MEN FOR THE HOUR

Lessons we can learn from the characters of the Judges

by Pastor David Legge
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"Men For The Hour"

Studies in the characters of the Judges

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Charles Dickens, the novelist, began his classic 'Tale of Two Cities' in these words: 'It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times'. As we turn to Israelite history, we find that in the epochs and different ages of their existence, this period of the Judges was certainly the worst of times for them. Indeed, you could say that both the books of Joshua and Judges are a tale of two very distinct and contrasting generations. The generation of Joshua, one that conquered the land in great triumph in the conquest; and the generation of the Judges being that which polluted the land that God had given them, by their compromise and sin. Joshua's generation fought her enemies, but by the time we get to the end of the book of Judges, the next generation has made friends with God's enemies and are now turning within to fight each other. The book of Joshua begins with the rule of God among the people, theologians call it 'theocracy'; but by the end of the book of Judges there is no rule of anyone, we have anarchy - every man does that which is right in his own eye, because there was no king in Israel.

Whereas Joshua rings with a shout of victory as God's people enter the promised land and cross the Jordan, and all the pieces of land are allocated to each particular tribe because they are children of the promise; Judges is a book that echoes with the sobs, the cries, the weeping and wailing of God's people under bondage, chastised by the hand of God because of their sin against Him. Some of you will be familiar with the proverb in Proverbs 14:34: 'Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people'. Essentially what we have here in the book of Judges is an historical record of the demise of a nation, a nation who fell from the heights of great spiritual heritage and covenant blessing from God to the depths of unparalleled depravity. It is evidenced in their flagrant idolatry and their unashamed apostasy. One Christian writer has commented and called this particular period of Israel's history 'the dark ages' of the Old Testament.

Now as such, would you not agree with me in saying that this book has a great deal to teach us in our particular day and in our modern age? The similarities of the Israelite generation and ours today is uncanny, as we will consider through this series. If ever there was a verse that had the ring of the 21st post-modern century age in which we live, it is the last verse of this book: 'There is no king in Israel, and every man does that which is right in his own eyes'. It could be the model of every archetypal permissive age that has ever lived, every generation that has no standards because they've rejected God's truth. That verse, as I said, is not only the key in understanding this particular book, but I believe it's the key in understanding our society today - why things are going wrong, why there is a moral and spiritual chaos in our day and generation. It's also the key to understanding human nature and human depravity; because there is not Christ's Lordship and the rule of God's sovereignty and providence in individual lives, that is the reason why there is anarchy - because man cannot guide his way, man cannot pilot his own vessel.

So the application of this book, as we will go through it, is painfully obvious when we consider the most rebellious characteristics of this ancient society and compare it to our post-modern one. Let me draw your attention first of all to the fact that the book of the Judges is found...
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among the historical books in the Old Testament. Let me just say on that vein that all history is important, because we, through the study of history, learn the mistakes that our forefathers have made - and hopefully learn how to avoid those mistakes, or at least be aware of making them again. How much more then should the spiritual history of God's people be important to us as the church today? Whatever distinctions you make between the Church and Israel, Israel were the people of God in the Old Testament, and we are the people of God in the New. We ought to learn from their mistakes and make sure, in whatever shape or form, that we do not make them in our own day.

The philosopher George Santiana said: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. Sadly God's people are uniquely guilty of repeating historical mistakes of their past, simply because they will not study biblical history and the history of God's people. I fear that we are in danger of being like those in Hosea's generation, where God said to them: 'My people are destroyed through lack of knowledge'. So let us, as we introduce this book of Judges today under the title 'Men For The Hour', and particularly under this study this morning 'The Worst of Times', let us learn from these mistakes of God's ancient people and make sure that we don't make them today.

I want to consider our study this morning under three headings, and the first in introduction is: the causes of the chaos that there were among this particular generation. Ultimately we find that the cause, the prime cause for the predicament that the Israelites find themselves in here, is that of compromise. They had begun to compromise with their enemies and the enemies of God. Isn't it true, when we consider this for a moment in this context, that in every occasion - right back to Genesis and Adam and Eve's disobedience of God - that disobedience is the reason for chaos universally, wherever we find it. Disobeying God's commands is the reason why God must chastise us, discipline us, and why ultimately we suffer from time to time. Disobedience, not doing what God says, not having God's reign and rule and Lordship in our lives, but rather doing things our own way.

But I think sometimes, more subtle than simple disobedience, a partial obedience is our problem and is equally fatal. What do I mean? Well, perhaps it's too obvious a tactic of the devil when he comes to tempt us, rather than tempting us with a blatant sin - to commit adultery, or murder, or something like that - he will tolerate us just disobeying in a minute thing. In other words, keeping God's whole law and walking before God in a pleasing manner, and perhaps falling down and being unfaithful or disobedient in a small area that seems insignificant to us - but he knows, perhaps more than we do, as Paul taught us, that 'a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump'. Or as Solomon put it: 'A little fox can spoil the vine'. So there were small seeds of compromise that began in the nation, and those small seeds of compromise produced the fruit of failure in Israel that would eventually mean that God allowed their enemies to overcome them in discipline.

Now let's look a bit more specifically at some of the acts that caused the chaos in the nation. Here's the first act: a partial obedience and a deficient view of their sin. Now note that down if you have a pen and paper, it's important that we remember these things: a partial obedience among the people and a deficient view of their sin. When we turn to chapter 1 we find that nine and a half of the tribes of Israel that settled in Cana land didn't drive out the Canaanites as God had commanded them. In chapter 1 there's a list of eight incomplete conquests by Judah, Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephriam, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali and Dan, and the other two tribes that aren't mentioned, Issachar and Simeon, it is presumed that they did the same - that they did not drive out the peoples that God told them to.
Here's the lesson right away for us, even in our Christian lives today many centuries later: a partial obedience to God, obeying God in many things but leaving something undone that we feel is of little significance to God or anyone else, is not only showing a deficient view of sin in our eyes, but will be the seed that will eventually lead to failure in that particular area of our lives. In other words, practically speaking, anything but a root and branch severing of sin in our lives preserves the problem for a future day. If we do not amputate sin in our lives in any shape or form that we find it, we are storing up trouble for ourselves in the future.

