

H. L. Rossier

**Comments on
the book of the Judges**

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Meditations on the Book of Judges

"For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." — Rom. 15:4.

Preface

The contrast between the books of Joshua and Judges is immense. Joshua, a striking type of the spirit of Christ in power*, leads Israel on to conquer and dwell in peace in the land of promise. The book of Judges gives us quite another order of things. Starting from the blessings conferred by Jehovah in Canaan, and confided to the responsibility of the people, it shows us what use Israel made of them. Did they justify the confidence God had placed in them? Did they live up to their privileges? The answer will be found in the book of Judges.

* See "Meditations on the Book of Joshua," by same writer.

Israel's history is repeated in that of the church. The Epistle to the Ephesians answers, in the New Testament, to Joshua; for in it we see the assembly seated in heavenly places, enjoying all

spiritual blessings in Christ, and wrestling no longer, like Israel, "against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wicked spirits in heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12 — margin)

Judges corresponds with 2 Timothy. The church, not having kept its first estate, there are, as for Israel, divine documents which prove its unfaithfulness, and which show the people of God abandoning their first love and following a path of declension which ends in utter and irremediable ruin.

The history of man — blessed of God, but responsible — is ever the same. Adam, Noah, Israel, the nations, the church — the sad picture never varies. Ah! how the Word of God depicts to us what we are, but blessed be His name, we also learn to know God. He exhorts and entreats us without ceasing. Beware, says He, not to let slip from your hands the blessings with which I have filled them! Return to me when you have turned aside! Neither does He limit Himself to warnings, but unfolding before us the riches of His grace, He shows us that He has resources, when we have lost everything; that His voice can awaken those who sleep among the dead (Eph. 5:14); that His arm can deliver those whom unbelief has replaced under

bondage; that there is a fight of faith for perilous times; that in the midst of the rubbish accumulated by man, there is a path which the vultures' eye has not seen, well known to faith, accessible to the simplest believer; in a word He shows us, that in a day of ruin, God can be as fully glorified as in the church's brightest days.

Chapters 1 to 3 v.4

Introduction

The condition of Israel at the time of Joshua's death

(Judges 1:1-16)

Judges 1:1-16 may be considered as a preface to the book of Judges, and the words, "Now after the death of Joshua, it came to pass," are the key to the whole book. It is not as yet, properly speaking, declension, but that which precedes it. What follows is governed by the fact, that Joshua, a type of the Spirit of Christ in power, was no longer in the midst of Israel. So also, in the church's history, the unhindered activity of the Spirit of God lasted but a short time. No doubt, as in the days of "the

elders that outlived Joshua" (Judges 2:7), the presence of the apostles stayed the tide of evil; but in both cases, the presence and working of certain deleterious principles, caused it to be foreseen, that when once the obstacle should be removed, the tide of declension would set in.

All was apparently going on well in Israel. The tribes take their several places in presence of a hostile world. They enquire of Jehovah, Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first? God says: "Judah shall go up, behold I have delivered the land into his hand." (v. 1, 2) The answer was plain, Judah could count implicitly on God's faithfulness to His promise; but already we see that the simplicity of faith was lacking in him, and that his dependence on Jehovah was not so real as it appeared to be. "And Judah said unto Simeon, his brother, come up with me into my lot, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I likewise will go with thee into thy lot. So Simeon went with him." (v. 3) Judah seems to mistrust his own strength; but, instead of finding his resource in the God of Israel, he seeks it in Simeon, and in reality lacks confidence in Jehovah. True, he does not ally himself with the enemies of God; if his faith fails, he turns to his brother Simeon, only to

his brother; but, nevertheless, under the pretext of pushing forward the work of God, we see, in principle, the dawn of human associations and alliances, which have become the ruling feature of all the present activity in Christendom. Did God require Simeon, in order to give Judah the lot of his inheritance?

The result of this combined action was apparently magnificent. We learn from Joshua 19:9 that "the part of the children of Judah was too much for them." But the inheritance of the children of Simeon was not the best, for it was taken from what Judah could not keep; thus they received their portion out of that which was superfluous to another, at the southern limit of the land of Israel, in the border which looked towards the desert. It was not that God disowned either tribe, for it is written (v. 4), "the Lord delivered the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand;" but warfare undertaken on the footing of a human alliance, bears more or less the imprint of its origin. The allies seize upon Adoni-bezek and "cut off his thumbs and his great toes." (v. 6) This was not what God commanded of old, nor what Joshua did to the kings of Jericho, of Ai, of Jerusalem, of Makkedah, and all the kings of the mountain and of the plain. To mutilate the enemy was simply human retaliation.

It had been, likewise, the custom of Adoni-bezek thus to humble his enemies; keeping them, however, at his court, as their presence served to increase his glory as conqueror. We see similar things in the church's history. How many times she has made a show of past victories to exalt herself in her own eyes and those of others. The conscience of a humbled foe is often more accessible than that of the people of God in prosperity. Adoni-bezek smitten by Judah, acknowledges having acted wrongly towards the vanquished kings, and bows to the judgment of God.

"And Judah went against the Canaanites that dwelt in Hebron (now the name of Hebron before was Kirjath-arba) and they slew Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmi. And from thence he went against the inhabitants of Debir: and the name of Debir before was Kirjath-sepher" (v. 10, 11). Joshua 15:14-15, ascribes to Caleb what our chapter attributes to Judah. Caleb's energy, perseverance and faith on this occasion were such that his whole tribe bore the imprint of it. In the early days of the church it was not so, when all were of one heart and soul, and advanced with oneness of faith towards the goal. The coming to the front of individual faith is manifested far more distinctly

in the course of the history of the judges raised up to deliver Israel; we see it, too, in the revivals which God works in our days; and while it is encouraging for the individual, it is humbling for the rest. What an honour for Caleb, that Judah should have gained the victory! On the other hand, let us not forget that each one of us may help to imprint weakness on the people of God as a whole. God grant that the church, though unfaithful, may have many Calebs in her midst today.

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

His victory had acquired it for Himself; but this relationship may be known and enjoyed to-day in its fulness by every one who is faithful.

This union gave Othniel a personal possession in the inheritance of him whose son he had become, and he had thenceforth an estate of his own. Our portion resembles his; we realize our heavenly position when we have taken our stand as regards the world, our hearts being attached to the person of Christ. Still this precious domain does not suffice to Achsah. The south land would be a barren field to her if her father did not give springs to water it. Achsah obtained the upper and the nether springs, just as in different circumstances, the saint passing through the valley of Baca, on the one hand makes it a well, and on the other sees rain from heaven filling the pools. Achsah is a thirsty soul, but she thirsts for Canaan's blessings. A Christian coveting the world is in a terrible condition, but God approves of and delights in one who thirsts for heaven. He satisfies such longings by copious springs, spiritual blessings which descend upon us and flow out from us. Those who covet the world, He visits with chastisements such as fell on Achan when he coveted the accursed thing.

The sixteenth verse, which closes this first division of the book, tells us of "the children of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law." The history of this family, come out of Midian and allied to Moses, is full of interest. When Jethro returned to his own land, after having visited Israel in the desert (Ex. 18:27), Moses asked his son Hobab to be to the children of Israel instead of eyes, to lead them in their encampments in the wilderness (Numbers 10:29-32); and in spite of his refusal, his sons, like Caleb, faithfully followed in the steps of the people of God. (Judges 4:11, 1 Sam. 15:6) Like Rahab, these children of a stranger amongst the nations, went up out of Jericho, the city of palm trees (Judges 1:16, cf., Deut. 34:3), to cast in their lot with Israel. In cleaving permanently to Judah, they resembled Ruth. And like Othniel, they allied themselves with the family of Caleb, and out of it they had more especially for their chief, the faithful Jabez, the son of sorrow, who made his requests with understanding to the God of Israel, and to whom God granted that which he asked (1 Chr. 2:50-55, 1 Chr. 4:9-10). The Rechabites were descended from the Kenites (1 Chr. 2:55, 2 Kings 10:15, Jer. 35), and when their history closes in the Bible, they are praised as true Nazarites in the midst of the ruin of Israel. But alas! this faithful remnant come out from

amongst the nations, plays its part also in the book of declension. We have an instance of it in Heber, the Kenite, in Judges 4. I cannot refrain from applying this history of the Kenites to the church called out from amidst the nations. Her testimony, too, is gone, but like the sons of Rechab amongst the Israelites, a faithful remnant in the midst of the ruin, can go on to the end in holy separation from evil, obeying the Word committed to them by their Leader.

What characterises declension?

(Judges 1:17-36)

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

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

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

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

* See, on this subject, a valuable tract. "Christianity, not Christendom," by J. N. D. (To be found in his Collected Writings, vol. 18)

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

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

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

"And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak ... and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight." (Numbers 13:33)

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

The history of the house of Joseph (v. 22-26) recalls that of Rahab in Joshua 2, with this main difference, the work of faith is absent. The act of the man of Luz, delivering up his city to the children of Israel, is that of a traitor, not that of a believer. Joseph decoys him by a promise of his life, and instead of, like Rahab, associating himself with God's people after his deliver-

ance, he returns to the world and rebuilds in the country of the Hittites, the very Luz which Jehovah had destroyed.

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

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

One more trait, and the picture is complete. "And the Amorites forced the children of Dan into the mountain; for they would not suffer them to come down to the valley" (v. 34). The world, at length, obtains what is sought, and spoils the children of God

of their inheritance. Satan's aim always is to rob us of those things which constitute our joy and strength; and he succeeds only too well.

Do not let us forget how gradual declension is.

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

Beloved brethren, we all belong to a period of declension. It is too late for the Church, collectively, to return; but let us, at least, individually, avoid this slippery path. Let us watch against the world, and mistrust even its fairest baits, seeking, in these closing days, to be amongst the faithful ones to whom the Lord can say, "I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." (Rev. 3:20) God grant that holy separation from the world, and increasing communion with the Lord, may characterize us until the close of our course.

The origin and consequences of declension

(Judges 2:1-5)

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

Delivered (in type) from the dominion of the flesh which was connected with the world, i.e., Egypt, they now belonged only to God. The great fact of circumcision at Gilgal, the cutting off of the flesh, is a Christian responsibility. But continual return-

ing to Gilgal was a necessity. There must be for the believer the constant realization before God, what the cross of Christ teaches, that "the flesh profits nothing." True self-judgment must be maintained if we would know wherein lies the secret of spiritual power by which we mortify our members which are upon the earth. (Col. 3:5) We may learn this from the victories in the book of Joshua. The Israelites always returned to Gilgal, except in one case (Joshua 7:2) where they were defeated.

But Gilgal had been neglected, nay, even forgotten since the days of Joshua. It is thus that hearts become worldly through the absence of daily self-judgment. The angel of Jehovah, the representative of Divine power in the midst of the people, had remained there alone, so to speak with nothing to do, waiting for Israel to return to him; he had waited long, Israel did not return. There was nothing for it, but that the angel should quit this blessed spot and go up to Bochim, the place of tears. Those days of strength and joy, when Jericho fell at the sound of God's trumpet, were over; the days, too, of Gibeon and Hazor were for ever gone. Israel could not recover the blessings dependent on Gilgal; Jehovah's power was no longer at the disposal of the people, looked at as a whole. Those days were

past, when Israel went up willingly to Gilgal, judging, in type, the flesh; so that, sin not being there, they might conquer. Achor, too, was past with its lesson of humiliation and blessing, when the people judged their sin to put it away and were restored. At Bochim Israel wept, obliged to bear their chastisement and its irremediable consequences; present restoration was not possible; God does not re-establish what man has ruined. The church has trodden the same path. Its ruin as a testimony and looked at on the side of human responsibility will be continuous to the end of its history. It has become unfaithful, till at last it has become established in the midst of the world, mixed up with iniquity of every kind which goes on to the close. God compares it to a great house with vessels to honour and dishonour. (2 Tim. 2) And yet the moment will come, when the history of man's responsibility being over, the Lord will present to Himself His church, glorious, having neither spot, nor wrinkle, nor any such thing. (Eph. 5) At that time it shall be said of her, as of Jacob, not "what has man wrought," but "what has God wrought!" (Numbers 23:23)

It was not a sense of humiliation which filled the hearts of the poor people at Bochim: they were there, shedding tears at the

sentence of judgment, and seeing no issue, for there was none. In the course of the book, we meet with times of partial deliverance, and even a beginning of real humiliation (Judges 10:15-16). But Israel's restoration is reserved for a future day. There is a sort of foretaste of it under Samuel, type of Christ, the true Judge and Prophet. In the scene at Mizpeh (1 Sam. 7), we have a picture of the day when Israel humbled, will be restored to their place of blessing as the people of God. Samuel convenes the people at Mizpeh, which is not merely the place of tears, but of humiliation. It was there that "they drew water and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day, and said there, 'we have sinned against the Lord.'" It was there that they put away their strange gods, and it was the dawn of an era of blessing which shone in all its splendour under the reigns of David and Solomon.

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

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

"What profit is it?" Their humbling is for their profit, turning their eyes to Him who "raises up the poor out of the dust, and lifts up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes." (1 Sam. 2:8)

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

In verses 1-3, the angel of the Lord speaks to the people. Had God broken His covenant? Had He not accomplished all that His mouth had spoken? It was Israel who had broken the covenant. "Why have ye done this?" How this question reaches and probes the conscience. Why? Because I preferred the world and its lusts to the power of the Spirit of God, idols to the ineffable favour of Jehovah's countenance. What then was the natural heart of this people? What is ours? Israel weeps and sacrifices (v. 5). How touching the grace which provides for wor-

ship in the midst of the ruin. The place of tears is one of sacrifice, and God accepts the offerings made at Bochim.

Israel's ruin looked at in reference to God.

(Judges 2:6 — 3:4)

Judges 2:6-9 is a repetition of Joshua 24:26-31, closely connecting this history of declension with that of the people before their fall. There were elders, that outlived Joshua, to help and encourage the people, just as there were apostles for the church, but in the days of the apostles as in those of the elders, principles, destructive of the assembly, were already at work. Judaism, worldliness, corruption, all these things Paul set his face against by the power of the Spirit of God, but with the certainty that after his departure, grievous wolves should enter in, not sparing the flock. The close of Chap. 1 gave us Israel's declension, in their connection with the world; the verses we have just read, show it to us in reference to God. We have a summary of the whole book of Judges in this passage. Worldliness and idolatry succeed each other. In whatever measure our hearts go after the world, they turn away from God; and between that and forsaking Jehovah to follow after idols, there is but a step. We see the same things in the life of Christians in-

dividually. It is not without purpose that the Spirit of God warns us so solemnly: "Little children keep yourselves from idols," 1 John 5:21. If we associate with the world, its cherished objects gain possession of our hearts, robbing Christ of His place.

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

thenceforth, amidst material only fit to be burned up, the sad mixture of vessels to honour and to dishonour.

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

There was only one resource, and it was worthy of God. In His grace He makes use of the very unfaithfulness and its consequences to bless the people. In suffering these nations to remain, God had not merely chastisement in view; He also wished "to prove Israel by them whether they will keep the way of the Lord to walk therein as their fathers did keep it" (Judges 2:22); in short, would they separate from evil? Thus in

2 Timothy God uses the mixture of vessels to honour and dishonour to test and bless the hearts of those that are faithful. "If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work" (2 Tim. 2:21). What a blessed description of faithfulness in perilous times! God would show us a path which glorifies Him as much in the darkest day of ruin as in the brightest days of the church.

But the Lord had yet another object in leaving these nations to prove Israel (Judges 3:4), "to know whether they would hearken unto the commandments of the Lord, which He commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. "The blessing which God had in view, was to cause Israel to return to that Word which had been given at the first, and which was their only safeguard. Similarly now, the apostle says to Timothy, in an Epistle which dwells on the ruin: "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:14-15). Has the condition of Christendom compelled us

to take a place of separation to God down here, adhering closely to His Word? Unless we can be thus characterized, we cannot be a testimony for God in a day of ruin. Those in Philadelphia bore this stamp, for He who addresses them is Himself the holy and the true; and they, walking in communion with Him, had kept His word, and not denied His name. These will also be the marks of the future children of the kingdom. In Psalm 1, they separate themselves from the way of sinners, and their delight is in the law of the Lord, meditating in it day and night.

There was a third object which the Lord had in view, in permitting these enemies to continue in the midst of Israel: "That the generations of the children of Israel might know, to teach them war" (Judges 3:2). When we allow ourselves to be cast down by the state of the church and its prevailing evil, we are apt to think that it is no longer any use to fight, and that our part should be exclusively that of the 7000 hidden ones who had not bowed the knee to Baal. (1 Kings 19) This is a serious mistake. There are Elijahs in days of ruin, and conflict is more than ever needed. Christian warfare is not, it is true, waged against flesh and blood, as with Israel, but against wicked spirits in the heav-

only places (Eph. 6:12, margin). This satanic power is always at work to hinder our taking possession of heavenly things, and to bring the people of God into bondage. We fight then either to conquer or to deliver. In Joshua and Ephesians the conflict is to put us in possession of our privileges; in Judges and 2 Timothy the warfare is more especially for the deliverance of the people of God. "Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ," says the apostle to his faithful disciple (2 Tim. 2:3). "Endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist," he says further on, adding, "I have fought the good fight" (2 Tim. 4:5, 7).

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

Chapters 3 v.5 to 5

Revivals

Othniel

(Judges 3:5-11)

It is most important to understand, as we have seen, that the church having been unfaithful to the call of God, restoration collectively is no longer possible. Christians are sometimes misled, as their thoughts by these very revivals effected by God, especially if they are themselves identified with one of these partial restorations wrought by the Spirit of God. Limited views, perhaps a narrow heart accustomed only to think of and love that portion of the church which more immediately concerns ourselves — a sectarian spirit which leads us to designate as church, the systems which man has substituted for the building of God — such are some of the causes which hinder us from forming a correct estimate of the true state of the assembly in this world. Now it is an indisputable fact for every Christian, in the habit of depending on the Word of God, that the present days are evil, that the mystery of iniquity already works, for there are already many antichrists, and everything

ripening for the final apostasy. But another fact quite as positive is, that God is faithful and will never leave Himself without testimony.

He can even make use of the evil as in Judges 2 to dispense fresh blessings to His people.

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

Let us begin by a general observation. When things are morally in a low state, God uses instruments which in themselves are imperfect and bear the stamp of weakness, — Othniel sprang from a younger branch of the family; he was "the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother." Ehud was weak through his infirmity,

Shamgar through his weapon, Deborah from her sex, Barak by his natural character, Gideon on account of his relations, Jephthah by his birth. Other judges are mentioned who are rich, influential, or prosperous (Judges 10:1-4; Judges 12:8-15), and God uses them no doubt, but more to maintain results already obtained than as deliverers. We are no longer in the days of Joshua, or of the Apostles, when a power was developed in man, which hindered the weakness of the vessel from appearing, and yet the very infirmity of these witnesses (characteristic of the period we are in) glorified the power of Him who could use them.

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

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

Let us ask God to raise up Othniels in the present day; yea, rather let us be Othniels ourselves by true consecration of heart to the Lord, by an increasing desire to appropriate and realize

these heavenly things, and we shall be instruments well-fitted for the Master and prepared unto every good work.

