Gentiles seek after. Now let us listen to Paul,

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. (Eph 4:17-18)

As we thought of the oppression with which Jabin II oppressed Israel and the tremendous battle that was fought to deliver Israel from him and from his military commander Sisera, you will remember that we allowed ourselves liberal use of the inspired poetry of Deborah. She put these things in their true historic setting, to see this battle in the larger context of the revelation of God. She pictured it all beginning with the great theophany on Mount Sinai when God came down to reveal himself and intervene in our world. He spoke into the world, writing with his finger to make known his law and his glory.

Not now then a question simply of a brilliant brain possessed by Moses, using things religious and moral—though doubtless he did have a brilliant brain and there is nothing wrong in having one. But beyond what the most brilliant brain can do there stands the immeasurably superior thing of *divine revelation*. Deborah records how God came down to Sinai, made himself known to Israel and chose them as an elect people, a royal kingdom of priests, to receive his revelation and to make it known to men. God planned that they should be his unique witness in the Gentile world.

Joshua tells us that when God, with his tabernacle and the ark containing the tables of the law, led them into Canaan, Jabin I led a confederacy of Gentile kings against the Lord. In their ignorance and darkness they tried to stop this great movement in history. As we thought how Joshua conquered them, our minds went (with their Christian habit) to the New Testament. We observed the apostles as they gathered in the upper room after their first imprisonment (Acts 4). Together with the united church they reflected upon the opposition that was mounting against them, and to comfort their hearts they cited Psalm 2,

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' (vv. 1-3)

They were using this poetry to give expression to the opposition that the Son of God incarnate had found when he came to reveal God. It was not the prostitutes and tax gatherers but the chief priest, together with Herod, Pilate, and renegade Jews that formed an unholy alliance to do away with the Lord's Christ.

In the battle led by Deborah and Barak against the forces of the Canaanites we noticed the apparent folly of their tactics. Having ordered Barak to take his ten thousand men up Mount Tabor, in an inspired moment Deborah commanded him in the name of the Lord to bring them down to the plain. The tactic seemed suicidal, when down in the plain nine hundred chariots of iron were waiting under the skilful generalship of Sisera. Because she was inspired of God, Deborah knew what Sisera didn't. At that moment it was not merely Barak but the Lord himself who came down to fight with the nobles. 'The stars in their courses fought against Sisera,' says the inspired prophetess (Judg 5:20). God simply put his finger upon the elements and there came a colossal cloudburst (as also happened against the army of the Turks in that same place many centuries later¹⁰). The wadi became a raging torrent and flooded the plain, the quagmire bogged down the chariots and made the

¹⁰ The battle of Mount Tabor, April 1799 ad between the French and the Turks.

Canaanites an easy prey; but it did also depend on a woman who was in touch with God and with his revelation in these matters. What at first sight seemed utter folly and weakness proved to be the wisdom and the strength of God.

As we thought of that we allowed ourselves to jump the centuries and think again of the tactics of the cross, when the Son of God himself came down and was opposed by the aforesaid kings and rulers with Satan at their head. It seemed utter weakness and folly as he hung on Calvary's cross, but the weakness of God proved stronger than men and the folly of God (if one may dare to so call it) wiser than men.

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor 2:6-8)

The best that their concerted wisdom could do proved to be real and utter folly. What bankruptcy, both of Jewish and Gentile minds, apart from the revelation of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We must move on now to the second phase of the Christian conquest of our inheritance. Our Lord is now risen and ascended triumphantly to glory, but the enemy still operates. The great strategic goal is that all the people of God should be brought to 'the oneness of the faith' (Eph 4:4-6). Do you suppose that is ever possible; will there ever be a time when we shall all believe the same? Even in heaven hadn't we better agree to differ? Whatever view we take of it down here on earth, we are committed by our Sovereign Commander to that goal and objective. Realism tells us that we have not arrived there yet, but we are to push on,

Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. (vv. 13-14)

We must not allow ourselves to become cynical. There is a battle and Paul reminds us of the craftiness of men who wait to deceive. We are well used to the idea that when the evangelist preaches the gospel he is in some sense wrestling against principalities and powers, but we sometimes forget that the same thing is true of the Christian teacher and the pastor striving to lead the Lord's people to maturity, not just in their emotions but in their beliefs, 'to bring them to the oneness of the faith.' There is severe dishevelment of Christian belief in all directions. The reason is that there is a satanic mind behind it all, far more interested in opposing your progress as a believer than in tempting you to some lurid vice. Because God is truth, Satan has his innumerable wiles and minions fighting the battle to cause disunity amongst the people of the Lord, in particular in what they believe.

'Leading captivity captive'

Our Lord has not left us without provision. It might help us as a thought model, if I were to borrow a phrase or two from Deborah's inspired prophecy. After years in which the enemy had oppressed Israel and scattered them until all was fragmentation, Barak stood there upon the mountain. 'Get up,' said Deborah, 'turn the tables on your enemy and the people that have mastered you by their big brain, technology and science. Don't let them triumph over all that Israel has ever stood for. Lead your captivity captive!' And that is precisely what Barak proceeded to do.

In vain Sisera's mother and her ladies prepared the table for his homecoming. Looking out of the lattice, she said, 'I wonder why his chariot wheels delay so long. Perhaps the spoil has been unusually large!' Barak had arisen to lead his captors captive, and that he did. Israel's poets never forgot it. When the psalmist makes his historical account he has interesting phrases to use, 'You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men' (Ps 68:18).

The phrase has a long history and appears once more in the crucial passage of Ephesians 4 from the pen of Paul. He is thinking of the warfare, the great objective of bringing the saints to the unity of the faith and the enemies that are all around, of the battle faced by the evangelist, pastor and teacher, and he comes with this glorious observation,

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.' (vv. 7-8)

Thus far he is quoting Psalm 68, but now in good rabbinic fashion he pauses to expound it. 'He ascended on high'—what can it mean and to whom can it refer? Who has ascended up on high? Who is big enough to fulfil this but the Messiah? 'In that case,' says Paul, 'if it says he ascended up on high, it must imply that before he ascended he descended into the very lower parts of our planet' (v. 9). He did indeed! He that ascended is he that descended first to the lower parts of the earth. I can go as far as the psalmist, who observed, 'My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth' (Ps 139:15). Would you like to go lower? Coming down in his incarnation our blessed Lord descended and in the return he 'ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things' (Eph 4:10), and from the spoil that he has taken from the conquering general he has distributed gifts.

There were some pretty hard-headed military commanders on the other side. I can think of Saul of Tarsus, whose pen wrote these words. What an opponent he would have been in any debate, what a campaigner against the truth revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. How mercilessly he harassed the early believers. The ascended Christ met and conquered him, took him as spoil and gave him to the church as a gift, an apostle for the building up of the church. What a tremendous victory it was on the Damascus road when the ascended Christ conquered his chief enemy, Paul. What a brain he had, but listen to him as he describes his conversion,

Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief. . . Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Tim 1:13, 15)

Paul had a massive brain, but his mind was in darkness until he was illuminated by God's Holy Spirit and his revelation of Christ. Now brought to his knees he was everlastingly thankful to the great Commander, 'I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service' (v. 12).

If you had been Jesus Christ would you have done this? I think I should have given him six years to cool his heels! But when he got converted our Lord dared trust the man and put him into his service to fight now on the other side the great battle of the building up of the body of Christ until we all come to the unity of the faith.

Paul is accustomed to using such military metaphors to explain himself. He uses it again in 2 Corinthians 2, where we read how harassed he was by the conflicting responsibilities that came upon him. He didn't know whether to stay in Troas, where a great door had been opened up to him in the gospel. First he was troubled because of the news that had come from Corinth of the disturbances there; then more recently because no news had come. So he left the gospel campaign and went to meet his colleague, hoping to get some information. I suspect he was wondering whether he had done right or wrong. How difficult it can be sometimes, in the midst of conflicting duties, to know whether you are doing right or if it would be better doing some other thing. Eventually Paul comes round to comforting his heart, for he perceives that in the end the great skill and wisdom are not his but his general's: 'But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere' (v. 14).

He is using a military metaphor based on Roman practice. If a Roman general should come to Britain, for instance, and win an unusually great victory over us poor English, he would return to Rome and if they considered his victory big enough they would grant him a triumph. They would get him in his chariot with all his other chariots and troops, and then certain Britons would be chained to his chariot wheels and be obliged to come along before, beside and after him as he wended his triumphal way to the capital to give thanks to the gods. As the procession passed and the local Romans came to look at these captives, what do you suppose they said? 'What clever Britons for allowing themselves to be in the right place at the right time to get conquered'? Of course not! They said, 'What a general who could conquer thugs like that!'

The greatest privilege God ever conferred on a man was to defeat him and chain him to the triumphal chariot wheels of Jesus Christ, so that it is not my cleverness and wisdom which is exhibited but the wisdom and power of the great Commander himself. He has converted and subdued me and chained me to his chariot wheels by the love and mercy and grace of his heart, so that through me—even me, and through you—even you, he is pleased to make known the fragrance of the knowledge of God in every place. Not merely by what you are doing for him, but even more by what he has done for you.

What wealth our ascended Lord has! You cannot know the stimulus it is to my faith to see you as his captives. I am not flattering you, but what treasure, what brains, what abilities

you have. Once lost in Gentile darkness, now conquered by the Lord he has given you to his church and to me for the enrichment and the building up of the Body of Christ. At last the battle shall be won. He has ascended on high, led captivity captive and given his gifts, so that he might fill all things.

What is a 'Gentile mind'?

As we think in those terms of the battle that we are called to, we must now notice another facet of Gentile opposition. Let us think of the other side of the Canaanite picture—the technology that went behind the chariots, the industry and the commerce. As I said earlier, there is nothing wrong with these things in themselves. They are to be wondered at and admired, but they can turn themselves into enemies and develop into oppression. It is an ironic thing that we have observed before. Israel in Egypt had been under the oppression of the Pharaohs and God had redeemed them. Now they were in the promised land, but was it any better? For many years the Canaanites had mightily oppressed them. This is what happens when men and women go about technology and commerce, their daily life of material things, with a Gentile mind. 'It will enslave them,' says the Lord Jesus. Twice over he exhorts us not to behave like the Gentiles behave, 'And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words' (Matt 6:7).

More to our point is his warning that, when it comes to the material things of life, we shouldn't behave like the Gentiles do, 'Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all' (vv. 31–32). If you do, he says, it will enslave you, 'No one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money' (v. 24).

He comes to his conclusion, 'Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you' (vv. 31–33).

What do these verses mean? In my youth I took them in one way. I said to myself, 'Before I go to my work or after my career I will give out a few tracts. I will put the prayer meeting before my business duties'—which isn't a bad thing to do. I remember what a challenge it was, particularly when the exams came near, to dare to put what you may call 'the routines of godliness' before the pressures of exams. I can't say that I suffered any major disaster by doing it. However, sometimes there is a severe temptation to say that I will give myself to the Lord's things—to his word, to prayer, to his church—when I have got through my exams. Now I have got through, but I am getting married and I haven't got a bean. Next, we've got half-a-dozen children—I'll do it when I've got the children off my hands. . . So, even my youthful hesitating and inadequate exposition served for something—'Seek first the kingdom of God.'

But it doesn't simply mean that before I get on with my own interests I have first of all to give some time to the Lord's interests; this is a recipe for how to go about our daily lives,

how to orientate ourselves to life's needs. They are genuine needs and your Father knows you need them. In giving us his counsel our Lord must not be misinterpreted to say unrealistic things.

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (vv. 26–29)

We mustn't interpret it to mean that because the birds don't store up you shouldn't store up, nor because the lilies don't weave clothes you shouldn't weave clothes either. Where would you get them from if you didn't? But if with their limited abilities their heavenly Father looks after them, how much more shall you with your far superior abilities be looked after by the Lord?

The real point is the motivation. Why do you go to work? 'What a stupid question—I go to work to get food and clothes!' you say. Is that your prime motive? You old Gentile—I had better hopes of you and thought you were regenerate! That is what the Gentiles do. When they go to work their prime motivation is food and clothes and what power comes from it, I suppose, and what toys. But surely that is not the prime motivation for a believer to go to work, to get food and clothes? Eight hours a day are not to be so thrown down the drain. If I am a believer in Christ my first-level motivation is that I seek the rule of God in my daily work and the practical righteousness that results from that. The prime purpose in daily work is not merely getting food and clothes. They shall perish—don't we know how soon they perish, and how soon we want some more. What a waste of time, if eight hours a day are given simply and primarily to get things that perish so quickly.

Daily work is the school where I learn to seek the rule of God, the kingdom of God, in my life. I have learnt in the Bible that I ought to be honest. Learning it in my study is one thing—where shall I practise what I have learned about the need for honesty? 'You will go to work,' says God. 'If you are not inclined to do so, I will give you a stomach and make it get hungry and then off to work you will go!' In its disciplines we learn to behave honestly, justly, compassionately, unselfishly and caringly for other people. As we work through the hours of the days and the years, the rule of God begins to form in us a Christian character. If I listen to the Lord Jesus, that's why I go to work.

Sometimes the whole motive for going to work can be lost. Here's a Christian man—nobody can deny that he needs clothes, so he goes to work and there comes a temptation to do a shady deal. The worldly man does it, why shouldn't he? He does the shady deal, gets a dozen coats, but has lost the very thing for which the Lord sent him to work—to develop the rule of God in his life. What a tragedy. The clothes will be worn out very soon, but what of the character he is building?

Talking of clothes, here's a Christian tailor. Times are difficult, he is glad of every order. He has got one and now here comes Mr. Smith for another order. He wants it tomorrow afternoon and the Christian tailor knows he hasn't a hope of getting it done tomorrow afternoon, but he wants the order. If he says 'No,' the man will take the order elsewhere.

Smiling, he says, 'Yes, come back tomorrow afternoon and I will see if I can get it done.' The man comes back tomorrow afternoon, 'Oh, I am sorry it's not done, come back tomorrow morning.' He knows very well it won't be done tomorrow morning. He is desperate for money, times are hard. He is under a bit of oppression now, isn't he?

Here is a man in business, a commercial traveller. The principals of his firm are bringing pressure to bear on him to join the Freemasons. They say, 'If you don't join the Freemasons you are losing us business.' To come out of a job these days at forty is a very bleak prospect, what should he do? Seek the kingdom of God after he's been to business? No, in going to business he should put the rule of God first. 'Then he'll be out of a job! Aren't you preaching very unrealistic stuff?' someone will say. But your heavenly Father knows, even if I don't, that you have need of these things, and he has promised it to you. How it liberates us if we dare to believe it.

Some dear folks are oppressed by far too much work. If I were to give vent to a little ingratitude and unfair criticism, I should think back to my youth to elders who should have taught me. Pressures of professional life and business were so tremendous that they had very little time to study God's word or feed the church. Too much or too little can be oppression, but your Father knows and if we serve him he has promised that ultimately he will help us to conquer the worries that come. But serve money first and you will be anxious; too much on the one hand, or too little and unemployment on the other.

Coming to the help of the Lord in the day of battle

We are talking about this in the context of this great battle that raged in olden times, when the Canaanites in all their massive technology, brains, industry and commerce oppressed the people of God. Great things are at stake. Now listen to Deborah as she summons the tribes of Israel up to Mount Tabor. Not now the matter of a few clothes; the whole battle for truth is at stake. Is Israel the vehicle of God's revelation to the Gentiles, or is the whole thing going to be obliterated and shattered? With prophetic voice she calls Israel to the battle of the Lord and some came—glorious men, hazarding their lives in the thick of the battle. But when the battle was at its thickest the inhabitants of Meroz did not come to the help of the Lord. 'Curse you Meroz,' said the angel of the Lord (Judg 5:23).

Around this big world there is a battle on for the minds of men. Whether we know it or not the Lord is involved, striving against the mighty, and you and I have a chance to join in the battle. God forbid that we get so lost in the occupations of life, so oppressed and obsessed by our material needs and business that the angel of the Lord has to say, 'Where are the men?' (There are women pioneering in Africa, lonely and alone, but where are the men?) 'Curse you Meroz,' said the angel of the Lord, 'that you didn't come to the help of the Lord in the day of battle.' It would be a tragedy if we were trying to get too many coats and didn't have enough time to join in this battle.

'Why did Dan remain in ships?' (v. 17). I don't know whether this can be answered. Remaining in the ships, messing about in boats when such a tremendous battle was at stake. Young men were facing the enemy on the battlefield and some of them getting wounded, why did Dan remain in the ships? I don't know, but he remained in the ships and forever

lost his chance to have the honour of coming to the aid of the Lord in the battle against the mighty.

We all have different parts in that battle. Let us honour those who give themselves to industry and commerce not just to make money or to get food and clothes, their life in commerce and industry is laid before the Lord for the sake of the kingdom of God. Their eye is on the goal; their hard toil and tears are for the Lord's sake as part of the battle of the spreading of his word and the support of his fighters. We cannot all be in the front line, we need to seek the Lord that our motivations are clear and all that we do shall be with this prime motivation, that we seek the kingdom of God.

Jael

Let the final word be given to Jael. She has come under some bitter criticism for what she did. It is said by some that she committed an act of foul treachery, inviting Sisera into her tent, offering him milk, lulling him into a false sense of confidence and putting a tent peg through his brain.

For my part, I want to notice exactly at what point she decided to do that. She went out to meet Sisera and brought him into her tent. He said, 'Give me some water,' and she brought him milk. He said to her, 'Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, "Is anyone here?" say, "No"' (Judg 4:18-20). That was more than she dared to do. What if an Israelite was to come up the path and say, 'Is there any man here,' and Jael said 'No'? That would have been the end of Jael. Not to speak of what would have happened when her husband came home and found a curious lump in the back of the tent in the women's quarters! The only thing she could have done was to tell the truth. Sisera knew what it might mean for her to tell a lie and that made up her mind for her.

In the ancient east it was the woman's job to put up the tent and to take it down. Women may not have had much to do with armies and fighting, but they did have their own battles to fight. It was the women who drove the stakes into the ground, put the tents up and made a secure home for their husbands and children. A tent peg may be a very simple thing, but it means a lot if you are living in tents. For the ancient easterner how easily it became a figure, 'The peg that was fastened in a secure place' (Isa 22:25). To the prophet it represented life's security.

In this great world in which the battles run to and fro, how nervous mothers feel when their teenagers go up to university, out into the world not yet saved. What is the security you want for them? It's not primarily a pension, is it? What security is there in earth or heaven, except in a faith that is tied to that great peg in a secure place, our blessed Lord? What is your own life built around for its security?

There was Sisera, coaxed to sleep with the milk, and Jael got the tent peg and she hammered it through his brain.

God be praised for the intellect he has given us and we must love him with all our minds, hearts, souls and strength. But in this fallen world we shall not find security and the ultimate solution by our unaided Gentile intellect, we shall only find security, certainty and truth in God and his self-revelation in Christ. If my Gentile unregenerate intellect comes into

conflict with Jesus Christ and God's revelation I shall have to decide what I am going to stake my life round. As my ultimate security for time and eternity, what is the truth?

You will have to stake your life round something, unless you want to live in a tent that collapses with the first breeze. What are you going to stake it round—things, career, intellect? Or do you say, 'No! If intellect gets in the way of God's revelation I take my tent peg and pierce it through and put my faith in Christ who is the truth.'

God help us in the home, in business and in all our preaching, for the thing is more than simple theory. If Jesus Christ is truth, if the Bible is God's revelation, then we shall have to stake our very life and all that we have on it.

Gideon (1)

Judges 6:1–6, 20–24; 7:19–21; 8:22–28; 2 Corinthians 4:6–11

We come now to exceedingly practical matters and you will begin to perceive that my experience is deficient, and therefore my exposition of holy Scripture is liable likewise to be deficient. In my life I have never been an elder, nor in any official sense a pastor, let alone an evangelist or planter of churches. Therefore, you may feel that my comments are of a theorist who would need the voice of experience to balance his exposition.

We shall consider the story of Gideon, the fourth deliverance and the story that lies at the centre of the book of Judges. In some sense Gideon is the brightest character in the whole book. Certainly the Holy Spirit spends more time describing his character and qualifications for the task to which he was called than he spends on any other individual in the book. We may think he was the most spiritual of all the deliverers and yet we shall observe that, like all watersheds, he rises to great heights at the beginning and falls away sadly at the end. His morning was bright with promise; his noonday brilliant with success; but at the time of the evening of his life dark and threatening clouds began to appear in the sky.

The enemy: The Midianites and the Amalekites

Our first task is once more to reconnoitre the enemy that the Lord allowed to come into Israel at this particular time. We are told that the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel (6:2 KJV). With Midian came the Amalekites and the children of the East. They made no attempt to control the land; they simply came on their raids, took the food and departed. They were nomads, though very highly organised under their tribal kings and chiefs. At the time of harvest they would come in their multitudes riding their swift camels, penetrate the land of Israel, steal all the food and ride off again.

They were nomads, as distinct from the Israelites who at this period were trying to settle down in the land, each with his three-acre farm, or more, with its carefully marked boundaries, all endeavouring with their village council and elders to settle any dispute that arose. They were feeling proud of their private property, tending it with loving care, acting as farmers sowing the seed and investing their money and labours. Over the years they were trying to systematically build up something on their farms in the promised land so that they might enjoy their inheritance.

Harvest is about to commence, the food is already ripe and they are about to reap the lovely fruits of all their labours, when over the horizon comes a vast hoard of camels. Their riders sweep into the land, steal everything and then run off. You can imagine the hubbub, can't you, and the blows and the swear words and all those other disgraceful things. They

came up like a multitude of locusts, and when they were gone the result was just like a plague of locusts—there was scarcely a grain of food or a green leaf left.