Now a question that often comes out of this particular era of Israelite history within people's minds and hearts, and even amongst sceptics and doubters concerning the biblical history and the goodness of our God is: how could a God of love and a God of grace command the killing of these Canaanite people? How could God do it? I'm not going to in the problems that are involved in this, and I don't have time to expound that question in one iota this morning, but simply to say that Campbell Morgan answered the question very well when he said: 'God is perpetually at war with sin, that is the whole explanation of the extermination of the Canaanites'.

You see, sometimes we need to attain God's view of sin afresh, because we lose it, if we ever had it. What was it the Lord Jesus Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount? If your hand offends you, cut it off; if your eye offends you, pluck it out - a root and branch treatment, amputation of sin. Do not flirt with it! Do not allow it to take root! You see, if you do not obey God completely, only in a partial obedience, you will be conquered. If you do not conquer that sin, that sin will conquer you! Do you have a partial obedience, and a conscious partial obedience to God? That could be a sign that you have a deficient view of your sin. I happen to believe in the total depravity of human nature, and I think we have lost the Biblical doctrine that we are sinful, we are undone, we are without God, without hope. Whenever you start doubting total depravity, you need to read the book of the Judges.

Here's the second act that caused the chaos in the land: compromise and a cooperation with the world. Not only partial obedience and a deficient view of sin, but compromise and cooperation with the world. We read, as we read through this history in chapter 2, that the Israelites went into league with the Canaanite people, verse 2 of chapter 2 God prohibited them from marrying with them, intermarriage, and in chapter 3 and verse 6 we see that they disobeyed God in that regard. In that same verse, chapter 3 and verse 6, we find that that intermarrying led to idolatry, the Israelite men or women adopted the gods of their spouse. The end result was disobedience and eventually complete apostasy from God, a falling away, a standing apart from the truth.

Here is the act that started the chaos, the embryo seed: compromise and cooperation with the world. This is teaching us very clearly that failure comes with compromise, not only partial obedience and a deficient view of sin, but a compromise with the things of this world. That's why Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians and chapter 6 verses 17 and 18, in our particular context in this New Testament age: 'Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you'. We underestimate the impact upon our spiritual lives of compromising with the world. Are you compromising with worldliness? What is worldliness? That is a very hard word to define, and in our modern age it's getting more difficult!

Let me give you an inkling, I'm not going to mention specifics, but the first step to worldliness, James 4:4 tells us, is friendship with the world. Are you friendly with the world and the things of the world? Friendship with the world, James tells us in chapter 1 and verse
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27, means that you will become spotted by the world, you will be contaminated - whether consciously or unconsciously, it matters not. The next step after that spotting with the world is to love the world and the things of the world, 1 John 2:15. Gradually having a relationship and affection towards those things in the world, you will become, Romans 12:2 says, conformed to the world - the world will have a control over you, and the likeness of the world will be in your character rather than that of Christ. Then that can eventually lead, as 1 Corinthians 11 tells us, to be, even as a believer, condemned with the world. That's the kind of judgment that came to Lot, we will see it coming to Samson, one of the Judges, and it came to Israel's King Saul because they compromised with the world, they cooperated with worldliness.

Dale Ralph Davies, who has a commentary on the book of Judges, says - and I think is tremendous - 'The principle remains', in other words whether it's Old or New Testament it matters not, 'we must retain a distinct separation from our culture, while mounting an active opposition to it, else we will blend with it'. This is lost today in modern Christianity, the opposite is what is being taught: that we must blend with the culture. He goes on to say: 'We are still called to this separation from and combat with our own godless culture'. Moffat translated Romans 12:2 like this: 'Instead of being moulded to this world, have your mind renewed, and so be transformed in nature; able to make out what the will of God is, namely what is good and acceptable to Him and perfect'.

A partial obedience and deficient view of sin caused the chaos; a compromise and cooperation with the world; and thirdly, they lacked personal experimental knowledge of God. They lacked a personal experimental knowledge of God. Now we must dig deeper to find this one, another cause of their compromise. You see, in the history we learn that Joshua's generation did the fighting, Joshua's people conquered the land. It was through their conquering and conquest that the later generation, the Judges generation, entered into rest and comfort if you like. Here's a subtle lesson and danger for all of us: when another generation fights the fight of faith and wins the victory for us, and we enter into their blessings and enjoy that comfort of their struggles, we can lose sight of the fight! Because they chose in the Judges generation not to wrestle against the enemy within, they became comfortable, they got used to the status quo. Their comfort led to complacency or indifference, and then that led to their compromise. The simple lesson is this: when you relax in your spiritual life and stop to wrestle, eventually it will end in rebellion. You may not believe that, but you just try it! Let your guard down, allow the devil in, and he will overcome you!

Some writers have called this 'the second-generation syndrome'. If you look at chapter 2 and verse 10: 'And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers', the first generation of Joshua, 'and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done'. They had no personal, experimental knowledge of God in their lives. In other words, the Judges generation answered 'Yes' to the question:

'Shall I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fight to win the prize,
And sail through bloody seas?'

You might be here as a second or a third-generation Christian, and you don't know why all chaos has been let loose in your life, why you're overcome with sin and temptation you fall at at every turn. It could be that you've come into the heritage of your forefathers, but you yourself do not have an experiential knowledge of God in your life. Sidlow Baxter put it like
this: 'The God of their fathers was simply a convenient resort in time of extremity, when things were tolerably comfortable bare-faced betrayal of Jehovah was the order of the day'.

Oh, when we're in trouble we call upon God, but when others fight and wrestle for our victory and we enter into the rest, and we live mostly, generally speaking in a free country where we have so many luxuries that others do not have, how complacent we can be! 'Who needs a personal knowledge of God?'.