Ehud

(Judges 3:12-30)

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

weapon was short, but well suited to its work. It was a tried sword, capable of piercing to the inward parts of God's enemy and of giving him his death-blow.

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

Having brought the present to Eglon, Ehud turned again from the graven images (Judges 3:19, margin) that were by Gilgal; having, as he said, a "secret message" unto the king. It was not, as with many others, a public victory, but a secret, single-handed encounter between the deliverer and the enemy, the public results of which were soon to appear. It was so with Christ when He was tempted of Satan in the desert. Here all

takes place silently, with no apparent struggle, no cry; the enemy was found dead by the servants, who thought their Master was resting. The power by which Israel had been enthralled is destroyed by the short sword of a left-handed man.

There was no fame or glory attending such a victory. It was a secret message, but a "message from God" unto Eglon (Judges 5:20). Our weapon is divine, and therein lies all its power. With Ehud, as with Gideon, it was the "sword of the Lord." The king was dead, but the weapon was not drawn out of his belly. Ehud was gone, but the servants had before their eyes the instrument of victory; God proved to their confusion, that it was this short sword which had abased the proud man, whose eyes stood out with fatness.

It remained for Ehud to reap the fruits of his victory. "He blew a trumpet in the mountain of Ephraim" to assemble the people of God, and they "took the fords of Jordan toward Moab, and suffered not a man to pass over." The people recovered these usurped possessions; and, through the vigilance of the children of Israel, the way of approach for the enemy was cut off. The usurper was expelled and destroyed, Moab could no longer maintain himself on the two banks of the Jordan. Such should

be the practical result of conflict at the present time. If the actual effect is not to make us openly break with the world, it is fruitless and does not answer to the purpose of God. The more complete the separation, the more lasting is the peace. "The land," we are told, "had rest four-score years."

Shamgar

(Judges 3:31)

Shamgar, the son of Anath, who followed Ehud, gained a signal victory over the Philistines: he also delivered Israel. Ehud's sword was mighty, though short. Shamgar wrought deliverance by the means of a weapon which seemed wholly unsuited to such a work; a contemptible instrument, to all appearance only suitable for goading brute creatures. Without wishing to press unduly here a typical meaning — a tendency to do which in teaching is dangerous in more ways than one — I would like to compare the ox-goad of Shamgar with the short sword of Ehud. We have one weapon, the Word of God; it may be presented in different aspects, but it is the only one that the man of faith makes use of in the warfare. To the intellectual and unbelieving world it is like an ox-goad, fit, at the best, only for women, children and uneducated persons, full of fiction and contradic-

tions; yet it is this instrument, despised by men, that God uses to gain the victory. In making use of it, faith finds a weapon where the world only sees folly, for the weakness of God is stronger than men. Doubtless, it is written for the unlearned and suited to their needs and to their walk; but this very ox-goad can kill six hundred Philistines.

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

Deborah and Barak

(Judges 4)

Up to this time God had, in judgment, delivered the unfaithful Israelites into the hands of outside enemies.* A further proof of unfaithfulness on their part, is followed by more serious consequences. Jabin, king of Canaan, reigning in Hazor, with nine hundred chariots of iron, a terrible adversary, conquered Israel and oppressed them. In Joshua 11 we find an ancestor of this very Jabin, with chariots of war and the same capital. In those

days Israel understood, under the mighty energy of the Spirit of God, that there could be nothing in common between them and Jabin. They smote him with the edge of the sword, after having burnt his chariots with fire, and they destroyed his capital. Whatever connection could there be between the people of God and the political and military world, whose dominion was to be erased from the map of Canaan? Alas, all is now changed, and Israel, unfaithful, falls under the government of the world. Hazor, their ancient enemy, arises from its ashes, is resuscitated; it is rebuilt within the limits of Canaan, and the people's inheritance becomes the kingdom of Jabin! This has its parallel in the history of the church, whose position at the beginning was one of entire separation from the world, consequently there was no thought of the latter being suffered to take any part in the affairs of the assembly. But the carnal state of the assembly at Corinth led one in its midst, who had a matter against another, to go to law before the unjust and not before the saints. (1 Cor. 6) "Do you not know," said the apostle, "that the saints shall judge the world?" And rebuking them he adds: "I speak to your shame." But what road has the church travelled since then? In reality it is the world that governs the church. "I know," says the Lord to Pergamos, "where thou dwellest, even

where Satan's seat is." (Rev. 2:13) Even in the great revival at the Reformation, saints had recourse to the governments of the world, and leant upon them. In the present day there are Christians who, when persecuted, instead of rejoicing to suffer for Christ's sake, claim protection from the powers that be. The judgment on the Hazor of Joshua is no longer anything but a remembrance. Israel served the gods of the Canaanites, having taken their daughters to be their wives and given their daughters to their sons. (Judges 3:5-6) This union bore fruit, and Jabin oppresses the people who, whether they would or not, were forced to endure his rule.

- * **N. B.** I except the Philistine under Shamgar, the short narrative given in Judges 3:31 being only an episode, as is proved by Judges 4:1, where the general history is resumed, not at the death of Shamgar but at that of Ehud.

Moreover, this was not the only symptom of Israel's low condition in these inauspicious days. For if outwardly they were ruled over by their enemy, what was the state of government within? Committed to the hands of a woman! At the outset, as the Word of God teaches us, the oversight of the church locally was committed to elders, appointed for this purpose by the apostles or their delegates, under the guidance of the Holy

Spirit. The order of the assembly, in that which pertained to it locally, fell to their charge. Dropping for a moment man's imitation of this divine institution, would there be any exaggeration in saying that the tendency to entrust government, wholly or partially, into the hands of women is becoming increasingly marked amongst the sects of Christendom in the present day? It is even boasted of, and Christians go so far as to state and seek to prove that such a condition of things is of God, and shows the flourishing state of the church. They quote Deborah in favour of their opinion, but let us see what she was like.

Deborah was a remarkable woman, a woman of faith, one deeply impressed with the humiliating condition of the people of God. She sees that it would be to the shame of the leaders in Israel, that God should entrust a post of public activity to a woman in their midst. She says to Barak: "I will surely go with thee; notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour, for Jehovah shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." (v. 9) But, in all her exercise of authority for God, to the confusion of this people rendered effeminate by sin, Deborah maintains, in circumstances which might have proved a great snare to her, the place assigned by God in His Word to

woman. She would not, otherwise, have been a woman of faith. This chapter gives us the history of two women of faith, Deborah and Jael. Each maintains the character in keeping with the position assigned by God to woman. Where does Deborah exercise her authority? Is she seen, as other judges, going in circuit over the land of Israel, or placing herself at the head of the armies? Nothing of the kind; and it is not without reason, it seems to me, that the Word says: "She dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah ... and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment." (v. 5) Prophetess and judge though she was in Israel, she did not step out of the sphere God had assigned to her. Instead of going to Barak, she sent and called him to her where she dwelt.

Barak was a man of God, and accounted by the Word a judge in Israel. "The time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah." (Heb. 11:32) But Barak was a man lacking in character, moral energy and confidence in God. We must not expect in a day of ruin to see all the divine resources displayed in the instruments employed of God.

The labourers are few, but not only so, what little distinctiveness there is on the part of those who have the gifts of the

Spirit, how little is their absence felt by Christians. Lack of character in Barak, made him wish to be the woman's helper, whereas Gen. 2:18 makes her the helper of the man. He degraded the office in which God had set him, and what was worse, he sought to take Deborah out of her place of dependence as a woman: "If thou wilt go with me, then I will go; but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go." (v. 8) "I will surely go with thee," she replied. This she could do consistently with her place according to scripture. We read in later times of holy women who accompanied the Lord, becoming His servants in order to minister to His needs. Deborah's act was right, but Barak's motive was wrong, and Deborah rebukes him severely. (v. 9) What was Barak's motive at bottom? He was willing to depend on God, but not without a human and tangible prop as well. There are many such souls in Christendom. There is, on their part, so little sense of the presence of God, so slight a knowledge of His will, so little decision as to their walk, that, in order to go on in the path of God, they prefer leaning on another to direct dependence on Him only. The counsel of "spiritual directors" is followed, rather than that of the Lord, His Spirit and His Word. What if the leader they follow be mistaken? But God, the Lord, His Spirit, His Word, are

infallible! Faithful Deborah does not encourage Barak in this wrong course, and Barak suffers the consequences of his want of faith.

He goes up with his army, and Deborah with him. Heber, one of the Kenites, of whom we have already spoken in Judges 1, had, in these troublous times, seen fit to sever himself from his tribe, and pitch his tent elsewhere (v. 11). Now "there was peace between Jabin, the king of Hazor, and the house of Heber, the Kenite." (v. 17)

Heber's act does not seem to have been one of faith. He separated himself from the people in their low estate so as to relieve himself of the responsibility of Israel's sorrowful condition.* Moreover, he was at peace with the avowed enemy of his people; and he had so managed as not to be disquieted by Jabin. But a weak woman dwelt under Heber's tent, who refused safety at such a price, and did not acknowledge an alliance with the enemy of her nation. Israel had undivided possession of her heart. Barak gains the victory, and Deborah, this woman of faith, and mother in Israel, plays no part in it. Sisera's army is defeated; and he himself, forced to flee away on foot, comes to the tent of Jael, where he counts on finding a

hospitable shelter. Jael hides him; he asks for a drink of water, and she gives him what was better, milk. She does not treat him at first as an enemy, but with pity; yet in presence of the enemy of her people she becomes pitiless. The instrument she used for Israel's deliverance was even more worthless than Shamgar's, for the only weapons she had were the tools of a woman who keeps the tent; it is with them that she deals the fatal blow to the head of the enemy. Jael, like Deborah and every woman of faith, does not go at all beyond her sphere. She carries out her work of vengeance inside her dwelling, with the arms with which the tent supplied her, and gains the victory there; for women are also called to face the enemy, though it be in the place and with the special weapon assigned to them by God. The faith of these women shines out in this chapter — Jael does not, like Barak, seek a helper; she depends entirely on the Lord. The secret of her action lies between herself and God. She handles the weapons belonging to her contracted sphere, as skillfully as a man could have done; for had her hand trembled in the very least, all would have been compromised. Alone (her husband, her natural protector, being absent), but with the Lord, she — one in heart with all the arrayed armies of Israel — fights under her tent. And Deborah in her song can say of

her: "Blessed above women shall Jael, the wife of Heber, the Kenite, be; blessed shall she be above women in the tent." (v. 24)

* **N. B.** This is more or less the history of all the sects in Christendom.

With what feelings of humiliation Barak must have gazed on Jael's victory, seeing a woman thus honoured of God, in a path in which he, though leader and judge, had not wished to walk.

All honour to these women! God made use of them to arouse the children of His people to a sense of their responsibility, for once awakened: "they destroyed Jabin, king of Canaan." (v. 24)

Deborah's Song

(Judges 5)

Jehovah had wrought a wonderful deliverance through the instrumentality of two weak women, and a man lacking in character; the very feebleness of His instruments serving to magnify His grace and power. The victory, as we have said, is the signal for the awakening of the people, and the Spirit of God gives expression to it by the mouth of the prophetess. Deborah

and Barak relate and celebrate the blessings recovered through Israel's deliverance.

(v. 1) "Then sang Deborah and Barak, the son of Ahinoam, on that day, saying:"

The first thing that follows the deliverance is praise; very different, doubtless, in a day of ruin, from what it was at the beginning, when they went forth out of Egypt: "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord." (Ex. 15:1) The whole nation joined their leader in the song of deliverance; not a voice was silent. Imagine the harmony of those 600,000 voices, blended in one celebrating, on the seashore, the victory achieved by the Lord! "I will sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously." All the women, with Miriam at their head, joining in these praises, repeated the same words, "Sing ye to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously." (Ex. 15:20-21) What a contrast to Judges 5! "Then sang Deborah and Barak." One woman and one man — two by themselves- — two witnesses of a time of ruin; but the Lord is present, the Spirit of God is there; and if these two are the witnesses of the ruin, they can, nevertheless, rejoice and celebrate the greatness of the work of the Lord. Renewal of praise is the mark of a true re-

vival, and the children of God when restored in soul feel this their first need. Deborah and Barak do not isolate themselves, even though all the people are not with them; they acknowledge the unity of the nation, and their praise is the expression of what all Israel should have rendered.

(v. 2) "For that the leaders took the lead in Israel, for that the people offered themselves willingly, bless ye the Lord." (Revised Version) The motive for praise is what the grace of God has produced in the leaders, and among the people. God recognizes that, and thus encourages His own, so vacillating and weak.

(v. 3) "Hear, O ye kings; give ear, O ye princes; I, even I, will sing unto the Lord; I will sing unto the Lord; I will sing praise to the Lord God of Israel."

Praise belongs exclusively to the saints. "I, even I," they say. Kings and princes are invited to listen, but they have no part in the song, for the deliverance of Israel is their ruin.

(vs. 4, 5) "Lord, when thou wentest out of Seir, when thou marchedst out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water. The moun-

tains melted from before the Lord, even that Sinai from before the Lord God of Israel."

These words recall the commencement of Moses' song in Deut. 33, to which Ps. 68:7-8 also refers. In these we find another important principle of the revival. Souls are led back to the first blessings, seeking again what God gave at the beginning. Instead of being guided by what passed before their eyes, they ask themselves, "What has God wrought?" This is our safeguard in a day of ruin. Let us not say, like unfaithful Christians, we should adapt ourselves to the time in which we live. At a time of which the Apostle John said, "It is the last hour" (1 John 2:18. Revised Version), the saints had as a resource: "That which was from the beginning." (1 John 1:1)

(vs. 6, 8) "In the days of Shamgar, the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied," etc.

Here we have a new principle. The faithful acknowledge the ruin in Israel. They neither attempt to palliate nor excuse the evil, but judge it according to God. Four things characterize the ruin: 1st, "The highways were unoccupied and the travelers walked through by-ways." This is the result of the enemy's

yoke. The people could no longer walk safely along the highways, those roads on which all had walked together, for it was there that they met the enemy, and the travelers chose the by-paths, each one according to the choice of his own heart. Is it not this also which characterizes the church of God in our day?

Secondly, "The inhabitants of the villages ceased." The places where the people were wont to dwell in peace, surrounded by their families, were deserted. This visible unity of the people had disappeared until the day that Deborah was raised up for the partial restoration of Israel. Is the unity of the family of God more apparent at the present day? Alas! although a faithful few may act upon it, it exists no longer in its entirety, except to faith and in the counsels of God.

Thirdly, "They chose new gods; then was war in the gates." Yes, idolatry had become the religion of the people who had forsaken God, the eternal God. Israel, having offended the Lord, was chastised by war, and by a relentless enemy.

Fourthly, "Was there a shield or spear seen among forty thousand in Israel?" No longer were there weapons to combat evil. Where now are the weapons? What has been done with the

sword of the Spirit ? Where is the power of the Word to resist the false doctrines swarming in the very midst of Christendom, eating as they do like a canker, and trampling in the dust the wondrous name of Christ? "How long," says the Psalmist, (Ps. 4:2), "will ye turn my glory into shame?" Even the shield of faith has been cast down to the ground, evil is in the ascendancy, and the people of God powerless to withstand it.

In the confusion which exists, the part of the faithful is to apprehend the magnitude of the evil, and bow their heads in humiliation. It is not enough to realize our heavenly blessings, God would have us, who are His people, fully know how greatly, in the existing state of things, we have dishonoured Him, in order that we may separate from it. If we are in the testimony of God, we withdraw from evil. The most terrible characteristic of the last days is not open immorality, although the state of things is deeply corrupt, but more particularly, false doctrines. 2 Timothy exhorts us especially in regard to the latter, to depart from iniquity, and to purge ourselves from vessels to dishonour. But this is not enough; the prophetess adds:

(v. 9) "My heart is toward the governors of Israel, that offered themselves willingly among the people." This is another prin-

ciple. The soul sees what the Spirit of God has wrought, and associates itself with it. The heart of Deborah is with the faithful in Israel. She takes her place openly with those who offered themselves willingly; and, recognizing what God has wrought amidst the ruin, she says: "Bless ye the Lord!" happy to see here below this little testimony among the governors. May all our hearts appreciate it, and may we be able to say with her: "Bless ye the Lord."

(vs. 10, 11) Then, turning to those who were in the peaceful enjoyment of recovered blessings, the prophetess says: "Meditate, ye that ride on white asses" (margin), an indication of wealth and prosperity; the sons of noble families and of the judges possessed this privilege. (cf. Judges 10:4; Judges 12:14) It is like an appeal to those who enjoy, without fighting, the fruit of the victory. "Ye that sit on rich carpets" (Revised Version), those who have the advantage of the rest and quiet with their attendant blessings. "Ye that walk by the way," those who enjoy the security that has been gained. Deborah, I say, addresses herself to these, and invites them to "meditate." They have done nothing in this victory but taste its fruits, for some only had fought, and their voices were heard in the division of the

spoil, in the places of drawing water. It must not be forgotten, that however blessed these times were, they were not the restoration of Israel, any more than the revivals of our days are the re-establishment of the church. If the conquerors could rehearse the righteous acts of the Lord towards the unprotected cities of Israel, if the people had arisen to go down to the gates and confront the enemy, it was none the less a time of ruin and of but partial restoration. Ah! how needful it is for the people of God in our days to remember these things!

But there are still greater blessings for us. The spirit of the song becomes more and more filled with fervour, in rapidity of utterance do the words flow forth from the mouth of Deborah.

(v. 12) "Awake, awake, Deborah: awake, awake, utter a song: arise, Barak, and lead thy captivity captive, thou son of Ahinoam." Psalm 68, that magnificent song, passages of which re-call that of Deborah (cf. verses 8, 9, 13, 18), celebrates the full millennial restoration of Israel, consequent on the exaltation of the Lord. It is there said that the Lord will dwell in the midst of his people: "The Lord will dwell in it forever." ... "The Lord is among them." Whence can this blessing come? The prophet replies, "Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led

captivity captive: thou hast received gifts in the man (margin); yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them." Now the words of this Psalm, which celebrates the fulness of future blessings, we hear proceeding from the lips of a weak woman in a day of ruin, when the Lord has marked Israel's forehead with the sign of lost blessings! "Arise, Barak, and lead thy captivity captive, thou son of Ahinoam." What encouragement for us! The highest truths of all are the special portion of faith, in the low state of the Judges, as they are now for us in the perilous times through which we are passing. The song of Moses, overflowing with the joy of a redeemed people, after the passage of the Red Sea, celebrated deliverance by death, to bring the people to the dwelling place of God; and later on, to the sanctuary which His hands had established. Marvellous song, the song of a soul just delivered, as it contemplates the victory of which the cross is the antitype; hymn where the heart, like ointment poured forth, ascends in the praises of deliverance — a deliverance which no hymn can fully express.