That was not only tragic in itself, but it was very ironic. When they had been redeemed out of Egypt God had promised that he would bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey. Here they were in the land and instead of the milk and honey there was nothing but a scorched earth and starvation facing them.

I wonder if even that brief description finds an echo in your heart. Whether you have known any times, not only in your life, but perhaps in your church life, when you had the right to expect the enjoyment of a glad spiritual inheritance, the milk and honey—the delights of the Holy Spirit and fellowship with the Lord's people—and then there has been an eruption and seemingly hordes of irresponsible nomads (let's call them no other) sweep down upon your church or your life. After the hubbub and the raucous shouting and the disputes and the protests are over they leave it a barren foodless wilderness. If ever it happens you will not only feel the pang of hunger, you will feel the pangs of irony. What a thing—to go out to the world and sing to them how Christ can satisfy their hearts and come home to a barren, foodless, starving church.

Why did God allow it to happen? When they cried to the Lord he sent a prophet to them, who said,

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage. And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. And I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed my voice. (Judg 6:8–10)

The simple and first answer is plain disobedience. Mark how the Lord emphasises his moral right to be obeyed and therefore the folly and sheer ingratitude of disobedience, 'I brought you. . . I redeemed you. . . I brought you forth. . . I set you free. . . I delivered you. . . I drove them out. . . I gave you their land.' Israel had come to a funny state of mind when they could look back over the great feats of redemption in the past and see what the Lord had done for them, and yet fail to feel any moral or spiritual obligation to obey him. They took the blessings of his redemption, but now had got into the frame of mind that whether they obeyed him or not didn't really matter.

It is an idle thought, isn't it, that you can be redeemed and brought into your great spiritual inheritance—as near to Paradise as we shall get on earth—then disobey the Lord and think the paradise is going to continue? Disobedience to our Lord and his word and disloyalty to his person will bring us into a spiritual desert.

Our Lord allowed them to feel the results of their disobedience; he brought the Midianites upon them. To help us characterise them yet further, we are told in chapter 8 that the Midianites were *Ishmaelites*. They were in fact a mixture of clans, but predominant amongst them were the Ishmaelites. We can read the characterisation of Ishmael given to us by God himself in Genesis 16:11–12. Historically and geographically this meant that he dwelt among his brethren, but whereas they were trying to be settled farmers in the

promised land, Ishmael and the Midianites continued in their nomadic style of living, which to a settled community must always seem irresponsible.

They go wherever they can get the food; they move on here, they move on there. They have virtually no respect for anybody's property or for anybody's work, no concept of what belongs to them and what belongs to other people. Therefore they were constantly engaging in their raids, waiting until Israel had planted the harvest then rushing in and taking the whole lot. You can imagine the consequent scene, 'His hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him' (v. 12).

In our spiritual experience and in the experiences of our churches we could be forgiven sometimes if we felt that there are some Ishmaelites around, bringing with them the evil of strife.

If that was the enemy and if that was the cause, *how shall we go about putting it right?* You say, 'The thing to do is to go for the jugular vein; go for the cause of all the trouble.' The cause was that the Israelites had disobeyed the Lord and gone after the worship of Baal. The only thing to do is go for the centre of the trouble with a clear head and strong nerve. Smash the Baal worship and you will restore the paradise. Eventually the trouble will have to be faced, there is no running away from it; the whole thing will have to be argued out and the battle will have to be fought within Israel. Whatever the Midianites may be doing at the moment, the Israelites will have to fight the battle between themselves. Gideon will have to face his family and his next-door neighbours; he will have to approach the altar of Baal and bring it down and argue the case. But, as you see from the consequent story, it is not going to be all that easy. Gideon stood in danger of losing his own life. The disobedience and love of Baal and unscriptural practice was so entrenched, that to challenge it is going to create a colossal explosion of strife and battling amongst the people of God.

And there is another thing to be considered. The land was already devastated and the people at large already bitterly hungry, almost famine conditions prevailing. What if you should provoke some more strife and the land become even more devastated by internal conflict? So we must put an eye to tactics.

Gideon's strategy and tactics

We shall observe that Gideon made no attempt to strike at the altar of Baal immediately, even though it was the cause of the trouble. Nor does the Holy Spirit prod him and push him immediately into attacking the problem, which was Baal worship. Tactically speaking, there was a prime objective that had to be maintained. If you lost that, you might as well not bother about Baal. In the enemy's book (not merely the enemy at the level of Midian himself, but of the arch enemy that stood behind Midian) the objective was not simply introducing the worship of Baal, but starving out the people of God. They came into the land to destroy it, and if the position was going to be saved then the Number One objective was to stop the enemy doing that at all costs.

When the battles got fierce and the enemy came in like a flood the Israelites thought the best thing to do was to save life and limb. They hid themselves in dens and caves in the mountains and said, 'We are safe now.' That's one tactic, but it meant when they were gone

the food was gone; and if the food had gone completely Israel would have to abandon their position in the promised land and go somewhere else. So, when we are first introduced to Gideon we notice the first part of his wise strategy; he was not knocking down altars of Baal nor arguing with his fellow-citizens about their rights and wrongs.

Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth [oak] at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press to hide it from the Midianites. (Judg 6:11)

Good man! What an eye for strategy and tactics he had. He saw the point; the key to Israel's being able to maintain her position in the land and not forced to give up was by hook or by crook to maintain the food supply. If we may anticipate the climax of the story, this is shown to be excellent and absolutely right tactics. On the eve of the battle with the Midianites Gideon is told by the Lord to go down to their camp, to overhear their conversation and thus to be encouraged for the battle. He went down in the dark by the perimeter of the camp and there were a couple of Midianite soldiers outside their tent (7:9–14).

One chap said, 'I had a horrible dream just now. I dreamt that there came a barley cake rolling into the camp and it knocked this tent and that tent and before you knew where you were all the tents were knocked over by a barley cake.' The other chap went white around the gills and said, 'I know what it means; that's Gideon!' He had knocked them into confusion by maintaining his food supply.

You may think my exposition fanciful, but the things I shall refer to are not fanciful. My dear brothers, we might as well be honest; we have known times in our church life when the Midianites have come in like a flood. It has seemed that the world has been full of Ishmaelites, as thick as you could stack them in any one church—'every man's hand against his fellow and every fellow's hand against the other.' And the result? A withering of the food supply. If that should ever happen, whatever the cause of it, this passage suggests to me that the Number One tactic is to keep the food supply going. For, suppose you indulge in argument first and win the battle, if the Lord's people are starved out and they are obliged to go elsewhere what have you won?

There would have to come a time when Gideon faced the wrongdoers in Israel and argued with them. He got a nickname in Israel of Jerubbaal—'Let Baal contend against him' (6:32). But notice he doesn't immediately go and argue with the sinners and the rebels and the disobedient and try to put them right first. There is arguing to be done, but not yet. Before you start arguing with your brethren there is some arguing to be done with the Lord.

'And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valour"' (6:12). Did Gideon reply, 'Yes, I suppose that is true'? No, he did not. (I think Gideon was being a little bit deliberately obtuse!) The angel said, 'The LORD is with you.' Gideon replied, 'Please, sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us . . . ?' (v. 13).

First, he kept the food supply going, even if only for the limited extent of his family, which was all he could do. Second, he argued and won his case with God. When, as a result of his intercession, the Lord gave him the assurance and the promise that he sought, did he

run as fast as his legs could carry him to argue with the rebels and the sinners and put them right? No he didn't—there are more important things than that in life—he stayed to worship the Lord. He said,

'Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you.' And he said, 'I will stay till you return.' So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them. And the angel of God said to him, 'Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour the broth over them.' And he did so. Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes. And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. (vv. 18–21)

It was fortunate he was able to make a bit of broth, wasn't it? Highly embarrassing if you have a guest and you have nothing to put in front of him. If that guest should happen to be the Lord himself and you have nothing to feed him with, what an embarrassing disaster that would be. I speak not as your mentor; I speak as your brother. One of the tragic results of strife and disobedience of this order is that it withers our souls, so when we come individually or as a church before the Lord our hearts are barren and we have nothing to worship the Lord with.

Of course, it was the enemy's tactics that it should be so. And therefore how wise of this man, and of the God who was informing him, that he should go for the big things first and maintain the food supply. He argued and gained his point with God first and had enough food to entertain the Lord. In those moments he was given an experience that perhaps above all qualified him to lead Israel to deliverance. When Gideon saw that it was the angel of the Lord, he said,

Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face. But the LORD said to him, 'Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.' Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and called it, The LORD Is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites. (vv. 22–24)

At that moment he had a vision of God and saw the face of God. At first that was consternation indeed. He was a part of Israel in all her brokenness, failure, disobedience, strife and famine, so he thought that he was going to die. He then discovered something about the nature of God that filled his soul with wonder and worship. God made himself known to him as *Jehovah-shalom*, the God of peace.

Blessed is a man or woman, a servant of the Lord, who finds peace of heart when all around is interminable strife, fury, shouting and disagreement, famine and starvation. Where shall he find the strength to endure it without becoming warped in spirit and poverty-stricken? It is in that fellowship with God, being led by God's Spirit into the knowledge of *Jehovah-shalom*, even in the middle of the tornado. The Hebrew word *shalôm*

means not only the cessation or absence of hostilities; it means positively peace and plenty, integration and wholeness.

In those moments Gideon discovered that this indescribable and immeasurable wealth was open to him and to his people. The strength in that enjoyment of God and of his peace and wealth would enable Gideon to go out to the battle of words with his fellow Israelites and eventually to strife with the Midianite hoards.

Paul's experience at Corinth

As I read that ancient story, one or two things remind me of another servant of God in a much later time. I am thinking of the Apostle Paul and how at one stage he planted a church in Corinth. He gave his heart to it and worked for it, slogging night and day making his tents, so that he shouldn't have to charge them anything for his spiritual ministry. Fathering them, praying with them, tending them, teaching them, he was rewarded at length by a church torn with strife from end to end. There was party strife, brother haling brother to the law court, social distinction at the Lord's Supper, heresy raising its head and causing division and endless strife in the church.

They had very able tongues at Corinth, so they knew well how to issue withering criticisms of Paul himself. They criticised his bodily form, his imperfect oratory and his temperament, questioned what he was doing with the cash of the freewill offerings and all kinds of things like that until you would have thought the man's soul would have been withered to a cinder. Certainly, the souls of the believers in Corinth were pretty starved. When they were asked to make a contribution to the poor of Jerusalem they said they hadn't got money to spare; whereas their brothers up in Macedonia, as poor as the proverbial church mice, had already taken an enormous collection, until Paul was embarrassed to take it.

What was the difference? Not the money market, but the state of their hearts. Corinth was a poverty-stricken church with strife running through it. There were Ishmaelites galore—'every man's hand against his fellow and every fellow's hand against his brother.' How did Paul survive it? Why didn't he get out his apostolic guns and blow them out of the waterline? Where did he get the grace to put up with it? Listen to him,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. (2 Cor 1:3–7)

When the trouble increases, so does the comfort of God increase. Isn't God magnificent! 'Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph' (2 Cor 2:14). 'God has made me a minister of the new covenant,' he says. 'The old covenant was written on tablets of stone, but

the ministry of justification that puts people right with God is written on the fleshy tablets of the human heart' (3:3). When many of us would have given up long ago, Paul's heart is welling up. He has found the God of peace and plenty. Now he can say, 'For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison' (4:17).

If it ever should be our lot to come into a situation where every man's hand is against the other, with its withering results, God give us the wisdom to put first things first. To maintain the food supply, to learn to intercede and argue with God for his people, to have enough food in one's own soul to be able to continue the worship of God, come what may. That will lead on to a vision of the Lord that shall sustain us through the weariest and most famine-stricken years.

Gideon and the altar of Baal

But of course the wrong had to be faced. Baal worship was so entrenched, and not only in remote parts either but on his own doorstep. There was an altar of Baal in his father's house. It was going to be a daunting task to go out and face the villagers and the townspeople and argue it out with them. What strife there was going to be; it nearly resulted in his being put to death. Baalism had been tolerated for so long that people thought it was the right thing and got offended when you said it ought to go—even if you quoted holy Scripture and Moses! They wouldn't listen, they had it in their minds that it was right; so what was Gideon to do?

I have a secret admiration for Gideon, because in one little particular I am just like him—I am as cowardly as ever he was! It was difficult to go out there and face them, so, because he was afraid to do it by day, he did it by night. I have often adopted the same tactics myself. Afraid to face them, I will do it when they aren't there and when they come back they will find it's done!

There's another bit of his tactics I admire as well—not negative, but positive. Said the Lord, 'You are to take such and such a bullock, you are to build an altar and publicly offer a sacrifice to the LORD on it.'

'But, Lord,' said Gideon, 'there is a difficulty! The altar of Baal is just on the point where you are asking for your altar to be put up.'

'That's too bad for the altar of Baal!' says the Lord. 'You must obey me. If the altar of Baal gets in the way it will have to be knocked down.'

That caught the people on the wrong foot. When they woke up in the morning their precious Baal altar was down, an altar to the Lord in its place and the paraphernalia of Baal burnt up in a positive act of worship to the Lord. What could they say? Even Gideon's father, who was not renowned for his strength, argued, 'Are you saying that I mustn't worship the LORD then? Will you plead for Baal instead of the LORD?'

In many a matter that has vexed the church and Christendom down the years, over which there were liable to be all sorts of loud arguments and people getting upset, it seems to me that it is good to follow a positive attitude. I must obey the Lord—that's Number One. If that conflicts with hoary old traditions or heretical notions, or things that are not clear that confuse the gospel, I must obey the Lord. I am not being negative, I am being positive; if other things are not consistent with this they will have to go.

Gideon's fleece

And so Gideon achieved his purpose, the altar of Baal was down and the worship of God was public. Now there was no avoiding the Midianites, but Gideon will wait a little while longer to make sure. You say, 'He's a bit of a ditherer! He's in danger of being so preoccupied with his own worship and prayer and things that he never gets to action.' Wait a minute! To commit Israel in its woefully weak state to a battle with hordes of Midianites—have you any idea what the consequences could be if the Midianites won? Before he would commit Israel to it he wanted to make a test and an experiment. Was God with him; and how would he know?

Being a farmer he tried a sign that was near to his heart. Could he control the falling of the dew by his prayers? Many times he had watched the blessing of the dew—after the torrid heat of the day, in the morning seeing the calm dew rising to replenish and refresh the corn crops and make them grow in spite of the terrible heat. Israel was parched by the raids, if the battle went against them now they would be even more devastated. He would only commit Israel to this battle if he could be sure that God would control the dew in answer to his prayers. When from time to time the poets in Israel thought of the dew they likened it to this, that, and the other. There is a delightful piece of poetry that says,

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life for evermore. (Ps 133:1–3)

My brother, can we control the dew? When you come from the presence of God, silent and almost unseen do you bring a certain feeling of refreshing into the hearts of God's people? Some of the heat and the weariness are gone and something supernatural has settled in your mind and heart. I wish I had it. There are so many things that distress us and burn out our emotions. Oh to be one that knows how to maintain the food supply, how to intercede with God for his people, how to worship the Lord; to be one who has discovered that the Lord is *Jehovah-shalom*—the Lord of peace and plenty—and, amidst all the hurly-burly of life, able to leave behind a veritable blessing of God's Holy Spirit that refreshes and tends to unite the people of God. Long tactics of preparation therefore, before ever the battle was fought.

Gideon (2) and Abimelech

We come now to the final stages of Gideon's great exploits. When we finished the last section we were considering how he delayed yet longer before he committed Israel to the battle against the Midianites, to be sure that by his prayers he could control the dew and thus know that God was with him.

The battle

Now we come to the battle itself. We shall observe that in the battle the objective was not merely that they should defeat the Midianites but that through Gideon God should restore his own authority. It was for lack of perception of the moral authority of God and his right to be obeyed that Israel had gone their disobedient way and brought these troubles upon themselves. It was not now a question of who was the better arguer, the better logician and the better exegete, who could win the wordy battles; it was a question of whether or not the supremacy of God could be established in Israel's heart and conscience once more, together with a sense of his reality. What kind of battle, and more particularly, what kind of tactics would not only win the battle but achieve that demonstration?

Therefore we read that when Gideon first led out his troops God asked him to put his men through an experimental trial, which should have the effect of reducing their great number down to a minimum. Presumably the tactic was special to this case, for you remember that in the previous battle, when Barak took his troops to combat Sisera and the Canaanites he went up with ten thousand men. Now Gideon was going up against the Midianites, but God himself intervened to reduce his army to the absolute minimum. And that is all the more striking because we are told that the Midianite host came up like the sand on the seashore for number.

You would have thought that it is the biggest army, the largest numbers that you can get on any one side that wins the battle. In times of strife we are tempted to think that the more we get on our side, the more likely we are to win the battle. But if we simply win our battles by the large majority of numbers we have on our side, there is still something missing, surely? And that something is vital—the establishment of the authority not of numbers but of God.

I shall not stay to hazard guesses as to any meaning there might be found in the particular experiment that God asked Gideon to make. I come swiftly to the final tactics. Reduced to comparatively few men, Gideon led them out in the dark of night to surround the enemy's camp. As he put them round the perimeter of the camp their tiny ranks were

stretched to the maximum, but he was told to adopt a striking tactic. Each man was equipped with a pitcher in one hand and a sword in the other. Inside every pitcher was a torch. As they crept up in the dark they would have been invisible until the moment came when Gideon gave the command, 'Look at me, and do likewise' (7:17). So they smashed the earthen vessels, held the torches aloft, and cried, 'A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!' (v. 20).

As anybody who has been walking down a country road knows, when the headlights of some car come staring you in the face, you can't actually see whether it is a BMW, a Mercedes Benz or a Mini Minor, can you? What you see is the light, not what is behind the light. Woken up with a start in the middle of the night, these poor Midianites looked out to the blaze of lights that was around and they couldn't see whether there were many or few behind the lights, so they were thrown into confusion. Thus the Lord achieved his victory over the Midianites through Gideon.

Light shining in broken vessels. Paul may well be using an allusion to this very battle and this particular tactic, when he says, 'We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us' (2 Cor 4:7). 'What does it matter if the old earthen vessel is broken and smashed,' says Paul, 'that the excellency of the power of God might be manifest? You have rightly been saying that my body and personal presence are weak. Yes, the old earthen vessel is being broken in the service of the Lord. We carry about in our body the dying of Jesus, "For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake'" (vv. 10–11). (I take it he is referring to the physical destruction of his person). Just like his blessed Lord was put to death upon a tree and from that sorry sight there shone out the splendour of the majesty and the power of God unto salvation, so in his servant, as the earthen vessel was broken, it became evident that the enormous power that came through him was not Paul's but God's. He 'has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (v. 6). What a glorious privilege! What an expensive ministry, if our earthen vessels must be prepared to be broken so that all might see that the power is not in oratory, little speaker's tricks, massive theology (though it all may help, who knows?), but in the power of God.

Gideon and the men of Ephraim

So Midian was subdued, and if we had been able to leave the story there it would be a happy story indeed. But the record goes on in all realism to tell us that the wonderful fruits of the victory were followed by a success that was in part flawed. In the first place, now that they had deliverance from the Midianite raiders you might have thought that, without exception, all the people of God would come crowding round, praising the Lord and patting old Gideon on the back. Not so the Ephraimites. 'Why didn't you call us? We have a right to be called,' they said (8:1). And here they are, getting angry and stirring up more strife. You say, 'Why can't those petty-minded Ephraimites rejoice in the victory, never mind who won it?' They didn't have a part, and weren't asked.

I have known churches ruined from end to end because Mrs. So-and-So wasn't asked to arrange the flowers—you must have a nice pot of flowers under the preacher's desk! Somebody went and asked Mrs. Jones and didn't ask Mrs. Smith. Woe betides the Gospel

Meeting now; it becomes irrelevant and the battles of the Lord irrelevant. The peace of a church can be smashed over such stupid trifles.

My brothers, we know our own hearts. We would love to be the preacher that preached and thousands came to Christ. When I am not the preacher, but somebody else is, my narrow heart knows a pang of jealousy. God give us some sense of proportion with the world outside perishing and the battles of the Lord in progress, God save us from being people that are prepared to make trouble in the church and disarray in the armies of the Lord because of personal grievance that we were not invited to do something.

Gideon managed to find grace enough to calm these people before their indignation broke out into serious trouble.

Gideon's patience runs out

But he wasn't so successful with the next groups of people—the men of Succoth and the men of Penuel (8:5–9). To their everlasting disgrace, these gentlemen wanted to stand on the sidelines and sit on the fence. They were going to wait and see who was successful so that they could be on the winning side—there's a lot of people like that! So when Gideon, 'exhausted yet pursuing' (v. 4), asked for their help and support and loaves of bread, they said, 'You have not won yet; wait until you have won.' Gideon's response to that was, 'I will teach you!' (vv. 7, 9) And so he did. When he was victorious he came to the men of Succoth and he got nasty briars and thorns of the wilderness and harrowed them (v. 16). They looked a sad sight by the time he had finished—all shreds of flesh and blood. Oh, Gideon! But you can't be surprised at the man losing his temper, can you? Frayed emotionally, as he must have been after the battle, he said, 'I will teach you.' From time to time some of us have said the same thing under our breath and used the thorns—the nasty, twisted sharp pricking things that the curse produced—to cut our brethren down to size.

Then he came to the men of Penuel and broke down their tower (v. 17). Oh, Gideon, whose side are you fighting on now? They will need that defence, but in your exasperation will you break down their tower and leave them more defenceless against the enemy than they were before? However wayward I think my brothers and sisters are, they are at least on the Lord's side. If I must discipline them, God help me to do it as it should be done; not through my revenge to leave the Lord's people less able to defend themselves than they were before.