Well, we must move on, because those are the causes of the chaos, but secondly I want to share with you the signs of their decline. The signs of their decline were manifest in a downward spiral of sin that affected every facet of Israelite life. They became socially degraded, morally perverted, and the result was spiritually bankrupt for approximately 400 years of this history. Socially, through the intermarriage; morally, the last verse of the book says it well 'Every man did that which was right in his own eyes' - and I want you to note that it says that they did 'what they thought was right', that's the essence of the problem. They didn't choose to do things that were wrong, or that they thought were wrong, but the problem is - one of the recurrent expressions in this book is 'the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord', so what they thought was right was wrong, and what God thought was wrong they thought was right! That is what's called relativism, that is the spirit of the age today. There are no absolutes, no black-and-white wrong and right. So this society is such a mirror image of ours: there is murder in chapter 9, there is rape, abuse sexually and emotionally, there is violence in chapter 19, there is homosexuality in chapter 19 - this is the archetypal permissive society without standards, without attributes, without laws, because they have forsaken God!

Morally, and then spiritually, boy, I couldn't even begin to go into this one. Yahweh, Jehovah is the Holy God of heaven, He is high above creation, He is not assimilated in it - although it gives glory to Him. The Canaanite god was different, the Canaanite god was Baal who was the god of storm and fertility, and it was important to worship this god if you wanted crops every year, if you wanted to produce children and livestock and have blessing upon your family. Baal's female consort was Ashteroth. Now bear with me, and I don't want to go into this in too much detail, but in Canaanite theology and indeed in their agricultural system, the fertility of the land depended on the fertility of the relationship between these two gods - Baal and Ashteroth.

Now, this leads us into how they worshipped that God. They practised what is called 'ritualistic prostitution', 'sacred prostitution'. Every man who worshipped Baal would go to their temple, or under a grove, and they would copulate with a temple prostitute. The thinking in theology was this: that by that act of sexual intercourse there would be a stimulation of Baal and Ashteroth in heaven, who in turn would copulate, and from it the reign would come and the sun would shine, and the blessing of natural reproduction in the earth would come to pass. So when you read in the Scriptures the words 'to go a-whoring', it is not just a turn of phrase, it is more than a figure of speech. This is how these Canaanites worship their god, this is how Israel was starting to turn away from God and worship this god. There was a sexual explosion in this particular generation.

Now I say to you today, and whilst you might think I'm touching on things that shouldn't be touched on from the pulpit, whether you like it or not these things are in scripture. Whilst we have to be guarded and careful in how we speak while we're in the midst of younger people, the fact of the matter is: if you don't hear it here, you're going to hear it in the world, and you'll hear it according to the world's standards and interpretation. Can I say something very directly this morning? There is a pornographic explosion in our world today. Now some of you
folk who are very sensitive, and of an older generation who don't know how to turn the computer on, let alone work on the Internet, bear with me here - because what I am saying, I hope that you will trust my judgment. The Internet is filled with pornographic filth, filled with it. The danger of it is simply the anonymity of how you can sin on the Internet, no one knows, no one has to know, you can do it for free. In spirit, effectively what this is is falling into such a pagan worship of sex. Archaeologists have actually dug up carvings and pictures of this Canaanite age and how they worshipped, and there's nothing to touch it today even in our pornographic world. We live, and they lived in a generation of degeneration!

Now I'm asking you, whoever you are, are you showing these same signs of decline in your life? Socially, morally, spiritually: these are the diagnostic symptoms of compromise with the world, and in Judges about six or seven times there's this merry-go-round - only it's not merry, it's a go-round of vice and vileness. They rebel against God, God brings divine retribution against them and judges them, then they seem to repent in tears. Then God restores them, but then they sin again when the Judge dies, even more than they did in the first instance! Why is this? Because they don't realise the extremity of their sin, they have a deficient view of their sin. In verse 5 of chapter 2 we read that they wept, and they wept in a place called Bochim, and 'Bochim' means 'weeping', 'weepers'. These people, when God started to judge them for their rebellion, started to cry out for mercy. They were crying, it seemed, in repentance. It even says in chapter 2 and verse 5 that they made sacrifices to the Lord, but it was all superficial - because in verses 18 and 19 we read that once that particular Judge died, they went back to their old ways. This was superficial repentance. So not only had they a deficient view of the sinfulness of sin, they had a deficient view of the depths of true repentance.

I hit, I believe, another sore point in evangelicalism today. Repentance is hardly mentioned, and when it is mentioned in Gospel sermons the preacher - and this has happened to me - can be accused of adding something to the grace of God and not preaching a salvation that is faith alone. We do believe that it is by grace through faith, but it is not a salvation by grace through faith without repentance. The fact of the matter is, Saul fell into the trap that these Judges' generations did. Remember he spared the King of the Amalekites, and he spared some of the livestock to sacrifice to God, and what did the prophet Samuel say to him? It was the word of God to his heart: 'To obey is better than sacrifice'. As Matthew Henry in his commentary said: 'Many are melted under the word, maybe even melted to tears, then harden again before they are cast into a new mould'. Is that any of us today? You're melted before God's word, but before you can allow God to cast you into a new creation you've hardened again into your old ways. Weeping, there's very seldom any weeping in our meetings today, and I find that my eyes are too dry as well - but even if people weep for their sins, it doesn't mean that it's true repentance. These people wept, that's further on than we are today, but it meant nothing!

Martin Lloyd-Jones was accused on one occasion of encouraging emotionalism when he ministered in a congregation in Wales. His retort was: 'It is very easy to make a Welshman cry, but it needs an earthquake to make him change his mind'. That is repentance, a change of mind, and a change of mind that is evidenced in a change of life. They needed to understand true repentance, as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 7:10, 'Godly sorrow worketh repentance not to be repented of' - repentance unto salvation.

Thirdly and finally let me leave with you, in summary of this book and in introduction, the answer for this age. The answer for this age is the answer for every age, and it is simply the grace of God. There's an astonishing story of salvation in this book, if you look at chapter 2
and verse 14 for a moment, the first part, it says: 'The anger of the LORD was hot against Israel'. Now take that statement and then bring it to verse 16, the beginning: 'Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them'. If you were writing that, you would never have put those two statements together - but verse 18 says that God, like those in bondage in Egypt, God heard their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them. It was God that sent them to vex them, to make them thorns in their side, but God was doing it out of love - because He loved them, He chastened them.