It is a woman who, in a day of obscurity and ruin, sounds forth a song which rises above death, the hymn of deliverance by re-

surrection. Of whom, in "Arise, Barak," is she speaking here? Is it merely of the son of Ahinoam? For our part we do not doubt that Barak is a type, somewhat obscure it may be, of Christ ascended to God's right hand, having led captivity captive. (Eph. 4:8)

A dark and sorrowful state of things had supervened since the song in Exodus, but here the prophetic intelligence of a woman directs us heavenward, in the type of a risen Christ. She awakes; her eyes are opened to contemplate a glorious scene, Barak rising up to lead the vanquished captivity, faint image of that liberty into which a victorious Christ introduces us to enjoy eternally with Himself. If the things spoken of at the beginning of this chapter characterize the awakening of the present time, one at least of them should especially predominate, and that is, the knowledge of a glorified Man ascended to the right hand of God, One whom our eyes and our hearts follow in that heavenly scene, into which He, as victor, has entered, after having delivered us by His death and resurrection. Once more, beloved, far from being discouraged, have we not cause to repeat with Deborah, "Praise ye the Lord"?

(v. 13) "Then came down a remnant of the nobles and the people; the Lord came down for me against the mighty." (Revised Version)

Now Israel is called to come down to the place she was in at the beginning, to fight and to bear testimony in the midst of a scene where God is still leaving her. We cannot expect, even in a time of religious awakening, to see all the people come down. It will never be but "a remnant of the nobles," but how great the privilege, for God reckons this remnant "as His people," for it is in His eyes the blessed representation of them. What joy of heart should it not be to the faithful to see even one witness separated to God from the mass, which, like Reuben, "abode among the sheepfolds." However much we may desire it, we must not expect more, for otherwise it would not be a day of ruin. And, moreover, what a portion is ours! "The Lord came down for me against the mighty." Brethren, should not that suffice us? He who has ascended on high, is the same who comes down with us to give us the victory in every fresh conflict.

(vs. 14-18) God notes those who have been for Him, and those who, for one motive or another, have remained behind. Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, and Issachar came down, with undi-

vided hearts, in the Lord's path. But, lo! Reuben hesitates at the frontier to consider. Wherefore this indecision? "Why abodest thou among the sheepfolds, to hear the bleatings of the flocks?" The trumpet calling the people together had no voice for the heart of Reuben. His prosperity was such, that he preferred remaining in the peaceful enjoyment of his acquired wealth, resting among the sheepfolds, stopping at the watercourses (Revised Version), which formed his boundary. Fellow Christians of the present day, is that our position? Have we followed the nobles who have shown us the way? Have we been content with "great searchings of heart?" Are we lacking in decision in testimony for Christ?

"Gilead abode beyond Jordan." Those days were past when Gilead, equipped for war, accompanied his brethren in their conquests of Canaan. Now, satisfied with his worldly position — shall I say, worldly religion? — outside the limits of the land strictly speaking, beyond Jordan, he is unconscious of any further need, and remains where he is. "Asher continued on the sea shore, and abode in his breaches." When it was a question of fighting, where was Asher to be found? Occupied with his own concerns, his business. He had not made the least sacrifice

in these in order to take part in the Lord's battle. However, Deborah does not linger in the recital of evil. Full of joy, she delights in relating every instance of devotedness to the Lord. (v. 18) "Zebulun and Naphthali were a people that jeopardized their lives unto the death in the high places of the field."

Then in verses 19-22, we have another characteristic of faithfulness. They do not glory in, nor think of, themselves; but the victory was attributed to God only, in the proclamation of its heavenly character.

"They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera." This part of the song closes with an unqualified malediction on Meroz. "Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty." Those who in these troublous times do not take sides with Christ; those who identify themselves with His name and that of God's people, and whose hearts are at the same time indifferent to Himself, let them be cursed. "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha." (1 Cor 16:22)

Now (verses 24-27) Jael is honoured, that which has a little strength is blessed. "He asked water, and she gave him milk; she brought forth butter in a lordly dish." When the enemy of the people of God comes to her, this woman shows grace. Bringing forth the best thing she has in her tent in recognition of Sisera's rank, she hands him the refreshment in a lordly dish. Is not this the very opposite of contempt? Is it not thus that we should act towards the enemies of God, giving them for their thirst and their nourishment even more than they ask? God's witnesses go on with grace beyond the worst enemies of Christ.

Jael is celebrated because she acted thus; but let us read what follows: "She put her hand to the nail and her right hand to the workman's hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote off his head, when she had pierced and stricken through his temples." Ah! the heart of Jael was unreservedly with the God of Israel, with the Israel of God: when it became a question of the truth, and of treating the enemy as such, she displayed the greatest energy. This woman is, at this juncture, in the contracted sphere of the house, the real leader of the armies of Jehovah. She is in the foremost rank, honoured of

God to gain the victory, for she has an undivided heart for His people. Curse ye, Meroz; but blessed be Jael.

(Verses 28, 30) Another scene is taking place in the palace of Sisera's mother, whose pride is humbled to the very dust.*

* **N. B.** It may be observed in passing, that in spite of the eminent position given her of God, Deborah maintains her character of a mother in Israel, and manifests remarkable intelligence as to what comes within the province of her sex, celebrating that which honours Jael, the woman of faith, and proclaiming what draws down judgment on the haughty woman. Later on, another woman, the Queen of Sheba, welcomed by Solomon, did not review the armies of that king, but gave her attention to "the house that he had built, and the meat of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the attendance of his ministers, and their apparel, and his cup-bearers, and his ascent by which he went up unto the house of the Lord. (1 Kings 10:4-5) Showing an intelligent appreciation of what belonged to that sphere.

The song of Deborah closes with these words: "So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord; but let them that love Him be as the sun when he goes forth in his might. (v. 31) Here we have one more recovered blessing which characterizes the awakening: Deborah proclaims her hope. She looks on to that glorious day,

when the Lord having executed judgment, the saints in Israel shall shine forth as the sun itself, like Him whose countenance was, in the eyes of the prophet, "as the sun shines in his strength." (Rev. 1:16, cf. Matt. 13:43)

Amid the darkness of this world's night we have too, beloved brethren, but far better than Deborah, this hope very near. Already the morning star has arisen in our hearts, already the eye of faith, piercing the veil, rejoices in the wondrous scene that is still concealed, but which is summed up in the ineffable words, "So shall we ever be with the Lord."

Chapters 6-8

Gideon

The word of God reaching the conscience

(Judges 6:1-10)

In spite of all the blessings enumerated in Judges 5, Israel very soon relapsed into evil ways and forsook Jehovah. By way of chastisement for this unfaithfulness, God delivered them into the hands of the Midianites. The people passed through all the

phases of misery (material for them — moral for the church) which invariably follow going after the world and forsaking God. Under Jabin, Israel was without arms (Judges 5:8); under the yoke of Midian he was famished — the consequence of our unfaithfulness, from which we always suffer when we seek our portion with the world. It drags us down and takes away our arms, our strength leaves us, and we lose every means of withstanding; not only so, but the very sources of existence are also lacking, for the world never affords nourishment to any one, and we perceive it by the barrenness which invades the soul, when, in our folly, we leave the marrow and fatness of the house of God for the harvests which are merely a mirage of the desert. This was the experience of Israel; Midian "left no sustenance" for him (v. 4)

Then in his misery Israel cried unto Jehovah. He responded, and wrought a fresh revival, in which He sought to probe, more deeply than in the past, the conscience of this poor people. It is interesting to see the way the Lord took to bring about this result. "Jehovah sent a prophet unto the children of Israel." His name is not given, nor does it matter, for this man was simply the bearer of the word of God, in order to bring the people into

His presence. God has a means by which to bless us: His word, which meets every requirement and ought to be quite sufficient for us. Ps. 119 shows us the marvellous part the word plays in the life of the faithful. This psalm exceeds all the others in length. The word of God ought to occupy a corresponding place in our lives. Do we appreciate its value? Does it fill up our days and nights — our thoughts, more or less, when we have not time to sit down and meditate upon it?

God applied, in a way full of grace (vs. 8-10), this word to the conscience of the Israelites, telling them all that He had done for them; how He had led them out, given them deliverance and victory, and brought them in; and, having unfolded before them all His goodness, He adds one word: "But ye have not obeyed My voice." Not a word as to how they might be delivered; He did not yet open the way for their return to Him. The prophet disappeared, leaving them under the weight of their responsibility in the presence of grace. God had borne them in His arms and upon His heart; He had been to them a cloud of fire and of darkness (Ex. 13:21-22; Ex. 14:20); He had fought for them. Have I failed, said He, in any respect towards you; but what have you done? This silence was calculated to

touch their conscience far more than any reproaches. They were impressed, if not convicted; but the word of grace did not yet give to the unfaithful people what they needed. Israel continued powerless before the enemy.

Gideon prepared for service

(Judges 6:11-40)

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

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

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

But there is another principle of the greatest importance: this work requires that all be of God. Gideon was already a believer, before the angel of Jehovah sat under the oak. Whatever he had yet to learn, he believed the word of God, which had been transmitted to him by his forefathers (v. 13). Moreover, he identified himself with the people of God: "If Jehovah be with us" — "Jehovah has forsaken us," he says. He did not follow

the course of Heber, he endured with the Israelites the consequences of their wrong-doing. Respect for His word and affection for His people are two signs of divine life at all times, and appertain to all the faithful. Gideon had, however, much to learn. His faith was very feeble, for he did not count on the goodness of God. Humble, doubtless, but looking at himself, he formed a conclusion what God ought to be to him, from what he was. "Now," said he, "Jehovah has forsaken us." The situation is hopeless, for it is the consequence of our unfaithfulness. Thus reasoned Gideon, but did God reason thus? "Jehovah is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." Ah! how little did he know what was in the heart of God, and how many there are that reason like Gideon. Moreover, notwithstanding his humility, there had not yet been true judgment of self. He wished to offer something, to "bring forth his present" to Jehovah (v. 18). It was, doubtless, not with the intention of doing some great thing for God, but with the thought that all would be well if God accepted his present. We will see the answer of Jehovah, but first let us go back to the principle enunciated above; that, in the work of the deliverance of His people, God is alone upon the scene (see Ex. 14:13-14; 2 Chron. 20:12-18). In the first place, "the angel of Jehovah appeared unto him." Like Saul on

the way to Damascus — it is God who commences by revealing Himself to the soul of every one of His servants, in the person of Jesus. Secondly, Jehovah revealed Himself to Gideon as associated with him: "Jehovah is with thee." Thirdly, it was He who gave Gideon a character — "thou mighty man of valour" — a character which Gideon himself, in his weakness, would never have dreamed of obtaining. Fourthly, "Jehovah looked upon him" in grace, in order to reveal Himself, not only to Him but in Him, as the God of power. If Gideon had no strength, Jehovah had it for him; it is the secret which He made known to him, for He said: "this thy might." Fifthly, it was He who sent him: "Go in this thy might." So was Paul, the servant of God, sent: "not of men, neither by man" (Gal. 1:1).

Finally, God gave him the proof of the interest He had in him. We have already seen that Gideon wished to offer something to Jehovah, but He can accept nothing from man as such. "Take," said he, "the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock, and pour out the broth" (v. 20). The only offering which God can accept, is Christ. If He did not receive what Gideon offered Him, He accepted that which represented Christ in it. This man of God had a very imperfect understanding of

the value of the sacrifices, which Jehovah had commanded to the children of Israel; "the broth in the pot" was a witness of his ignorance. But God discerned what was real, underlying this feeble faith, and accepted the offering when Gideon laid it "upon the rock." The fire of judgment rose up out of the rock, consuming the flesh and the unleavened cakes. The proof of the interest which God had for him was, in figure, the judgment fallen upon Christ.

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

forgotten), for, if we have not peace ourselves, how can we proclaim it to others?

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

It was only after the altar of worship was set up that God called Gideon as a servant to bear public testimony, and this began in his father's house. It consisted in destroying "the altar of Baal, and the grove that is by it," and substituting for these the altar of testimony — the altar of the God whom Gideon knew. The positive duty of one who would be a testimony for God is, before all else, to cast down his idols. Why is it that there are so few true servants among Christians, walking in the power of a testimony for Christ? It is because they have not the two altars.

And why have they not the second? Because they have not provided themselves wood for the sacrifice. The idols are the wood (v. 26). Let us overthrow them, let nothing of them remain. Let us begin in the innermost circle of the family. If we do not do this, where will our testimony be? The overthrowing of the idols is the secret of power; the Spirit of Jehovah only came upon Gideon when he had accomplished this act. We have not now, as he, Baals of stone, and groves of wood, but we have many other idols; and, little like him, we often prefer them to the power of a faithful walk with God. Gideon obeyed unhesitatingly, without compromise or reservation. For him the idols were nothing compared with the God he knew. This "mighty man of valour" had been wanting in courage. Fear of the enemy (v. 11), afraid of God (v. 23), fear of his father's house (v. 27), were some of his characteristics. He did his work at night, fearing to do it by day; he did it, nevertheless, for God had so commanded him. It was only in the morning that the people of the city saw what had been done. He who knew the character of Gideon had not said to him: Do this work by day. Let us, too, feeble as we are, destroy our idols in silence, when no eye observes us. Let us not speak too loudly of the matter; let us accomplish this difficult work with fear and trembling,

looking to God only, in the silence of the night. The world will soon perceive that we have a new altar which it knows not, and that the grove has no value for us except as wood to be burned. Then the world, which has hitherto sustained us, will hate us. It was the altar of testimony which drew upon Gideon the animosity of all. Hated, but what did it matter, for he received the name of Jerubbaal (let Baal plead), and became in presence of all, the personal witness of the worthlessness of the things he had formerly worshipped.

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

Brethren, are we witnesses before the world of the folly of all that it finds its interest in? If we have not maintained the altar of Baal, possibly we have not destroyed "the grove that is by it." Unqualified obedience to the word of God, is the path of power. At certain periods of our lives power has characterized our service, at others it has been lacking. Let us then ask ourselves if we have not rebuilt some idol that we had des-

troyed. All public service for the Christian must begin by faithfulness in the little circle in which he is called to move.

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

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

Gideon, notwithstanding his strength, did not manifest much confidence in God. He asked for signs to know if Jehovah would save the people by his hand. All God's orders to Gideon were clear and simple, but when Gideon asked for signs of God, all became obscure and complicated. We can hardly understand what his thought was. It may be that the fleece repres-

ented Israel, blessed of God, when dryness rested upon the nations, and vice versa, for having proved God, Gideon put Him to a counterproof. What poor faith! What feeble confidence in Him! But the God of grace patiently did what His servant required. He wished to deliver His people. He wished, by all means, to sustain the feeble heart of His witness, in order to enlist him in His service and to make him an instrument for His glory.

What Characterises God's Witnesses in the Day of Ruin

(Judges 7:1-14)

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

In the days of the nation's moral prosperity under Joshua, when it was a question of going to war, all Israel went up to battle, and the unity of the people was thereby strikingly manifested. The first conflict at Ai (Joshua 7:1-5), the only exception to this rule, resulted in the defeat of those who took part in it. In a time of declension, it is otherwise. When all the people went up

with Gideon, Jehovah said to him: "the people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands," for the danger was that Israel would vaunt themselves against Jehovah, saying: "Mine own hand has saved me." At such a period God takes special care to repress the pride that would attach credit to man in a work which belongs exclusively to Himself. Christendom in the present day boasts of the number of its adherents, under the impression that it sees therein a factor in the work of God. If any work is wrought of Him, she attributes it to herself; and, like Laodicea, prides herself in her resources: "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing."

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

In verse 3, we find the second characteristic: "whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from Mount Gilead." Moses had formerly given this command to the children of Israel: "What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart" (Deut. 20:8). The same passage (vs. 5-7) teaches us that those who were fearful

and afraid, were those who had something to lose. A servant of God is full of courage for his work, when he has nothing to lose here, because the excellency of Christ has made him despise what the world values. Alas! what numbers of fearful there are in our days, even as formerly, when: "there returned of the people twenty and two thousand, and there remained ten thousand." God wants undivided hearts for the accomplishment of His work; hearts that have nothing to lose, that are afraid of nothing, and who cannot exert a baneful influence over those who have gone out to the war unentangled with the affairs of this life. The twenty-two thousand came in for the spoil, but were unequal to the effort required to get it. Those that are fearful will profit by the testimony, but have not the qualification necessary to maintain it.

We come now to a third characteristic of the witnesses. God tested them in order to bring out if they realized that all is loss for those who would win the battle. "He brought down the people unto the water." Will they bow down upon their knees to drink, or lap of the water with their tongues, as a dog laps? Some seek their ease, and enjoy to the full those blessings which Providence has placed in their path; others, having as

their sole aim to gain the victory, do not allow themselves to be diverted from their object, but, tasting the water by the way, only find therein what invigorates them for their service. It is said of the Lord, "He shall drink of the brook in the way" (Ps. 110:7). When He thus drank, "He stedfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem," the scene of His agony and death (Luke 9:51). There is nothing that so trammels the action of the Christian in his testimony, as taking his ease, and settling down in the enjoyment of the earthly blessings which the providence of God bestows upon him, instead of simply tasting them by the way. The Christianity of the present day, bows down upon the knees to drink; it gives thanks, it may be, to God, but sees, in the earthly blessings, the object and end of its piety; whereas, the witnesses for God, just take as much as will enable them to continue on their journey. These three hundred, who lapped the water as a dog lappeth, drinking what the hand carried to the mouth, were not only the devoted, but the humble ones. They remind one of the poor Syrophenician woman, who, when compared to a dog, replied, "Yes Lord," happy to be dependent only on His grace (Mark 7:28). God wants devoted yet humble witnesses.

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

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

Gideon learned to know himself, but God also revealed to him the moral state of the enemy that he was called to encounter. It

was a vanquished foe. "For into his hand," said the Midianite to his fellow, "has God delivered Midian and all the host" (v. 14). May we have a better understanding of this truth in connection with our three enemies, the flesh, the world and Satan. The flesh is crucified, the world is overcome, Satan is judged. This fills us with courage before them. Gideon, realized all these things and worshipped.

What testimony consists in.

(Judges 7:15-25)

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

We find the use of the trumpets detailed in Numbers 10:1-10. They were the voice of God to communicate His mind to the

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

who has scattered us, and that the great opposition to his power is the gathering together of the children of God apart from the world, and we will have the joy of having laboured for that which the word calls "good and pleasant!" (Ps. 133:1).

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

The trumpet called to battle; and here we arrive at the circumstances of our chapter. The testimony of God is inseparable from conflict, for it not only consists in gathering together, and the march, but in an attitude openly taken in opposition to the world, the enemy of God. We have to proclaim boldly that we are — without any possible compromise — in a struggle with the world. The conflict has two purposes: to put us in possession of our privileges (which is the subject of the book of Joshua), and to deliver the people of God who have been brought into subjection to the enemy through their own un-

faithfulness, which is the way it is looked at in the book of Judges. In Joshua all Israel were to go up to the conquest of Canaan; here, the struggle is reserved to a certain number of witnesses, champions of Jehovah, for the deliverance of His captive people.