Gideon yields to temptation

The late afternoon and early evening of Gideon's career began to be clouded over. Yet a very bright thing is observed by the historian, "Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.'" (8:22)

With tremendous grace and loyalty he replied, 'I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you' (v. 23). That was the very issue over which the battle was fought—who is the ultimate authority?

Beware of people that follow you because you are such an impressive character! If that's why they follow you, when you are gone they will follow the next impressive character. Our job is to lead men to be loyal to the Lord and if the Lord removes us what does that matter? In my book Gideon gets ten out of ten for his answer to that particular temptation.

But there was a little hidden weakness somewhere. He said, 'I will ask one thing from you, that you give me, every man, the earrings of his spoil' (v. 24). The Midianites were Ishmaelites and they had these earrings, as well as gold collars worn by their kings to show the mighty victories they had won. Gideon made an ephod out of them as a memory of his victory. It became a snare and Israel went after it and gloried, not in the Lord but in the spoils of their victory.

What a very human temptation it is. We love to look back over the past and encourage ourselves by what the Lord has done. There too could lurk a temptation. 'God forbid,' says Paul.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. (2 Cor 12:2–5)

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14)

Though very often it is against the wishes of great leaders of the people of God, who strove in their day to lead the people to put their faith in God, what a sorry thing it is to see the subsequent generations idolise the man and his victories, put their trust in that and not in the living God.

Abimelech

With that we come to the sorry story of Abimelech, Gideon's son (Judg 8:31). It reminds us now that we are in the second half of the book and over the watershed, going downhill fast. See how the writer helps us to feel this so poignantly. He lists Abimelech amidst the major judges and gives him all the proportions that the major judges and deliverers had. If you were reading the book for the first time you would read of *Othniel*, that great deliverer of the people of God; you would read of *Ehud* and his great exploits in the delivering and saving of the people of God; you would read of *Barak and Deborah* and *Jael*, the great deliverers of the people of God; and *Gideon* the great deliverer and saviour of the people of God. And then *Abimelech*—and without thinking you would think of him as another great deliverer.

But wait a minute; something has gone wrong. What is happening here? The irony is that presently you wake up to the fact that he isn't a deliverer at all. He takes the stance of being a judge, ruling in Israel, but far from being a deliverer he is imposing himself as a tyrant. Far from delivering Israel from the enemy, he is the enemy from which Israel will

have to be delivered. Far from delivering the Israelites from idolatry, he imposes himself on the people of God with the resources taken from the idolatrous shrine of Baal-berith in Shechem (9:4).

We are talking about a real man in the ancient city of Shechem, with remains going back to an exceedingly early date. It was the city to which Abraham came (Gen 12:6); and Jacob and company at the crossroads in Palestine (Gen 33:18). A terrible deed was done there by the sons of Jacob in the name of religion against Hamor and his son the prince, in the matter of Jacob's daughter, Dinah (Gen 34). The memories have remained with the Canaanite inhabitants and in this period of our story we shall read mention of Hamor (v. 28). Though now it was taken over, as I believe by the Israelites, and was not simply an enclave of independent Canaanites but a real Israelite city, doubtless some Canaanites were still living there.

At this stage Abimelech imposed himself as a tyrant upon the people. How did it all happen? To understand it we must go back to the days of Gideon, his father, when he slew the men of Penueh.

Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, 'Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?' They answered, 'As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king.' And he said, 'They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you.' (Judg 8:18-19)

Doubtless these Midianite kings were using the last little bit of flattery they had to try and save their necks. They said, 'Every one of them was like you are—the son of a king.' When the Israelites came in their gratitude and said to Gideon, 'You be king', he said 'No, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you' (v. 23), but he took the golden ornaments of the kings. Then presently he had a son. Who was it exactly that called that son Abimelech, which means 'My father is king'?—was it Gideon, or was it his proud wife (v. 31)? 'No, I won't be king,' says Gideon; but his son bore the name 'My father is king.'

How did Abimelech sell the whole proposition to the people of Shechem that they should accept him as king? He hadn't won any victory for them; on what grounds did he make his argument? First, let us notice the false alternative that he put before them.

Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh. (Judg 9:2)

Perhaps for the moment they didn't see that the alternative was false. If somebody wakes you out of a deep sleep tomorrow morning and puts a proposition before you, 'Would you prefer to die by being hanged or by being shot?'—being shot is better, isn't it? Less messy! But it could be a false alternative. So don't say 'I think I'll choose being shot,' say 'I don't have to choose either, thank you very much!' Is it better to have all these seventy folks as a kind of spiritual democracy? But then you can't get anything done! Wouldn't it be better to have just one man? Which is better, one man or many? Well, perhaps one man then!

It was a false alternative. Had it been Gideon, he would have said, 'We don't have to choose either; it is the Lord who is king.' But that had now escaped the attention of the men of Shechem. When he urged his plea on the ground of family loyalty they agreed to take one of Abimelech's alternatives. (How these things have bothered the people of God, when the affairs of a church are run on the basis of family connections.)

Then, if you please, he went to the house of Baal-berith, a downright pagan temple, part of the old Canaanite worship that hadn't been eliminated. Drawing his resources from the silver in the pagan temple he came to Shechem and imposed his rule upon the people of God. You rightly say, 'What has Baal-berith got to do with the people of God?' Nothing really! Why didn't Abimelech take the resources and be king in Baal-berith's temple, why did he come to Shechem? I think he thought they were an easy touch. With the resources of a pagan temple and pagan ideas behind him he came and slaughtered all seventy sons of Gideon except one, to establish his own monarchy over the people (v. 5).

Now we must watch, as we have this distasteful spectacle of power politics in the city of Shechem. One of Gideon's sons escaped and with his life in his hands he went and stood on the top of mount Gerizim. Before he ran away he harangued the crowd on the philosophy of government and leadership (vv. 7–21). He told them a fable, one of the very few fables in the Bible. It is a story of trees going to make themselves a king. Anybody knows that trees don't normally do that kind of thing; so it isn't a parable, it is a fable. Yet it does convey some very powerful truth.

The olive tree, the fig tree and the vine were each asked in turn to rule over all the other trees, and you will gather from the terms he used in his fable that Jotham hadn't a very high appreciation of people who tried to rule.

The trees said, 'Come and reign over us.'

'Do you think I am going to be tempted by that?' the olive tree, the fig tree and the vine say together.

Said the olive tree, 'I am making such a magnificent contribution to the people—to their health and their joy, and to their honouring of the Lord. I produce the oil that enriches their very marrow and bones, keeps them free of arthritis and gets them jumping and praising the Lord. I give them the oil to keep the light burning in the tabernacle; I don't want to go and reign over people.'

The fig tree said, 'Should I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go to wave to and fro over the trees?'

The vine said, 'I haven't got the time. My job in life is to produce the wine that makes glad the heart of God and man.'

Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'Come and reign over us.'

The bramble said, 'That's the job for me! Let everybody bow down to me. If they don't, let fire come out of me and burn up the cedars of Lebanon.'

Just imagine it. Here is some bent, twisty, thorny bramble, and he is going to control the cedars of Lebanon. If they don't do what he says, he will cut them down and rob Israel of their magnificent productions of many years. That is all the bramble has in his head. What does the bramble contribute? Nothing, not one berry of fruit; it is only good at bossing!

There have on occasions been people like that in companies of the Lord's people. They contribute almost nothing spiritually but they do love to be boss. Woe betide you if you cross them, for they are prepared to shatter I don't know what. Cedar trees of hundreds of years of maturity mean nothing to them, they will smash them readily so long as they can keep control, be the boss and be the leader.

Having uttered that fable, which was all too clear for Abimelech's liking, Jotham ran for his life. Would to God the people of Shechem had been able to listen to him.

We ought to turn aside for a moment to listen to a higher authority. There were times when our Lord found it necessary to talk to his apostles about the true nature of governing the people of God. He had just told them that they were going up to Jerusalem, that 'the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles' (Mark 10:33). It is astonishing to read what they now wanted to ask him.

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What do you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?' And they said to him, 'We are able.' And Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.' And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mark 10:35-45)

This is what makes his government a delight and will fill eternity with glorious praise. The one who sits in the very centre of the throne is the Lamb of God, who expressed his kingliness never more powerfully than when he came down here, went to Calvary and gave his life even for the weakest and humblest of his servants.

When you are in heaven, what do you imagine sitting on the right hand and on the left would mean, anyway? Some folks seem to think that we shall be rewarded by being able to sit down on magnificent thrones, put up our feet on heavenly divans and go into gracious and celestial retirement for eternity. It is not so! The highest position will mean that you serve as the servant of the maximum number of people. 'Who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I,' says Christ with incredible wonder, 'I am among you as the one who serves' (Luke 22:27).

You would feel pretty uppish in the world if you could go home and press a button and some liveried servant appeared with your slippers. Suppose you could press the button and

the blessed Lord appeared and said, 'Your heavenly slippers, my child.' What would you do? That is his concept of bigness and he shall remain the biggest because he serves the most.

We saw it in him when he was here on earth (Mark 10:46–52). It was immediately after James and John had come asking to sit on the right hand and on the left and he had corrected them, saying, 'The Son of man came not to be served but to serve.' They were just leaving Jericho when a blind beggar sitting by the way side called out, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'

People said, 'Shut up! He has no time to listen to you. He is the Son of David; he can't talk to beggars.'

But the Son of David stopped and told them to call the man.

'What do you want?' Jesus asked.

And the blind man said, 'I would like to receive my sight.'

'Very good,' says Christ, 'I came to serve,' and in that moment the man's eyes were opened and he saw the Son of David.

I wonder was he disappointed? I wonder if he thought he was going to see some beautiful ermine-trimmed robe with a little notch here and there to say he was king, and a crown on his head. He was after all on his way to Jerusalem, the capital city. When his eyes were opened to see the Son of David he saw a travel-stained man from Nazareth, whom they would take at Jerusalem and nail to a tree. The discovery had a revolutionary effect on that blind man's life. He did not ask to sit on the right hand or the left; he decided he had been sitting long enough those many years, crying constantly 'Give me, give me.' His eyes were opened to see the one who came not to be given to, but to give. For the last time he said 'Give me,' and he rose up and followed the king in the way (v. 52).

The way to where?—The way to the self-giving of Calvary. Where is his kingship? If you look within your heart, you know that that is how Christ won your affections and that is how he holds you. He is the blessed shepherd king. He is not like those perversions of politicians in Israel's day who were supposed to be shepherds but they despised and fleeced the weak sheep and didn't care for those that were ill. Nor like those big rams who pushed the little chaps out of the way so that they could get the best of the water when they came to drink. He is the true Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. This is real government and you would go anywhere and do anything for him. So we learn the lesson, and if we are going to be allowed to actively rule with the Saviour we shall need to learn it before we get home to glory. Let Peter have the final word.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Pet 5:1–4)

Peter doesn't say that he was a *partaker* in the sufferings of Christ—he ran off, didn't he? He says he was a *witness* of the sufferings of Christ—but he shall be a partaker of the glory.

Even as a great apostle he is not afraid to remind us of his ghastly mistakes in the past. 'Be careful not to lord it over God's heritage,' he says. 'God has given it to you to look after; but gird yourself with humility.' Where had Peter learned his lesson, if not in the upper room when the Lord had taken a basin of water, girded himself with a towel and kneeled down and washed their feet? He performed the most menial task for them while they were debating which of them should be the biggest. Peter had learned his lesson and now he says, 'All of you clothe yourselves with humility, to serve one another' (v. 5).

Gaal the son of Ebed

It is a pain to have to come back to consider Abimelech. At this time a certain man offered to put things right, so we had better take him seriously for the moment (9:26). Gaal the son of Ebed came with his brethren over to Shechem. The men of Shechem put their trust in him and he said (amongst other things), 'Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him? Is he not the son of Jerubbaal? And Zebul his officer, why should we serve him? Would to God these people were under my hand, then I would settle the business in a trice and remove Abimelech.'

Throwing down his challenge, he said to Abimelech, 'Increase your army, and come out' (v. 29). So now we have got a volunteer on the stage, who is going to solve the problem.

'Who is Abimelech?' says Gaal. 'He belongs to Gideon's family. We are not of Gideon's family; we go back to Hamor, so you should look to me,' he says.

The wise among you will ponder a minute, 'Is that any solution? That's the trouble we started with!' Gaal's objection is not to Abimelech being the boss; his objection is that Abimelech is from the wrong family. Gaal thought his family ought to be in charge and, playing on the old family prejudices going back to the tribalism of the Canaanites, he seeks to get the power into his hands.

It is so true to life that it is painful to speak about it. When trouble in leadership breaks out amongst the people of God, how many times the arguments start over family loyalties. 'My family was here at the first, and we were the founder members!' How is that any solution? We may pray for our brethren around the world when trouble arises and they split on tribal lines, but can we always hold up our heads and say we have been guiltless of that very thing in our churches?

Abimelech carried on his work of devastation to keep control of his position at any price. He didn't mind what he smashed, how many men of Shechem he butchered, and finally he burned down the tower where the innocent in the city had taken refuge, just to keep hold of power. Some deliverer this! What shall be the end of the man?

It may not be the ideal ending to the story; I merely recall the facts (9:50-57). From Shechem Abimelech went on his wild career to Thebez, proceeding to do exactly the same thing there to establish his rule and he came near to the tower to destroy it as well. While the men were debating power politics there was a woman at her home. The children had to be fed and her husband was coming home from work. She didn't altogether understand these great things that were going on, but dinner had to be prepared! People have to be fed—the

Lord's people have to be fed. She was busy, getting on with the job (like the vine, the olive-tree, and the fig tree). In her own way, grinding out the daily chores, she was preparing the meal for the family to keep them going. She looked over the wall and there was Abimelech, carrying on his nonsense and threatening to destroy the people of God and her family as well. That won't do! So she dropped the millstone over the wall and it happened to light on his head and crushed the nonsense out of it forever. That wasn't a very spiritual tactic, but it put an end to the trouble!

There comes a time when the sheep must rise up against shepherds. When men get it into their heads that the main thing in Christianity is who is boss and they don't mind how much they destroy in order to get their way and maintain their hold, who can blame sensible, ordinary people if they say that this is not what Christianity is about? God's people must be fed. Let's cast a millstone over the wall and put an end to all this nonsense.

We have come around full circle. From the days when those old Midianites came up and robbed Israel of their food and Gideon came to authority amongst the people of God because right from the start he had wisely saved the food supply. Now a son that knew nothing about feeding anybody had come to eminence. He saw only position and power and control and thought that was the secret and the whole name of the game. He had to be stopped in favour of what the real business is.

Before he left our Lord himself commanded Peter, 'Peter, feed my sheep.' Yes, we must have leaders in the church; of course we must have elders and we must obey them in the Lord. I am not decrying the need for government in the church—God forbid. But if as a sheep I may bleat in the direction of my shepherds, God help them to see what their job is. First and last they must feed the church of God. If they don't, there is little else worth doing.

Jephthah

Judges 10:6–16; 11:12–28

We have now studied enough of the captivities and deliverances of Israel in the time of the judges that we could perhaps profitably begin to compare and contrast them in our minds. They all have in common the notable feature that Israel sinned and God brought their enemies upon them, then God raised up a deliverer and he delivered them. But we are beginning to observe yet again that the tactics used by the deliverers are strikingly different on each occasion. Naturally enough, since the tactics are geared to defeating that particular enemy.

The enemy: The king of the Ammonites

What is remarkable about the story of Jephthah and his deliverance is that, before he engaged in battle with the enemy he tried his very best to use methods of diplomacy and negotiation with the king of the Ammonites. It was only when he exhausted all his diplomatic arguments and negotiations that Jephthah was obliged to go to war.

You will tell me that in the second of the deliverances Ehud used what appears on the surface to be a disguise of diplomatic negotiation. He went into the presence of the king, as that fat old king was sitting in his upper chamber, and twice over he said, 'I have a message from the Lord for you.' On that occasion the message turned out to be a very sharp word from the Lord in the form of a double-edged dagger thrust sharply through the man's belly.

On the occasion of Jephthah's warfare however, he is shown in remarkable light—particularly when it would appear that he and his followers were a sort of unconstitutional band of men working in that part of the world. He makes a very sincere and detailed diplomatic representation to the Ammonite court, sending a series of messengers in the official name of Jephthah in order to try and induce sense in the head of the king that he should abandon his unfounded claims and settle the matter peaceably without recourse to war. And since it is so unusual amongst these judges to negotiate with the enemy we shall naturally concentrate our attention on these diplomatic exchanges.

But first of all perhaps we ought to reconnoitre the enemy. We shall notice that a series of general attacks upon Israel is recorded in chapter 10, and then subsequently a particular battle against Ammon in chapter 11. At this stage Ammon seems to have been leading most of the others. So let us begin by looking at the geographical position of Ammon and what all the argument between Jephthah and the Ammonites is about.

When Israel came in her final approaches towards the promised land, the king of Arad prevented them from coming up through the foothills of Judah, so they were obliged to

backtrack and come across and up the other side of the Dead Sea and the other side of Jordan. Edom wouldn't let them pass through, so they had to skirt the land of Edom. Moab wouldn't let them pass through, so they had to skirt the land of Moab. They came eventually to the territory governed by Ammon and his response was to bring out his army. Israel therefore were obliged to fight and they conquered Ammon.

The two and a half tribes claimed that that should be their inheritance—they had helped Israel to fight for it. When all the misunderstandings between them and Moses were cleared up, the two and a half tribes were in fact allowed to come back and settle in these parts that had originally been the territory of Ammon (Num 32). So now the promised land as given to the twelve tribes included more than perhaps had originally been intended—not only the western side of Jordan but a great track of land on the eastern side.

At this period of history Israel had been in the land some three hundred years. The children of Ammon had never forgotten that they had once owned these territories up here in Gilead (Judg 11:13), so their king began to wax more powerful and conducted raids, not only against the Israelites that dwelt in Gilead but he even began to press across the River Jordan and harass the tribes that were living on the western side (10:9). He made himself very uncomfortable towards Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim, and life began to be distressing for some of the major tribes. The Philistines had apparently not been there in the time of Joshua, but now in the intervening centuries they had arrived and were inhabiting this coastal plain and their famous five cities.¹¹ They too were beginning to be strong and to push the tribes of Judah from the south west, so that Israel were being sorely stressed by both the Philistines and the Ammonites and threatened once more with the loss of their inheritance. Ammon was the chief enemy. From their point of view it was natural for the Ammonites to hold the view that Israel had stolen their territory and they were always seeking for opportunity to get it back.

The origin of Ammon

So now let us trace some of the history that the Holy Spirit has recorded about the activities and characteristics of the nation of Ammon, not only in the time of Judges but in later times. While Jephthah scored a notable victory and for the time being settled the problem, it wasn't permanently settled and recurred later. Perhaps you might even take the view that it is there to the present day, with all the disputes about the West Bank from those who live on the other side of the Jordan.

As far as his origin goes in the Old Testament, Ammon (like Moab, his half-brother) was simultaneously the son and the grandson of Lot (Gen 19:36–38). If you look at the special features that recur in the history connected with Ammon you will find two things running consistently through them. In the first place, he is forever pouring scorn on the Israelites, doing his utmost to hold them in contempt, to despise and discourage them by making them look ridiculous and altogether absurd. In the second place you will find that though he

¹¹ The five cities of the Philistines were Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron (Josh 13:3; 1 Sam 6:17). They were situated in the broad coastal plain of southern Palestine, except for Gath, which is in the hill country. Our word Palestine is derived from the term *Philistine*.

pours scorn on Israel and treats them with contempt, nevertheless, given any opportunity he will attempt to take over their territory and inheritance and install himself in what he has stolen from Israel.

For instance, in the early days of King Saul, Nahash the Ammonite agreed to make a covenant with the men of Jabesh, on condition that their right eyes were put out (1 Sam 11:1–2). That was not only meant as an insult; it was meant to make them ineffective in guarding their territory, because a man with his right eye out can't sight his bow and arrow very well. Then Ammon shows his contempt for them when he says he will 'bring disgrace on all Israel.'

First Chronicles 19:3–5 tells a story of a later generation of Ammonites. When the king of Ammon died his son Hanun came to the throne. David of Judah was now on the throne of Israel and he sent a diplomatic mission to convey his condolences to Hanun, but his advisers told him that David was merely seeking an occasion for war and spying out the land. So Hanun the Ammonite took David's men, shaved them and cut off their clothes in the middle and sent them away like that. Once more Ammon had tried to make Israel look utter fools.

When we come to the prophet Amos we hear the other side of the story. 'Ammon have ripped open pregnant women at Gilead, that they might enlarge their border' (1:13). They were ruthlessly trying to get back the territory they had originally lost.

Then God says through Zephaniah the prophet, 'I have heard the taunts of Moab and the revilings of the Ammonites, how they have taunted my people and made boasts against their territory' (2:8).

And then there are those stories in Nehemiah, when Nehemiah came back to complete the rebuilding of the city walls around the temple. Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite were on hand to pass their comments; they laughed them to scorn and despised them. 'What is this thing that you are doing?' they said. 'Are you rebelling against the king?' (2:19). They continued in their mockery of the Jews, and Tobiah said, 'If a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!' (4:1–3).

You shouldn't be taken in by it. Nehemiah had to go back to headquarters at one stage and when he returned after some lengthy period, whom should he find installed in one of the side chambers of the temple? None other than Master Tobiah the Ammonite! (13:6–7.) With all his sarcasm, mockery and insults about the whole effort, give him an opportunity and he will be in and take the whole thing over for himself. Not only did he take over territory, he installed himself in a chamber in the sacred courts of the house of God with all his own personal household stuff. The priest at the time in Judah hadn't the sense to see what was happening. Being related to Tobiah in marriage, he had allowed him to come in. When Nehemiah came back it didn't take him two minutes to sum up the situation, nor more than another two minutes to know what to do—he booted him out!