Fossett has said, and I think it's wonderful: 'It was not their repentance of sin, but God's repentance because of their cry and distress that brought Him to their help'. Isn't our God a wonderful gracious God? It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed! God sent to this generation, in all their degradation, Judges, 'Deliverers' is the word, 'Saviours' - and what a motley crew they were! Othniel, a young brother, the eldest was not sent; Ehud, was a left-handed man which was seen as weakness, perhaps, in those days; Barak was urged to be a man by Deborah, who was the Judge herself, he wouldn't go and do the job, she had to try and push him on. Gideon went to war with only a lamp and a pitcher; Shamgar had an ox goad; Jephthah was an outlaw; Samson used the jawbone of an ass - and you know the sexual weaknesses that Samson had. But God is communicating to these people that He doesn't use the mighty, He doesn't use the noble, He uses the weak things of this world that God can take, and who will allow Him to take and use.

The wonderful message of this book, I believe in the light of the New Testament, is that these people - yes, they were in bondage; and yes, God sends them a deliverer - but as we have seen from chapter 2, they were mere human deliverers, they were fallible, they were full of faults. They may have been men with hearts of iron, as one has said, but they had feet of clay. Whilst the deliverer lived the people were free, but once the deliverer died they came under oppression again. What they needed was a deliverer who would never die. Thank God we have one! Hebrews says: 'This man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them'.

You need to understand God's view of sin. You need to understand God's view of repentance. But we all need to understand that Christ is the answer for this age, and He is the answer for every need. We trust that we will see more of our blessed Lord Jesus as we go through this series together.

Isn't it great to have a God who gives us more than we deserve, isn't it? Can I ask you: have you true repentance in your life? I'm not asking you do you believe Jesus is the Son of God, do you believe He died for your sin - could the reason that you're going around in circles regarding sin, never having victory over it, be because there was never true repentance in your life at the beginning. I pose the question to you, to make sure that your faith is sure. But believers, let us never lose sight of the awful sinfulness of our hearts. Repentance is necessary every day, but let us never forget what God has done for us in saving us in His Son. I heard a testimony the other evening of Mary Peckham who was converted during the Lewis Revival, she talks about her testimony leading after conversion - but this is what I want to leave you with: when she came to the point of realising her own sinfulness in a meeting just like this, she prayed a prayer. But it's not the prayer that a lot of people pray, here's what she said - and it's shocking: 'Lord, I'm a sinner, send me to hell'. How many of us could pray like that? When she said those words from her heart, she heard the preacher say: 'He was wounded for your transgressions, He was bruised for your iniquities', and she says her
heart melted as the grace of God was applied to it.

Father, we thank You for a wonderful Saviour. We know that He is the answer for this dark age, let us never lose the thrill of our salvation, and the depth of the repentance that needs to be there day by day if we are to be useful to Him. We thank You for the Saviour, our eternal Saviour, Amen.
Judges chapter 3 we're turning to, under the title 'The Paraclete's Prototype' - and 'Paraclete' is another word, in fact it's a Greek transliteration, which means you take the Greek letters and correspond them to English letters rather than translating the word from Greek to English. You just take the letters and spell it out as it is in English letters, and it's the name given at times in the New Testament to the Holy Spirit. 'One who comes alongside', that's what it means, 'para-clete', 'and helps, strengthens, comforts, and gives us God's divine aid'.

What is a prototype? Well, when a new technology comes along and is invented, usually the idea precedes the object. Someone has an idea of an invention, and then they actually get to work on it and make the thing. I've been thinking about this, and this is why I've used this word 'prototype', because usually there is a uniform pattern from the development of an idea until the object is materialised. The idea, the principles of how the invention works, is then put into practice and engineered by a machine or by men's hands to create an object. More often than not the pattern goes like this: first of all there is the blueprint, the plans are drawn up based upon proven principles. In other words, if you want to take an aeroplane, an aeroplane's plans are drawn up on the principle of aerodynamics. When you get that blueprint, the second step is that a prototype is engineered - in other words, a model, a working model based upon those plans and those principles. Then the third step in the uniform pattern, as far as I understand it, is that copies are then made of the prototype.

So follow with me: there is the blueprint, the plan, based upon the principles and the laws - the idea that you have. Then you make one unique model, a prototype, the first type like the plans - putting in practice, engineering upon those principles. Then thirdly, if the prototype works, you make copies and those are the things that are sold. Now, if you will, I want to use that as a type of illustration of chapter 2 and verses 11-19 that we read together; because that, if you like, is the blueprint for God's deliverance of His people. Those are the principles laid down there by the Holy Spirit. God's people were sinning and rebelling, then eventually they would cry out in some kind of pseudo-repentance we saw in our last study in introduction, it wasn't repentance at all - but yet they cried out, they groaned to God under their task masters, just like those in Exodus. God had mercy upon them, sent them a deliverer, a Judge. They seemed to turn back to God, no matter how superficial it was at the time; God blessed them, then the Judge died, then they went back to their old evil ways again.

Now we see there, if you like, the blueprint, the principles of why God sent them a deliverer. They were in rebellion, they needed to be delivered from their taskmasters, and God raised up a saviour. Those are the principles. But what we have in chapter 3 and verses 7-11, I believe, is the prototype, the Holy Spirit's prototype, the first example in the book of Judges of one of God's deliverers that He sends to His people. All the following Judges that we have, Samson and the rest of them, Gideon and so on and so forth, they are copies made of the Spirit's initial model.
Othniel then, I believe, is the Spirit's prototype. I think often people miss this as they look at this character, and some have actually found fault with the first account of a Judge - they think it's a little bit empty, uninteresting, there's a lack of colour in the account of his life. It's not very dramatic, as the other Judges seem to be - and that is true. The reason I believe it is true is because it's almost identical with the blueprint. The verses of 7-11 in chapter 3 are almost a mirror image of the same principles you find in the plans, chapter 2 verse 11-19, with just a few personal details of Othniel added in to spice it up a little, but not much. We ask the question, as we ought to always do of God's word: why is that? The Holy Spirit does not ever in a haphazard way inspire His word, so why is it that He just seems to repeat, as it were, the principles in chapter 2 adding the name of Othniel and very little else? It's not very exciting. The reason is: God's Spirit desires this first account of the first Judge to be His prototype, and for us to understand the ideal model of what He sees as His deliverer, what His Judge ought to be.