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

The empty pitchers are a second factor in testimony. They were, doubtless, some of the utensils which had contained the victuals of the people (v. 8); and though now empty and worthless, Gideon, taught of God, knew how to utilize them for His glory. 2 Cor. 4:1-10 makes obvious allusion to this scene. The apostle Paul speaking there of the position he was placed in as a witness before the world, says, he was "for the manifestation of the truth," and to bear "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (R.V.) before men. He then adds: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (v. 7). An earthen vessel, such was the "mortal flesh" of the great apostle of the Gentiles. Empty pitchers represented what Gideon and his warriors were

in themselves. The lesson which their leader had just learned in the camp of Midian, the three hundred had also individually to realize. Like Paul's earthen vessel, these empty pitchers were only fit to be broken. When God raises up a testimony, He only glorifies Himself in instruments which He has broken. He carried His gospel to the nations by a Saul whom He had previously cast down in the dust on his way to Damascus, and glorified the excellence of His power in a Paul whom He continued to discipline to the end. "Troubled on every side," said the apostle, "yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus ..."

Of what use were these empty pitchers? To hold the lamps, the third and most important element in testimony for God; to carry within them this treasure, the divine light, in order that, as the apostle says, "the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:10). If, in testimony, the trumpets represent the word of God, and the pitchers ourselves, what are the lamps but the life of Jesus, the light of Christ. The first two elements only serve to make the third manifest amidst the surrounding darkness. Gideon's men blew the trumpets, and brake

the pitchers (Judges 7:19), and the light shone out all about them. It is the same with real witnesses: "For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake;" it is God Himself who takes care to break the vessels, "that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:11). It does not say: the life of Christ, but that of Jesus, the life of that Man whose path through this world was one of holiness. We are called to represent down here the Man Jesus, walking as He walked (1 John 2:6), and it is in that that our testimony consists.

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

broken! "Blessed ... blessed," as the Lord said in Matt. 5, adding: "Rejoice and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven."

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

It is an encouraging fact that testimony begets testimony. The three hundred were employed to reunite the people. The men of Israel were gathered together and pursued Midian (v. 23), and all the men of Ephraim came together and joined in the pursuit and shared in the spoil. We shall see this result if we are faithful. Let us be witnesses for Christ, and we shall awaken zeal in

those who are His. May that time soon arrive in which, when Jesus comes, He shall find, not only some hundreds, but, a people who are all witnesses, who have fought, held fast, and overcome for Him!

Difficulties and snares in service

(Judges 8:1-23)

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

The men of Ephraim contended with Gideon. In the time of Deborah they had been in the post of honour (Judges 5:14), but since then there had been declension, and Gideon, taught of God, had not summoned them; they were fallen to the second rank. This distinction made them jealous of what Jehovah had entrusted to their companions, jealous of the energy of faith

and of its results to the others. "Why hast thou served us thus?" (v. 1) Ephraim, preoccupied with his own importance, thinks of himself instead of thinking of God. This is a frequent source of strife between brethren, and such contentions are far more painful and trying than conflict with the world. It is precious to see the man of God pass through this difficulty in the power of the Spirit. The book of Judges gives us three examples of similar contentions: the case of Gideon, that of Jephthah, and that of the eleven tribes against Benjamin. Here trouble was avoided, and a breach prevented. Later on, it was not so. When altercations arise among Christians, deep humility is their only resource. Gideon had learned this in the school of God, as the preceding chapters relate, so that it was not difficult for him to realize on this occasion how to act. God had made him understand that the courage and strength which he had, did not emanate from himself; and that, in itself, the sword of Gideon was worth as little as a cake of barley bread. And so, in the presence of Ephraim, the servant that Jehovah had used for this great deliverance, took care not to speak of himself. He devoted his attention to what God had done by the hands of his brethren. "What have I done now," said he, "in comparison of you? Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of

Abiezer?" He took the lowest place and acknowledged the zeal for God which, after all, they had shown to their honour; and the humility of this servant of God is thus the means of removing a great difficulty. Let us act in a similar way, and, when we speak of our brethren, let us enumerate, not their failures, but what God has wrought in them. Can I not admire Christ in my brother when I see how God is dealing with him, breaking him down so that, at all costs, what characterized the Lord may be manifested in Him? Nothing so appeases contention as seeing Christ in others; it is the result of a normal Christian condition in the children of God.

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

They reached Succoth, a city of Israel which belonged to the tribe of Gad. Succoth rejected them, refusing even to give them bread. There was thus, in the midst of the people of God, an entire city, bearing the name of Israel, which had renounced all

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

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

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

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

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

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

But we see him exposed to a fresh snare (v. 22-23). It is no longer the flattery of the world, but that of the people of God. The men of Israel said unto Gideon: "Rule thou over us, both thou and thy son and thy son's son also, for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian." They put their leader in the place of Jehovah and offer him the sceptre. "Rule thou over us." None are more prone to clericalism than the people of God. It is not only the bane of Christendom, it is also the innate tendency of the natural heart of believers. The fact of ministry be-

ing blessed is apt to lead us to make of the servant a "minister" in the human sense, thus losing sight of God. By the grace of God, the faith of Gideon escaped this danger. He said resolutely, "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; Jehovah shall rule over you." The object of his ministry was that God should have the pre-eminence and lose nothing of His authority over His people.

Gideon's ephod

(Judges 8:24-35)

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

"And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey;" a request with which the people willingly complied. Gideon did not covet these things as Achan did, when he brought judgment upon Israel. He was noble-hearted and disinterested, and wished to make a good use of the gold. Aaron, of old, had

asked for their ornaments to make therewith the calf of gold. Jerubbaal, who had cast down the idols, in no wise sought to set them up again; but, impressed with the sense of his own importance, he wished to erect a memorial of his victory at Ophrah, his native town. This memorial was to be an ephod, an article of divine appointment. It formed part of the vestments which the sacrificing priest wore when representing the people before God. It was indeed a beautiful object, yet in Jehovah's eyes it was worthless, apart from the high priest who wore it. Alas! all Israel looked upon this ephod as a means of approach to God, and went and prostrated themselves before it. Even Gideon and his house fell into the snare.

Christendom is no stranger to ephods. Many are the things of divine appointment which it has apart from Christ and by which it imagines that it can approach God. The church, ministry, baptism, the Lord's supper, and even prayer, separated from their source, become ephods before which people prostrate themselves. Form takes the place of God, and souls thereby fall again into idolatry. Ah! do they not even make an idol of Christ on the cross! The brazen serpent had been kept and the people had made a false god of it. Like the faithful

Hezekiah, the true witness of the present day cannot put up with that. The king brake in pieces this idol, and called it Nehushtan, i.e., a piece of brass (2 Kings 18:4).

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

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

Chapters 9 to 12

Fresh Declension and Fresh Revivals

Abimelech, or the Usurpation of Authority

(Judges 9)

This chapter introduces us to such a sorrowful phase of declension, that, at first sight, it does not seem to contain a single refuge for faith. In Judges 8, we have seen the congregation of Israel wishing to confer authority on their leader; here, a wolf usurps the Shepherd's place, and seizes upon the flock in order to devour it. It is the arbitrary authority of the evil servant, who, in the absence of his lord, began to smite his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken (Matt. 24:48-49). This briefly reminds us of the principle of clericalism in the house of God and its pernicious encroachments. The wretched

Abimelech was not a judge; he sought a position still more exalted: he had himself proclaimed king (v. 6), and took, in the midst of the people, the title assumed by those who rule over the nations. In thus openly arrogating to himself this title (v. 2), he acted in the opposite way to a judge who had been raised up of God (cf. Judges 8:23). In order to usurp this place, he resorted to thoroughly human expedients. Through the brothers of his mother, the concubine of Gideon, he beguiled the men of Shechem under the guise of fraternity. They placed confidence in this traitor; their moral state was so low, that they even forgot the bond that united them to all Israel, and said of Abimelech: "He is our brother." Fraternity had lost, for them, its true meaning, and had come to be a name characterizing only a party.

The influence of this man was sustained by treasure taken from the house of a false god. The usurper appealed to the pockets of the people, and did not despise the unholy source from which the money came. This silver served to accomplish the devil's work. Baal's treasure took the place of Jehovah's power, and furnished the usurper with the means of persecuting and cutting off the posterity of faith, the family of God (v. 5). One only,

Jotham, the youngest of all Gideon's sons, a poor, insignificant creature, escaped, and succeeded in concealing himself.

Abimelech was successful; the evil spirit triumphed, but it will never be a spirit of peace among men. Intestine dissensions, treacheries, struggles for supremacy, vintages productive of drunken hilarity, drunkenness finding its vent in curses, the ambition of Gaal, the counsels of Ebed, the craft of Zebul, the violence of Abimelech — such were the disturbing elements which troubled the camp of Israel, when the testimony of God had left it. It became a scene of sorrow, of slaughter, and of hatred; but Jehovah, in His grace, caused a ray of light to shine in the midst of the darkness. He does not leave Himself without testimony; this we may reiterate with confidence, as we pass through difficult times. And should there be, as here, only a single witness left for God in this world, may we be that one, that despised Jotham, the last of all, but standing steadfast for God. Preserved by the providential goodness of Jehovah, "he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim" (v. 7). Moses, in the past, had decreed that six tribes should stand on Mount Ebal to curse, and six on Gerizim to bless. Joshua had remembered this when the people entered Canaan, but since then

Israel had morally chosen Ebal, the place of cursing. Jotham chose Gerizim, the place of blessing, and he stood there alone. As God's witness, in face of the whole people, he lifted up his voice and spoke a fable in their ears, proclaiming the blessing of faith and also the consequences of the unfaithfulness of the people. Jotham is, in his own person, the representative of the blessings of the true Israel of God; as to himself, feeble and persecuted, yet able to enjoy the favour of God and testify for Him, bearing fruit to His glory.

In his recital, three trees refuse to be promoted over the other trees. They depict, according to the word, the different characteristics of Israel under the blessing of Jehovah. The olive tree said: "Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?" (v. 9). Oil answers to the unction and the power of the Holy Spirit by which God and men are honoured. The Israel of God can only realize this power, when in thorough separation from the nation's and their principles. These latter set up kings over themselves (1 Sam. 8:5), whilst Jehovah was the sole ruler of the people when faithful. The fig tree said: "Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the

trees?" (v. 11), for Israel could only bear fruit when in separation from the nations. The vine said: "Should I leave my wine, which cheers God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?" New wine is the joy found in the mutual communion of men with God, and this enjoyment — the highest that could be desired — was lost to Israel when they adopted the spirit and ways of the nations.

What a lesson for us Christians! The world is to the church, what the nations were to Israel. If we yield to its solicitations, we abandon our oil, our fruit, our new wine — that is to say, our spiritual power, the works which God has prepared for us (Eph. 2:10), and the joy of communion. Oh! are we able to respond to all the offers of the world; Should I leave that which is my happiness and my strength, for fruitless turmoil, or to satisfy the lusts and ambitions of the heart of men? Jotham, like his father Gideon (Judges 8:23), appreciates these treasures of the Israel of God, and set himself apart on Gerizim, retaining his blessed position. In the presence of all this apostate people, he is the true and last bud of faith, the sole witness for God. What honour for the young and feeble son of Jerubbaal! Spurned by all, his lot was the only enviable one, for he glori-

fied God in this sorrowful world. May we too, like him, be found in the path of separation from evil. There we shall taste all that the trees of God yield. He who has enjoyed these things exclaims: "Should I leave them?"

When Jotham had shown the people their folly, and foretold their judgment, he ran away and fled (v. 21). He left the congregation of Israel, abandoning it to the chastisement which was already at the door. He went to Beer and dwelt there: "That is the well whereof Jehovah spake unto Moses, 'Gather the people together, and I will give them water,'" and which Israel celebrated in a song (Num. 21:16-18). Thus it is, that the faithful witnesses, in the midst of Christendom already ripe for judgment, withdraw to Beer, the true gathering point, where is the fountain of living water (cf. Jer. 2:13), the place also of songs and praises.

Tola and Jair

(Judges 10:1-5)

The beginning of this chapter gives us a brief sketch of the history of two judges in Israel — Tola and Jair — both eminent men. The first was renowned for his descent, his ancestors be-

ing mentioned in Genesis amongst the sons of Israel who went down into Egypt — namely, Tola and Puah among the sons of Issachar (Gen. 46:13; 1 Chr. 8:1). The second was conspicuous for his wealth, the number of his sons, his prosperity (cf. Judges 5:10), and his cities. But, strange to say, nothing else is added. Their rule continued for nearly the same length of time. God made use of them, qualifying even Tola "to save Israel" (R.V.), but He did not glorify Himself by them in any special way. This reminds us of 1 Cor. 1:26-29; "Not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, yea, and things, which are not, to bring to nought things that are; that no flesh should glory in His presence." God uses, in preference, weak vessels, and that is the reason why so many of the judges bear, in one way or another, the stamp of weakness. On the other hand, all the value of God's instruments consists in presenting the character of Christ. How difficult it would be for a man who was powerful, noble or rich, to reflect the traits of Him who, when here below, was found in the place of weakness, humiliation and poverty, that

He might bring the grace of God to us. The judges who preceded them, being neither Tolas nor Jairs, were examples of humility, of forgetfulness of self, esteeming others better than themselves; and who, having nothing to lose, gave proof of spiritual energy which nothing could arrest and whose very weakness achieved a victory.

A Fresh Revival in Israel

(Judges 10:6-18)

The peaceful times of Tola and Jair did not prevent the people from sinking lower and lower. The declension increased, and the evil became more pronounced. "And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of Jehovah, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook Jehovah, and served not Him" (v. 6). Never before had such an assemblage of false gods been seen in Israel. The people were wholly given over to idolatry. Ammon was raised up as the rod of Jehovah and oppressed Gilead eighteen years. He also passed over Jordan to fight against Judah and Benjamin. Then, under the pressure of circumstances, grace wrought in the conscience of the people.

It is a remarkable fact, that, in proportion as apostasy approaches its final development, the awakenings in conscience became deeper. I do not say that they widened. We have but to call to mind the song of Deborah, which brought out in the clearest light all the privileges of the people of God. But Israel, at that time, had but a slight sense of their responsibility, the conscience of the people was less aroused, and self-judgment less marked. We find here, for the first time, divine light penetrating the conscience of the people, and leading them to judge themselves deeply (cf. Judges 6:7-10). "We have sinned against Thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim" (v. 10). Then God reminds them of all His grace and His deliverances on former occasions. and of the number of the nations out of whose hand He had saved them, adding: "Yet ye have forsaken me, and served other gods" — driving home, like an arrow in their consciences, the word which their distress had wrung from them, and He closes with these words: "Wherefore I will deliver you no more" (v. 13). Israel, as a whole, could not be restored. This finds its counterpart in the history of the church.

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

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

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

forward to speak of themselves, but, forsaking idols, to serve the Lord.

However blessed this day of revival was, one thing was painfully lacking — a knowledge of the fundamental truths which God had confided to His people. "And the people and princes of Gilead said one to another, what man is he that will begin to fight against the children of Ammon? he shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead" (v. 18). They had no sense of the unity of the people. Gilead made of himself a party. The authority and guidance of the Spirit of God were but little known, for they said: "What man is he?" They had only another step to make — to choose for themselves; this step they took in vs. 4-11 of the following chapter. Not that Jephthah was not raised up of God, but Gilead took part in the choice. How widely different was this from the call of Gideon, and how painfully characteristic of the last days of declension — this inter-meddling of man.

Jephthah and his Daughter

(Judges 11)

In verses 1-11 the deliverer comes on the scene. He bears the stamp of infirmity, so often found throughout this book. Jephthah, the Gileadite, was "a mighty man of valour," but of impure origin, the son of an harlot, the remembrance of which could not fail to fill him with shame. Nevertheless God used him, yea much more than this, presents to us, through him, some of the characteristics of Christ. Let us remember that the history of believers is only of value in the measure in which a reflection of the Saviour is reproduced in them. There would be much to perplex and little to edify in the history of Jephthah, did we not seek therein what manifested God's character. The word of God which shows, on the one hand, the natural man, wholly estranged from God, describes to us, also, all the weaknesses and failures of men of faith such as Jephthah; but God gives us more than that in their history. He presents Christ to us, and it is this which makes them so interesting. We readily discover the faults of our brethren, but we should be more interested in the way God forms and fashions them, in order, spite of all, to raise up witnesses for Christ. Jephthah, whose origin was somewhat similar to that of Abimelech, presents a

marked contrast to that ungodly man. Abimelech sought, from the outset, to exalt himself, and usurped the place of the legitimate family of Gideon. Jephthah, who — apart from his origin — was the eldest of the family, was rejected by his brethren: "Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou art the son of a strange woman" (v. 2). Does that not remind us of the words: "We will not have this man to reign over us!" (Luke 19:14). "Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob" (v. 3). Jephthah allowed himself to be despoiled, humbled himself instead of lifting up his head among the wicked, gave up all his rights and went away to a strange country. But God knew how to find him and to bring him to the front again. The moment came, when those who had driven their deliverer away, were compelled to cast themselves as suppliants at his feet. "Did not ye hate me," said Jephthah to the elders of Gilead, "and expel me from my father's house?" (v. 7). This very saviour whom they had derided, they were forced, as formerly were Joseph's brethren, to acknowledge in the far country; and, appealing to him in their distress, besought him to become their captain. Jephthah did not consent to take this title before victory (v. 9). And so will it be with Christ, who will be publicly recognized as the Head of Israel by His tri-

umph over their enemies. It is interesting to see in this man, despised by the world yet enduring its scorn, a faint representation of the Messiah; for we may say, that it was in representing Christ, that he was considered worthy to lead the people of God.

The children of Ammon were at that time, the sworn enemies of Israel. The worst adversaries of the people of God are always the descendants, according to the flesh, of believers. Midian, against whom Gideon fought, proceeded from Ishmael, the seed of Abraham according to the flesh; Moab and the children of Ammon sprang from Lot; Edom was the son of Isaac after the flesh. There were others, no doubt, such as Jabin under Barak, and the Philistines under Samson, but we maintain that our most determined enemies are the outcome of our failures or of the flesh in us. The bitterest opposition to the testimony and spiritual life of the church, springs from her own unfaithfulness under cover of the name of Christ. Her idolatrous ways, so foreign to divine life, in all their hatred and craft, will prove to be for the humiliation, chastisement and snare of God's people, to the very end.

The children of Ammon, taking advantage of the low condition of Israel to rise up against them, sought to despoil them of their lawful territory and privileges and to appropriate them to themselves. What had the people gained by bowing down before the idols of Ammon? They had fallen under the judgment of God, and into the hands of the enemies of Jehovah. If we step on to the world's platform, it robs us, causes us to lose the reality of our privileges, and takes them away. Dreadful confusion is the result. The world then says to us: My rights are as great as yours, I am as good a Christian as you are, for you show as much activity for the things of the world as I do. "Israel took away my land ... now therefore restore those lands again peaceably" (v. 13). Such are the consequences of our unfaithfulness.

Under these circumstances a revival produces remarkable effects. Jephthah did not deny the low condition of the people, but, when he addressed the children of Ammon, he went back to the beginning of Israel's blessings (vs. 15-27). Far from agreeing to this state of things, in accepting the yoke which Ammon for eighteen years had placed upon the people, he took his stand upon Israel's original blessings, in the day when they

went out of Egypt for the purpose of entering Canaan. He maintained the blessings, as the ones upon which the people had been established. We will proceed said he, in accordance with the principles which God gave us at the beginning, and which are ours for ever. He saw the people, the family of God, as God had looked at them at the first, and said: "Our conflict is not with the children of Ammon, but with the Amorites." It is the same for the church. Her warfare is with the spiritual powers in heavenly places (Eph. 6), just as Israel's was with the Canaanites. Our controversy is not with the religious mixtures, which are the outcome of the flesh and which we neither recognize as friends or enemies, nor do we combat them unless they compel us to do so. Our language should be that of Jephthah: "We will keep the land which Jehovah has given us" (v. 24).