Since way back in early history Ammon has been an enemy, always wanting to take from Israel their God-given inheritance. As one of the means to that end they have tried to discourage and demoralise Israel by making them look fools and pouring contempt on them at every possible turn.

Before we get down to studying the detail of the text further, perhaps we should remind ourselves that there are still people who would try to filch parts, if not the whole, of their

glorious inheritance from God's people. I think of that marvellous inheritance that God gave his people in the form of holy Scripture. Oh, for the effrontery of men down the centuries who have stolen from the people this God-given inheritance. Not only holy Scripture, but parts of our glorious salvation. Scripture assures the people of God of their divine birthright; the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins; boldness to enter into the very holiest of all; the priesthood of all believers. It is common and sad knowledge that for centuries and in many parts of the world, there have been those that filched it all from the people of God; they weren't even allowed to know they had the right to it. When men and women arose to champion God's people and recover again the inheritance that had been lost, how many times the enemy of the modern world used the same tactics as of old and tried to demoralise God's people by pouring scorn on what they called our 'feeble efforts.' Neither should we be persuaded that the danger from the enemy is altogether past.

God's patience begins to run out

Let us think then of Judges 10. We noticed that, not only were the Ammonites coming to get back the territory of Gilead, and also pressing across Jordan to harass the tribes on the western side of the river, but the Philistines also were pressing from the southwest. Threatened on all sides with the loss of their territory and inheritance, Israel was very greatly distressed and they cried to the Lord. But this time the Lord stood on his dignity.

And the Lord said to the people of Israel, 'Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more.' (Judg 10:11-13)

This is the remonstrance, dare I say it, of a God who has been deeply hurt. Was he not their supreme inheritance?

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. (Ps 16:5-6)

'I have a marvellous heritage because I have the Lord,' says the psalmist. And here is Israel, smarting under the fact that they are losing their territorial inheritance; and as soon as they recover it by the mercy of God, they are prepared to forget God for days without number. They are not interested in God as their inheritance; they are interested in God as I am interested in my GP. I confess my attitude to my doctor—I think he is a marvellous man, but I don't go and see him more than I have to. If I should get an earache I'll go and see him. When he has cured it I say, 'Thank you very much, goodbye. I will come back the next time I need you!' I don't bring the doctor home and get to know him, I leave him in his proper place down there in his surgery. He is a resource person that I go and cry to when I am in need. Isn't that what prayer is? And when the need is gone you don't need to come again until you have got another need.

You will perceive how pagan Israel is becoming, and God has got tired of it. 'You are not interested in me; you are interested simply in your acres in Palestine. Choose some other gods and let them save you,' he said. For a while that brought Israel to their senses. They cried to the Lord and in his infinite mercy he raised them up a deliverer. What a deliverer he was!

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, 'You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.' (Judg 11:1-2)

The wheels of God may turn very slowly, but they do turn. When Gilead found themselves in distress, they were obliged to go to the very man they had driven out, to ask him would he please have mercy on them and come back and deliver them (vv. 5-6).

'But you drove me out,' says Jephthah.

'We have had a change of mind,' they said. 'If you come back we will make you head.' What a vivid object lesson! In his wise providence God sometimes orders our circumstances to bring us to our senses to see at the level of daily life what we have been doing at the higher level.

If Israel ever had an opportunity to put their attitude to God right, it was now. They had rejected the Lord and now they were asking him to come back again. Similarly they are obliged to go after Jephthah whom they had driven out and ask him to come back again. Surely they would have the gumption to see the lesson? This time, when the Lord delivered them, instead of ditching him again they would make him Lord. What they actually did we shall have to see later on.

Jephthah's tactics

Let us turn from more preliminaries and come to the business. The actual battle that eventually ensued is described in very few words and we shall not stop on it. We shall, however, ponder this magnificent display of diplomacy and the marvellous lesson in ancient history that Jephthah argued with the Ammonites.

'Why are you coming out to war against me?' he said (v. 12).

'Because Israel took away my territory,' says the king of Ammon. 'Now you restore it peaceably.'

'You have got it altogether wrong,' replies Jephthah. 'It was not like that.'

And now there starts a long argument based on ancient history. I know you would prefer to hear me speak about John 3:16, but a lesson in ancient history is absolutely vital to the situation here.

Jephthah is no mere brigand just stealing what isn't his. He details what actually happened those long years ago in the wilderness. Under Moses they came up at the first wave of the conquest and conquered that land. God gave it to them and Jephthah is now going to argue the point with the king of the children of Ammon on the grounds of history (vv. 15-27).

‘We did not steal your territory,’ said he. ‘We didn’t even attack it in the first place, it happened this way. We came to Edom and Edom wouldn’t let us pass through, so very peaceably we went round their borders and we didn’t go through. (God forbade us to touch Edom because he was our half-brother.) We came to the border of Moab and Moab wouldn’t let us pass through, and we respected their territorial rights. We didn’t plunder it, we didn’t attack it, we didn’t take it by force—we respected their borders and went all the way round though it was a hard and tiresome journey.’

‘I must remind you what happened when we came there,’ said Jephthah. ‘Your ancestors came out and attacked us; we had no option but to fight, we weren’t the ones to start it. And as I stand before Almighty God, who is our judge this day, I witness to you, Ammon, what the facts were. Whereas we would have gone round, you attacked us and obliged us to fight, committing our cause to our God Jehovah and you to your god Chemosh. We fought for our very lives against you and God gave us the territory. It has been so for three hundred years and we shall not now give you what is our God-given birthright. You can argue that the territory is yours, but the evidence of ancient history and what actually happened on that occasion stands against you.’

Defending early church history

What has that got to do with us? I know that it is the stuff of international negotiations, but is there never an occasion when we as Christians need to argue our early church history? In order to guard the inheritance of the people of God, have you been obliged to cite early church history and insist on what actually happened? I am not talking so much about early church history that you will find in ordinary books, dealing with the post-apostolic age; I am talking about really early church history.

There is one epistle at least in the New Testament that spends practically two whole chapters insisting that we get absolutely right what actually happened in the days of the early church. In the epistle by Paul to the Galatians the first two chapters argue over the recital of church history. What has church history got to do with the gospel? Everything! Galatians contains two great chunks of church history written for this express purpose, to guard the inheritance of the Lord and the very basic gospel of Christ against those who would filch salvation from us.

Paul was concerned in the first place to establish that justification is by faith and not by works; nor by religious observance, ritual and sacrament as some false teachers were beginning to teach the Galatians. And what is more, he is not only concerned to teach us that justification is by faith, he is concerned to teach us that the promises, the covenant and the inheritance are an unconditional gift of faith. Let no man rob us of it or of its enjoyment.

Paul sounds his note of alarm, ‘You who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace’ (5:4). You can’t have both; you are either justified through grace by faith in Christ, or by the works of the law. Inheritance is on the ground of faith and given to true born sons of God. If you return to those weak and beggarly elements, then hear the verdict of God upon all such slavery, ‘The slave shall not inherit along with the free’ (4:30). It is nothing less than the very vitals of the gospel. People’s enjoyment of salvation and justification and their inheritance are at stake and therefore Paul argues the case of what

actually happened in the early church to secure that the gospel he had preached was their God-given right. He says in the very opening verse, 'Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead' (Gal 1:1). And he proceeds to record his history from his conversion onwards, to make it apparent what he means: that he did not get the gospel either from men or through man. He was not appointed an apostle from men or through man, but by direct ordination of the risen Lord.

Coming into chapter 2 he sums up his argument, to tell us what happened when he eventually went up to Jerusalem and met the other apostles. 'James and Peter and John were eminent apostles, but they added nothing to me—I did not get my gospel from them,' says Paul. Why does Paul insist on the exactitudes of early church history in that fashion?

Let me tell you a little story. Years and years ago in the bad old days long before Vatican Council II, I had a conversation with a High Anglican churchman who was thinking of becoming a monk in the Roman Catholic Church. It soon appeared that he didn't place much value on evangelicalism.

'All this subjective stuff; believing in Christ and being born again by some kind of subjective emotional experience! No, I have a far superior gospel,' he said. 'The objective thing: the ritual of the church, the infant baptized and made a child of God by the objective act, none of this subjective quicksand of emotion! I put my faith in the great objective act. What would you say about my becoming a monk?' he asked.

'That is a little bit difficult for me,' I said, 'because I have the prior difficulty that the Church into which you are going as a monk curses me; so I am not an unbiased adviser.'

'Curses you? How is that?' he said.

'I am one of those people who are not only trusting Christ, I am absolutely sure I am saved and I shall never be lost,' I responded.

'You can't be that!' he said.

'You do disappoint me,' I said. 'I thought you said just now that you were not trusting anything but the objective *ex opere operato*¹² thing. How is it that I, an evangelical, can be sure, and you with your marvellous objectivity can't be sure?'

He said, 'It all depends on our works. We have to work for our salvation.'

'Well that is news to me,' I said.

I read him Romans 4:5: 'To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.'

He said, 'Does it really say that—where does it say that?'

'Romans 4:5. What do you take it to mean?' I asked.

'I didn't know that was in the Bible! But that is the trouble with you evangelicals,' he said, 'always taking bits from the Bible as though you can interpret it. That's where you go wrong. What we need to do is take this to a priest and get the interpretation of the Church. It is the Church that gave us the Bible, you know.'

¹² *Ex opere operato* is a Latin expression meaning, 'by the work worked'.

‘Did the Church write the Old Testament?’ I asked.

‘Well, no. But it gave us the New Testament and the Church that gave us the New Testament is the one who should be allowed to say what she meant. It is no good you taking the New Testament and deciding what you think it means.’

I said, ‘Suppose for instance I had been in Arabia, like Paul—he had his revelation from God in the desert of Arabia—and I had been burdened about my soul and wanted to find salvation. I ask him how I can be right with God and Paul says this verse to me, “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” Could I have listened, understood, believed and been saved there and then? Or should I have had to say, “Thank you Paul, but of course I couldn’t begin to understand that, I shall have to take this to the Church at Jerusalem because they are the people that gave it to you?”’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that is what you would have to do. Take it to the Church and let the Church tell you.’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘that’s news, because as I read at the beginning of the epistle to the Galatians—and I began my Jephthahite argument from ancient history—“Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man”. That means he got his apostleship straight from God.’

‘Oh yes,’ my friend said, ‘he did.’

‘I suspect that, though it came from God, it came through the apostles?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘it came through men.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘no it didn’t, because Paul says, “not from men nor through man.”’

‘The apostles were at Jerusalem and Peter did give him the gospel,’ he said.

‘But,’ I said, ‘Paul tells us here that when he went up to Jerusalem, “they who were of repute amongst the apostles, they added nothing.”’

‘They must have done,’ he said.

‘No good knocking your head against that brick wall, the Bible actually says that the apostles didn’t add anything to him. He got his gospel directly by revelation from the Lord.’

He replied, ‘You make Paul speak like a Protestant!’

It is important, isn’t it? Nothing less than justification by faith—our inheritance now and forever is by faith. And how may I be sure of it? Can I really come to Paul’s letter, listen, understand, believe and be saved? Or do I take it first of all to the Church or somebody and let them tell me what it means? If you do that, what do you suppose they are going to tell you? I don’t say it harshly, but the answer is, what they have told people for hundreds of years and robbed them of their certain knowledge of justification, acceptance with God and of their inheritance, and left them in the quagmires and uncertainties of doubt.

For the gospel’s sake it is an exceedingly important thing that we learn our early church history, so that we can answer the claims of those who would filch our inheritance from us. History is important; not only over these basic matters of justification and the inheritance, but the many other lovely things—the priesthood of all believers, our entrance into the holy place and our right to go out and preach the gospel without the official ordination of a Church.

Like Jephthah, we ought to be men and women who are not looking for trouble and certainly not looking for battles. Let's settle the matter peaceably. Alas for those hotheads that in the name of the gospel have taken to the sword; but we shall have to argue and take our stand firmly upon the facts of ancient history.

Jephthah's daughter

Two other matters call for our attention. First, the matter that you all—and particularly the ladies—have been waiting to hear. What is he going to say about Jephthah's daughter? Did Jephthah actually sacrifice her, or may we think that he merely confined her to perpetual virginity? To your great frustration I am not going to tell you what I think! For very often when good and true men and women, after much thought, come to different opinions about a passage of the word of God, they may be overlooking some other fact.

Let us actually look at the passage that talks about it. Having (rashly, I think) issued his vow, Jephthah came back from the battle and the first person who came out of the house was his daughter.

Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. (Judg 11:34)

Whether she was confined to perpetual virginity, as some say, or was in fact sacrificed upon the altar, it had the same result. Jephthah never had any grandson and his line perished.

To see the significance of that we must go back a little bit into history. When Gideon had won his triumph his people came round him and said, 'You have delivered us, now be king over us.' And Gideon had replied, 'I will not rule over you, neither shall my sons rule over you' (8:22–23). In other words, 'I will not be king myself and I will not set up a dynasty.' The time for kingship in Israel had not yet come. It would come one day, but not yet. Gideon's objection to being king was founded upon this, 'I will not rule over you when the Lord is your king.'

Some years have gone by since Gideon had refused the kingship. In his mad ambition Abimelech had seized rule, but it was evident in Israel that this was a terrible thing. Now come to Jephthah and listen to him negotiating with the elders who had come seeking for him. 'If I go and fight for you,' he says, 'and the Lord delivers the enemy into my hand, shall I be your head?' (11:9 KJV). And he says it without a flicker of an eyebrow to suggest that there is anything the slightest doubtful about the proposition.

What had Israel's trouble been? They had gone for their deliverances and as soon as they got the deliverances they had forgotten the Lord, left him on the side and gone their own way. Now they are proposing that the Lord should deliver them but not be their head. 'Let Jephthah be head,' they said. So he made his vow and said, 'Lord, take what you will' (v. 31), and when he came home the thing that came out of the house was his daughter. She was his only daughter and he had no son. Whatever happened to the dear girl, the line of Jephthah came to an end completely. There was no dynasty, no royal house.

Thank God for all deliverers; but this wasn't a day for turning deliverers into a movement, still less into a dynasty. The secret of Israel's safety at this stage in history lay in their retaining that vivid sense that the Lord was king. Not Gideon nor his sons; not Jephthah and his non-existent dynasty.

Jephthah runs out of patience

Matters didn't end there and I have a sorry story to tell; but then I warned you at the very first lecture that I had sorry things to say. After it was over and the territory was secured from Ammon, along came Ephraim. 'Jephthah,' they said, 'you went out and fought the Ammonites and you didn't call us.'

We have heard of Ephraim before—when Gideon was successful they got horribly upset because they hadn't had the leading part (8:1). Now poor old Jephthah has been successful and they come along and say, 'You didn't call us! Who gave you permission to go without us? We will burn you and your house with fire.' (12:1).

'I did call you and you didn't come,' said Jephthah. 'You didn't help in the fight but you propose to be in control, and everybody has got to consult you before they do anything!'

The conversation got very rude. Said the Ephraimites to the Jephthahites, 'You are a nasty lot of renegades.'

Jephthah might have been a very diplomatic gentleman when he was dealing with the Ammonites, but there did come a point at which his temper burst—'You call me a renegade! Who do you think you are, wanting to control everybody? You do nothing yourself to save the Lord's people and you have the affront to be rude to us,'—behaving a bit like Ammon itself.

Then there came another strife, and it didn't stop with words. As a result of Ephraim's attempt to control the other tribes, when the Gileadites under Jephthah got to the fords of the Jordan they said, 'We will teach them a thing or two.' When an Ephraimite wanted to go across they would ask, 'Are you an Ephraimite?' If they said 'No,' they would be challenged to pronounce the word *Shibboleth*. But the Ephraimites couldn't say it; they said *Sibboleth*. The tragedy was that they both meant the same thing.

They were brother tribes who began life fighting the enemy and now the fight has turned inwards, with brother fighting brother and group fighting group. The Gileadite group smashing the Ephraimite group and cutting them down because they can't pronounce, as we proverbially call it now, 'the right Shibboleth.' What an unqualified tragedy and, unless I have sorely misread history, sometimes we too become confused at that level, with equally disastrous results.

Samson (1)

Judges 13:1–25

We come now to the story of the final judge and deliverer, the story of Samson, perhaps the best known story in all the book of Judges. And yet I suggest to you, as we read it in our academic fashion, we shall be in a slight danger; we shall certainly find it an exercise in humility and charity, and a challenge in discernment.

Samson's faults are so glaring and lurid that it would be easy for us to concentrate on them and to suppose that we are automatically better than he and so fall into the trap of which Paul warned us, 'Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall' (1 Cor 10:12), and then our charity will be under severe strain as we continue to read the story. Samson's life and service are so full of manifest weaknesses, so many wrong and unworthy actions and deeds that we might be in danger of coming to a judgment that is altogether too harsh. In all our criticisms we shall have to remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit's verdict upon Samson's life in Hebrews 11 is that he was a man of faith; whose faith, if not his behaviour, we are meant to admire and follow.

The challenge of being gifted

It will also be an exercise for us in discernment. Samson was an extraordinarily gifted man. The power of the Holy Spirit upon him is mentioned explicitly at least four times in these chapters, and it is evident that the power he wielded was more than human power. So he had supernatural gift and power, but we mustn't let that blind our eyes, as eventually it blinded his, to the fact that the possession of spiritual gift is no guarantee of godly conduct.

All of us need to remind ourselves that gift is not necessarily the same as grace. Many a man and woman, not gifted so much as we may be, may in fact be far more godly — far more filled with God's grace; far more self-controlled and Christlike than some of the Lord's more spectacularly gifted servants. Gift is no proof against falling. The record of Samson's life will serve to remind us that just because a man is gifted we cannot afford to suppose that all he does and all his methods are necessarily right.

In 1 Corinthians 12–14 Paul discusses the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps more than in any other context he appeals to us to be critical of ourselves, 'Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature . . . Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said' (14:20, 29). Not with harsh and unbrotherly criticism of course, but with clear sighted discernment. Just because a gifted man says this or does that, we would be in danger if we automatically said that he must be right. We must learn in humility to judge.

Whilst he was tremendously gifted and called of God to be a Nazirite, failure on Samson's part to check his gift with such discernment meant that he broke almost every rule and ended in disaster. He was raised up of God as a deliverer, but when he died Israel were as much in bondage to the Philistines as they had ever been. He had done all sorts of spectacular spiritual fireworks, but if you ask what they achieved in the end you might be forgiven for thinking that it was perilously little.

However, in the first place the story encourages us to think much of the grace of God. Aren't you astounded that God used Samson? My brothers and sisters, we ought to be more astounded that God uses us. Whatever should happen if God waited until we were perfect before he used us? And if God is prepared to use me, even when I am imperfect, how shall I criticize too harshly the fact that he used Samson? The story magnifies the grace of God and makes us humble. God often uses us not because of our faithfulness but in spite of our failures. But as our story will tell us, there are times and there are things which we do that make it impossible even for the God of grace to use us.

The enemy: The Philistines

So let us now think of the enemy that Samson would fight. To use the biblical phrase, 'He shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines' (13:5). Just let me remind you again where the Philistines were located. In the early days of the first phase of the conquest under Joshua there is no record of any Philistines, but it would appear that in the intervening centuries they gradually began to come. In other literature they are known as the *Sea Peoples*, though learned opinion disagrees as to where they came from. The Septuagint translation has the notion that they came from Cappadocia, which is not altogether out of court. Others held that they came from Crete and some think that they were remnants of the Minoan civilization. They came and settled on the seaboard in the southwest and made themselves a perfect nuisance to the Egyptians, who struggled to contain them and keep them up north. From this time onwards they began to be a serious enemy.

According to Genesis there was an earlier batch of Philistines that had come into Canaan. In the stories of Abraham and Isaac you read already of local Philistine chieftains and kings (21:32, 34). But this is now the second big invasion, bigger by far than the other one. They had not only settled but they had begun to penetrate. They were a very civilized people; they had a very distinctive hairstyle and their funeral urns were the most peculiar things that you ever did see, with great ugly faces and folded arms under their chins. Recent archaeology has been turning up a whole host of these coffins in the southwest of Israel.

The Philistines—Sea Peoples—came over the Mediterranean into the land from the southwest, and a particular feature about them is that they began to peacefully penetrate into Israel. We do not read of any great battles or conflicts in those early days. Then they began to penetrate east and north, and at some stage reached quite a distance inland. Another interesting thing is that eventually it was the Philistines that gave their name to the land; when we call that part of the world *Palestine*, we are referring to it as the land of the Philistines. The Philistines so dominated the coast and some of the interior that some other

nations thought of that land as the Philistines' country, Palestine, and that was a sad confusion.

What kind of people were these Philistines?

As I remarked in an earlier study, when the Holy Spirit characterises different nations he will very often pick out one epithet that distinguishes a particular nation. All nations are sinners of course, but the historian will refer to *the sinners, the Amalekites* (1 Sam 15:18). All nations outside Israel were Gentiles, but the people that lived particularly north of the early settlements of Israel came to be naturally referred to as *Gentiles*—'Harosheth of the Gentiles' (Judg 4:2 KJV), and at the time of our Lord, 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Matt 4:15). It was the special part where the interface between Jew and Gentile was particularly marked and hence these particular nations appeared to Israel as Gentiles.

When you come to the book of Judges and later into the books of Samuel, the Philistines had become a serious threat to Israel until they were eventually put down by David. One particular epithet is often used, *the uncircumcised Philistine*, or even simply the uncircumcised (1 Sam 17:26). King Saul of Israel had a horror of falling into the hands of the uncircumcised (31:4)—that is of course, the Philistines.