The reasons for the absence of drama and embellishment is in order that we don't miss His point, in order that we don't get taken up with the characteristic personal aspects of this man's life and miss what God wants us to see. What is that? The essential features of God's man for the hour. So the reason why Othniel seems to be a bit of a dull story that is not much different than chapter 2 verses 11-19, what God has already said, is that God wants to highlight in this first Judge to distinguish clearly, without any personal distractions, God in the life of this man. Can you see that? God wants you to see that He is instrumental in bringing Israel's salvation.

So, whilst some have concluded that Othniel's an awfully boring, uninteresting character; I think he's probably the most exciting of all the Judges, because you can see God clearer in the account of Othniel's life because the personal, biographical details - whether they account his successes or failures like the rest of the Judges - they are withheld because the Spirit desires us to see that God was the deliverer of His people in bondage. I think he's a bit like John the Baptist. Remember what he said when he introduced the Lord Jesus Christ? 'He must increase, I must decrease'. The Holy Spirit has desired a paradigm, a pattern to show us, right at the beginning, after outlining the principles of how He was going to save his people; in this first example, this prototype, He wants us to see a paradigm of salvation. 'This is my plan, I will save my own people' - salvation, He wants them to realise, is always of the Lord. Whatever instrument He chooses to use, He wants us to see that God's gracious deliverance of His people comes always from Him.

Now, in saying that, here is my first point: it is not that Othniel had nothing of himself that was commendable. In fact, to the contrary, there are few Judges like him - let alone men around among the people of God today. In fact, the Rabbis applied to him Song of Songs chapter 4 and verse 7: 'Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee'. This was a remarkable Judge. Here are some of his commendable features that I want you to note. First of all: he was born into a distinguished family. If you look at his lineage, the clan that he came from had close connections with the tribe of Judah, which of course was the leading tribe in Israel - and this was through Caleb. If you look at chapter 1 for a moment and verse 13, we read: 'And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother' - so he was connected to Caleb, 'Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother'. Now that could mean that Kenaz or Othniel was Caleb's younger brother, but without going into the details, it's more likely that Othniel was Caleb's younger brother, probably his half-brother - we know that from other portions of historic Scripture.

The fact of the matter is, this is the point: he had a solid family background. Whether he was
Caleb's brother or Caleb's nephew, Othniel had the privilege of belonging to a family that was led by an outstanding believer, Caleb. You remember from Old Testament history that Caleb, along with Joshua, were two of the greatest men of their generation. So what I want you to note is, we should never underestimate the impact that a godly family background can have upon the development of an individual character. He had witnessed, whether it was his older brother, or his cousin, or someone else, the example of Caleb, and how Caleb took a mountain even in his old age. Never forget that we are examples to others - the question is: what kind of example are you?

That was a commendable feature in Othniel's life. The second is perhaps greater, because we can have a great family background, but it means very little in the long-term - but this man had a great past victory to his life. He had made a name for himself among Israel in battle. He actually, if you look at chapter 1 again and verse 13, through it won Caleb's daughter as his wife: 'Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took it: and he gave him Achsah his daughter to wife'. Really the story of Joshua 15, if you want to read it at home, is repeated in verses 11-15 of chapter 1 of Judges. All it is is that Caleb, this man of faith, though he was 85 years old, attacked the heart of Canaanite power in Kirjatharba, or Hebron, and God had given him a great victory. But the fact of the matter was, Judah had one other main centre of Canaanite power to conquer: Kirjathsepher or Debir. Caleb, after conquering one of them, issued a challenge to the people: 'The one who attacks Kirjathsepher and conquers it, I will even give my daughter Achsah for a wife'. In response, I wonder was it the example of his older brother or cousin, Othniel rose, he attacked the city, he captured it, he won Caleb's daughter - and now, years later, God chooses Othniel to lead His people against this godless leader, Chushan.

He was given a godly example from a godly family, and therefore we ought never to underestimate a godly example upon character. But added to that, we ought never to underestimate that each victory, as the hymn writer says, will help us. What do I mean? Well, simply the principle that this victory in Othniel's past set him up to be in a position where God could approach him to make a victory among the people in the present. Those little victories in his past made him a man who was ready for future battles.

Now that's a principle right throughout God's word, in fact right up to we get to heaven and we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, and He says unto us 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant, because thou hast been faithful in a very little have thou authority over ten cities'. Faithful in little, little victories, God will give us the big challenges. Two commendable features: born into a distinguished family, a great past victory to his name. Thirdly, he has no weaknesses recorded about him as the other Judges have. We will explore their weaknesses individually as we proceed through this series, but the point is simply this: they had many weaknesses and infirmities, and varied ones, but there is none mentioned of Othniel.

Now I'm quite sure that he had them, for we all do, and it's commendable that he hadn't got any, and we see here a holy life - but here's the point that I want you to find in these three sub-points: none of these commendable features in Othniel's life are actually mentioned in this text as a reason for why God used him. They are commendable attributes, but here is the warning that we find in the book of Judges: whether we have strengths or whether we have weaknesses to our name, if God uses us it is of God! Lest you miss my point: his very strengths could have been his weaknesses if he thought that those strengths could commend him to the work of God.

Let me explain what I mean a little further: whilst these were commendable features, the
victory that Othniel wrought in the nation is attributed to something else. What does the Holy Spirit attribute his success to? Not that he had nothing that was commendable, on the contrary, rather he had nothing to commend himself to the service of God - that's very important. What are the distinctive features as you look down at these verses, verses 7-11, that point out how the battle was won for Israel and God? The only unique thing that is said about Othniel different than the blueprint that we find in chapter 2 verses 11-19, is that the Holy Spirit of God is mentioned in verse 10. Look at it: 'The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel, and went out to war'. That's the only difference, and whilst Othniel was far more commendable than any of the other Judges - he was from a distinguished family, he had great past victories to his name, there are no weaknesses recorded of his character - with all those commendable features, the fact of the matter is: the only thing that is mentioned here is what he had in common with the other Judges, the Spirit of God came upon him.