Jephthah having spoken thus, a fresh blessing was granted him: "Then the Spirit of Jehovah came upon Jephthah" (v. 29). The power of God was found in the path which he was on. Not to conform to the ruin as though God could accept it, and to act on the principles which God committed to us at the beginning, is the path of power even when we are reduced to the number of two or three gathered together in His name.

"The Spirit of Jehovah came upon Jephthah." Alas! how often it happens that the flesh manifests itself in us, as it did in him. He was not content with divine grace and power. Ignorant of the true character of God, he "vowed a vow unto Jehovah" (v. 30), made an arrangement with God, on the footing of a mutual agreement; and, binding himself before Him in a legal way, fell into Israel's error in the wilderness of Sinai. "If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be, that whatsoever comes forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be Jehovah's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" (vs. 30, 31).

God, leaving Jephthah to the responsibility and consequences of his vow, did not manifest either approval or disapproval of it. Heaven seemed closed to the voice of the leader of Israel. Nevertheless the Spirit of Jehovah accorded to him the victory.

Jephthah returned to Mizpeh, unto his house, and, behold his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances. "She was his only child" (v. 34). These words remind us of more than one passage of Scripture. God said to Abraham, "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest"

(Gen. 22:2). But Abraham offered up his son "by faith" at God's command, Jephthah offered his daughter by an act of his own will, which was simply a want of faith. The words "only," "only begotten," remind us again of a greater than Isaac. Like Jephthah in his earlier history, his daughter reproduced in a touching manner some traits of the character of Christ. When faith was lacking in the father, it shone out brightly in his poor child. This only daughter, devoted beforehand to the sacrifice by a rash vow (Christ, on the contrary, was that by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God), is seen submitting herself, instead of rebelling or blaming her father. "My father," said she, "if thou hast opened thy mouth unto Jehovah, do to me according to that which has proceeded out of thy mouth; forasmuch as Jehovah has taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies, even of the children of Ammon" (v. 36). She submitted on account of Jehovah, a faint reflection, doubtless, of Him who said: "I come to do Thy will, O God." She counted her life as nothing, in view of the victory; "forasmuch as Jehovah has taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies," and for that consented to be sacrificed. No thought of herself detained her. Beautiful self-renunciation by faith which looked only to God! She suffered besides in another way deeply painful for every

woman of faith in Israel, whose desire was to be mother of a posterity which might become the lineage of the Messiah. But this only daughter consented to be cut off from the scene as a barren woman. "Let me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows" (v. 37). However beautiful this devotedness was, how infinitely did that of the Lord Jesus surpass it! In view of salvation, He to whom everything belonged consented to be "cut off and have nothing" (Dan. 9:26, margin). Abandoning all His prerogatives as Messiah, all His rights as Son of God and Son of man, he renounced His posterity in order to obtain a better victory which only He could achieve. He gave up His life, but "He shall see His seed" (Isa. 53:10), and Jehovah "will make His seed to endure for ever" (Ps. 89:29).

Truly, in this daughter of Israel was reproduced, very feebly no doubt, some of the perfection of Christ. Her simple faith shone out and she submitted to the will of God. She consented to be offered up for a burnt offering, like Him who was sacrificed later on, not as she did to confirm the victory, but to obtain a better deliverance. Let us follow the example of Jephthah's daughter; let us learn to forget ourselves in offering ourselves

up to Him who was sacrificed for us, to die in faith "not having received the promises," without obtaining any apparent result for our labour but satisfied to have been the epistle of Christ among men, and His representatives, to the glory and honour of God!

Strife between Brethren

(Judges 12:1-6)

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

In the book of Joshua, characterized by the power of the Holy Spirit with Israel, this effort was baffled at the time of the con-

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

Later, in the book (Judges 8:1), when Ephraim began to chide with Gideon, the conflict was quieted through the humility of the latter who deemed the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer. In Judges 8, and still more in the chapter we are considering, it is no longer a question of defending principles. The discontent of Ephraim proceeded from a sense of his own importance. He had been pacified on the former occasion by the humility of Gideon, but, conscience not having been reached and there having been no self-judgment, he renewed against Jephthah the same accusations. A fault in our career as Christians left unjudged will reappear sooner or later in similar circumstances. Here the state of Ephraim had grown worse, for while on the previous occasion he had

gleaned, on the present one, waiting for some incentive from without, he had done nothing. This did not, however, make him the less jealous of the results which the energy of faith in his brethren had produced. It is the same in the present day, and we are all in danger of falling into this snare. The church, instead of being a witness for Christ, has gone back to the world; it is a time when God takes for witnesses the weakest, the poorest, and those least qualified among His people. In acting through them, God would confound the "mighty" or the "noble" (see 1 Cor. 1), in whose eyes there is nothing important except what emanates from themselves. Unable to humble themselves, or to rejoice in what God has done by the instrumentality of others, they despise all that does not come within the circle formed by their own worldliness. If the work goes on they express their jealousy if it still extends they become enemies and proceed from hatred to threats: "We will burn thine house upon thee with fire" (v. 1).

In Deborah's day, Ephraim was the first; under Jephthah, God accounted him as nothing. All that he could now draw from his former blessings was the remembrance of his importance and the desire to make the most of it. Alas! on the other hand, we

no longer find on the part of Jephthah the disinterestedness or humility of a Gideon. He answered the flesh by the flesh, his own wounded feelings clashing with the egotism of Ephraim. In his defence he made self prominent. "I and MY PEOPLE were at great strife with the children of Ammon; and when I called you, ye delivered me not out of their hands, And when I saw that ye delivered me not, I put my life in my hands; and passed over against the children of Ammon, and Jehovah delivered them into my hand: wherefore then are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me?" (vs. 2, 3). Jephthah talked of himself, thought about his disputed worth, fell into the snare that Satan had set for him and formed a party, when just before, having identified himself with the people, he had proclaimed their unity in the presence of the children of Ammon (Judges 11:12, 23, 27). But now, "my people" meant Gilead as opposed to Ephraim.

Words intensified the quarrel. "The men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites" (v. 4). There was not a single principle involved in this struggle. On all sides it was but jealousy, personal importance and angry

words exchanged by irritated hearts; and so a fratricidal war broke out in the midst of Israel, brought about by their own hand. At the passages of Jordan they are known, for the purpose of killing one another, by a Shibboleth, a formula used for the name of Jehovah, and which had nothing to do with the truth of God. And there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.

Let us be on our guard against such snares, for if there be one thing which especially belongs to a time of ruin, it is strife in the family of God. Let us have our hearts enlarged as to the work of God in this world. When entrusted to other hands than ours, it should have the same importance and value for us, as though it were done by ourselves. Paul, in chains at Rome, writing to the Philippians, rejoiced that Christ was preached even by those who were adding affliction to his bonds. Let us not give any importance whatever to our work, but like Gideon leave the vintage of Abiezer unestimated. A season of quietness is no guarantee against these dangers. At the beginning of the church's history (Acts 6:1-6), there arose murmurings and jealousies between the Grecians and the Hebrews, to appease which needed more than the humility of a Gideon, requiring

even the great wisdom of the apostles. They handed over to others the care of serving tables, relinquishing an authority which would have given them prominence in the administration of the assembly, in order to continue in prayer and to give themselves wholly to the ministry of the word. By such acts as these, consciences are reached and Satan's devices against the testimony defeated.

Ibzan, Elon and Abdon

(Judges 12:7-15)

After Jephthah, under the reign of three judges, Israel enjoyed the peace which had been acquired. One of these judges sprang from Judah, another from Zebulun, and the third from Ephraim. They were not called on to fight, but to maintain the people in the condition in which victory had placed them. Possibly they had not the energy of a Jair (Judges 10:1-5), who "arose," as the word tells us, but, like him, two of these judges were men of great wealth. Periods of outward prosperity are not the most profitable for the people of God. The personal importance of the judges comes out, but not the condition of Israel. Who they were, and what they did, is known, but not anything of what was going on in the heart and conscience of the people. And so

no sooner was the last of these judges dead, than Israel relapsed into their previous condition (Judges 13:1). There are certain occasions when we have to "overcome," others when we have to "stand" (Eph. 6:13). How do we employ the corresponding days of peace which the Lord permits us to have? To strengthen ourselves in the truths God has given us, or to go to sleep amid comfortable surroundings, only to be unexpectedly awoken when Satan returns to the charge, and to find ourselves powerless in the presence of the enemy? Those who are not fed are not able to fight. Let us use the times of prosperity in growing in our personal knowledge of the Lord and in walking in communion with Him. We shall thus be strengthened to resist fresh attacks, and avoid falling into bondage more cruel than that from which we have escaped.

Judges 13-16

Samson

Nazariteship

These chapters form a new division in the book of Judges. From Judges 3 to Judges 12 we have seen a series of deliver-

ances wrought by instruments raised up of God. It was a period of revivals. The part with which we are about to be occupied has a special character.

Again did Israel fall: "And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of Jehovah; and Jehovah delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years" (Judges 13:1). God does not give us any particulars of this fresh declension, but we discern His estimate of it, by the weight of the rod He laid upon His people; and the Philistines were the chastisement. Nothing more clearly indicates the state of Israel than this fact. Hitherto the subjection had been to outside enemies; or to Jabin, chief of the former possessors of the land; or to the nations which had sprung from Israel after the flesh and who attacked them on their borders. Here we find the enemy established within the confines of Israel and committing ravages. The Philistines ruled over the people and reduced them to a state of servitude. There is hardly any difference, morally, between those times and the present. The unfaithfulness of the church has long since brought about this last form of evil. That which was once outside the house of God now rules within; those described in the first chapter of Romans have taken up their abode there, and

impart their own characteristics to the people of God (cf. Rom. 1; 2 Tim. 3:1-5). This mixture is what is called Christendom.

Now what is the resource of the Lord's people at such a time? One word answers the question, namely, Nazariteship. We should be characterized at the present time by complete separation, and by a true and whole-hearted consecration to God.

Before entering upon the history of Samson, let us look a little at this important subject. Under the law, when all was outwardly in order, Nazariteship was of temporary duration (Num. 6); in a time of ruin it became perpetual, as we see in the example before us. Samson was a Nazarite from his mother's womb. This permanent character of Nazariteship reappeared in Samuel, judge and prophet (1 Sam. 1, 2), but ceased with David, type of the royal grace, and Solomon, type of the royal glory of Christ. Then came the ruin of the people under human responsible royalty, as had been the case in the time of the judges under the more direct government of God. After this ruin of the people and of the royalty was complete, Israel was delivered into the hands of the Gentiles, and a remnant of Judah was restored to await the Messiah.

The house was doubtless swept, but the people were lifeless. John the Baptist was raised up with a permanent Nazariteship (Luke 1:15), when the ruin was fully manifested, though not yet headed up by the rejection of Christ, and when judgment (but a Saviour also) was at the door. Announced by John the Baptist, Jesus appeared, the true Joseph — a Nazarite among His brethren — but without the signs of earthly Nazariteship, because He was Himself the reality of this type. This of itself strikingly proclaimed the ruin of the people. At the end of His course the Lord entered upon a second and heavenly phase of His Nazariteship. He sanctified Himself in heaven for His disciples, the true Nazarite, separated from sinners and seated at the right hand of God, leaving His own here below to represent His Nazariteship. The world having been by the cross convicted of sin, ruined and judged, the disciples, then the church, became heavenly Nazarites in perpetuity in the midst of the world. We shall see, as we go through the history of Samson, how the church itself has answered to this calling. There is another important thing to notice. That which under the law was the provision for a few, is, under grace, the portion of all. Priesthood, which belonged to only one family out of the Levites, has become the universal privilege of all the children

of God (1 Peter 2:5, 9). There was a still less numerous class in Israel, that of the Nazarites, composed of a few isolated men and women (not to speak of the Rechabites — Jer. 35 — in the days of the prophets), which gives the characteristics belonging now to all the saints. We have indicated the reason, it is that separation to God is necessarily the mark of witnesses that have to do with man in his ruined condition, with the world on the eve of judgment. This truth of Nazariteship in its universal and permanent character fills the New Testament and shines out on every page of the Holy Book for those who have eyes to see. It is of immense practical importance.

Under the law, a Nazarite, whether man or woman, was separated to the service of God, during a fixed period of time. This separation consisted in three things (Num. 6:1-9), which touched figuratively the most necessary and most important elements of human life. Sociability belongs to the nature and the very existence of man. Now the Nazarite had to abstain from wine and strong drink. It is said of wine (Judges 9:13), that it "cheers God and Man." This joy of sociable men they could have shared together with God, but sin had entered by man, and God could no longer rejoice with him. He who de-

voted himself to the service of God could no longer find his joy in the society of his fellows, for God has nothing in common with the joy of sinners. The servant of the Lord may not seek friends in the world, sit down at their banquets, nor share their pleasures, for God is not there; and the more distinctly the ruin is seen, the more is this fact brought home to us. Christians fail much as to this. They have "worldly friends" and cultivate their society, not for the purpose of putting the Gospel before them, but for self-gratification. Alas! how little do we resemble Paul, when he said: "Henceforth know we no man after the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16). From this point of view, as from every other, the Lord was a perfect Nazarite, a stranger to all the joys of sociable man. He even said to His disciples, at that meeting which He had ardently desired, when, with death before Him, He might have tasted with them for a moment earthly joy: "Verily I say unto you, I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine, until that day that I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25). The day is coming when the wine which cheers God and man will be drunk new in a scene purified from sin, in which the true servant will be able to take part without restriction. The word of God insists upon the importance of this separation: "He shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of

strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried; ... he shall eat nothing that is made of the vine tree, from the kernels even to the husk" (Num. 6:3-4). Do we take heed to this, my brethren? Do we deny ourselves what may minister, even remotely, to the joy of the heart of the natural man? How are we carrying out our Nazariteship? But perhaps you will say, how is it possible to do so in such an absolute way? This we find in being heavenly in character. Ours is a heavenly Nazariteship. Separation under Judaism was a material one; under Christianity it becomes spiritual and heavenly. The Lord to whom we belong, is separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens. He has two means of separating us with Himself and like Himself. The first, the word of God, puts us in connection with the Father in heaven; the second, His own person — Himself — a Christ set apart for us in heaven, in order to indicate and establish the fact that our relationships, our ties and our affections are henceforth heavenly, in the midst of a judged world which has rejected Christ.

A second thing characterized the Nazarite: "All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head; until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separates himself

unto Jehovah, he shall be holy, and let the locks of the hair of his head grow" (Num. 6:5). Besides sociability, there is a second characteristic which touches man to the very core. He is a selfish being, with an independent will, and for whom there is nothing of more importance than self, his dignity, and all that attaches thereto. Now long hair separated the Nazarite, in figure, from all that, being at the same time the token of dependence and dishonour (1 Cor. 11). The long hair of the Nazarite proclaimed openly, that he had abandoned his dignity and personal rights as a man, in order to devote himself to the service of God. That which was glory for the woman was shame for him. He relinquished his personality under this veil. He who was born to this dignity neglected it, he who was appointed to rule submitted himself to the Lord as a wife to her husband. Without this dependence there can be neither service for God nor power for it. That which was a sign of weakness for the Nazarite, became the source of his strength. Moreover, his devotedness to the Lord found expression in forgetfulness of self leading him to neglect himself in order that he might fulfil his service more perfectly.

Yet a third thing characterized him: "All the days that he separates himself unto Jehovah he shall come at no dead body. He shall not make himself unclean for his father, or for his mother, for his brother or for his sister, when they die; because the consecration of his God is upon his head" (Num. 6:6-7). The third characteristic belongs to man since the fall, and is inherent in his being, that is sin, proved by its consequence — death. This was what it was the duty of the Nazarite to avoid at all cost. The strongest ties, those of the family, must not be taken into consideration, when setting himself apart for the service of God was in question. How little do we understand this! There are many Christians who say: "Suffer me first to go and bury my father." Others say: "I cannot, my relations would not allow it." Such are not Nazarites. But it was not only family ties which the Nazarite should set aside when it was a question of service, and which he should disclaim after the example of the perfect Nazarite: "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come." "Who is my mother and who are my brethren?" (John 2:4; Matt. 12:48). The Nazarite should keep himself from all sin, from all defilement. The law made no provision for wilful sin, whilst it is to such that grace more particularly addresses itself. One wilful sin alone, the renouncing of Chris-

tianity, is beyond the resources of grace (Heb. 10:26). The law had its resources except for wilful sin.

First: In the daily life of the Israelite, for sin through ignorance, and for trespass (Lev. 4, 5).

Second: In his walk, for sin through lack of vigilance or through inadvertence (Num. 19).

Third: In his service, for sin arising from negligence, and for sin unforeseen and which it would appear impossible for a man to avoid. "And if any man die very suddenly by him, and he has defiled the head of his consecration ..." (Num. 6:9). This was an involuntary case and impossible to have foreseen, yet it was sin, and the more so because it was a question of a particularly important and honoured service.

How this speaks to our consciences! Our Nazariteship involves the most absolute separation from the defilements of this world. Nowhere in this chapter does God suppose that the Nazirite would deliberately drink wine, cut his hair, or touch a dead body. It is the same for us — God does not suppose that we must sin, and He acts towards us on this principle.

The three marks of Nazariteship, of which we have spoken, were only the external characteristics of this calling, however important they may have been as such, an importance easily forgotten. They were the result of a vow, of consecration to the service of Jehovah, of inward separation of heart to Him. "When either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate themselves unto Jehovah ..." (Num. 6:2). I press this point, as of the utmost importance. A vow was a decision to serve God unreservedly in a certain manner, thus devoting oneself to the service of Jehovah. This devotedness to Christ is the foundation of Christian Nazariteship. If it is not there we expose ourselves to a serious fall. One may be a Nazarite in an outward sort of way, may possess even, as Samson, the great power that accompanies Nazariteship, and not be separated in heart. Doubtless, this side which was wholly external under the law is no longer so in Christianity; for one may be now a member of a temperance society without being a Nazarite. For the Christian, a testimony borne before the world answers to these outward signs; a testimony which separates us from its defilements as well as from its joys, and causes us to walk openly in a path of dependence, taking the word of God for guidance. Now, we may make a profession

of these things, may walk outwardly in the path of Nazariteship, and, all the while, have divided and unsanctified hearts. Such a course would end, as with Samson, in a defeat; and if it did not come to that, we should at any rate lose the blessing which flows from whole-hearted consecration in the Lord's service. In Lev. 7 the feast of the peace offering lasted two days for him who had made a vow, and only one day when it was thanksgiving for blessings received. The effect of renouncing all that the world could offer is seen in the worship of Abraham in Gen. 12 and Gen. 13. He built there three altars: that at Sichem, the altar of obedience, to Jehovah who had appeared unto him; that at Bethel, the altar of the pilgrim, to the name of Jehovah; that at Hebron, the altar of renunciation, unto Jehovah Himself, and it was there that the patriarch realized the divine blessings in all their extent.