Many nations outside Israel were uncircumcised; though it wouldn't be right to think that only Israel was circumcised, as a lot of other nations practised the rite of circumcision. The thing that distinguished Israel was the significance that Israel gave to it. If we spend a while now thinking about what circumcision represented for the true Israelite, then perhaps we shall have part of the key to the understanding of the issues at stake in these subsequent conflicts. It was little short of a disaster when the nation that was uncircumcised began to penetrate, intermingle with and eventually control circumcised Israel, so from the outside nations' point of view it was the uncircumcised people that predominated and were the real inhabitants of that land.

What should the distinction be between uncircumcised Philistines and circumcised Israelites? Even in those ancient times it was far more than some empty ritual and ceremony. Read the ancient books and the Prophets, and see what circumcision stood for to the godly in Israel. In later times, however, it became a mere external ritual. Paul has to denounce his fellow Jews, who treated circumcision as a mere empty emblem and ritual (Rom 2:25–29). Somehow they thought it brought merit, even if their behaviour was shocking. Godly Israelites saw that circumcision was a seal, an outward sign, and yet it had symbolic significance.

The significance of circumcision physically

Let us therefore ponder it for a moment and, if we see what a true circumcised Israelite was, we shall begin to see what an uncircumcised Philistine was and how he contrasted so importantly with a true Israelite.

Circumcision lay at the very beginnings of the race that sprang from Abraham (Gen 17). Certainly Abraham was not justified on the grounds of his circumcision, nor were any of his followers; but circumcision was a sign of the righteousness that he had by faith and was a

sign and seal of the great covenant that God had with Abraham and his descendants. If they were true descendants they walked in the steps of the faith of their father Abraham (Rom 4:12). Alas, for many it became an empty formula. It ought to have meant that being true children of Abraham, as indicated by this external sign, they walked in the steps of Abraham's faith and belonged to this special race. In addition however, it should have indicated that they were spiritual descendants of Abraham, men of faith in God—the God who quickened Abraham's dead body and brought life out of death by his miraculous and living power; the living God with whom the true relationship is a relationship of living faith.

If that is what circumcision stood for in the earlier days of Genesis, then the Philistines were uncircumcised. They had no vivid personal experience of faith in the true and living God like Abraham had. They had their religion, but they had no experience of the God that could bring life out of death, such as Abraham and Sarah had. Moreover, they were strangers from the covenants of Israel; circumcision was a seal of the covenant and the Philistines stood outside. In our modern language they were *unregenerate*.

Already, perhaps, you can see what a dangerous and threatening thing it was when the uncircumcised Philistines began peacefully to penetrate the genuine people of God, until at length people looking on from the outside saw no difference between the one and the other. Whether they were circumcised or uncircumcised did not make a lot of difference, they were all just religious and the distinction was obliterated.

I needn't pause long to remind you where very early on Christendom suffered a similar fate. It is the constant peril that in one generation you have a church of believers who have known personally what it is to believe in him that raised up Jesus from the dead and have been born again by the incorruptible seed of the word of God. They know God as a living reality because of their regeneration. Then in the next generation the tide comes creeping in and the first thing that goes is that living relationship with the Lord. Churches can have men and women in their midst who have never had any real experience of the living God and the world outside doesn't know the difference.

In many countries one of the biggest difficulties missionaries face is that people are rejecting Christianity, but not true Christianity—they are rejecting what they have thought to be Christianity. In Old Testament terms they are rejecting the Philistines, but they think they are rejecting the Israelites.

The significance of circumcision spiritually

But then let us look at Jeremiah 9:23–26, where it brings home to the Israelites of that day what was meant to be the spiritual significance of circumcision:

Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practises steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight,' declares the LORD. 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh—Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert

who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart.'

The early words of that paragraph are well known to us. They are quoted at the onset of the first epistle to the Corinthians, where Paul is pleading that the message of the cross is not merely that there is forgiveness through the death of Christ; it bids us consider that our salvation was accomplished by no less drastic a thing than God's fair Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, being crucified on a cross. It spells the bankruptcy both of human wisdom and human might. Their great achievement and their highest wisdom, both religious and political, was that they crucified the Lord of glory.

Why is it then that the gospel of Christ comes to be the gospel of the cross? 'It is this way round,' says Paul. 'A wise man's wisdom cannot save him, or a powerful man's power, or a rich man's riches. Man is bankrupt and God has determined to save us in such a way that no flesh shall glory [boast, have confidence in itself] before God' (1:27–29). How did the Corinthians get into Christ? 'It wasn't by my wisdom, nor yet by Apollos's eloquence,' says Paul (3:5).

I hope not, for if Paul's wisdom put you into Christ, one of these days there will come a man with a better wisdom and he will take you out of Christ. And if it was Apollos's eloquence that put you into Christ, then some greater orator will come and take you out of Christ. Thank God we are in Christ not by the wisdom of men, 'It is of God that you are in Christ Jesus' (1:30)—nothing short of divine power has put you there.

As Paul preaches his genuine supernaturalism upon which our gospel depends, it sounds so Christian that we might forget that it didn't begin in the Christian New Testament; it began in Jeremiah as the prophet called upon Israel to observe the significance of their circumcision. God rebukes the nations that are 'circumcised in their uncircumcision'—physically and outwardly circumcised. Jeremiah lists them: Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the children of Ammon, and Moab. Outwardly circumcised but uncircumcised in heart, putting their confidence in their riches and their wisdom and their philosophies—in anything instead of in the Lord, like truly circumcised people would. Circumcision therefore becomes a mark of those who have true confidence in the living God and put no confidence in man and man's ability.

The Philistines and their philosophy

Then who are the Philistines? They were religious people. Let me transport you to another later period of their history. Israel, at a low ebb, had come to put their trust in external rituals like the ark instead of the living God and God had to allow them to see that mere symbols count as nothing. If Israel has lost faith in the living God, the mere symbol of the ark is a box with some gold on it. When they say, 'Let's bring the ark that *it* may save us' (1 Sam 4:3), God despises their whole bag of tricks and lets the ark go with the Israelites into defeat. The Philistines took the ark down to their country and put it into the house of Dagon their god. But now here comes the different tune—because it was a symbol appointed by the living God, God's reputation was at stake.

The Philistines put the ark in the house of Dagon and in the morning Dagon had fallen down on the ground (1 Sam 5:2–3). So they thought it out and decided in their wisdom that if your god falls down the best thing to do is to pick it up again. So they heaved him up and bowed down and worshipped him and gladly went home and slept! The next day he had fallen down again and this time his head was off (that doesn't say a lot for the god's brains!) and his hands were off. What do you do when your god loses his brains and his hands? What fools brainy people can be; the thing was transparent enough. The Philistines' religion was ultimately a worship of man, his power and his brain. But in the end it is true of all idolatry, you have to carry your idol.

There is a gorgeous bit of sarcasm in Isaiah. He pictures a village where idols stand there in their array. The villagers see a crowd gathering on the distant horizon, presently it takes shape and it is their enemy galloping as hard as they can come. In their panic the villagers collect all their household utensils and pack them up, and just as they are about to escape they notice their gods! You can't leave your gods behind, so with great effort and not a little anxiety they heave the gods down from their place. Now they have to carry the gods as well, and instead of helping them to escape they bog them down in the mud.

'Listen to me,' says God through Isaiah. 'With idolatry you have to carry your god, but I will carry you: "I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save"' (46:4). From birth to death he will carry his people. I will not need to tell you that that is the very basis of the gospel that Isaiah preached, and the gospel that the apostles preached as well.

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. (Isa 45:22)

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

Forsake your confidence in man—his power and his brain, and all the idols that you have manufactured from those brains—put your faith in the living God and know the reality of his salvation. The Philistines found the lesson hard. It was the Philistines who produced the greatest hulk of a man that ever stalked on to Israel's stage, Goliath himself (1 Sam 17). King Saul of Israel thought he was a very big man himself until he saw Goliath. Look at his helmet—what a size of a brain! Look at his arms—you wouldn't get anywhere near him. What a man he was. Listen to his taunts as he comes on to the battlefield as a single combat hero after the manner of the ancient world, 'I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together' (v. 10). Imagine the spectacle if you can—this big man striding on to the stage and defying the armies of the living God (v. 26).

The mystery of the angel's name and the secret of Samson's power

Since that was the Philistine philosophy, Samson was a man who was a mystery to them. He had another power that they didn't understand and he made them feel decidedly uncomfortable at times. What was the secret of this different kind of power? It obviously wasn't in his stature. If he had been big and brawny like Goliath, the Philistines would have acceded, but apparently he was an ordinary stature of a man. He actually looked a bit

womanly with his long hair—a funny thing, the Philistines thought. They hadn't the sense to see where his secret lay, but were determined to find out. Not so they might copy it, but so that they might suppress it. What a curious creature unregenerate man is; he doesn't believe in supernatural power, but if it exists he is going to stop it.

Let us now notice one or two ideas that recur in the story. We start with the early preparatory chapter concerned more with Samson's parents than with Samson. Notice the dominant theme of the *incomprehensibility* of the name of the angel who appeared to them.

Then the woman came and told her husband, 'A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name.' . . .

And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, 'What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honour you?' And the angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?' (Judg 13:6, 17–18)

Mysterious as indeed it was, how would the man in question ever have got round to explaining to Manoah the high mysteries of his name? He was none other than the angel of the Lord. 'If you will offer an offering,' said the angel, 'you must offer it to the Lord' (v. 16). There must be no offering to some mere man, but Manoah didn't know that he was the angel of the Lord. As Manoah offered it the flame began to rise heavenwards as also the angel did, mysteriously and wondrously—he went up to heaven in the smoke and the flame, accepted like the sacrifice in the presence of God.

Let's check ourselves, lest we be led away on fancy's path. Is this meant to be a real theme on which we should concentrate our attention? Well, we should at least look how the idea of mystery, secret, or enigma recurs. When Samson went down to the Philistines (ch. 14) he posed a riddle to them and vexed their brains with its incomprehensibility. They wouldn't have found it out to this day if they had not extorted it by illegitimate means. It was a riddle and a secret betrayal. Come to the story of Delilah (ch. 16). Once more it is a question of a Philistine woman urging Samson to betray his secret, until at length the secret and the mystery were eventually extracted from Samson and they overcame him.

When reading the story as a piece of literature I am suggesting to you that we have to take notice of this initial theme of the mystery, the incomprehensibility of the name. This is what a Philistine by definition will never fully understand. What an awesome experience was given to Manoah and his wife when the very angel of the Lord¹³ came down to speak God's message to them. This is not *typology*, the angel of the Lord isn't a type of anything; he is himself. Nor is this *myth* and fancy; it was real to that homely couple in those far off days when Israel was battling against the Philistines, whose boast was in man's brain, brawn, and power.

God began to prepare them for the training of a deliverer that should be equipped to meet the Philistine challenge by knowing the reality of the supernatural power of God and having a relationship with the God of heaven. How else will you conquer Philistine man

¹³ I believe it was he who in later times after his incarnation we would have called the Second Person of the Trinity, or the Son of God.

than by the supernatural power of God? So the angel of the Lord came to Manoah and his wife to tell them what would be necessary to prepare their son to eventually do battle and begin to deliver Israel.

Come with me in your imagination to that actual occasion. How would you have felt as you stood by that rough-hewn altar in that primitive and ancient field?

‘He didn’t tell me his name,’ said Manoah’s wife.

‘Who is he?’ said Manoah.

Eventually plucking up courage he asked, ‘What is your name?’

‘Why do you ask my name,’ the angel replied, ‘seeing it is wonderful?’¹⁴

The mystery revealed

Centuries later that same angel of the Lord again visited our earth. Now incarnate, standing with his disciples he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said,

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt 11:25–27)

Wonderful words—spoken on the dusty roadside of Palestine to a few humble fishermen. The very Lord of heaven and earth passed by the Philistines of this world, the circumcised Jews in the temple; the leader of the priests himself, physically circumcised but uncircumcised in heart, no real living experience of God—he had a handful of fishermen around him and you and I might think he would be disappointed by this frugal harvest from his ministry, but his own heart is bubbling over with joy. ‘I thank you, Father, for this superb miracle. You have hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them to babes.’ The hymn writer has put it well,

But the high mysteries of His name
An angel’s grasp transcend;
The Father only (glorious claim!)
The Son can comprehend.

Yet loving thee, on whom His love
Ineffable doth rest,
Thy members all, in Thee, above,
As one with Thee are blest.¹⁵

Oh, the wonder of it. ‘No one knows the Son but the Father; no one knows the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son is willing to reveal him.’ It isn’t of course that our Lord is

¹⁴ ‘secret’ (KJV); ‘beyond understanding’ (NIV).

¹⁵ Josiah Conder, 1836, ‘Thou art the everlasting Word’ (from The Believers Hymn Book).

being spiteful or narrow-minded when he says to his Father, 'You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding [the Philistines of this world], and revealed them to little children.' God isn't a thing; the supreme Lord is a person.

When it comes to knowing things there is an easy way to do it. Take an atom, for instance. To get to know an atom all you need is a brain like Einstein, a few machines plus multimillions of pounds and you will eventually find an atom you can smash! When it has been smashed to bits, the pieces come out and you can understand what is in it, because an atom is a thing.

You won't know me that way. I won't confess to many brains, but you can put me through your atom smasher and investigate every atom and molecule in my body and you won't know me because I am not just a thing, I happen to be a person. And the supreme Lord? You can bring your brain to bear upon him and put him through all your chemical analyses and atomic and molecular science, and you will remain as ignorant of the living God as you were when you started because he isn't a thing.

When will man learn his place? Let him rejoice in his God-given wisdom, his powers of analysis and thought, but let him have the humility to observe that, when it comes to knowing the uncreated Lord, God isn't a thing to be analysed or a person to be known in that way. How then shall I know him? If the wise and prudent can't understand, how on earth is the babe going to understand?

But we are looking at it from the wrong angle. If it was a question of us taxing our brains and bringing them up to such heights that we could understand God, we should never understand him. It is the other way round: the Supreme Lord is pleased to manifest himself. If you should allow me I could investigate something about you. Watch how you do your house, see what sports you like, analyse the material in your clothes. But if you chose not to communicate yourself to me I shall not know you, even with my swelled head and enormous brains! Here is your little baby in your arms, looking into your face and saying 'Dada'. He knows you. You say, 'He is a clever baby.' No he's not! Clever you who are able to get through to the baby.

Who is this Jesus Christ, what is his name? He came down to our earth into our humble fields, to us who would never have known the Father, and he is able to make God known to us.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. (Zech 4:6)

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me. (Jer 9:23-24)

What a magnificent gospel! The Lord is prepared to reveal his unknowable name to us. As the little baby begins to say Mama and Dada and to know his parents, so we can know the secret that lies at the very heart of the universe.

Samson (2)

Judges 14:1–20

We have been studying the Philistines, the last great major enemy in the book of Judges. We noticed that they gave their name to the promised land, since Palestine means, literally, the land of the Philistines. For many outsiders the promised land was the land of the Philistines, as they seem not to have known much about the Israelites.

Yet of course there was a vital difference between Israel and the Philistines. Israel were circumcised, the Philistines uncircumcised; Israel stood in a covenant relationship with God and circumcision was for them the seal and sign of that covenant, the Philistines stood outside, strangers from the covenants of Israel. More importantly still, according to the Old Testament and particularly according to her prophets, circumcision was meant to be not only a seal and sign, but also a symbol indicating Israel's faith in the living God. Israel had learned not to put her faith in human wisdom and might and power, but in the living God himself. Out of national and personal experience they had had dealings with the God who had brought life out of death for Abraham and Sarah their ancestors.

Israel did not very often live up to the implications of circumcision and the prophet Jeremiah had to denounce them. They were circumcised outwardly, as were many other nations, but when it came to the spiritual and moral significance of that emblem they were little better than the nations surrounding them.

Then we considered the first steps that God took to prepare for them a deliverer from the hand of the Philistines, and those first steps were taken more with his parents than with Samson himself. There came a man of God, who turned out to be none other than the angel of the Lord; so that when they enquired after his name he said that his name was wonderful—it was the incomprehensible name. He had come down to prepare Manoah and his wife, and then Samson, for battle with this particular foe.

The Philistine nation that produced the giant man Goliath was a nation confident in its brain and in its brawn, but a nation that knew nothing other than pagan idolatry. They had a worship that was transparently thin and was but the worship of man's own deified brain and brawn. If ever Israel were to be delivered from such an enemy they would have to have a fresh, living experience in the supernatural power of God—the living God, the God that is more than man.

This exalted experience was given to Manoah and his wife in the visitation of the angel of the Lord, the second person of the Trinity, the bearer of the incomprehensible name, the Son of God himself. What a wonderful thing it must have been for them. But Manoah's first reaction was one of extreme fear, 'We shall surely die, for we have seen God' (v. 22). Then his wife, with more spiritual insight than her husband, learned to reason with the reason of

faith, 'Do you suppose it would be the Lord's intention to kill us when he has made known all these wonderful things and has accepted this sacrifice at our hands?'

The pressure is irresistible now to leave those ancient times and be transported to that holy spot on earth where once again those holy feet stood. In our minds to see the incarnate Word of God ascend and know that an eternal, indissoluble link has been forged through that man in glory with the superhuman, the supernatural, the other world, the living God. What a glorious message of acceptance it is, to be grasped with all our hearts. Certainly the Lord has no intention to kill us, having accepted the Sacrifice. This blessed man has gone up to glory in a deeper sense, but gone up in the very flame of the Sacrifice, and being accepted himself we are accepted in him. The whole basis and balance of our confidence has shifted and we perceive what Paul is saying—'Let not anyone boast in man, for what is Paul or Cephas or anybody else?' Let us learn, as Jeremiah said, 'He that glories, let him glory in the Lord.'

The Nazirite vow

These were the steps to prepare Samson's parents and thus Samson himself to wage battle by the power of God's supernatural Spirit against the naturalists, the Philistines—the men with confidence in man. So let us turn to think of the deliverer himself, Samson. He obviously had two qualities: superhuman strength to put alongside the strength of the Philistines, and a supernatural secret to put alongside their mere human brains. We shall watch this theme of a secret/mystery/enigma developing through the stories. Samson had strength and a power that was superior to theirs. Their problem was to know the secret of that strength.

But in addition to that strength, indeed as the source and condition of it, his parents were instructed that they were to bring him up as a Nazirite from the womb (13:5). So much so that not only Samson, but his mother also, would be required to observe some of the rules and the regulations of that vow. She too was to abstain from wine and all that pertained to it, as was Samson in his life. She was not to eat any unclean thing, and of course neither was Samson. No razor was to come upon his head; he was to remain unshaven and his hair to grow long.

It is a sad fact that as we read the story we shall find that Samson himself trifled (to put it no more strongly) with the first of those conditions. As a Nazirite he was not to take of the vine nor touch it, but time and again you will find him wandering in the valleys where the very best vines were grown and the wines of the Philistines were processed. Perhaps he had the strength to resist temptation—let's give him the benefit of the doubt. A Nazirite was not to touch the dead body of any human. Even the ordinary Israelite was regarded as being unclean if he touched the carcass or the bone of a dead animal, if it was an unclean animal. According to Jewish ritual, lions and asses are unclean animals. However, in the course of the story, as Samson does his exploits, we shall find he contracts defilement from these things. He takes honey out of the dead carcass of a lion and uses the jawbone of an ass to smite the Philistines.

In spite of breaking the rules and disobeying the commandments, and the compromise of his devotion and loyalty to God in these matters of the Nazirite vow, God in his mercy still used him. But he reached a point where God could no longer use him and all his

strength was gone. The climax of the story is how Samson betrayed the secret of his strength and let his hair be taken from him.

What was the point of that strange ancient ritual, the institution of the Nazirite vow? Obviously it expressed a special and extreme form of devotion to the Lord, and as such it is easy to read it in this context. If the deliverer were to be used of God and to know the superhuman power of the Holy Spirit in his ministry, then it would require of him a special consecration to the Lord. But what was this business of Nazirite men having to wear their hair long? It is a strange and very ancient and antique custom; perhaps the full understanding of it has long since passed beyond the horizon of our knowledge. On the other hand, perhaps there are also some hints in various parts of holy Scripture. 'No razor must come upon his head,' said the man of God. It is interesting to note that such tools had already been developed at this time in history. The Philistines had some mighty sharp razors and scissors that could cut off Samson's seven locks.

I am glad I don't live in those far off times; shaving is a bother enough with soap and brush and razor, just imagine shaving with some of those antiquated implements that we see in the museums! But they worked, for men shaved their beards and trimmed their hair. They were just as vain then as in this cosmetic age! What is wrong with shaving; why shouldn't we shave? Isn't it man's responsibility to be well dressed and to make something of his manliness? But this was a special vow of consecration. When a Nazirite entered upon his vow, first of all he shaved his head and then during the period of his vow he let the hair grow utterly untouched by any human instrument.

I wonder if we might not get a clue to the implications of this far-off symbolism when we observe, for instance, the instructions in connection with God's holy altar. 'If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it' (Exod 20:25). In what sense would they profane it? Whatever the reason it is evident that the suitable material to be used in an altar of the Lord was plain untrimmed stone, as nature left it. No human tool was to touch it; it was to be pristine, uncut nature, with no intrusion of man's effort. It was to be virgin stone.

We have that same kind of concept in other areas of nature—we talk about a virgin forest. When man comes with his axes and modern machinery, he can maybe improve the forest, tend and guard it and preserve it. Nonetheless, I suspect all of us have a certain feeling when we stand somewhere that human foot has never been and human tools have never been used. Even in our modern times there is awe about it, and there certainly was in ancient times.