In other words, what made him the man for the hour, and every man for the hour, is the power of God in their lives by the Holy Spirit - and not what we were, or what we are, or what we are not as human beings. I haven't got time to show you it, but if you look at the life of Gideon you find the same thing - the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson. Now here are some vital lessons that I want us to see in the remainder of our meeting this morning from this. He had many things commendable, but nothing to commend him to the service of God, and the thing that made the difference was God's Spirit. Here's the lesson: one, God's desire in His servants, what is it? This is what we're learning here, this is what the Spirit wants us to see in His prototype. God desires for men and women, whether they have great strengths or great weaknesses, those in whom He and His power can be seen. That's what God desires. He doesn't need your strength, whatever it is: intellectually, emotionally, physically - and isn't it encouraging, whilst we don't want to encourage sin or weakness, God is not hindered, necessarily, by our weaknesses. But the ingredient that made this man different here is always what made all the Judges different, and any man of God in any era: the power of God which is not of us.

Isn't that what Zechariah said? 'Not by might, not by power', human power, 'but by my Spirit, saith the Lord'. In 1 Corinthians chapter 1 did Paul not say this, in verse 25: 'The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath 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, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence'.

I heard a humourous story told by Howard Hendricks, who was involved in Moody Bible School in the States, I think he's still preaching around. He was at a Pastor's Conference, and a very pious looking brother came up to him after his message and said: 'Brother Hendricks, pray that I shall be nothing'. Hendricks replied: 'Ah man, just take that by faith'. Just take that by faith! We are nothing, and the sooner we see we are nothing, and we have nothing to commend ourselves to God - whilst we might have commendable features that have encouraged us in some way to God's service - the source of Othniel's power and every Judge's power must be the source of our power today. In Acts chapter 1 and verse 8 they were told: 'Ye shall be witnesses unto me when ye receive the Holy Spirit'. They couldn't do it without God's Spirit. That's why in Ephesians 5 and 18 we are commanded: 'Be ye filled', be
continuously controlled, 'by the Holy Spirit'.

Now I ask you the question today: what does our lawless generation need to see more than anything? Is it our skills? Is it our activities? It's certainly not our weaknesses and our splits and so on, but what they do need to see more than anything is God in Christ in our lives. We need to lie low and exalt Christ. If Christ is seen in our character and our lives, it will have nothing to do with our abilities, will it? It was Henry Drummond who said: 'To become like Christ is the only thing in the world worth caring for, the thing before which every ambition of man is folly, and all lower achievement vain'. Isaac Watts wrote those immortal words:

'When I survey the wondrous Cross', originally it said
'on which the young Prince of glory died,
My richest gain, I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride'.

You see Christ-likeness is better than any gift of preaching or whatever, and without Christ-likeness any gift that you have, Paul says, is as a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal, it's empty! This is the difference with every hero that God has used in the Bible and in Christian history: Christ-likeness was seen in them! In the biography of Murray M'Cheyne, by James A Stewart, he wrote these words: 'Mr M'Cheyne's holiness was notable even before he spoke a word. His appearance spoke for him. There was a minister in the north of Scotland with whom he spent the night one evening, and he was so marvellously struck by this man that when M'Cheyne left the room he burst into tears and said, 'Oh, that is the most Jesus-like man I ever met'. 'Oh, that is the most Jesus-like man I ever met' - in another place Stewart adds: 'M'Cheyne spent hours in holy communion inside the veil, in rapturous praise and adoration, being bathed in Calvary's love. He would come forth from God's presence to leave the fragrance of Christ as he went from house-to-house in visitation. As he walked the streets of his parish, and even anywhere in Britain, the people were startled to see the look of Jesus upon his face'. Now that's New Testament Christianity! In fact in Acts 4 we read that 'they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they had been with Jesus'.

This is a blessing that God does not give to the strong, or those who think that they're strong, but whether you have commendable features or less commendable features, either of them or nothing! As Elwood McQuaid put it: 'With God there are no extraordinary people, only ordinary ones through whom He chooses to do extraordinary things'. Othniel not only rescued the nation from bondage, but he also served his people, the record says, for 40 years. He brought rest to the land of God - here's another lesson: never underestimate the good that one person can do filled with the Holy Spirit, and living an obedient life in the will of God. Forty years rest in the nation because of one man.

That is God's desire in His servants, but here secondly is the final lesson for us: our dependence in the worst of times needs to be upon the grace and the Spirit of God - there is a lesson. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes, what is the answer? What is the answer to our age? You listen to the news, you hear about 15-year-olds being stabbed and raped, and abuse mentally, physically, sexually that can't even be imagined - and it's in our land, and that's only what we hear about. There is worse going on that we never hear about! What is the answer? Well, Othniel as the Spirit's prototype was to show these people that the answer comes from God, deliverance will be from God, it is all of grace - and amazing grace it is!
God came and brought a deliverer - was it in response to their repentance? I don't believe it was, because their repentance was shallow as we saw in our introduction in the first week, it was superficial. The reason God raised up a saviour seems to be in response to their misery. Look at verse 9 in chapter 3. 'When the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel, who delivered them' - when they cried. In other words, He responded to their pain and not their penitence. Now that causes some intellectual difficulties for us perhaps, but not when we see that here is one of the attributes of our God - 'What is it?', you say. Our God is a jealous God!

We have such a negative take on that word 'jealous' that we don't really attribute it to God at times - but what it means is that even God's wrath is the hope of His people. He is the covenant keeping God: 'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth', so to be under the discipline of God means to be immeasurably loved by God. It shows that the God who has bound Himself to His people by covenant will not allow them to be cosy in their infidelity and their sin. Let me illustrate it to you like this: suppose a husband has the sad but true evidence that his wife is having an affair with another man. The gossip is not just gossip or innuendo, it is truth, and it has been established and it has been proven. For the sake of argument, the husband, let's say - whilst it's hard to say that everybody, or anyone at times, is innocent - but let's say that the husband is squeaky clean, he hasn't been offending at all. When the husband hears that the wife has been unfaithful, he says: 'Well, you win some, you lose some, that's the way the cookie crumbles, there are plenty more fish in the sea' - what would your conclusion be? He doesn't love her! He doesn't love her, if he did, he would be upset, he would be jealous, he would be angry.