But to return to the Nazarite. It is interesting to note what he had to do, when he had "defiled the head of his consecration" (Num. 6:9-11). One of these acts corresponded to the loss of his external Nazariteship, the other to the violation of his vow, his inward consecration. He had to shave his head. This was the public acknowledgement that he had failed, and also the

avowal that the power of his Nazariteship had left him. The repentant Nazarite was not like Samson who "wist not that Jehovah was departed from him."

He acknowledged it, proclaiming, so to speak, that he was no longer qualified for service. Then he had to offer "two turtle doves or two young pigeons," the sacrifice of one who "was not able to bring a lamb." This was an acknowledgement of his incapacity, of his worthlessness as a servant, and at the same time of the value of the blood offered for his purification. We should note these things carefully and not assume an appearance of spiritual power when we have lost communion with the Lord, but confess with humiliation our sin before God, when we have failed in the responsibility of our service.

Let us persevere in this service without growing weary, and not allow anything to interfere with it. The time came for the Nazarite when the days of his separation were fulfilled, then he offered all the sacrifices. This day will dawn for us also, when the Lord will come and His sacrifice will have borne its full results, sin abolished, death destroyed, and Satan bruised forever under our feet. Then we shall shave the head of our Nazariteship (Num. 6:18); then the power of the Holy Spirit

will no longer be employed in strengthening us for separation from all evil in our service, then we shall "take the hair of the head of our separation, and put it in the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offerings," for our whole energy will be taken up with the joy of uninterrupted communion, and the scene of the new world will be, like ourselves, perfectly conformed to the mind and heart of God.

A Remnant

(Judges 13)

The people having relapsed into unfaithfulness, were in subjection to enemies within — to the Philistines, who were established in Israel's territory. It was the last stage in the history of declension. The children of Israel no longer cried to Jehovah; submitting to this state of things, they did not even wish to be delivered from it (Judges 15:11), and, for the sake of living quietly in their state of servitude, sought to get rid of their liberator. The time of total apostasy was at hand.

In the midst of this irremediable state of things, God separated a godly remnant, and addressed his communications to them. Manoah and his wife feared Jehovah, listened to His voice and

spake to one another (cf. Mal. 3:16), a striking type of the remnant — of the Marys, and Elizabeths, and Annas, and Zacharias, and Simeons — that waited for the true Messiah, the Saviour of Israel; type also of the future remnant, who, passing through the tribulation, will follow the paths of righteousness, waiting for the coming of their King.

Samson, the deliverer of Israel, found at his birth, not a people that welcomed him, but this godly couple who believed in his mission. The Lord, rejected by the people from the time of His arrival on the scene, found only a few faithful souls with whom He could enter into association, those excellent of the earth mentioned in Psalm 16, in whom He found His delight. Times of irremediable ruin are then the times of remnants; this, consequently, applies to the present period of the church — a period foretold by the Sovereign Prophet to His disciples, when He spoke to them of an assembly reduced to two or three gathered to the true centre, to the name of Christ, during His absence. This period is mentioned in Revelation, when — in presence of the idolatry of Thyatira, the deadness of Sardis, and the nauseating lukewarmness of Laodicea — the approbation

of Him that is holy, of Him that is true, is pronounced upon the feeble separated remnant of Philadelphia.

That which characterizes a remnant at all times is Nazariteship, entire "separation unto the Lord." The angel of Jehovah appearing unto the wife of Manoah, said to her: "Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not; but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son. Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing" (vs. 3, 4). This woman had to take upon herself Nazariteship, because she was the vessel chosen of God to present to the people the promised deliverer. "For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head; for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines" (v. 5). The Nazariteship of Samson involved that of his mother. In order to do honour to the deliverer of Israel, it was needful for his witnesses to bear before the eyes of all, the impress of his own character. This is true at all times. If we do not manifest Christ down here in His character of entire separation to God, we are not witnesses for our Saviour. Christ having come, permanent Nazariteship should characterize the saints as it does the Lord; and the more

the ruin increases, the more apparent will this become. The second epistle of Timothy, which tells us of the last days, is full of the characteristics of Nazariteship. In 2 Timothy 2:19, it is the Nazarite withdrawing from iniquity; in 2 Timothy 2:21, it is his purifying himself for God; in 2 Timothy 3:10-11, and 2 Timothy 4:5-7, it is, as the servant of God, walking in forgetfulness of self and in absolute dependence on the Lord. Is it not the Nazarite who speaks in 2 Cor. 4:7-12? In 2 Cor. 6 - 7:1, of this same epistle we again find the principal traits of Nazariteship; reproach and self-forgetfulness in vs. 4-10; separation from all association with the world in vs. 14, 15; cleansing from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit in 2 Cor. 7:1. Quotations might be multiplied. What it is important to establish is, that there is for us, neither walk, nor testimony, nor service, without Nazariteship; that is to say, without devotedness and separation to God.

In v. 6, Manoah's wife told her husband about the angel's visit: "A man of God came unto me, and his countenance was like the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible; but I asked him not whence he was, neither told he me his name." This poor woman had but little intelligence; she knew neither

whence the angel came nor who he was, nor did she ask him, proving how slight was her acquaintance with God. Far from giving her confidence, the presence of the God of promises frightened her, for she only saw the countenance of the angel to be "very terrible." Manoah himself, a man of sincere piety, had little understanding, but he desired more. He wished to know "what to do unto the child" (v. 8), then, "what shall he do" (v. 12, margin). Instead of answering his questions, the angel of Jehovah said to him: "Of all that I said unto the woman let her beware. She may not eat of anything that comes of the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing; all that I commanded her let her observe" (vs. 13, 14). Why? Because knowledge is not the first thing that God requires. Neither it, nor even true piety, such as was found in Manoah and his wife, is sufficient to keep us in the midst of the ruin. That which was needed for them before knowledge was true personal separation to God, a separation which had as its pattern and measure the Nazariteship of him who was about to appear.

Other truths too — the portion of Christ's witnesses in a day of declension — are revealed to us here. "Manoah said unto the

angel of Jehovah, What is thy name ... And the angel of Jehovah said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is wonderful (margin). So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered them upon a rock unto Jehovah; and the angel did wondrously; and Manoah and his wife looked on" (vs. 17-19).

In reviewing the history of the different epochs of this book, we find that to each revival there are certain corresponding principles which characterize it. The times of Othniel, Ehud, Barak, Gideon and Jephthah, each furnishes us with some new principle; but God reserves the most precious truths of all for the last days of ruin, hidden until then and wonderful. How worthy of the God of love is such a way of acting! Knowing the difficulties of His own in the midst of increasing unfaithfulness and wishing to attract their hearts in the midst of this darkness, He brings to light and confides to His witnesses truths more and more glorious.

The starting point of these truths is the sacrifice. Manoah, more intelligent than Gideon (cf. Judges 6:19), took the kid with the meat offering, and offered them upon a rock unto Jehovah. The cross is the foundation of all our knowledge as children of God.

Manoah was desirous of knowing many things which Jehovah could not reveal to him before the sacrifice. But this foundation once laid, the angel did wondrously, which doubtless was revealed, in a manner still obscure and symbolical, to the eyes of this poor remnant who were waiting for a Saviour. "For it came to pass, when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of Jehovah ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on" (v. 20). They found in the fire of the sacrifice a new way, not opened up hitherto, a way for the representative of Jehovah to ascend to Him; and, their gaze fixed on the angel, they saw a glorious person, whose dwelling place they knew now that he had disappeared from before their eyes. Then only, "Manoah knew that it was an angel of Jehovah" (v. 21). The heart and the interests of this poor remnant were at that moment withdrawn from this world, and followed the angel, ascending with him to heaven. These simple believers could thenceforth speak of a path which led to heaven, and of a person who was there, who had become their object while they were still here below.

In this wonderful act another thing was revealed, not for Manoah, but for us: the future character of this Nazariteship of

which the angel had spoken to them. It is now heavenly, as we have above remarked. The angel in parting from them went up into heaven. The Lord Jesus, rejected by the world, said: "For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth" (John 17:19). Set apart in heaven, He attracts us after, and fixes our eyes upon, Himself; in order that the heavenly character of the One whom the world has rejected may be reproduced in us here below. In presence of this revelation, so instructive for us, but of which Manoah and his wife had but a faint glimpse, they "fell on their faces to the ground" (v. 20). And shall not we, in the midst of increasing darkness, adore in fuller measure, the God who has revealed to us, not only a heavenly and glorified Christ, but our place in Him, and has given Him to us as an object that we may reflect Him more perfectly in this world? Such are the blessings given to fill our hearts with joy and gratitude. How many Christians there are, who, seeking a place in the world, walk down here with bowed heads as they see the state of things around them, and vex their souls from day to day, as just Lot did of old — but such is not our part; we are not called to be Lots, nor to act like him down here. Our portion is with Abraham, the friend of God, who was not disheartened by the ruin. As a Nazarite he kept his place on

his high mountain, his eyes fixed — not on Sodom, but — on the city which has foundations. Jesus said of him: "Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Ah! rather than be discouraged, let us praise God, and thank Him for the heavenly treasure He has given us in Christ.

Like so many Christians of the present day, Manoah was filled with fear when he found himself in the presence of God. "He said to his wife, we shall surely die, because we have seen God" (v. 22). His companion was a true helpmeet for him. Is there any room for fear, said she, when God has accepted our offering? The love of God, proved to us at the cross, is the positive guarantee for everything else. "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32)

The Serpent and the Lion: the Feast

(Judges 14)

We have seen what Nazariteship is. The history of Samson shows us, that in it lies our spiritual power.

Christ only has fully made good His Nazariteship, an absolute moral separation, throughout the whole of His life down here,

and it is still the case in heaven where He abides the true Naz-
arite "separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26).

Samson, the Nazarite, is hardly a type of Christ except as to his mission (Judges 13:5). He is really, rather the type of the testimony which the church of God renders in separation from the world, in the power of the Spirit and in communion with the Lord. The history of this man of God, although abounding in acts of power, is notwithstanding one of the most sorrowful recitals contained in the word. Samson (the church likewise, founded on an ascended Christ) should have been a true representative of separation to God. Alas! he was nothing of the sort. In comparing his Nazariteship with that of Christ, how striking does the deficiency of Samson's appear!

Christ, the true Nazarite, encountered Satan in two characters: in the desert, as the serpent subtle and enticing; and, at the end of His course, as the roaring lion that rends and devours. In the desert, the Lord met the wiles of the enemy, with the word of God and entire dependence upon Him, and gained the victory. Samson, at the beginning of his career, encountered the serpent, who sought to entice him by means of one of the daughters of the Philistines. Twice is it said that "she pleased him well" (vs.

3, 7). From that time he formed the intention of uniting himself to this woman who belonged to the race of Israel's oppressors. It is just the same with the individual or with the church when in conflict with the deceiver; Satan, who had nothing in Christ (John 14:30), easily finds a response in our hearts: By means of the eyes, our hearts are lured to the object presented by him and find pleasure in acquiring it. It does not necessarily follow that we must fall. If such objects are attractive to our eyes, grace and the word which reveals this grace to us are able to keep us. Notwithstanding the tendencies of his heart, Samson, kept by the providential grace of God, never married the daughter of the Philistines.

The desire of Samson showed that the word of God had not its right weight with him. His parents, knowing much less of the counsels, but more of the word, of God than he did, said to him: "Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines?" (v. 3) The word of God was indeed explicit on this point: "Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son, for they will turn

away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods" (Deut. 7:3-4). Why did not Samson take heed to this? Christ, the perfect Nazarite, recognized the absolute authority of the Scriptures and fed upon every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. The word of God not having its right weight with Samson, he started on a downward path which could only lead to a fall. In the life of Samson, three women mark the three stages which led to the loss of his Nazariteship. The first was pleasing to his eyes; he formed a passing connection with the second (Judges 16:1), and he loved the third (Judges 16:4). When his affections were engaged, the last hour of his Nazariteship had sounded.

Nevertheless Samson was not devoid of affection for Jehovah and His people. It is said, "But his father and his mother knew not that it was of Jehovah, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines" (v. 4). The domination of the latter was hateful to him. He was looking for a favourable opportunity to strike the blow which should break the yoke weighing upon the children of Israel. But Samson was not single-eyed; he brought a divided heart to the work. Trying to reconcile pleasing his own eyes with his hatred against the enemy of his people, he was

holding out his left hand to the world and at the same time wanting to fight it with his right. Yet God took note of what there was for Him in this divided heart. "It was of the Lord" who could use even the weaknesses of Samson to accomplish His purposes of grace towards His people.

This proneness to seek in the world that which "pleases the eyes," led Samson into endless difficulties from which only the power of God could deliver him. There are many instances in the word where a first look turned toward the world involves the believer in irreparable trouble. We have to watch against that with fear and trembling, for we can never foretell what abyss a single lust may open for us. Such was the case with Adam, with Noah, with Lot, with David. Grace can keep us, but it will not do to trifle with it, nor to imagine that we can use it as a cloak to cover our lusts or to excuse our sins. Let us rely on it in order to be sustained and preserved from falling, and if we have been so unhappy as to have abandoned for an instant this support, let us quickly return to it for restoration and for the recovery of our lost communion.

Samson was on slippery ground. His eyes were enamoured, and he desired to take this woman for his wife; for alliance

with the world follows the lust of the eyes. Then he made a feast (v. 10), and seated himself at it, guarding no doubt the external marks of his Nazariteship, for we are not told that he drank wine with the Philistines; yet this repast had a sorrowful termination for him.

Before going any further let us take into consideration what preceded the feast in Samson's history. We have already said that Satan not only presents himself as a serpent, but also as a roaring lion. It was in this character that the Lord Jesus met him in Gethsemane and at the cross. Nothing is more terrifying than the roar of the lion. Satan sought to frighten the holy soul of Christ in order to make Him abandon the divine path which led down to the sacrifice. In the power of the Holy Spirit and in perfect dependence on His Father, the Lord withstood him in the garden of the Mount of Olives. At the cross, where he opened his mouth against Christ "as a ravening and a roaring lion" (Ps. 22:13), the Lord in "the weakness of God" (see 1 Cor. 1:25), overcame "the strong man," and, through death, nullified his power (Heb. 2:14). In just the same form does Satan present himself to the children of God. "Your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may

devour" (1 Peter 5:8). If he does not succeed in beguiling us, he tries to frighten us. Samson was now confronted by the young lion, coming up against him from the country of the Philistines, and here his nazariteship was manifested in its full power, which is that of the Spirit of God. "And the Spirit of Jehovah came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand" (v. 6). Such is the way that we have to act when meeting Satan. We should not spare him in the least, for if we do he will return to the charge. We must, in our struggle, rend him as we would rend a kid. He can do nothing to us so long as we resist him fearlessly (see James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9); for, weapons (if we may so speak), Jesus has already overcome him for us at the cross.

Later on, Samson, passing by the same road, turned aside to see the carcase of the lion, and found in it "a swarm of bees and honey;" he ate some of it as he went along, and gave some to his parents. As the fruit of Christ's victory on the cross, all heavenly blessings have been placed in our hands, and these blessings are taken from the spoil of the defeated enemy. And if we, obtaining a victory over him (henceforth rendered easy), treat him as a vanquished foe, our souls will be filled with

strength and sweetness. We shall be able to impart of what we have got to others; but, like Samson who ate as he went along, our own souls will have first been fed. Let us never treat Satan as a friend; if we do, we shall come away from such a meeting beaten and enfeebled, embittered and famished.

The victory of Samson over the lion of Timnath was not only a proof of strength; it was a secret between him and God. When his eyes were attracted to the daughter of the Philistines, he told his parents of it; concerning his victory he told no one. The life of Samson abounded with secrets and at the same time with acts of power. Even his Nazariteship was a secret, a link, unknown to any, between his own soul and Jehovah. This link is for us communion. We meet with four secrets in this chapter. Samson had not divulged his intentions to his parents, nor the part that Jehovah had in these things (v. 4); he had not told them of his victory (v. 6), nor the place whence he had procured the honey (v. 9), nor his riddle (v. 16). All that, kept unbroken between his soul and God, was for him the only means of following a path of blessing in the midst of this world.

Let us return to Samson's feast. He put forth his riddle to the Philistines, rightly supposing that they would understand noth-

ing about it; indeed, had it not been for the feast, he would not have been in danger of betraying himself. But the enemy succeeded in robbing him of that which he had so carefully concealed. The world has an insidious effect upon us, leading to loss of our communion with God. If our hearts, like Samson's, in any way cling to what the world may present to us, it will not be long before we lose our communion. Absence of communion does not at first imply loss of strength; it is, however, the road which leads to it; for, as long as Nazariteship exists, even externally, strength will not be lacking, as Samson proved to the Philistines in the matter of the thirty changes of garments. But did this man of God have much peace and joy during the days of the feast? On the contrary, it was a struggle with tears, care and pressure (v. 17). He was betrayed by the very woman of his choice. One can scarcely conceive that association with the world would produce the bad results which, as a matter of fact, it does. Samson would never have thought that his thirty companions, aided by his wife, would lay traps to plunder him, for the thirty changes of garments by right belonged to him. Satan may separate us from communion with the Lord, may make us unhappy; he may also hinder our being

witnesses here below, but, thanks be to God, he cannot pluck us out of the hand of Christ.

The grace of God preserved Samson from the final consequences of his error, and delivered him from an alliance of which God could not approve. The Spirit of Jehovah having come upon him he performed mighty deeds. "And his anger was kindled" (v. 19). Samson was a man of a very selfish character and was guided in his action by the sense of the wrong that had been done him. Nevertheless he was victorious over the enemies of Jehovah, and kept for himself none of their spoil, it went back to the world, from whence it had been taken. Then he quitted the scene of so much unhappiness and "went up to his father's house," which he never should have left to settle among the Philistines. May we profit by this lesson; and if, in our intercourse with the world, we have passed through painful experiences, let us hasten to return to the Father's house (which we never should have left, even in thought), where He dwells whose communion is the source of our peace and happiness all our pilgrimage way, till that moment comes when we shall enter forever into that house — our eternal dwelling-place!

Victories

(Judges 15)

Judges 14 and 15 form really a single narrative, and before going further, I would like to return to the consideration of two or three points common to both.

The first is, that God always works out His ways, and that too through a multitude of circumstances that are far from answering to His thoughts. Yea, further, He uses these very circumstances to make good His purposes, which are, in the case we are considering, the deliverance of Israel by an instrument moulded by Him with this end in view; and this explains the words, "It was of the Lord" (Judges 14:4). God brings about His ways, not only by means of things that He approves of, but also by making, our very faults, His discipline, the opposition of Satan and of the world, in a word, everything to conduce to the desired result. Unfaithfulness on our part does not disturb the ways of God. This is seen, in a remarkable manner, all through the life of Samson, and can be verified in the history of the Church. These ways of God all culminate in victory and in the blessings consequent thereon. How encouraging to prove it! Very often, to our confusion, our own ways come to nothing.