It seems to me therefore, that in abstaining from using any tool upon his hair the Nazirite is not delighting in being scruffy or careless. His hair is allowed to grow utterly for God, untouched by human effort. This is virgin nature given over to God, and at the end it will be cut off and sacrificed upon the altar for God. What might that tell us and what did it tell those ancient people? On the one side, here is the Philistine with all his sophistication but no knowledge of the living God; knowing nothing more than mere human power and ingenuity and brain. Set over against him is a man, apparently not of any unusual physique, who is utterly consecrated to God. It is going to show God's power in response to Samson's dedication.

What did Samson accomplish?

And so, after all the preparation, as Samson prepared for his task you may be forgiven if you feel that the actual achievement was a little bit small. We have been used to reading of big battles. Barak with his ten thousand men making mincemeat of Sisera in spite of his chariots of iron; Gideon with a handful of men sending a whole camp of Midianites packing in the confusion of the night; even Jephthah, with his sturdy warfare, routing the Ammonites. And now after all this preparation we are treated to a few foxes running around with fireworks in their tails. It brightened up the night sky and looked fun as the sparks spattered, but could you call that a notable victory to put alongside the others? You may be forgiven for feeling that there is an anticlimax somewhere. For all the spiritual power, fireworks, scintillations and marvellous goings on, very little in the end was accomplished.

The Holy Spirit warns us in advance that not very much is going to be accomplished. You will have noticed what the man of God said to Samson's parents: 'The child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel out of the hand of the Philistines' (13:5). Mark the verb, *begin*. He certainly didn't end it. It would be years and years and years before there would arise a conqueror out of Judah to adequately meet the Philistines. Even from this time onward the Philistines grew in power. The great man Saul had a go at defeating them and was miserably defeated himself. It wasn't until David came and fought the giant, raised his armies and defeated the Philistines in pitch battle, that the Philistine pressure was relieved.

You must not expect too much of Samson. In God's plan he was to begin the process of deliverance. And what would that involve? Precisely this: the demonstration that there was a difference between the God of Israel and the god of the Philistines; a demonstration that there was a difference between the power that the Philistines wielded and the power that Samson wielded. If that seems to you a very small thing to demonstrate, then remember what the danger was at this time. The Philistines had come from across the sea and now they were spreading and gradually permeating amongst the people of Israel with their superior culture, until the very land was going to be called Philistine Land. For many people there would be no difference between an uncircumcised Philistine and a circumcised Israelite. The difference was of course the reality of the living God and Israel's need to experience his power. If nothing more was demonstrated in the history and career of Samson, then it was an exceedingly important thing to discover that there was a reality in the living, supernatural power of God, and the true Israelite stood on that side.

What is true Christianity?

If you will allow me to draw another of my analogies, I would bid you think of the Middle Ages. What happened after those early centuries of apostolic and post-apostolic evangelism? Empowered by a self-evidently supernatural power that turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6), it eventually subsided. And what was lost? The sense of the power of the living God, the need of being born again by the supernatural power of God. Nowadays we may say that this or that is a *dead church*. But this phrase hides a very serious reality. What is true Christianity? In the eyes of the world it is but religion. To them the business of being born

again of the Spirit of God is a mystery. They do not understand it, for the things of the Spirit of God are folly to the unregenerate mind. The world at large has an impression of Christianity that it is mere human religion, man's effort to do his best and they know nothing more. The first point to be established is that there is something more. There is a supernatural side to Christianity, but this is not a deluxe edition of Christianity available for the particularly advanced. Supernatural Christianity starts at the very beginning:

Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:5–6)

In many churches, if you could do nothing more than get a few foxes with torches in their tails to run about among them, it might at least waken them up to the reality of the supernatural power of God. They might start asking, 'Is there something more to Christianity than just being good and doing the best you can?'

Before the long dark ages settled in at the end of the book of Judges, God lit a candle to show the difference between Philistinism and its uncircumcision, and Israel with the true God and her circumcision. If nothing more than that was achieved, it is not something to be sneezed at.

Samson's marriage

So let's get on with the story. Samson saw a girl of the Philistines and he said to his parents, 'Get me the young lady for my wife' (14:2). They said, 'Isn't there a girl amongst all the daughters of your people (in your church!), that you should go and marry an unconverted girl?'

'A Philistine—an *uncircumcised Philistine*,' said his father with emphasis in his voice—'must you go to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines?'

His parents were right. As we have studied the structure of this book, we have seen that one of the sad things is that Samson himself was guilty of the very sins the people had to be delivered from at the beginning in the days of Othniel. What would Samson not have done for God if he had been an Othniel? Just try and imagine Samson matched with Achsah, the Philistines would have to look out! Samson with his supernatural power, Achsah with her devotion to the Lord and tremendous pioneering spirit, the two would have been unbeatable. Whereas Achsah was the secret of Othniel's success, Samson's unregenerate women (let's call them no better than that) were the secret of his downfall.

Mother and Father were right. Do you think the Lord sometimes bids us to go and break the very commandments he himself has given? Sometimes you say, 'I feel led that way.' Is the Holy Spirit inconsistent? When Samson in his young folly began to put himself on the road that would eventually lead him to entrapment, God in his sovereign grace did not abandon him but sought to use the occasion.

What a magnificent God we have. He will use our successes for his glory, and he will do his utmost to turn our mistakes to our benefit as well. The Lord got his opportunity against the Philistines and it did result in an exhibition that there was a difference between Philistine and Israelite after all. The term '*uncircumcised Philistine*' was not an epithet of

abuse that you hurled around; it indicated a true distinction between them and the real people of God.

It seems to me that in the process God tried to teach Samson some very salutary lessons. As he goes down to make the preliminary negotiations with this Philistine girl a lion came out and roared against him (v. 5). Very often the work and power of the Spirit within Samson was provoked by opposition, and as the lion roared against him Samson took it by its jaws and split it in two and continued down the road. When the negotiations were finished he turned aside to see the carcass and in the body of the lion he found honey. He ate some of it and brought some in his hands and gave it to his parents. With a very nice touch the historian says, 'He did not tell them where he got the honey' —they might have poured it down his shirt! Honey from the carcass of a lion and you meant to be a Nazirite? When you have children you can't always be sure what they are up to; they didn't know and they ate it and it tasted good.

Samson's riddle

They went off to the marriage feast. Then Samson suddenly had an idea for his thirty companions. If you were invited to dine with a sovereign in the ancient world, in the course of the evening the monarch himself would suggest playing a few games. He would set a riddle and you would have to rack your brains to solve it for the pleasure of His Majesty. And so at his wedding banquet Samson played the game of riddles. 'Let's put thirty linen garments and thirty changes of raiment as the stake. I will tell you a riddle and if you can solve it I will give you the clothes; if you can't solve it you will give them to me. "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet"' (Judg 14:12-14).

It was a very fair description of what had happened, and before we go further we can ponder it and its significance. In spite of his failure it was the Spirit of God that had come upon Samson, making a profound difference in the nature of the lion. The lion's nature is to eat and it was being made to act as the very opposite. What would the lion have said if it had woken up and found people using his body as a honey pot? Out of the strong—the powerfully destructive—came forth sweetness. Is this all nothing other than an ancient little fairy story? Or is it still true that God's Holy Spirit has the power to change not only lions but wild, unclean animals of men and women and make them act contrary to fallen nature? It is no fairy story; this is the power of the Holy Spirit at work.

I do not have a clue how Samson thought the Philistines were going to understand his riddle. They could have said, 'You've won, here are the clothes; but we'd like to know what on earth you are talking about. What is this secret, this mystery, this enigma? What is this mysterious power that could change an eater into something that produces food?' Perhaps if Samson had told them they could have been helped to understand it. The tragedy is that they didn't want to understand it. They wanted to find out what it was, not so that they might enjoy it themselves but so that they might destroy it. What a curious thing unregenerate man is. With evidence in front of his nose to cause him to think that there is some further power, he doesn't want it; it makes him feel uncomfortable. He only wants to find out its secret in order to prove to himself that he can be in control.

A question of loyalty. Now Samson was going to be taught another lesson about nature, this time human nature. The Philistines asked his wife, 'Whose side are you on?' This wasn't that form of marriage where the bride left her father's home and came to the home of her husband. It was a recognised form of marriage in those far off days in which the husband would marry a girl and then visit her from time to time, leaving her in the home of her parents. It meant that for all her professed love the girl remained a Philistine.

You can give up now the hope that if a child of God marries an unregenerate person, somehow he or she will be bound to change. This was a Philistine lass to begin with and she was a Philistine lass to her dying day. For all her professions of love, her loyalty was not with Samson but with the Philistines. Can you understand it? I think if I was a girl and my husband had the power to roar around like Samson did and fight lions and things, I would show him off a bit to the Philistines! Not this girl—her loyalties remained where they had always been, with the uncircumcised Philistines. She tried to find the answer to his riddle under duress, to tell the Philistines so that Samson might lose the wager.

Now perceive a lesson that God was beginning to teach Samson. It was God, wasn't it? He had given him more than human power until he had courage to face a lion, and he had seen the lion made to act contrary to its nature. But the Samson that could conquer a lion couldn't face a woman when she nagged! There you see his weak point. He was a man possessed of the Holy Spirit of God, but defeated at the level of his emotional life. Don't mistake the emotion of love, beauty or culture for personal experience of God. How hard it is for us to learn the lesson that, apart from God's Holy Spirit, unregenerate flesh is flesh and will remain flesh.

When the secret of the riddle was discovered, in his rage Samson went round and slew thirty Philistines and took their raiment and paid the wager. As well as teaching Samson the lesson that this power was a reality and there was a difference, the Lord had used it to take an advantage against the Philistines. However, when Samson eventually returned to get his wife he found to his dismay and disgust that she had been given to another (15:2). Faced with that opposition he went out and caught three hundred foxes, tied their tails together, put smoking firebrands between them and set them loose in the Philistines' cornfields. When the Philistines found out who had done it they burned the girl and her father alive, so now Samson had lost his wife completely.

The men of Judah hand Samson over to the Philistines

Would to God Samson had learned his lesson. One mistake with the Philistine girls ought to have been enough—why didn't he heave a deep sigh of relief and go home? In his anger and disgust he smote the Philistines, but mark what happened next. Here come the men of Judah. Is there going to be revival; could they see hope of deliverance at last from this weight of Philistine uncircumcision that was holding them in oppression? Now they had caught a glimpse of the power of God, could they be free and the whole place woken up and a revival would come?

You have misread it! 'This is uncommonly inconvenient, Samson,' they said. 'We don't know much about this type of experience you are having, a sort of a high, but you are causing a lot of trouble around here. Things were peaceful until you started witnessing with

your riddles and things. Nobody can make any sense out of them anyway. Don't you know that the Philistines are our rulers? We mustn't upset them, so we have come to bind you and hand you over to the Philistines.' A man filled with the Spirit of God, and God's people binding him and handing him over to stop him disturbing the establishment, the uncircumcised Philistines! It would have been sad if it had happened only once, but oh for the multitudes of times it has happened—think of Christian England putting John Bunyan in prison.

'Promise that you won't attack me,' said Samson (v. 12). He knew that he should be obliged to kill them if they did, and he didn't want to do that—he knew who the enemy was. So they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up to the Philistines who shouted as they met him. Whereupon the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him and the ropes that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire and his bonds dropped from off his hands (v. 14). He caught hold of the jawbone of a donkey (he shouldn't have used that, should he?) and smote many Philistines, and a great deliverance was wrought. And then in his desperate thirst, dehydration and almost death, he cried out to God for water. There came more than human water, miraculously provided to quench his thirst and revive him (vv. 18–19).¹⁶ God is merciful. He doesn't wait until we are perfect in our methods before he blesses us, or he might never be able to bless us at all.

So something had been done. It had been established that there was a difference, and some perhaps were beginning to see what that difference was. To others it was still, and must remain, a mystery. The unregenerate person still doesn't know what it is that you have. After someone is converted he or she will often say, 'I could see you had something I hadn't got.' Much as you might have tried to explain what it is, it remained a mystery to them. Of course it did! It is not to be accounted for by mere logic. The things of the Spirit of God are folly to the unregenerate mind; it doesn't know them and cannot discern them. But what a thing it is to establish in the minds of people that there is the supernatural power of God's Spirit and they can experience it. That is the difference between true and dead religion.

Having demonstrated the power to make the lion act contrary to nature, the Holy Spirit had warned Samson that there was nothing he could do when human beings in their ignorance reject God and want to get rid of him. And then Samson had been mercifully and providentially relieved of this ghastly mistake of marrying a Philistine girl.

It would have been good if the story had ended there but it goes on again.¹⁷ You will begin to think you are seeing the whole thing replayed, but with a very serious difference. Samson fails to learn his lesson and goes down to the Philistines again, and once more they set a trap for him (16:2). When he rose up in the middle of the night it doesn't say the Holy Spirit came upon him this time—the Holy Spirit is not there to get people out of scrapes when they persist in folly and get themselves into sin. But Samson had a gift, and he took hold of the doors and doorposts of the gates of the city, pulled them out and carried them up the mountain.

¹⁶ Samson called the place En-hakkore, the place of him that called, or cried aloud.

¹⁷ There are two great parts to the story of Samson, but we shall not discuss all the theories of source criticism here.

I suggest we had better think further before we attribute that to the Holy Spirit. Just because a man has the gift of a teacher, it doesn't imply that every time he uses the gift he is being led of the Spirit; and every time a man speaks in a tongue that doesn't prove either that the Spirit is using him. If you ask how I know, I know because I am a teacher! When the Holy Spirit isn't in it, it is possible to have a gift and to use it in a most carnal fashion.

Samson indulged himself and once more he was allowed to get out of the trap. Instead of thanking God and coming to repentance, he went again into a worse trap, but this time it proved fatal. Faced with unregenerate glamour and mere human emotion and love and self-indulgence, Samson had to choose what kind of a life he was going to devote himself to. Was he a man moved of God's Spirit, or a man led by the flesh? He made his choice; with the hair of his devotedness to God gone he was left powerless and weak (v. 20).

The Philistines mocked him. What a sad thing an extinct volcano is. How tragic to see a once mighty warrior for God stripped of his power and made the sport of the unregenerate. Samson was the only deliverer in the book of Judges who not only didn't deliver the people from the dominion of the enemy (when he died they were still under it); he was the only one that got captured. He was bound in the prison house of the Philistines, where he was made an advertisement for the superior power of a god of the Philistines.

While you carry the marks of God's Holy Spirit—his power in your life, his power in your church—you are superior to anything on earth. Lose his living power and you are a very poor thing compared with what the 'real' world can do by way of its brain and its brawn.

They put out Samson's eyes and took him to grind in the prison house where presently his hair began to grow. The Philistines made a great feast and there were many lords and ladies on the rooftop to watch the sport. In his misery Samson called unto the Lord, 'O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes' (Judg 16:28).

He felt for the pillars and calling upon God he bowed with all his strength and brought the house down, killing more Philistines in his death than ever he had done in his life. We are not home yet. May God preserve in us personally and in our churches the living reality of the presence and power of his almighty Spirit.

The Two Epilogues (1)

Judges 17:1–13; 18:1a; 19:1a; 21:25

Epilogue One

We come now to the final two sections of the book of Judges and by common consent they are difficult sections indeed. We shall find some help with them, perhaps, if we remind ourselves again of the position they occupy in the structure of the book. There is a certain similarity between the two introductory sections and the two epilogues.

The last two parts of the book have this in common, that they both give us stories concerning Levites. When we look further we shall find that the first large passage (17:1–18:31) is a story that concentrates our attention particularly on the institution of the Levites, one of the major institutions among the people of God at this time. Whereas the second and last major story runs from 19:1–21:25 and deals with another major institution among the tribes, what we sometimes call the *All Tribal Assembly*. We do not hear very much about it in the Old Testament, but it contributed a very important part to the wellbeing of the nation, at least when it was functioning as it should.

When we look back to the two large passages of introduction that stand at the beginning of the book we find that the first introduction too is concerned with the functioning of the All Tribal Assembly. We notice phrases that occur and reoccur, that occur again in the final section of the book when we are once more introduced to the workings of the All Tribal Assembly. You may care to work out for yourselves all the smaller details that these two things have in common, because they shed a very interesting historical light on the workings of an institution in Israel about which we do not hear very much.

Then again, when we were studying the second major portion of the introduction (2:6–3:6) we found it was concerned with Israel's recurrent lapses into idolatry. They intermarried with the Canaanite peoples, went after their gods and forsook the Lord their God. Mercifully those lapses into idolatry were intermittent, but now when we come to the first of the epilogues we find a very sorry story of the institutionalising of idolatry, the setting up of at least a couple of completely idolatrous shrines.

Micah had a shrine in his house and eventually he was able to import and hire a Levite, if you please. You will be further shocked when you read at the end of chapter 18 that the Levite was none other than a grandson of Moses. It is horrifying to see that in such a short time some part of the institution of the Levites had become so horribly corrupt that Moses' grandson and his successors hired their services out to a completely idolatrous shrine.

Decline in the institution of the judges

The writer of Judges has a thesis to develop. He points out to us that when it comes to the institution of the Judges, after the time of Gideon in particular, there was a noticeable decline.

Gideon had begun by nobly fighting the Midianites and taking his stand against idolatry. But as you come to the close of his story, Gideon takes to fighting and destroying Israelites as well as Midianites. And by the evening of his life he has taken the first few steps of lapsing into idolatry with the setting up of his golden ephod.

Then we notice as we come to *Abimelech* what a sad contrast he is to the story of *Deborah, Barak and Jael*. That trilogy fought the enemy of the Lord's people, and Jael in particular put an end to the trouble when she killed an enemy through his skull. But when we study the story of Abimelech we notice another woman who put an end to the trouble by smashing another man's skull. The sad thing was that on that occasion it was the skull of an Israelite who, pretending to be a deliverer, had become a tyrant and was already carrying along the decline that started with Gideon, now into worse depths. Being invited to be king, Gideon had said, 'I will not rule over you, the Lord your God is your king.' Somebody had given his son the name Abimelech, 'My Father is king' and Abimelech had tried to put himself in the position of a virtual king and tyrant, much to the anguish of the people of God.

Jephthah was a remarkable and praiseworthy man for his attempts to avoid war by diplomatic procedures. He attempted to argue out the case on historical grounds with the enemy, the Ammonite, and thereby avoid bloodshed. When it was impossible to avoid going to war he went to war and nobly defeated the enemy. But then, like Gideon, he became provoked by the unreasonable behaviour of his brethren and went down and took the fords of Jordan.

Shades of what *Ehud* had done; he had gone down and taken the fords of Jordan and as the Moabites had tried to cross over he had finally eliminated the enemy and so subdued the king of Moab. Using exactly the same tactics Jephthah took the fords of Jordan, and the swords of those who came across. But this time the people he slaughtered were not the enemy but his own national brethren. 'There is a decline,' says the writer of Judges.

In the first story the trouble was that the people had intermarried with the Gentiles, but God still had leaders who could be relied upon to live honourably and so deliver the people of God from this gross mistake with all its consequent evil. By the time you come to the last judge and deliverer, he himself is guilty of the very sin from which the people themselves had to be delivered at the beginning of the proceedings.

We are not surprised to find that kind of thing. The writer of Judges has told us that the Israelites went astray and when they repented God delivered them. When the judge was dead they went back to their old ways, but not merely back—you don't play with evil and get off quite so harmlessly. They went back, only each time they went back worse than they were before. The writer has selected his material to illustrate this sad and solemn, but very real, thesis.

Decline in the institution of the Levites

We shall find now, as we come to the final two passages in the book, he is taking that thesis further. Not only did the institution of the Judges in the end fail—after Samuel you will not read of judges as deliverers in that sense—the other two institutions likewise failed. The Levites failed, but when we read this sorry story of the Levites we are not to suppose that all the Levites were like this. Of course they weren't, any more than it would be fair to assess all the other judges and deliverers by the pattern of Samson.

Samson is in many respects a sorry example of the judges, but he indicates the extreme to which that institution of Judges went. So when we read these final stories of the Levites we mustn't suppose that the Levites had all been like this. This is an example of a grave tendency that was to be found among the Levites, the institutionalisation of idolatry. As their saviours and deliverers, the judges had a bad enough time bringing people back to the Lord. If only they had been able to rely upon an institution of Levites that had remained utterly faithful to the Lord, many of the battles would have been won more easily and some would never have needed to be fought. But the institution of the Levites had gone into sad decline.

Decline in the institution of the All Tribal Assembly

In the first story in the book the All Tribal Assembly is meeting together in solemn concourse, waiting upon God for directions as to who should go up first in order to expel and destroy the Canaanites, so that Israel might enter into their inheritance. Now at the end of the book the All Tribal Assembly is met together once more, waiting upon God in solemn contrition (at least in the end) and asking the very same question: 'Who shall go up for us first?' But the occasion is altogether a sadder one. Not now to defeat the enemy and lead the people of God into their glorious inheritance, but the sad and sorry necessity of chastising one of the tribes of Israel for an outrageous offence. For an immorality and crime against society as bad, if not worse than anything you would have found among the Canaanites. 'It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans' (see 1 Cor 5:1).

Of course the All Tribal Assembly existed in part for that very type of need—to discipline the people of God where discipline should prove necessary. It would be altogether unrealistic to suppose in that far off day, or even in our own, that we were so near to the state of things that obtains in heaven that we do not need any discipline amongst the people of God. Until we get home to glory discipline will be necessary. The sad thing about this story is the terrible shambles they made of the process of discipline, so that discipline came very near to leading to complete destruction. We are introduced to further decline in all the institutions—the Judges and the Levites, and finally the All Tribal Assembly.