So this jealous love that God has toward us, it is showing us His immeasurable love, and at all costs He is an intolerant God towards our sin. This love divine, all loves excelling is not some soft laxity, it is a blazing intolerance, it is an absolute claim of His own children. That's why Jesus said in Matthew 10: 'Unless you love me more than your father, more than your mother, more than your children, more than your husband and your wife, you cannot be my disciples'. You see, this is the trouble having the God of Israel as your God, because He is a God who will not suffer infidelity - and if you forsake Him, He will pursue you in anger.

This is the kindness of God that ought to lead us to repentance, does it lead you and I to repentance I wonder? God wants to waken us with His goodness, but if we won't do that will we awaken with His severity? What ought to happen? You'd think these people would come and meet God's consistency and God faithfulness toward them in true repentance and faithfulness, but they don't! Whilst the ideal saviour, the Paraclete's prototype, whilst he delivered them from the King named Chushanrishathaim, which means 'double wickedness', a cruel and a powerful man - it's even enshrined within his name - Othniel was not a perfect or a complete saviour, for Othniel died after 40 years and then the people went back to their wickedness. They regressed into oppression.

But as I left with you my final point, as we enter into this study that I believe we'll glean a great deal from in the days that lie ahead, what Israel needed and what we need is a Saviour, a Deliverer who will never die! Is there one? Oh, yes there is: 'This man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them'. Christ is the answer to the age of the Judges, Christ is the answer to our age, but we've got to let Christ live from us that others will see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven.

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Well, how will we apply God's word to our hearts today? Do we think that we have something that makes us commendable as a servant of God? We do at times: 'God picked a good one when He got me, you know', that's the way we think, 'I've a quare gift for this, or that, or the other'. Or do we realise that unless we can lower ourselves, and be converted to become a little child, and realise that if God's going to do anything through us it'll be all of Him and you'll not see us in it at all? That's hard.

Oh Father, help us, help us to become like that camel that goes through the eye of a needle in humility, to be poor of spirit, to abase ourselves, to submit ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that we might be exalted in due season. Lord, we are nothing, we are nothing, You don't need us, but You have chosen us in grace to be a people unto Yourself. Help us to realise that we have nothing to commend ourselves to Thee for salvation, nor for service. Even gifts that we have been given, that we may engage with are gifts of the Spirit, they're not of us. Help us in these days, the worst of days, to lie low and exalt Christ; that people would say of us: 'I see Jesus', Amen.
Men For The Hour - Chapter 3
"Ehud, The Handicapped Hero"

Judges chapter 3, and taking up our reading where we left off in our last study, if you can remember that far back, from verse 11. We looked at the first Judge, we called him 'The Paraclete's Prototype', the ideal Judge. Verse 11: "And the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died". Then we find this cycle that is perpetual right throughout the book of Judges, that when the Judge died, the people returned to their sin.

Verse 12: "And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD: and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD. And he gathered unto him the children of Ammon and Amalek, and went and smote Israel, and possessed the city of palm trees. So the children of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. But when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, the LORD raised them up a deliverer, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man lefthanded: and by him the children of Israel sent a present unto Eglon the king of Moab. But Ehud made him a dagger which had two edges, of a cubit length; and he did gird it under his raiment upon his right thigh. And he brought the present unto Eglon king of Moab: and Eglon was a very fat man. And when he had made an end to offer the present, he sent away the people that bare the present. But he himself turned again from the quarries that were by Gilgal, and said, I have a secret errand unto thee, O king: who said, Keep silence. And all that stood by him went out from him. And Ehud came unto him; and he was sitting in a summer parlor, which he had for himself alone. And Ehud said, I have a message from God unto thee. And he arose out of his seat. And Ehud put forth his left hand, and took the dagger from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly: A
nd the haft, or the handle, "also went in after the blade; and the fat closed upon the blade, so that he could not draw the dagger out of his belly; and the dirt came out. Then Ehud went forth through the porch, and shut the doors of the parlor upon him, and locked them. When he was gone out, his servants came; and when they saw that, behold, the doors of the parlor were locked, they said, Surely he covereth his feet in his summer chamber. And they tarried till they were ashamed: and, behold, their lord was fallen down dead on the earth. And Ehud escaped while they tarried, and passed beyond the quarries, and escaped unto Seirath. And it came to pass, when he was come, that he blew a trumpet in the mountain of Ephraim, and the children of Israel went down with him from the mount, and he before them. And he said unto them, Follow after me: for the LORD hath delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand. And they went down after him, and took the fords of Jordan toward Moab, and suffered not a man to pass over. And they slew of Moab at that time about ten thousand men, all lusty, and all men of valor; and there escaped not a man. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest fourscore years. And after him was Shamgar the son of Anath, which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad: and he also delivered Israel". Verse 1 of chapter 4: "And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, when Ehud was dead".

I've called my study this morning 'Ehud, The Handicapped Hero', and it will become clear why I have entitled it that as we go through our study. If you were ever looking for a biblical
equivalent to the video nasty, you need look no further than this account of Ehud's slaying of Eglon. Put it this way: it's not the type of drama that you would enjoy over a Chinese meal some romantic evening, if you have any romantic evenings left in you! It's no Anne of Green Gables! It is, if it was on the shelf today as a book or perhaps as a video or DVD, it's X-rated stuff! It's incredibly violent and even vile in the account that it gives to us of this great assassination of the Moabite King. It's so vicious and gruesome in its account that some biblical scholars actually find it difficult to reconcile this account with the rest of Scripture, Old and New Testament. In fact one expositor actually apologises for the text, and I quote him, he says: 'By even the most elementary standard of ethics, Ehud's deception and murder of Eglon stand condemned. Passages like this, when encountered by the untutored reader of the Scriptures, cause consternation and questioning'. Whilst we vehemently disagree with such an assertion as that, we can understand how this account of Ehud's slaying of Eglon can cause a shock factor, can make you stand back a little and fill your mind with genuine questions.

Now let me just warn you, because it's very easy for us to rush into a passage like this and right away allegorise it - in other words, take spiritual truths out of it, representations. We could talk about the sword of Ehud being the sword of the Spirit and so on, and that might be valid in one sense, but it's very important that when we are looking for spiritual lessons from a narrative like this, that we don't bypass the real meaning of the text. Let me put it like this: that we don't sweep the real meaning of the text under the spiritual carpet, for there are lessons that God has given to us from this actual literal account. We all believe and we defend, I hope to the end, 2 Timothy 3:16, that 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and', as it goes on to say, 'All Scripture is profitable'.