Witness Samson, who did not take the daughter of the Philistine as his wife. Frequently do the children of God find themselves unable to proceed farther in the path they are upon, because of some divine obstacle blocking up the way, and they are forced to retrace their steps with humiliation. At other times, our course, which should have been continued in the power of service, is suddenly interrupted without return to the point of deviation being possible. Samson again furnishes us with the proof. Nothing like this ever occurs in the ways of God. They overrule our ways. It was by the death of a blind Samson that Jehovah achieved the greatest victory. A Moses, whose way was stopped before entering the land of promise, was forthcoming on the holy mount in the same glory as Christ.

The second point is, that mixed as Samson's motives were, "he sought an occasion" in a time of ruin (Judges 14:4). And wherefore? To deliver Israel by smiting the enemy that held them in bondage. May this motive be ours also. "Redeeming the time" (seizing opportunities), says the apostle, "because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16). May we then, Nazarites ourselves, have our hearts filled with tender pity for our brethren who are still in bondage, under the world's yoke, and seek occasion, in

love and the energy of the Spirit, to deliver them from it. These two chapters strikingly illustrate the fact that Samson sought an occasion against the Philistines, and that the intensity of his desire enabled him to find it, and that too when the slothful and indifferent, meeting an obstacle in their path, would have turned back.

A third expression constantly occurs in these chapters: "The Spirit of Jehovah came upon him" (Judges 13:25; Judges 14:6, 19; Judges 15:14). When we see these words we may be sure that the conflict is entirely according to God and without mixture. We likewise may achieve such victories, not by being dependent upon a temporary action of the Holy Spirit coming upon us from without, but because we have, in virtue of redemption, been sealed by the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of power. Nevertheless, it is important to remark that we cannot estimate the moral worth of a man of God by the greatness of his gift. Nowhere in the Scripture do we find a stronger man than Samson, nor one weaker morally. The New Testament gives us a similar example in the Assembly at Corinth, which came behind in no gift of power, and yet permitted every sort of moral evil in their midst. Samson was a Nazarite, upon

whom the Spirit of God often came, but he was also a man whose heart had never been judged, and so his state was not in keeping with the gift he exercised. Not once, from the beginning to the end of his career, did he hesitate following the path of his lusts; going, without a struggle, wherever his heart led him. Notwithstanding the power of the Spirit, he was a carnal man. When he visited his wife with a kid, his kindness was carnal; when the world proposed giving him another woman, which he did not care for, in exchange for the one he so earnestly desired, his anger was carnal. Yet thus it ever is that the world treats us, to our loss and shame, when we have desired anything from it. That which it gives, after so many fine promises, has no value to the child of God, and cannot satisfy him. In the matter of the three hundred foxes, the Spirit of Jehovah did not come upon him, for, as I have already said, his anger was carnal. He wanted to "do a displeasure" to the Philistines, by attacking them in their outward circumstances; and, with a view to this, resorted to a device which does not at all seem to be according to the mind of God. The enraged Philistines went up and burnt his wife, who was their accomplice, and her father.

Samson found in their vengeance (v. 7) a fresh opportunity for doing the work of God. Here again we find much mixture: "Yet will I be avenged of you," and it is not added that the Spirit of Jehovah came upon him; but if He did not openly appear, God was behind the scene, and, in spite of all, it was a deliverance for the people. "And he went down and dwelt in the top of the rock Etam." It must necessarily be the case, that the believer finds himself isolated, when he takes sides with God against the world, and Samson understood this. Those who would be witnesses for Christ in a day of ruin must expect to be set aside, and this, too, alas! by the people of God.

The three thousand men of Judah, the stillness of whose servitude was disturbed by Samson's testimony, consent to help the world which wishes to get rid of him; preferring the yoke of the Philistines to the difficulties and risks arising from this testimony. Nowhere in the book of Judges do we find a lower moral state than this. Not only does Israel no longer cry to Jehovah, but they do not wish to be delivered. The man of God, their rightful deliverer, was an incumbrance to them. The Philistines said: "We are come up, to do to him as he has done to us" (v. 10). Judah said: "What is this that thou hast done unto

us?" (v. 11). In thus identifying themselves with the enemy who enslaved them, Judah was no longer Judah, but morally exchanged their name for that of the Philistines. Fellowship between them was complete; both were enemies of the testimony, though Judah was far the worse, preferring slavery to the unhindered power of the Spirit of God, of which Samson was the instrument.

Samson allowed them to bind him, and this finds its counterpart in the history of Christendom. The people of God have acted towards the Holy Ghost in a similar manner that Judah did to Samson. His power disturbed them; and not wanting the liberty of the Spirit, they have hindered His action, fettering Him, as it were, with their new methods, like the new cords with which Judah bound their liberator, saying to him all the time: "Surely we will not kill thee." Samson could have acted very differently, for these worthless fetters were to him like so many spider's webs, as he proved later on. The strong man laughed at their new cords, but he consented to be bound. What a responsibility for the three thousand men of Judah who had such a slight appreciation of the gift that God had given them! What shame for them! Surely there was no shame for Samson.

If anything casts merited reproach upon the Christians that are linked with the world, it is the restraint put upon the free working of the Holy Spirit among them, because His action embarrasses them, and they are at a loss what to do.

But, at a given moment, the power of the Spirit bursts all bonds. "The Spirit of Jehovah came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands" (v. 14). Then God made use of a bone cast away in the fields, the worthless jawbone of an ass, to gain a signal victory, and the place was called Ramath-lehi, from the name of the despicable instrument used in the combat. Such instruments are we in the hands of the Spirit of God (see 1 Cor. 1:27-29), but it pleases the Lord to associate our names with His victory, as if the jawbone of an ass had slain "heaps upon heaps."

After his victory Samson "was sore athirst" (v. 18). The activity of the believer is not all; conflict does not quench the thirst. Something was necessary for Samson to meet his personal need, otherwise, as he said, "I shall die for thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised." If we do not wish to lose the results of conflict, we must use the word of God for our re-

freshment, and not only for combat. In his extremity, Samson called on Jehovah, who showed him a refreshing spring flowing out of a rock cleft by God's hand. The rock everywhere and always is Christ. "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink" (John 7:37). Let us get back into Christ's presence after conflict. His word will refresh us. Samson was alive to the dangers which closely attend victory. The fact that God had "given this great deliverance into the hand of His servant" would be very likely to make us "fall into the hands of the uncircumcised," if the soul does not at once seek shelter, refreshment and strength by the waters of grace, of which Christ is the dispenser. In that day of blessing, Samson was characterized by these two things: a great activity in conflict for others, and, as to himself, a humble dependence upon God, which enabled him to avail himself of the resources in Christ.

The first part of Samson's history closes with these words: "And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years". (v. 20) It contains, notwithstanding all the failures which we have pointed out, God's approbation of the public career of His servant. The ensuing chapter shows us the loss of his Nazariteship.

Defeat and Restoration

(Judges 16)

We now enter upon a new period in Samson's history, characterized by the loss of his Nazariteship and by his restoration. Judges 16:31, compared with Judges 15:20, marks outwardly this division. In Judges 15, God had preserved His servant in spite of himself, in a definite engagement with a woman who served other gods. But that did not rectify the natural tendency of his heart. And the first verse of this chapter shows us where this tendency led him. He had courted the idolatrous world, and now he goes after the defiled world, not fearing temporary association with it. A worldly propensity unjudged leads us necessarily to more serious falls. Thus it was, in the history of the church, that Pergamos led to Thyatira. Samson's connection with this woman was but a passing one, and he did not lose his strength there, for the secret between himself and God still continued. Waylaid all night, at the gate of the city, by his mortal enemies, he arose from his slumber, "and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that is before Hebron" (v. 3).

More than once does the history of Samson remind us of that of Christ; as, for instance, his victory over the lion of Timnath, and again in the achievement of the gates of Gaza. Like Samson, the Lord awaking from the sleep of death, has brought to nought the machinations of the enemy in breaking the gates of his terrible fortress. He has led into captivity that which held us captives; and, ascended on high, He has displayed the trophies of His victory. Death, the citadel of Satan, having no longer doors to hold us, has become for us a passage,* no bolt could imprison Christ there, no power is able to keep us there. The "hill that is before Hebron," the place of the risen Man who passed through death,** is a sure guarantee to us.

* "Hebron" means "a passage."

** We have remarked elsewhere (Meditations on the Book of Joshua) that Hebron is always in Scripture the place of death.

We have said more than once, that there is not a man of God who is not called to manifest, and who does not, in fact, manifest some traits of the person of the Saviour. Ah! how beautiful it would have been to have seen Samson a worthy representative of Christ in his victory over death, as he was in his victory over the ravaging lion! Whence went forth this strong man with

the gates of Gaza on his shoulders? For whom did he fight? Who had placed him in this extremity? In all these things, his history presents the most complete contrast to that of our adorable Saviour.

Let us pay attention to a still more humiliating recital (vs. 4-21). Samson, who had hitherto only formed a passing connection with evil, now went further. The daughter of the Philistines had been pleasing to his eye; the woman of Gaza had ensnared him for a moment; Delilah took possession of his affections. "He loved a woman in the valley of Sorek" (v. 4). This is the termination of the path of the child of God who gives way to, instead of judging, the first movements of his natural heart. Samson had hitherto guarded his intimate and secret relationship with God, in spite of everything. He possessed something which the world could not understand, and to the source of which it could not rise. His strength remained an enigma to his enemies; no doubt they saw the effect of it, but directed against themselves, and that made them all the more eager to wrest the secret of it from him, in order to find out what weapons to use against this servant of Jehovah. Doubtless, also, his long hair, a garb not common to all, was a public avowal of separation to

God. But had his secret not been betrayed, the world would never have imagined that what was typical of dependence and of self-forgetfulness, was for the Nazarite a source of strength.

Samson loved Delilah. His heart was divided, and God could not go on with this. It is impossible for our affections to go out to the world and likewise to God. "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other" (Luke 16:13). In loving Delilah, Samson as much as said that he hated and despised God; when, in actual fact, he belonged to Him. This woman's influence over him increased more and more. "How canst thou say, I love thee, when thine heart is not with me?" (v. 15). From that time his heart was taken captive, and it was not long ere he surrendered the whole of his secret. Three times — the seven green withs that never were dried, the new ropes that never were occupied, and the seven locks of his head woven with the web — had not been able to quench the power of the Spirit. God still sustained His poor, unfaithful servant. But when his secret was divulged, the mark of his dependence removed, the bond of communion between his soul and God abolished, what remained for him? All his strength had van-

ished. The past experiences of God's deliverances, in spite of his moral bondage, only served to deceive him and to lull him into security. Three times he had extricated himself at a critical moment. Why not a fourth? The blinded heart said to itself: "I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself." But, with communion lost, intelligence of the thoughts of God was wholly lacking. "He wist not that Jehovah had departed from him" (v. 20).

Not that Samson was very happy under the yoke of Delilah. "She pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death" (v. 16). That was all he got from what had most attracted him! He would gladly have refused but was no longer capable of doing so. A man of the world may find his joy in the world; a believer, never. At bottom, the heart of Samson was in a measure with God and the Israel of God. From that fact sprang all this conflict, struggle, vexation and misery. Our conscience speaks and we have no real rest, our joy is embittered. At last he took the final step, and "told her all his heart" (v. 17). That was followed by sleep: "She made him sleep upon her knees" (v. 19). The soul loses all sense of its relationship with God, and falls into heavy slumber in the dense

atmosphere of corruption. Then the enemy in ambush, watching for this moment, advanced, bound the strong man, put out his eyes, and treated him as one of their most wretched slaves. A condition, alas, worse than sleep! Samson is now only a poor blind slave, the sport of the enemies of Jehovah. Let us not be mistaken as to this, that the enemy was more hostile to God than to Samson, for the vanquished Nazarite became apparently the witness of the victory of the false god Dagon over the true God. The lack of reality in Christians is the world's most powerful weapon against Christ. In despising the unfaithful believer, it is really Him which the world finds the opportunity of despising.

Thank God, the history of the last of the judges does not close with this defeat. God will have the final victory in spite of the unfaithfulness of His witnesses. Samson recovered his Nazariteship in this state of bitter humiliation. "Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven" (v. 22). Samson was not a man of prayer. Only twice in all his history do we hear him addressing God (Judges 15:18; Judges 11:28). Here, whilst his enemies were celebrating their triumph, Samson cried to Jehovah. For my own part I appreciate in a man of

God an end brighter than the commencement, though, doubtless, this is not what is highest. The path of Christ, the perfect Man, was one of perfect evenness and uniformity in the very many varied circumstances through which He had to pass, and it is thus that we see Him in Psalm 16, and in the Gospels. And yet to end like Samson, whose life presented so many contrasts; to end like Jacob, whose course, full of schemes and human devices, closed with the glorious vision of Israel's future and by worship which recognized in Joseph the type of the promised Messiah; to end like that was far better than to terminate his career like Solomon, in idolatry, after a magnificent reign of wisdom and power. Yes, Samson's end was a splendid victory. "The dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life" (v. 30).

May we profit by this history, and not require such experience of ourselves, either by a bad beginning or a bad ending. Paul, a man subject to like infirmities as ourselves, avoided both, although weakness was manifest in his walk on more than one occasion. Let us learn to regulate our steps by those of our sinless Model; that was the strength of the apostle, and it will be ours. Then will God say of us: "They go from strength to

strength, every one of them in Zion appears before God" (Ps. 84:7).

Judges 17-21

Manifestation of the Ruin and Final Restoration

Religious and Moral Corruption of Israel

Judges 17-19.

The Levite of Judah

(Judges 17)

Chapters 17 to 21 form a kind of appendix to the book of Judges, an appendix of all importance for the completion of the moral picture of the declension of Israel, but which, in reality, as to time, precedes the opening of the book we are considering, and goes back to the last days of Joshua and of the elders that outlived him. It was important to show that if, on the one hand, declension was gradual, that on the other, the ruin was immediate and irremediable from the moment that God had confided to the people the responsibility of preserving the

blessings bestowed on them at the beginning. It was important, too, as we shall see later on, to demonstrate that the end God had in view was not the ruin, but the restoration of a people who might dwell before Him in unity, after the chastisements had run their course. It was, furthermore, of importance to show the connection of the priesthood with the ruin, and how it was associated therewith, and contributed thereto. All these weighty subjects, and many others besides, are touched upon in the small compass of the chapters which we are about to consider. The date of them is shown us in three passages which I mention for those who are interested in the arrangement of the book, and also that it may not be necessary to refer to them again. The first of these is in Judges 18:1. We learn from Joshua 19:47, that the tribe of Dan took possession of Leshem (the Leshem of Joshua being the Laish of Judges), at the time when the twelve tribes were called to conquer their inheritance. In the second passage, Judges 18:12, "Mahaneh-dan" received its name from the expedition of Dan, whereas at the commencement of the history of Samson (Judges 13:25) it was a place already known. Finally, in Judges 20:28, "Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it (the ark) in

those days;" from which we necessarily conclude that those days followed immediately what is related in Joshua 24:33.

These details established, we find in Judges 17 and Judges 18 the picture of the religious corruption of Israel whilst still in possession of their original blessings — a picture which does not offer a single spot where the heart can rest amid the ruin; and, when we come to examine it by the light of the word, we shall understand that our only refuge in this terrible flood of evil is God Himself.

These chapters are linked together by a characteristic phrase occurring four times. "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6; Judges 21:25). "In those days there was no king in Israel" (Judges 18:1; Judges 19:1).

Thus the state of the people is depicted by two facts. First: "There was no king in Israel." The time had not yet come when Israel would say: "Make us a king to judge us like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5). Hitherto the people had Jehovah as their king; now, God was forgotten or set aside, although royalty after the manner of the nations was not yet established. The

people had abandoned the system of divine government, without having as yet proclaimed that of the world, and this fact characterizes also Christendom in our days.

In the second place: "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes." They had, as in the present day, the reign of liberty of conscience. Each laid claim to having the "light of his conscience" for guidance, whilst the true light of the word of God was set aside and no longer referred to. How greatly these times differed from those of Joshua, when the word was the only guide and the only authority for Israel, in all that they undertook (Joshua 1:7-9; see also, amongst others, Joshua 3, Joshua 4:6; Joshua 8:30-35, etc). Now in reality, conscience, notwithstanding its immense value for man, is not a guide, but a judge — a wholly different thing. This judge which he does not listen to, man pretends to honour by choosing him as a guide. But how will it lead him, when perhaps it may become asleep, hardened, or even seared? These chapters show us where it led the Israelites when every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Idolatry had taken root alongside of some religious forms which still continued. They followed the impulses of their own hearts provided they thought they were do-

ing right, and were precipitated into frightful iniquities. "They thought they were doing right" is in the present day, as it was formerly, a current phrase used to sanction even what is apostasy from Christianity.

Utter disregard of the injunctions of God's word characterized Micah, this man of Mount Ephraim, and his mother. The one stole, when the law had said, "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex. 20:15), and his conscience was untouched when he avowed the fact. The mother "had wholly dedicated the silver unto Jehovah" for her son "to make a graven image and a molten image" (v. 3), although it had been said: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Ex. 20:3-4). She joined Jehovah's name to her idols, a worse thing than mere idolatry, and her conscience was silent. She set up a form of worship of her own, with which her guilty son fully identified himself. The so-called worship of the religious world in the present day does not differ so much from this as would at first appear; for the Lord's name is mixed up with many things coveted by the natural heart, as to all of which it is said: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). Art, music, gold, silver and articles of value adorn what is called divine

worship; and man makes room for what the world esteems and runs after, wealth, influence and worldly wisdom.

"Micah had an house of gods, and made an ephod and seraphim," associating the false gods with the ephod, a valueless part of Jewish worship when separated from the high priest who wore it. Then "he consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest" (v. 5). More than ever was the word of God forgotten. His son had no right to the priesthood and Micah had no right to consecrate him.

A fresh circumstance arose. A Levite of Judah, having as such a connection with the house of the Lord, but without any right as to the priesthood, happened to pass that way looking for a place wherein to sojourn. Micah got hold of this man, who brought him a semblance of religious succession. "Dwell with me, and be unto me a father and a priest, and I will give thee ten shekels of silver by the year, and a suit of apparel and thy victuals" (v. 10). Micah was getting on; he had installed a bona fide Levite in his house; valuing him more highly than his son, he supported and paid him. This was a ministry of man's appointing, constituted on the same principles as what we have all around us in

our days. Let us notice, in passing, how God recounts these things.

He does not censure, nor express indignation; He recounts the facts, and places them before us. Those who are spiritual discern what God condemns and what He approves of, and learn also to keep aloof, as He Himself does, from all the principles of which this chapter gives us so sad a picture. The carnal man continues in his blindness. Micah, in doing that which was right in his own eyes, thought to conciliate the favour of Jehovah! "Then said Micah, Now know I that Jehovah will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest" (v. 13).