Decline in the institution of theocracy

The two final portions of the book are also joined together by the constantly repeated observation of the historian, '*In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*' It seems evident that whoever the author was, in writing those words, he

seems to have a very high opinion of kingship in Israel. Even so, surely we must not read into his words more than he intends. Is he saying that in those far-off days, right from the days of Moses onwards until the monarchy, things were in a disreputable state because there was no king and everybody was doing what was right in his own eyes? Surely not! They were not always in Moses' time doing simply what was right in their own eyes. And under great and powerful judges like Gideon, surely they were not all just doing what was right in their own eyes?

If they had no earthly king or monarch, no one man ruled in Israel. That wasn't an oversight; it was by deliberate conviction. When invited to be king, Gideon said, 'No, certainly not. I will not be king. The Lord your God is your king' It wasn't carelessness; it was a deliberate institution, born of divine conviction, that Israel in her ideal state was a direct theocracy. It had been so even in the days of Moses, when every man and woman in Israel, whether they held office or not, believed themselves to be under the direct rule of God. Technically it was a theocracy and it worked.

We mustn't allow the stories of the disorders that eventually arose to make us imagine that things had always been like that, and that from the start theocracy had always been a foolish way of going about things. Israel wasn't simply waiting for some modern bright sparks to come along with better organisational ideas and gradually evolve them into the high state of monarchy. Rather, it was the reverse. In the original days God's own intention for Israel was a theocracy, that his people might enjoy the liberty, grandeur and dignity of living ordered lives together in their work and worship and their testimony because they knew the reality that each man and woman stood under the direct rule of the living God.

But that said, the plain story is that theocracy woefully declined. The writer's comment at the end of the book becomes increasingly true, 'There was no king in Israel' (21:25). That wouldn't have mattered if God were still their king. The trouble was that the reality of it had gone and the thing had become a hollow shell. Painful as it is, we shall not read it as people who are utterly unconcerned. In the churches to which you and I belong, I suspect we value very highly that form of government that is a direct theocracy, so we cannot remain unmoved when we read stories that show us that in Israel, under the continuing outward form of a theocracy, they had a form of godliness but had lost the power thereof. Instead of being a theocracy it wasn't even a decent democracy. It was anarchy, with everybody doing what was right in his own eyes.

The people reject God and demand a king

With the value of hindsight, the writer of Judges can tell us that, as a method of government, theocracy was to be abandoned and Israel introduced to monarchy. I have not time now to discuss with you all the involved questions that arose when Israel came to God and finally demanded a monarchy, pointing out that the other institutions hadn't worked. Theocracy hadn't worked; the priesthood had gone corrupt; the Levites were behaving abominably; even the prophets like Samuel, godly men themselves, had sons that disgraced their name and brought the institution of Prophet into disrepute. The people came and demanded a king as the only possible solution.

I am sorry too that I have not time to discuss with you the sorrow in the heart of God as he read their suggestion as a repudiation of his own kingship. Granted that some different form of government was necessary, it would have been at least polite if the people had come to God and said, 'Our institutions don't seem to be working. You are meant to be king, pray tell us what we should do now.' Instead of that, faced with the institutions appointed by God and theocracy supreme among them, the people came and said (as God read it), 'Your rule hasn't worked so now we are going to tell you how to go about things.' 'They have not rejected you,' says God to Samuel; 'they have rejected me.' In spite of that God in his mercy went along with their suggestion and gave them a king. At the same time, through the mouth of Samuel he implored them that in heart they would remain directly obedient to the Lord. Monarchy would not solve their problems, if they took it to mean that now they didn't have to bother much about waiting upon the Lord.

And the LORD said to Samuel, 'Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.' So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. (1 Sam 8:7-10)

He was very straight with them. 'In days gone by when the Lord your God was king, and you saw your enemies coming against you, you cried to the Lord and he invariably raised up a deliverer. And then you said, "We can't stand this business of waiting on the Lord any longer, let's institutionalise the thing and have a monarch so that we can sleep in our beds. If the Midianites come round the corner the monarch can deal with them and we shall not have to depend so much upon the Lord."'

For many years monarchy did prove to be a blessing in Israel. But, lest we should think that salvation is ultimately by our institutions, monarchy itself eventually failed, as do all human institutions. Judges adds its voice to the books of Kings, as it records the politics of the people of God of an ancient time. It teaches us the sombre and dispiriting lesson, that human institutions fail.

There must be a better answer somewhere and it is found in Jesus Christ our Lord. The judges, the deliverers failed—thank God for him whose name is Saviour and he shall save to the uttermost. The priests and the Levites failed—God has found an answer in a man who is Son of God, whose priesthood is unfailing and forever. The prophets and the kings failed and departed—praise God for him whose royal crown and priestly robes are not disguises for hidden flaws. Like Isaiah, let us turn our attention away from all mere humans and see the Lord high and lifted up, untainted by one spot of failure (Isa 6:1-3).

Why did theocracy go wrong?

Let us now face the historical facts and observe how theocracy went wrong and failed, and became inadequate. If a theocracy is going to work and you are going to get a number of

people living and working together under the direct rule of the Lord, directly responsible to him, it is absolutely essential that God shall be a living, vivid, personal reality to them. The glory of God shall be in their hearts, the wisdom of God their settled conviction, and genuine waiting on the Lord and his guidance their daily experience. If they are going to be directly governed by the Lord, the Number One necessity is that people shall know his word and his mind and not be driven simply by their emotional preferences. And knowing his word they will intelligently and deliberately obey it.

Micah

It is a very different state of affairs that we find in chapter 17 of Judges. Let us have a look at the ordinary people. There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.

‘Tell us all you know about the Lord, Micah. What a lovely name you’ve got—it means, “Who is like unto the Lord?” Tell us about the uniqueness of the Lord, what it is that you have found in him about all his unique glory. With a name like yours you ought to be able to do it easily.’ I suspect Micah got his name from fond parents. In the manner of ancient people they gave the boy a name that should sum up their religious conviction and their hope for the child. Israel’s basic, first belief was the uniqueness of Jehovah.

Let me tell you first of another Micah that you know perhaps a little bit better and read about more frequently. Micah the prophet also rejoiced in the name, ‘Who is like unto Jehovah?’ Perhaps again he got his name from fond parents, just as in our day it is the fashion of some people to give their children Christian names like Thomas and Peter, expressing their own Christian beliefs and values. But with Micah the prophet it was more than a name. It is evident that as he grew to manhood and reflected upon the ways of God in the past and his promises for the future, this glorious reality of the uniqueness of God burnt into his very heart and his emotions. In the final chapter of his prophecy he comes to his great climax, singing out the praise of God that his own personal name talked of. ‘Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger for ever, because he delights in steadfast love’ (Mic 7:18).

Micah thought long about the wonder of God. This unique wonder was revealed to him, that one day Messiah, the very fellow of God, would come down and be born in a place called Bethlehem (5:2). God transcendent, coming down to tiny Bethlehem and to the manger, and so close to people that they were able to take the rod and smite the judge of Israel on the face. Have you ever heard a story like that? Oh, the wonder of it! Who is a God like this, that to capture and rule my poor heart he came not only in human form but into the lowly manger, so that I might not be afraid to approach him. He came so near to his rebel subjects that they could spit in his face and bruise his cheek with the rod.

‘Who is like unto Jehovah?’ What Micah knew as prophecy we know as fact. The amazing grace of it! Micah the prophet pondered on his history, he remembered the days in the wilderness when Israel hadn’t been behaving very well. As the prophet spoke God himself spoke:

Hear what the LORD says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the LORD has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel. 'O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me!' (Mic 6:1–3)

Unknown to Israel, Balaam and Balak were climbing up their mountains to use their occult power and twist the arm of God, if they could, to curse Israel—and sometimes Israel deserved it. What would have happened then if God had become weary of them and found Israel boring? He might well have spoken a word and they would have disappeared from the map forever. But who is like unto Jehovah? The angel of the Lord came and stood in the way. God came down to meet Balaam and all his hosts and said, 'No you don't!' And Balaam was obliged to remark:

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. (Num 23:19–20)

Has he said he will bless them? Then bless them he will, Satan and all hell notwithstanding. When Micah the prophet turned to think of the chastisement that Israel received from the hand of God, he came to feel that what they had received was but a tithe of what they deserved, and in the end he could contain himself no more. There are things that go too deep for ordinary prose; they can only find a just and full expression in poetry, metaphor and simile:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger for ever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. (Mic 7:18–19)

My brothers and sisters, if the grace of God doesn't convince you of the utter incomparability and uniqueness of God and reach your heart, then no other power will be adequate to govern your unruly soul. We do well to sing,

Such deep transgressions to forgive,
Such guilty, daring worms to spare.
This is Thy grand prerogative,
And in this honour none shall share.
Who is a pardoning God like Thee,
Or who has grace so rich and free?¹⁸

¹⁸ Samuel Davies (1723–61), 'Great God of wonders!'

We have almost forgotten that other Micah and I must drag you back to meet him (Judg 17–18). Let's see what he's doing!

'What is this you have here, Micah?'

'It's a whole houseful of gods—other gods,' said he. 'We had an interesting incident in our family just recently, a marvellous experience of the Lord. I have a little house of gods, a collection I have been making. I am interested in comparative religion, I think you can get too narrow-minded and too exclusive. There is something in the Lord, but how can you write off the gods of the Canaanites as absolutely useless? I think that was extreme on Moses' part and today, instead of all this fighting, we ought to take the best out of all religions and put them together. I have been doing that—come and see my selection.'

'Collecting these gods can be a little expensive and I have to confess to a little weakness. My mother had a lot of silver lying about the place and I thought she wasn't using it so I took it. I realise it was wrong; and when she issued a curse in the name of Jehovah, that brought me to my senses. I didn't want to fall under judgment because of this so I admitted that I took it—I think confession is a very good thing! Mother responded so wonderfully. She said, "Blessed are you of the Lord, my son." To show her gratitude to the Lord she decided to give two hundred pieces of the silver back again to my collection, so that I could make an image of the Lord and put it in my museum. We are devoted to the Lord here!'

Where would you begin to talk to a man like that, who bears the name of Micah and is meant to stand for the uniqueness of Jehovah? Do you wonder theocracy is going downhill! He had an outward form of devotion; he still had a moral conscience and feared the wrath of Jehovah—when he was put on oath he spilt the beans, in case the wrath of God fell on him. His mother was very devoted and gave I don't know how much money to Jehovah. But what utter spiritual ignorance and darkness; they don't seem to have heard of the first or even the second commandment and the whole thing is biblically ruinous.

Acceptable worship

Before we start shouting too loud, how is Christendom? In some quarters it even went to the extent of nearly removing the second Commandment so that it might follow pagan practice and fill its houses with images, statues and gods and saints galore. How shall a theocracy work unless we take the rule of God seriously? Instead of just mouthing the doctrine of his uniqueness we must know the wonder in our own hearts. And how shall theocracy work if, in addition to knowing the Lord, we don't take his word and commands seriously? What is the good of devotion that offers to the Lord what he doesn't want anyway?

We should perhaps at this stage remember two things. This wasn't the last time Israel made this ghastly mistake. They had the external form of a creed that said Jehovah was incomparable, but lapsed into ignorance so that they didn't know the true Lord. There came a time when the true Lord became incarnate and many in Israel received him, but many others came and looked at him and found they didn't care for what they saw. They crucified him and went back to worshipping what they thought was God, but was in fact a god of their own imagination.

How shall you and I be saved from making that ghastly mistake? If our worship and our devotion is going to be acceptable to the Lord, hear the recipe and the programme that God has laid down. Peter himself tells us,

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' (1 Pet 2:4-6)

Says Peter, 'I came to the living stone and he made me a living stone. Now you come as well, and when you come as living stones to this great living stone you are built up a spiritual house to offer up sacrifices acceptable to the Lord.' 'I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone,' says God, and it is he that must set the angle and directions of all our worship and service.

The gentlemen especially will know that in the giving of presents there is one basic principle that must never be overlooked. It is your wife's birthday and with charm and gallantry you say to her,

'What would you like for your birthday — a box of chocolates or a bunch of daffodils?'

The good lady says, 'A bunch of daffodils, please — definitely not chocolates, they ruin one's figure!'

On the morning of her birthday, here is Husband with something behind his back, smiling with the joy of expressing his devotion to his dearly beloved wife. He kisses her on her cheek and says, 'Happy birthday my dear! Here you are,' and he presents her with a box of chocolates!

'I thought it was going to be daffodils,' says his disappointed wife.

'I don't like daffodils myself,' he says, 'I find chocolates more fun.'

'I see! You are bringing me the present in the hope that you will be the one to enjoy it!'

We shall have to be careful in our worship of the Lord. What do you worship for? Is it so that you can have a good time enjoying your emotions, being on an emotional high because you like it? I hope you do like worshipping the Lord, but the absolute basic first principle of sacrifice to the Lord God Almighty is not whether I enjoy it but whether he enjoys it. It is to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to him. How shall I know what he likes?

'I am building a temple,' says God, 'and there is the chief cornerstone. If you want to build a house that is pleasing to me you will arrange yourself round that cornerstone.' It is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence: when God first laid it and men came and looked at it they didn't like it. All this talk of being born again and then continuing in his word and being disciples, and being delivered from the slavery of sin — that was old fashioned and unpleasant talk and they didn't like it. That is not to be wondered at, for God's thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways. It is almost understandable that when he laid the chief cornerstone men disagreed about it and didn't like it.

If we are going to offer sacrifices acceptable to him we shall need to come to the living stone. We shall perceive that he is different, he is rejected of men and he doesn't fit our ideas. We have got to allow ourselves to be changed and altered—all the rough corners knocked off and ever more closely fitted to God's ideas and his chief cornerstone. We are being constantly changed to think God's thoughts and adopt his ideas and his standards, so that we might be brought together to offer sacrifices that are acceptable to the Lord.

What shall become of all that devotion of Micah's mother—what will the Almighty make of it? Two hundred pieces of silver given to the Lord to make something that he utterly detests! What a waste of devotion, for if a theocracy is going to work it means adhering to the word of God. That will mean knowing it and having all the word of God systematically taught, so that we do not content ourselves merely with our own traditional ideas, some of which might be right and some hopelessly wrong. We must have the word of God systematically taught so that our ideas can constantly be changed, lest we are worshipping a god of our own imagination or simply of our father's tradition, instead of worshipping the true and living God as he really is.

If a theocracy is going to work it will mean learning about the living God and his ideas. I will come to admire the living God and see the glory and wonder of his unique character and person. Falling in love with God in Jesus Christ our Lord, I will want to obey him and be like him. If my devotion becomes uninformed, unscriptural or even positively anti Scripture, my very devotion will take me further and further away from the Lord and take our churches to near disaster.

The Two Epilogues (2)

Judges 19:26–30

In our earlier studies we were thinking of how the original theocracy that had been among the Israelites gradually declined, and we began to see the reasons for that.

For a theocracy to work it must require that the people retain a vivid sense of the reality of God; a firm conviction not only of the basic theology of the uniqueness of God, but a living experience of what the character of God is and what it means in terms of their salvation. Their devotion in response to the revelation of God in their hearts must be channelled in its response to the Lord by obedience to his holy word. Where these things are not so, while the facade of a theocratic government may remain, the inner reality of it will be eaten out and become a dead thing. Finally, instead of a theocracy you will have at best a democracy, and at worst anarchy.

We started by considering the state of the knowledge of God amongst ordinary people, and we took the case of Micah and his mother (ch. 17). Now let us spend a few more moments on this story; considering first the case of the young Levite, and secondly the case of the Danites' expedition to enter further into their inheritance and to extend the borders of Israel further still.

The young Levite

The Levites were an exceedingly honourable institution and Micah was delighted when he was able to hire a Levite to be his priest in his own shrine. He knew no better of the things of God than to say, 'Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest' (17:13), thus displaying a horrible ignorance of the divine ordinance of the Levites. The first thing perhaps is to wonder that the Levite consented to become a priest in this idolatrous shrine, and if I have read it right he was none other than the grandson of Moses (18:30).

The ancient Masoretes who copied out the Hebrew Bible were so embarrassed by the facts given at the end of chapter 18 that when they came to the words in verse 30, the son of Moses, they wrote a large letter N¹⁹ over the word Moses to hint that really it shouldn't be Moses. It was utterly unthinkable that a grandson of Moses should allow himself, indeed hire himself out, to become a priest of an idolatrous shrine. So they wrote a big letter N over the word to suggest that you might be better advised to read it Manasseh.²⁰ Such cosmetics cannot hide the facts. It is part of the thesis of the writer of Judges that the third generation is an exceedingly dangerous, often wayward, and frequently ignorant and apostate generation.

¹⁹ נ, nun, the fourteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

²⁰ Moses is in Hebrew מֹשֶׁה, Manasseh is מְנַשֶּׁה.

The origin of the Levites

Let us turn now to think of the very concept of hiring himself out at all, and observe what it does to the whole underlying ethos and moving principle of the spirit of Levitical service. The origin of the order of Levite is as follows: When God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt he spared the Israelite firstborn, whereas the Egyptian firstborn were slain. God then reasonably enough claimed that the firstborn should be dedicated and consecrated to him. It wasn't much to ask, was it? The firstborn in Israel were sinners equally as the firstborn in Egypt. Being an impartial judge and a God of holiness and justice, God must execute his judgment not only on the Egyptians but on the Israelite firstborn as well. There is no distinction with him when it comes to judgment.

Indeed, the firstborn of Israel would have perished along with the Egyptians had it not been for the mercy of God's grace that he provided for them a way of deliverance from his judgment through the blood of the Passover Lamb, sprinkled upon doorpost and lintel. Redemption had not even started, and certainly was not yet finished when God came and pointed out the implication of this to the Israelite firstborn. 'Do you realise you wouldn't have a life to spend at all if it were not for my mercy? All of you would have been dead but for my mercies. By the redeeming sacrifice of the lamb you have a life now to live, and the logic of redemption demands that you give that life totally to me.'

It is the same kind of logic that underlies Paul's remark, 'The love of Christ controls us' (2 Cor 5:14). It isn't some sort of mushy sentimental thing within that now and again makes me pray. It is sheer hard headed logic: 'Because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died.' For if he hadn't died all would literally have died. 'And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised' (v. 15).

Therefore, their life is bought by another and belongs to another. It is not mere sentiment that should keep me busily consecrated to the Lord. If love will not do it then let logic do it. When you see me living selfishly and going my own way, tell me that I am a thief. My life is not my own. I have been bought with a price and logic demands that I own the implications of the price paid by Christ for my redemption and hand my life entirely over to God.

That is not just a New Testament lesson. It is the lesson that God drew from the ancient redemption as he brought his people and their firstborn out of Egypt. That done, God said that he would prefer now to do an exchange, and take the Levites instead of the firstborn. The ancient record tells us a quaint thing. When they had done the exchange there weren't quite enough Levites to go round to match all the firstborn. Did God say, 'Never mind, I can afford to lose some? I have got a few thousand; one or two here or there doesn't make much difference!' No, indeed he did not. He said, 'We haven't enough Levites to go round to substitute for all the firstborn. But if the firstborn are going to be quit of my service they must be bought back,' and the price he demanded was ten times the ordinary ransom money (see Exod. 30:13; Num 3:50).

If any of us should propose to buy ourselves out of the service of our redeeming Lord, consider the price that was paid to redeem us:

Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ. (1 Pet 1:18–19)

So the Levites went about their sacred ministry—they were not their own, they were bought with the redeeming blood to serve the Lord. Can you tell me how any Levite ever got it into his head that he could hire himself out? What was he doing selling his services for cash? Substituting money where there should have been the claims of redeeming blood. The very motive and heart of Levitical service is now being lost and eaten through: the incalculable price of redemption is now disappearing. He is in business with a religious commodity to sell, he hires himself out to an idolatrous shrine for his clothes and food and a spot of pocket money.

I have to record that he got a higher call later on. A whole tribe of Danites came passing by, and they gave him a call to their ministry. ‘Judge you whether it is better to be the priest to one man or to a whole tribe,’ they said (18:19). He heard the call, left the previous job and went to be priest to a whole tribe. Wouldn’t you? Yes, you would, if Levitical service was merely a career where you sold your services to the highest bidder.

But what a desecration of holy things it is. How have the mighty fallen from the redeeming love of heaven to the financial markets of the world? I have heard of a Mercedes Benz and a Ford Cortina being hired out; if you have enough money you can go to a firm that hires out cars. Where did Micah get it into his head that you could hire out a Levite?

According to the original instructions, the Levites were servants of the Lord. The Israelites contributed some hard cash and goods and materials to their upkeep; but under the original system they didn’t pay the Levites, they paid the Lord. Out of the demands that redemption made upon the ordinary Israelite he paid his tithes to the Lord and the Lord gave the Levites what was felt to be appropriate. The Levite remained the Lord’s servant. You couldn’t originally hire a Levite out for yourself, tell him what you wanted him to do and how he was to do it; it was the Lord’s business to control a Levite.

And now things have so slipped that Micah could afford to hire a Levite, with the inevitable result of course. Being a sensitive man he installed the expert as his priest and called him father (17:10). But he who paid the money and consecrated the Levite called the tune. That is always the danger when we look upon the Lord’s servants as people we can hire, and pay with our money to get what we want them to do, the whole sacredness of the ministry goes completely by the board.

The Danites

Now let’s turn to the final story in the first epilogue (ch. 18), and we shall notice the same feature. Externally all might look well to some extent, but when you examine the heart of it the thing is seen to be a horrible perversion. Rather late in the day the Danites decided to go in for extending the borders of Israel for the enlargement of their inheritance. They sent out spies, just like Moses, to spy out the land so that they should bring the report of where it would be appropriate to enlarge their border and enter their inheritance.