Dan and the Levite of Judah (Judges 18)

This chapter shows us the connection of one of the tribes with the religious system which we have seen set up in Judges 17. Dan had proved himself to be the weakest of the tribes of Israel. Forced into the mountains by the Amorites (Judges 1:34), and lacking the faith to take possession of his inheritance, he sent out five men to reconnoitre, in order to search the portion he still lacked. Laish, a quiet and prosperous town, was situated

at the northern extremity of Canaan, far from the Zidonians to whom it belonged, and did no business with any one. This city afforded Dan an opportunity for an inglorious conquest, but presented besides, everything that the natural heart could desire. "A place," said the messengers, "where there is no want of anything that is in the earth" (v. 10). Apart from its wickedness, Laish, like Sodom before its destruction, was like a garden of the Lord; a conquest worthy of a Lot but not of an Abraham, but which was a temptation to the tribe of Dan in their enfeebled and lax state. Dan had a battle to fight, a victory to gain in his own boundaries, over the Amorites of the valley; but this combat would have cost him too much; he preferred a conquest without danger, won at the extremity of the land far from the eyes of Jehovah's witnesses and from the place where his real enemy was, who was left without a word in possession of Dan's true inheritance.

On their way, these five men met the Levite in the house of Micah and asked him: "Who brought thee hither? and what makest (doest) thou in this place? and what hast thou here?" (v. 3). These questions ought to have opened the eyes of the Levite, if anything could have done so. What answer, in fact,

could he give? His own will had brought him there, for he sought to establish himself; he did what Micah told him to do; he had money, a salary — just so many characteristics of all ministry of human appointment, which can go on entirely without God, being dependent upon men, and working for a salary.

"And they said unto him. Ask counsel, we pray thee, of God, that we may know whether our way which we go shall be prosperous" (v. 5). Of such an one do the men seek direction as to their course, and they get the answer that they desired: "Go in peace; before Jehovah is your way wherein ye go" (v. 6). Under penalty of not being considered a properly appointed minister, it was necessary to mix up the Lord's name to this false pretension of being the oracle of the people.

Later on, when the tribe of Dan were again passing by armed, the first thing they did was to carry off Micah's gods and take absolute possession of his priest. They set before the latter in the most dazzling way the promotion that he would obtain: "Is it better for thee to be a priest unto the house of one man, or that thou be a priest unto a tribe, and a family in Israel?" (v. 19). He got a call to a more influential and lucrative position.

As to the will of God in the matter, that never entered the mind of the priest. His "heart was glad" at being called away to a new post, and taking "the ephod, and the seraphim, and the graven images, he went in the midst of the people" (v. 20). He took away his idols with him, and it is with this one whom the men called "their priest" that idolatry assumed an official character in Dan.

Micah ran after these spoilers and said: "Ye have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and ye are gone away; and what have I more?" (v. 24). What language! They had taken away his religion and the minister that he had appointed and he had nothing left! A man of faith would not have felt the loss of these things; God Himself, His word, His priesthood and His house at Shiloh would have still remained.

The children of Dan went their way, smote Laish, seized upon the city and "called the name of it Dan, after the name of Dan their father" (v. 29). The name of Dan had more importance for them than that of Jehovah. Such was, in a few words, the dark picture of the religious history of Israel.

The Levite of Ephraim

(Judges 19)

Judges 17 and Judges 18 have shown us the religious condition of Israel and the influence exercised over them by the pseudo-sacerdotal class. This self-styled priesthood, religiously corrupted, kept up religious corruption among the people. If the scenes with which chapter 17 commenced, belonged as we have seen to the times preceding the Judges, their transmission was necessary in order to set before us a picture of the solemn gradation of evil in Israel. It is somewhat the line which the Spirit of God follows in Luke's gospel, where the facts are grouped out of their chronological order, for the purpose of giving effect as a whole to certain moral truths.

Samson, the last of the Judges, still invoked Jehovah on certain memorable occasions of his life. The Levite of Judah only invoked Him over the head of his images and seraphim. The Levite of Ephraim, whose history we are about to consider, did not, alas! invoke Him at all. As far as he was concerned it seemed as if Jehovah no longer existed, and yet this man belonged to a class set apart to the service of Jehovah, for that of the priesthood, and of the house of God.

In Judges 19, we have the Levite of Ephraim in his connection not with the religious, but with the moral, state of the people. The latter was even worse than the former. The woman that the Levite had taken, left him, after being unfaithful to him. He went after her, following the bent of his own heart, and united himself to this degraded woman, doing just what pleased himself. This satisfied the woman's father, who saw therein the reinstatement of his daughter. Alas! this act was also, without his being aware of it, the justification of the evil and a sanction to the defilement — all the more serious, carrying with it, as it did, the weight of the sacred position of this man. The father detained his son-in-law, for the longer he remained, the more public and conspicuous did the reinstatement of his daughter become. The kindness of the world is manifested toward us in proportion as we serve its interests; it does not object to alliance with the family of God. The Levite allowed himself to be belated on his way. Having only his conscience, instead of God, as his guide, he yielded to the influence of others, missed his opportunity, and fell into evil.

This man, who had allied himself to a prostitute, would not turn in to the Jebusites. It is sometimes thus with Christians.

They shrink from open association with the world, whilst at the same time the hidden springs of their own lives are impure. It is possible to be very strict as to one's public walk and yet very lax as to personal holiness. "We will not turn aside hither into the city of a stranger, that is not of the children of Israel" (v. 12). The Levite was more attached to his people than to Jehovah, or rather, he did not take the latter into consideration at all. Avoiding the Jebusites from national pride rather than from piety, he seemed to imply that whatever came from Israel must necessarily be all right, when Israel had already outrageously abandoned Jehovah. These principles remain unchanged, and the ruin of our day is as much characterized by them as that of God's ancient people. Every sect in Christendom is boasted about in contrast with the heathen nations; when, as to matter of fact, Christendom itself has become the haunt of every sort of corruption, moral and religious. The Levite soon perceived that he was not received in the midst of a people whom God had expressly commanded not to forsake the Levite (Deut. 12:19). Corrupted profession did not offer a shelter to the servant of Jehovah. (I do not speak here of the moral character of this man). We see in verse 18 the feelings which such treatment produced in his heart: "I am now going to the house of Je-

hovah; and there is no man that receives me to house." An isolated stranger who sojourned amid the corruption of Gibeah, and like Lot in Sodom, aware of it, for he said: "Only lodge not in the street" (v. 20), received the traveller into his house. A frightful thing ensued. The impure passions of men who bore the name of Jehovah equalled in horror those of the accursed city. Such things, taking place in Israel, were worse than the history of Lot, for, as dead flies cause the ointment to stink, so the corruption of the people of God is the worst of all. Moreover, we do not see any intervention of angels to deliver the just. Like Lot, the host of the Levite speaks at the door, accepting one evil to avoid a worse, and this is necessarily the principle of action of believers who go on with the world. God preserved this man from seeing his house defiled by these infamous wretches, but for him there was no other way visible. The Levite gave up his wife to dishonour. This issue might have been avoided by an appeal to God, remembering His protection in former days. Could He not, as formerly, have smitten the people with blindness? But no cry of anguish went up to Him; from the heart of the Levite to Jehovah the passage was barred.

The wretched woman, recovered from her earlier course of prostitution, without repentance or exercise of conscience, died from the dreadful consequences of what she formerly hankered after. God allowed the evil to run its full course, but, as the succeeding chapters will inform us, out of this frightful evil He brought glory to Himself.

The word of God presents two great subjects to us. What God is on the one hand; what man is on the other. God never attempts to cover up man's actual state, for, if He did, He would not be the God who is light; and His word would be false in both its presentations. As to man, God depicts him as indifferent, amiable, or religious according to nature, violent or corrupt, always selfish, hypocritical, ungodly, apostate; without law, under law, under grace, and that in all circumstances and in every degree — while God also shows us the work of His grace in the heart of man under all its forms and in all its gradations. We obtain thus a divine picture of our state, and are forced to the conclusion that we have no resource in ourselves, and that our only resource is in the heart of God.

Final Restoration

(Judges 20-21)

Breach and Recovery

(Judges 20)

Following on the crime of Gibeah, all the tribes from the extreme North to the extreme South were gathered together as one man unto Jehovah in Mizpeh" (ver 1). Very little seemed wanting in this unanimous protest against evil. There was zeal to enquire into and to purify themselves from it, and also a sense of Israel's corporate responsibility, which, later on under Deborah, Gideon and Jephthah, was lacking. The assembling together, the actions and the sentiments of the eleven tribes presented above all a fair appearance of unity (vs. 1, 8, 11), for the smallest tribe, and what was more a guilty one, was the only one absent. The centre of the people's unity was acknowledged, for it was "unto Jehovah" that they gathered together in Mizpeh (v. 1). What then was lacking in Israel? One thing, "the first love," which finds expression both towards God and towards those that are His. Towards God, this love had waxed cold in Israel. They had hearkened, deliberated, decided, and then consulted God (v. 18). In place of commencing with the word of God they had left it to the last. Not that it was omitted, but it no longer occupied the first place. This was a mark of having left their first love. "He that has My commandments,

and keeps them, he it is that loves me." "If a man love Me, he will keep My word" (John 14:21, 23). "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments" (1 John 5:3). Another mark was, that their hearts were more alive to the shame inflicted on Israel, than to the dishonour done to God (vs. 6, 10, 13). How often does this tendency show itself in assembly discipline! It is because God no longer has His right place in our hearts.

The forsaking of first love also betrays itself in our conduct towards our brethren; indeed intercourse with God and with our brethren are closely connected. "And this commandment have we from Him, that he who loves God love his brother also" (1 John 6:21). Israel looked upon Benjamin as an enemy, and, notwithstanding the fair appearance of unity, did not regard the sin of one tribe as that of all of the people. They said: "What wickedness is this that is done among you?" (v. 12) — not "among us." What a difference between this love and that which is described in 1 Cor. 13:4-7! Zeal was not lacking, but that did not make up for having left their first love. "Thou canst not bear them which are evil" of Rev. 2:2, was found here; but, as further on in the address to Ephesus, the Lord could say to His people: "I have somewhat against thee." They added: "that

we may put away the evil from Israel" (v. 13), but where was their brotherly affection? This is indeed always the danger in connection with discipline, and the Corinthians were exhorted to confirm their love toward the one who had fallen, after the discipline had done its work. If on the one hand, the people addressing Benjamin said "you" in place of "us" in verse 12; on the other, "us" and "we" usurp an undue place in the next verse: "Deliver us the men ... that we may put them to death and put away evil from Israel." Leaving the first love opens the door to self-importance.

As for Benjamin, they had grievously sinned in upholding evil in their midst, and the remonstrance of Israel, instead of humbling them, incited them to the most serious act: "to go out to battle against the children of Israel" (v. 14), and then what was far worse — they allied themselves with evil. The children of Benjamin gathered themselves together at Gibeah, they numbered the inhabitants of Gibeah, and they went forth out of Gibeah and destroyed down to the ground of the Israelites (vs. 14, 15, 21). The absence of humiliation on their part led to terrible results; not only did they not judge the evil, but as a necessary consequence, they fatally excused it, taking sides with

the evil-doers against the people of God. It is true that they put on an appearance of being without the inhabitants of Gibeah (v. 15), but they numbered them and availed themselves of their seven hundred chosen warriors. In this army the "left-handed" were equal in numbers to the chosen men of Gibeah, weakness which became strength in the Lord's service when it was an Ehud who fought. Here the left-handed were skilful against the Lord; the hand which ought to have been apt in defence, was strong to attack and deceive those who confronted them.

When every preliminary was exhausted, Israel asked counsel of God (v. 18). Judah shall go up first, was the reply of Him who was about to discipline Israel, and twenty-two thousand men of Judah were destroyed down to the ground. What grace God displayed in this defeat! Israel must learn that, in contests between brethren, there could be neither victors nor vanquished, but that all must be vanquished for the Lord to triumph at the end. God made use of this defeat for the restoration of His beloved people. Israel came forth strengthened from a combat which had cost him his troops, for he came out of it judged in reality by God himself. When the twenty-two thousand fell, the men of Israel encouraged themselves (v. 22). See what fruit their

chastisement bore: First: It led them to seek again the presence of Jehovah. Secondly: Instead of human indignation, they were filled with sorrow according to God and their tears were the proof of it. Thirdly: Their sorrow was not transient, for they wept until even. Fourthly: They learnt to depend more truly on the word of God, and no longer say, "Which of us shall go up first?" but "Shall I go up again?" Fifthly: Affection for their brother in his fall is at length revived, for they say: "The children of Benjamin my brother" (v. 23). How worthy of God was such a result! It was not victory but defeat which brought about these things, blessed fruits of the discipline, and meanwhile other fruits were yet to be produced. "And Jehovah said, go up against him."

Eighteen thousand men of the children of Israel were destroyed down to the ground in the second defeat. Then, in the first place, "All the children of Israel, and all the people went up, and came unto the house of God." No one was missing; they were unanimous in seeking Jehovah. Secondly: Instead of weeping until even, they wept, and sat there before Jehovah. Their sorrow before God was deepened and of longer duration. Thirdly: They "fasted that day until even." That was more than

sorrow; it was humiliation, judgment of the flesh and repentance. Fourthly and fifthly: They "offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before Jehovah." They recovered those two things of inestimable value, a true sense of the value of the sacrifice and of communion. Dependence on the word of God and the realization of His presence became more highly valued, through God's discipline. The people had the consciousness of being before God Himself, who dwells between the cherubims over the ark, and drew near to Him, by a living High Priest who interceded for Israel. Sixthly: Their own will was at last completely broken. "Shall I yet again go out or shall I cease?" (vs. 26-28) What thorough restoration! And that which brought it about was a horrible evil; not that God makes light of the enormity of the evil, but in the interest He bears towards His people, He makes use even of the evil for their blessing. From that time God could bless and assure them of victory.

Then the battle took place in which Israel restored, yet experiencing his own weakness and insufficiency, obtained the victory, but lost nearly a whole tribe. Benjamin was defeated by a humbled people who showed themselves weaker than he. It is the principle of all discipline in the assembly. Without love,

without dependence on God and His word, without self-judgment, discipline will always be defective, and it is only under such conditions that an assembly can purge out the old leaven.

Fruits of recovery

(Judges 21)

The restoration of Israel had as a result the absolute refusal of any connection with the evil. "Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpeh, saying there shall not any of us give his daughter unto Benjamin to wife" (v. 1). Let us remember that, in a day of ruin, when souls, under the action of grace, recover their first love for the Lord, they never become more tolerant of evil. The closer our communion is with God the more does it separate us from evil, but the affections of the saints' hearts towards their brethren are not blunted by this separation, as we see here. For the third time the people went up to the house of God, for this place having been found again, became indispensable to them. Defeat first drove them on that road, victory led them on to it again. "And they abode there till even before God."

On the previous visit, "they wept and sat there before Jehovah;" on this occasion, the first thing was to abide there. "When thou saidst, seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face Jehovah will I seek" (Ps. 27:8). It is our happiness, amid the evil and the sorrow of the present day, to seek the face of the Lord and abide till even before Him. Tears then flowed and such tears! "They lifted up their voices and wept sore." For the first time feeling all the bitterness they said: "O Jehovah, God of Israel, why is it come to pass in Israel, that there should be to-day one tribe lacking in Israel?" They did not say: The evil is put away, we are at length in quietness and tranquillity. The bitterness was in proportion to their recovery of their affections for Jehovah and for their brethren. The breach had been made, one tribe was lacking; it was like the body suffering from the loss of a limb. Israel's God had been dishonoured, the God before whose eyes, in His tabernacle, was the golden table with the twelve loaves of showbread thereon. Israel no longer thought of their own dishonour as they had before their humiliation, for the tears of bitterness were shed before Jehovah; and it was when the unity seemed hopelessly lost, that its realization was made good in the hearts of the people, which, in the eyes of Jehovah was more true unity than the semblance of it

by the people in a state of declension in the beginning of Judges 20.

The earliest rays of the morning found Israel at work building an altar. The people might say, with the Psalmist: "Early will I seek Thee." Humiliation and ruin did not hinder worship. What grace that there remained an altar to Jehovah amid such a state of things! Three things preceded this worship and led up to it — resolute separation from all evil, getting back into the presence of God, the ruin deeply felt and acknowledged. It was there that they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings; then that the heart entered into what the sacrifice of Christ was for God, and the portion God has given us with Him in it.

All these blessings recovered in the path of humiliation, were the starting point for the judgment of Jabesh-gilead. The inhabitants of that place had not come up to Jehovah to Mizpeh. That was indifference to the judgment of the evil by which God had been dishonoured in Israel's midst, and it was at the same time contempt for the unity of the people established by God, and which had been confirmed in such a striking way by the attitude of the eleven humbled tribes. The people of Jabesh-gilead had doubtless said, that it was no concern of theirs. How fre-

quently do we hear such expressions in our days! Their state was even worse than that of the evil-doer. For such a refusal, there was no mercy; but before the execution of the judgment, Israel delighted to contemplate mercy. "And the children of Israel repented them for Benjamin their brother, and said, there is one tribe cut off from Israel this day. How shall we do for wives for them that remain, seeing that we have sworn by Jehovah that we will not give them of our daughters to wives?" (vs. 6, 7) Moreover, the judgment was but the exercise of this mercy, for the cutting off of Jabesh-gilead was with a view to the restoration of Benjamin. Such was the way that Israel came out of that long and painful conflict. Happy indeed are they who learn from such circumstances, and know how to combine perfect hatred of evil, with unmingled love for their brethren. The four hundred young virgins of Jabesh-gilead were given for wives to the poor remnant of Benjamin.

But that did not suffice; the wound must be completely bound up. Love was ingenious in finding the remedy and suggested to Israel a way of helping their brethren without disowning their obligations toward God, or lowering the standard of separation from evil. Israel allowed themselves to be plundered at Shiloh

(vs. 17-21), as it were under the eyes of Jehovah. Exchanging the victor's place for that of the vanquished, they permitted their brother, so sorely tried by the discipline, to have the last word.

"And it shall be," they said, "when their fathers or their brethren come unto us to complain, that we will say unto them, Be favourable unto them for our sakes, because we reserved not to each man his wife in the war" (v. 22). Israel did not say: They reserved not, but "we reserved not." What delicacy and tenderness did those words evince, and how different from those recorded in chapter 20:12. "What wickedness is this that is done among you?" Israel no longer separated their cause from that of their brethren and the unity of the people, formed by God Himself, recovered its due place of importance in the eyes of the faithful in those sorrowful days of declension.

God grant that such may be the case with us, my brethren! If men, if Christians even, lightly esteem the divine unity of the church, or, when forced to avow that it is outwardly gone, seek to substitute for it a miserable daubing with untempered mortar and content themselves with an appearance of unity which does not deceive even those upholding it; if, in a word, men form al-

liances between their various sects, proving the very ruin they seek to justify; — let us turn away from such things, humbling ourselves on account of the ruin of the church (looked at on the side of human responsibility) without conforming to it; boldly proclaiming that "there is one body and one Spirit," "endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3-4), refusing all fellowship with the moral and religious evil of the day, "and above all these things putting on love, which is the bond of perfectness" (Col. 3:14).

Such is the instruction contained in the book of Judges, which closes with the solemn repetition of that which characterized the evil days. "In those days there was no king in Israel, every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (v. 25). God did not change that deplorable state of things; He simply states the fact; but He led His own away from the confused light of conscience, which while it judged never guided them; and brought them back to the pure light of His own infallible word which was able to conduct them, to build them up, and to give them an inheritance among all them which are sanctified (cf. Acts 20:32). "To the law and to the testimony," this is our safeguard in a day of ruin! (Isa. 8:20)