They happened to come by Micah and found a Levite there. They asked him what he was doing.

'I have got a good post here as a priest to Micah,' he said.

'Would you mind enquiring of the Lord for us?' asked the Danites (v. 5).

How could a man who was in total disobedience of holy writ know if their way was right before the Lord? But he told them to go in peace (v. 6). So the spies went on their way and reconnoitred the city of Laish.

They came back and said, 'It is a marvellous place! The Lord is going before us, so let us go on our way.'

Up they went and came to Micah's shrine once again. One of the spies said, 'There are some powerful gods in there; we could come into great benefit here!'

So they stationed some troops at the front yard and some of them went in. They offered the Levite a considerable advance on his salary, then they grabbed the gods and made off with them.

In his distress Micah went after them shouting, 'You have taken away the gods that I have made' (v. 24).

'You had better be quiet,' said the Danites, 'or you might annoy some of our fellows and they are pretty tough!'

Now see what has happened. Their idea of God is a magic little bit of stuff, like a medieval relic. It is all about power; morality has nothing to do with it. If you can grab it in war or by violence or force, then do it. At the international level somebody might be tempted to grab an atomic reactor, somebody else an electric carving knife. What type of gods are these that you just grab them? In place of faith in the living God, God has now become merely a magic superstitious object and morality doesn't enter into it.

Hear, if you can, echoing down the centuries, the wail of poor Micah, crying his heart out with injustice, 'I made those gods and you have gone and pinched them.' That's what happens when we descend to idolatry; we have to try and save our gods, instead of the true God saving us. Micah knows nothing of God's salvation—how could he, when his god is no longer the living God but a superstitious construction of his own imagination? You might think this story out of the past is irrelevant to our modern age, if you didn't know that for many people in enlightened Europe God is still a superstitious bit of bread, or a relic, or a construction of their philosophical notions, not the real God and therefore their gods cannot save them.

The final irony is reached when the Danites go on their expedition. Externally it looks very much like what the tribes were doing in earlier years. They come to this Gentile city that they have reconnoitred, with all its pagan gods of course. They destroy the city, and when they have done it they build it again and call it Dan and establish their own brand of idolatry there. When the early tribes went up to expel the Canaanites they were acting as the executors of God's holy law and judgment. Do you suppose these Danites are now acting similarly as the executors of God's holy law and judgment, when they destroyed the Canaanites and put their own form of idolatry in its place? Worse now than ever, because their form of idolatry carries the very name of God but it is a perversion of God. Jehovah has

become one more idol being propagated by the Israelites themselves. It is uncomfortable and sorry reading.

How many around our world have heard of the God of Christianity and the blessed name of Jesus, and what they have heard has not been the true God nor the true Saviour, but a bundle of idolatrous superstitions? We cannot wonder therefore that Israel's theocracy eventually declined and was replaced. Thank God we live in a better age, but may God write the lessons on our hearts. If we are to know a theocracy that really works, we too shall need to be preserved from our own ideas. May the claims of redemption be written so deeply upon our hearts, so vividly in the blood of Jesus Christ his Son, that we shall never lose the sense of the awesome sanctity of Christian ministry.

Never allow a sacred ministry to become a mere career for money, or controlled by the men who can afford to pay the most. May God see to it that in all our missionary endeavour to spread the kingdom of the Lord we do not take our own ideas, our nationalism and our cultures, and impose utterly unscriptural things on recent converts, but what we take them is God's holy unadulterated word.

Epilogue Two

Now I propose to spend just a few moments talking about Epilogue Two. It seems to me that my almost total lack of pastoral experience makes me peculiarly unfitted to talk to you on these topics. Indeed, I suspect my lack of pastoral experience is what makes it difficult for me to see some of the point of this final story.

The All Tribal Assembly

This last section deals with the All Tribal Assembly and its solemn responsibilities to exercise discipline among the people of God. I know at least enough about this to know that the exercise of discipline, even nowadays in the churches of the Lord, is fraught with exceedingly complicated considerations, and has often been an occasion for much disturbance and destructiveness in the church.

We start with the observation that it was wise of God for Israel to have this All Tribal Assembly in order to deal with outrageous cases of misbehaviour. As we said earlier, God was realistic enough to know that failures would arise amongst his people. If not dealt with firmly by godly discipline they could fester like a sore and become a scandal on the name of God and his revelation. Just imagine Israel coming into Palestine, putting down its pagan societies, setting itself up in their place and then committing, as the men of Gibeah did, such sexual immorality and outrage that would have shocked many an unconverted pagan.

The same thing can be said of the church at Corinth. Paul was alarmed that the Corinthians had in their midst a case of sexual immorality of such gravity that even the Greeks would have been shocked to know of it. What is the good of proclaiming that you have the word of God, preaching the gospel of the power of God unto salvation, and doing nothing to put these matters right? Will the unconverted not say, 'If that is the gospel, then thank the Lord we don't know anything about salvation by grace!' Discipline is necessary,

not only for the spiritual health and recovery of the offender, but for the testimony of the Lord and the progress of the gospel.

It is necessary for another reason too. Here were the Israelites, brought into their inheritance flowing with milk and honey, presumably enjoying it to the full. Joy and enjoyment and personal satisfaction can be difficult blessings to handle at times. God's salvation satisfies all my longings and makes me feel good, and at the same time it is holy and glorious. But where is the dividing line? Be warned! If my desires become my leading control, desires can be such tyrants that they will push me over the edge of the sanctities that God has put around his blessings in order to preserve them. 'Do I meet my criterion, does it feel good, and do I enjoy it?—I have a right to enjoy myself!' If it ever happens and my unholy desires drive me over the boundaries of the most sacred things in life, I will need the discipline of God to remind me that the holy joys of the eternal city itself are guarded round with great and high walls. The joy of heaven is only maintained by the observation of the strictest sanctities.

Important and necessary sanctities

So we are to deal here with the sanctities that necessarily became important for inter-tribal travel. If there was going to be contact between the Israelites in those far off ancient days, from one tribe to another, from one town to another, then people would need to have certain sanctities instilled into their hearts. The sanctities of human life, the sanctities of sex and marriage, the sanctity of the human person, the sanctity of a man's word and bond, and supremely the sanctity of the solemn oath taken in the name of God.

Even the unconverted nations saw that. Go back to the ancient Homeric Greeks and you will observe with what sacredness they regarded the matter of hospitality. They believed that one of the special charges of Zeus, the supreme god, was the guarding of hosts and guests. If somebody came to your town or home you were obliged to entertain and shelter the traveller. Not like some rascally innkeepers in the Roman world, where you had better put the ends of the bedstead into your boots or they wouldn't be there in the morning. And you had better set an alarm by your head, because when you woke up in the morning you mightn't be there either! And you had better sleep with your money under your pillow because the money would be gone too.

The ancient Greeks saw that no society could be built on such practices. There had got to be sanctity; you must protect the wayfaring man and not take advantage of his weak position. If he comes into your home you must protect his life. It is your duty, and if you didn't Zeus would be after you. The guest himself must respect the sanctities of the home. The unconverted Greeks saw that there would have to be sanctities if you were to build any kind of stable society. Shall not Israel see it and observe it?

A Levite and his concubine

We start with a sorry story of a concubine (if that is the true Hebrew translation) who played false to her husband, a Levite, and went off. But the text happily records that in the end she came back. It paints a delightfully charming scene of rustic hospitality. Here is the Levite

with his father-in-law, and they sit down to a meal and comfort their hearts. The man gets up to go and he asks him to stay, so he stayed the next day, and the next day again. The ancients set a tremendous store by their hospitality.

It would be an embarrassment to us who have to catch the 7.30 train in the morning, if when you got up to go the host pressed you to stay another day. In our modern hurried world, where life's pleasant things get pressed out, we sometimes need to be reminded of the New Testament's exhortation, 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers' (Heb 13:2). Elders are to be given to hospitality (Titus 1:8). What sacred joys, how near heaven it is in the home of a believer (as I bear witness to ten thousand times), to share their caviar or their crusts and to share the intimate and holy delights of a family that is on its way home to heaven. The blessed Saviour himself said that hospitality is one of the most vivid illustrations you will ever get here on earth of the delights that await the redeemed above. If you entertain in the truly Christian fashion, not for ostentation or self-boasting, but as Christians should, you will be rewarded at the resurrection of the just (Luke 14:14).

The bright and happy background of entertainment of the Levite by his father-in-law casts a lurid light on what subsequently happened in Gibeah. Take one thing as an example; we needn't go into all the details. When the Levite got up in the morning the woman was lying outstretched with her hands on the threshold—what a pathetic gesture. In vain all through the long hours of that terrible night she had sought a haven and protection. He said, 'Get up, let us be going' (19:28). But there was no answer. What had happened? It was only her body, perhaps still beautiful in its form but there wasn't any person there. How brutish our desires can be, to degrade a person into a mere beautiful thing. He could see her form—he called her but there was no answer.

What is the value of a human personality? Wherein is its sacredness and what is the significance of the human body? We shall not go to the excessive absurdities of the asceticism of some of the early Church Fathers who thought that sex was evil, but it does need to be guarded with sanctity lest our desires defeat themselves and we are left, not with a person but just with a thing. The sanctity of the human body as part of the human personality lies ultimately in this, 'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!' (1 Cor 6:15).

The Benjamites' mishandled discipline

And so we come to the discipline that the people of Benjamin felt it was necessary to mete out to the city of Gibeah (that belonged to Benjamin, 20:4). Surely their instinct was right, but discipline can be far more difficult than it might seem on the surface. When the Israelites gathered together in their tribes to decide upon the amount and method of the discipline, what happened then often happens still, the tribe of Benjamin as a whole began to take sides. Instead of taking sides with the people of God and disciplining their offending member town, they took sides with their fellow-Benjamites and for family and tribal reasons they were prepared to defy and refuse the discipline of the All Tribal Assembly. How often it has happened in other circles when a case of discipline is required. Somehow their sense of

sanctity and their concern for the honour of the Lord's name goes out of the window and the uppermost concern is for the reputation of their relatives and their family.

The tribes proceeded to try and discipline Benjamin. They even went to the Lord (v. 18). They asked the Lord, *'Who shall go up first for us?'* 'Judah shall go up first,' said the Lord. Twice over Judah tried to go up and discipline this erring town of Gibeah and the Benjamites came down and defeated them. (What wounds people can get, too, in the course of the disciplines of the church.)

The other boys were so clearly in the wrong, why did God allow the godly among the tribes to suffer defeat and wounds at the hands of those that were patently the sinners? Perhaps the answer is seen in the third occasion, when they came with weeping and with sacrifices (v. 26). They had discovered that they were sinful men and women too. How could they fulfil their office and discipline others until they had humbled themselves before the Lord and confessed the sin in their own hearts? Even though they were to do the disciplining, they needed to be accepted by God on the same ground as their brothers who had sinned. Phineas stood before the ark of the covenant and asked the Lord what they should do (v. 28).

How shall we proceed, if not regularly in that same spirit before our 'Ark of the Covenant', thinking in the terms of our new covenant? Not waiting until some disastrous sin has occurred, but learning to discern and judge ourselves so that we need not be judged (1 Cor 11:31).

The right balance

Eventually God gave them success in the disciplining of Benjamin their brother, but now it would seem that they went to another wrong extreme. Perhaps there was also some urge for revenge for the wounds they had suffered? In their urge to discipline they almost massacred Benjamin out of existence (v. 48). They then found themselves embarrassed that they had nearly destroyed a whole tribe. How trouble spreads! It was only one little city that needed to be disciplined, and now in the coming and going multitudes have been wounded and a whole tribe has nearly been decimated and put out of existence.

How easily we become unbalanced. Paul himself had to write to the church in Corinth, 'So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him' (2 Cor 2:7-8).

Even the ancient code says that if your brother has done something worthy of discipline and comes before the judges and they have to lay stripes on him, they may not exceed forty. Why not? Lest in disciplining him, he comes to be despised in their eyes (Deut 25:1-3). What a compassionate God we have. You mustn't despise the erring child of God that needs to be disciplined. 'Be careful in your disciplining of him,' says God, 'concentrating so much on his offence that you come to undervalue him.' And what shall we say to elders who sometimes have the sorry responsibility of having to discipline a grievous offender, who is nevertheless a soul for whom Christ died? What damage is done when we lose the sense of the sacredness and sanctity of our brothers and sisters, by reason of the redeeming price paid for them.

The sanctity of an oath in God's name

The All Tribal Assembly made one final mistake. In their excessive zeal they had nearly destroyed a tribe. A few hundred men of Benjamin were left but they had no wives, and the All Tribal Assembly suddenly woke up to what they had done. They had sworn an oath, that they wouldn't give their daughters to be their wives (21:1, 7). Had they any concept of the sanctity of an oath and a vow? What an exceedingly solemn thing it is, the final bastion of all sanctity, the solemn word of God and an oath in his name. If that gets tampered with we might perhaps begin to distrust God himself. To use an oath in the name of God is a thing like marriage, not to be entered into unadvisedly or hastily.

What will they do now? They can't give their daughters, but what about those Jabesh-gileadites? They had been put under oath to join in the discipline of this erring city and they hadn't come (v. 9). They deserve to be chastised, so they had an idea. Wouldn't it be convenient if we slaughtered the whole lot of them and saved the girls who haven't been married and they can do for the wives? Now they are punishing Gilead worse than they punished the original offenders and making capital out of the oath that the Jabesh-gileadites hadn't observed. Not for the seriousness of the sin itself, but because it was a convenient way of getting out of the mess they had got themselves into by their own folly and extremism.

When they had done it, there still weren't enough girls to go round. 'What shall we do? We can't give them our daughters because we are under this oath.' Then they said, 'There is going to be a feast of the Lord in Shiloh. Come down to it, you Benjamite lads, and when nobody is looking you should suddenly rush out and rape the girls, and then we shall be able to say to God that we didn't give them wives.' What a way of getting out of an oath! If the All Tribal Assembly is going to treat a solemn oath of God in that irresponsible fashion, who is going to be able to respect oaths made in the name of God? And if people lose their respect for oaths and vows made in the name of God, how long shall the community retain its sanctity?

The sanctity of marriage vows

What has all that ancient history got to do with us? Let me make a final observation. There are some countries, increasing in number, where not merely the ungodly but the Lord's people will stand, two of them, before the Lord and take solemn vows to remain faithful to each other until death. And within two, four, nine years, they will break those vows. A year later they will come and make some more vows, and sometimes break them as well; and then come and make some more until the whole sanctity of the divine vow is completely destroyed as a meaningless institution. If we lose our sense of the sacredness of a vow in the name of God, what unbridled lusts will erupt even into our Christian communities, and make a worldly tangle of what should have been the nearest thing to paradise this side of heaven.

We have to face these hard and sorry things, yet an irrepressible hope rises within us, even in times of depression, that grace shall reign and win the victory. At length it shall be seen that 'where sin increased, grace abounded all the more' (Rom 5:20). We shall certainly

need the Lord's help not to turn his grace into carelessness but to allow the Holy Spirit to instil into us the sanctities of God, so that as individuals and corporately as the people of God we might be little islands of paradise here on earth—as near as may be in a fallen and sorry world—clear lights amongst men, pointing them to the eternal and glorious heaven above. That is no myth or fairy story, but reality guaranteed to us by the life and death and resurrection of our blessed Lord.

APPENDIX A

Denials of First Principles

1. Israel, brought into the land by God according to his oath and never to be broken covenant, enter covenants with Canaanites and go after their gods (2:2–5).
2. FIRST CAPTIVITY to the king of the country from which Abraham came out (upper Mesopotamia).
3. SECOND CAPTIVITY Moab takes Jericho, the city Israel destroyed in order to enter Canaan.
4. THIRD CAPTIVITY Jabin, king of Canaan, mightily oppresses Israel just as Pharaoh had done.
5. FOURTH CAPTIVITY Israel are in the land of milk and honey, but Midian nearly starves them out.
6. ABIMELECH should have been a judge and deliverer: but he acts the tyrant: and Israel have to be saved from their saviour.
7. JEPHTHAH treats his brother Israelites as though they were enemies and slaughters them.
8. SAMSON The Philistines were uncircumcised, i.e. they were not members of the covenant between God and Abraham's seed. Samson marries an unconverted Philistine wife and blurs the distinction.
9. DANITES destroy the Canaanite city of Laish, rebuild it as Dan, and install therein—idolatry!
10. THE ALL TRIBAL ASSEMBLY in attempting to discipline Benjamin for breaking the sanctities of hospitality and sex, itself breaks the sanctities of oath and innocent blood, which was its responsibility to protect.

APPENDIX B

Table of Contents

The Two Introductions

1. 1:1 AFTER THE DEATH OF JOSHUA
2. 2:6 WHEN JOSHUA DISMISSED THE PEOPLE
another (3rd generation) . . . who did not know the Lord, and the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord

The Main Deliverers

3. 3:7 And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord
DELIVERER: OTHNIEL
4. 3:12 And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord
DELIVERER: EHUD After Ehud: Shamgar
5. 4:1 And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord
DELIVERERS: DEBORAH, BARAK, JAEL
6. 6:1 The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord
DELIVERER: GIDEON
7. 8:33 As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals.
ABIMELECH: KING!
DELIVERER: A WOMAN OF THEBEZ After Abimelech: Tola, Jair
8. 10:6 The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord
DELIVERER: JEPHTHAH After Jephthah: Ibzan, Elon, Abdon
9. 13:1 And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord
DELIVERER: SAMSON

The Two Epilogues

10. 17:1 MICAH—A LEVITE—THE DANITES—AND THEIR IDOLATRY
11. 19:1 THE ALL TRIBAL ASSEMBLY AND ITS MISHANDLING OF A CASE OF GROSS IMMORALITY.

APPENDIX C

The Two Introductions and the Two Epilogues

The Introductions

- 1:1–2:5 AFTER THE DEATH OF JOSHUA
THE ALL-TRIBAL ASSEMBLY AND THE SECOND PHASE OF THE
CONQUEST
*'Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites?'—and the Lord said,
'Judah' (1:1–2).*
- 2:6–3:6 THE THIRD GENERATION AFTER JOSHUA
Israel's Recurrent Lapses into and Rescues from Idolatry

The Epilogues

- 17:1–18:31 THE GRANDSON OF MOSES AND HIS POSTERITY BECOME PRIESTS
IN THE DANITES' SYSTEM OF INSTITUTIONALISED IDOLATRY (18:30)
- 19:1–21:25 THE ALL-TRIBAL ASSEMBLY AND THE BOTCHED DISCIPLINE OF
BENJAMIN
*'Who shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin? —and the Lord
said, 'Judah' (20:18).*

The Function of the First Introduction

1. IT SETS THE CONTEXT OF THE ERA OF THE JUDGES:

The second phase of the Conquest of Canaan

1st Phase: Joshua and the united armies of all the tribes broke the back of all opposition. Israel was now in the land and possessed it. In that sense Israel had rest.

2nd Phase: Each tribe had now to peel off from the united army, and to enter into their own particular inheritance, drive out any remaining Canaanites, and then settle and develop their allotted territory. That involved faith, courage, fighting and persistence.

2. THE VARIED SUCCESS OF THE INDIVIDUAL TRIBES:

- | | | |
|----|--|--------|
| 1. | Some, like Judah, drove out the Canaanites | 1:1–17 |
| 2. | Some, like Benjamin, did not drive out the Canaanites | 1:21 |
| 3. | Some did not drive out the Canaanites, but put them to task-work | 1:28 |
| 4. | Some <i>could not</i> drive the Canaanites out of parts of their possessions, e.g. Judah | 1:19 |
| 5. | Some <i>did not</i> , e.g. Ephraim | 1:29 |

3. THE FOUR INCIDENTS

- | | | | | |
|----|------------------|------------|---|---------|
| 1. | Adoni-bezek: | principle: | ‘For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged’ (Matt 7:2) | 1:4–7 |
| 2. | Othniel—Achsah: | principle: | ‘For to the one who has, more will be given’ (Matt 13:12) | 1:12–15 |
| 3. | Caleb: | principle: | past faith brings eventual reward | 1:20 |
| 4. | House of Joseph: | principle: | the price of compromise is that you perpetuate the evil elsewhere | 1:22–26 |

4. GOD’S REBUKE AT BOCHIM (2:1–5)

For his people’s lack of faith in his covenant and oath, which led them to make covenants with the Canaanites, instead of persisting in their efforts to drive them out.

The Function of the Second Introduction

2:6–3:6

to outline God's response to Israel's failure and compromise

1. A BASIC CAUSE OF (BUT NOT EXCUSE FOR) THEIR FORSAKING THE LORD 2:10

The weakness of the Third Generation:

They did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel

2. GOD'S ANGER 2:14–15

1. He taught and disciplined them by allowing them to experience, and suffer under, the consequences of their sin: spoiled, oppressed, weakened, distressed by their enemies, as the Lord had spoken, and as the Lord had sworn unto them 2:15
2. Cf. 1 Cor 11:28–32.

3. GOD'S MERCY 2:16–18

He raised up judges to be their saviours

(a) to teach them and judge their sin

(b) to bring them to repentance

(c) to lead them to deliverance from their enemies

4. GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL TURNING OF EVIL TO GOOD 2:19–3:6

1. By not driving out all the nations at once, but leaving them in order to prove Israel, whether they were genuine in faith and obedience 2:21–23
2. By leaving the nations in Canaan so as the younger generations of Israelites might learn to fight 3:1–2

About the Author

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