So, what's the profit in a story like the one we have read together today? Well, let me say, adding to that warning I've just given to you, it's important not to be ignorant also of the events of Israelite history that brought the oppression of this fat king upon the Israelites. This monster Eglon didn't just come out of nowhere, and we'll look a little bit later as to where he actually came from, his lineage, his ancestry, and why he was brought to power at this particular time. It's easy to overlook that and just read this after you've had your lovely peaceful Sunday morning breakfast, and be horrified in church, and your stomach churn at such an awful thing that happened in Israelite history, and not realise that there's a whole history behind it all.

It's easy also to underestimate the hardship that the people of Israel endured under such an iron-fisted oppressor like Eglon, or any of the other oppressors that we'll encounter in the book of Judges. It's also easy to underestimate the desperation that the people were in to escape, to get from under the iron fist of such a monstrosity as Eglon. Now how do we put this in context? Well, some of you can remember back to the war, and you may have been celebrating VE Day celebrations yesterday. Not all of us are as privileged as you, but you can remember when the Nazis were overthrown, when Hitler was defeated, the great joy and jubilation that there was. Now that was not a joy that was untainted with sorrow and sadness, but nevertheless there was a great joy - some of you can remember some of the unrepeatable songs that were sung during wartime about Hitler and Mussolini and so on. There was a kind of poking of fun at them.

This is what we have here, there is a humourous side to the biblical account of the overthrow of Eglon. There is this idea that the people of Israel would not have been tainted at all with any twinge of conscience as they heard this story, told it to their children and their children's children, and revelled in the gory assassination of a despot like Eglon. They didn't feel guilty about it at all, this man had been their oppressor, he had been their taskmaster, he had been
their Hitler, their Saddam Hussein, their Stalin. They were glad to get rid of him, no matter what the way was that he was disposed of. But I believe the key to understanding this particular account is found in verse 15, if you look down at it, verse 15 of chapter 3: 'But when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, the LORD raised them up a deliverer, Ehud'.

Now this is the key, no matter how difficult you find this passage to read and understand, God's word is clear: Ehud was God's man for the hour. This is what we've entitled this series: 'Men For The Hour', and Ehud the second Judge was God's divine choice. Now he wouldn't even have figured on our short list of applications for potential saviours, or perhaps he wouldn't even have figured on Israel's list, but the fact of the matter is - verse 15 says: 'The LORD raised up Ehud'. When we turn to verse 28, it says that it was the Lord who delivered the people through this act of assassination. Now here's my question to all these people who put a big question mark upon Scripture, and ask questions about its morality, and how it assimilates with the rest of the word of God: when will we ever learn, in reading the Scriptures, and indeed when will we as Christians, God's people today, ever learn in living life that God's ways are not our ways? For as high as the heavens are higher than the earth, God says to us in this age: 'So are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts than your thoughts'. As Paul exclaimed, lest you think this is an Old Testament thing, 'Oh the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God; how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out'. There are a myriad of other examples where God chooses saviours in the Scriptures that we never would have. Not only does He choose men that we would never have chosen, but He chooses to save His people through those men by plans that we never would have conceived of.

Here is a case in point, you see it with the rest of the Judges. I give you an example of David, he was the runt of the litter, he was the young boy of the family out keeping the sheep - yet he was God's choice, he was the one who would overthrow Goliath. How would he do it? Not with the army of Saul, but with his sling and a stone. We need look no further for an example of this than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. What do you mean? Surely He was the Son of God, you can get no better Saviour than He? Yes, but remember how He came unto the Jews. The Jews were expecting a military emancipator, but what did they get? They got a meek Messiah. As far as they were concerned, a ridiculous King, lowly and riding upon an ass, and upon the colt of an ass. Isaiah 53 told us that this would happen, for there was no attraction in the physical Christ any more than any other person in humanity. There was no form or comeliness, and when we would see Him, there was no beauty in Him that we should desire Him. That's why He was despised and rejected of men. That's why John says in chapter 1 that we hid our faces from Him, He came unto His own and His own received Him not. God's Saviour in the Lord Jesus Christ was not the choice of the Jews, it is not what they would have had or what they wanted. How did He ordain that Christ should save His people from their sins? By the cross - what a ridiculous plan! What a foolish scheme! For does not God's law to the Jews say in Deuteronomy that anyone who hangs on a tree is cursed of God? Yet this was God's plan, the foolishness of God was wiser than the wisdom of men, and so Paul says in Galatians: 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us'.

This is God's way! God doesn't choose the saviours that we would like, He chooses the saviours in His wisdom that He knows we need. He chooses a plan of salvation that is the only plan, and is the plan necessary for the hour. Why does God do that? Well, we read it from 1 Corinthians 1 - God does it so that no flesh should glory in His sight. Please remember that, because the man that we are looking at this morning was not mighty in his own flesh. We're going to look as well at how he was used, and here is the lesson: God has said in Zechariah 4:6, that it's not by might, it's not by man's strength, but 'it is by my Spirit saith the Lord'. If
you were to be at Calvary's cross now, 2000 years ago, and saw what the Lord Jesus would have endured, you wouldn't have seen anything spectacular in it. It was an awful sight! In one sense, in that day and age, it was an ordinary sight - but it was through that means that God would redeem His people. God's men and God's methods are not your men and your methods.

Now let's understand more about Ehud the handicapped hero by looking at three points. First of all: the present threat, the present threat to Israel at this time. You might ask the question: how did they get to this position, where a man like Eglon was oppressing them? Here's the simple answer, remember this: they chose to walk in the flesh and not in the spirit. If you look at verses 12 and 13 you see three armies of Mesopotamia: the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Amalekites. Not only were these Mesopotamian people neighbours to Israel, but they were also relatives. This gives us a bit of an insight into how Israel got into its present mess. If you remember in Genesis chapter 19, Lot, the nephew of Abraham, pitched his tent toward Sodom and began to be influenced by not just sodomy, but the Sodomite behaviour and civilisation - the worldliness that was there, the materialism, the sensuousness. We read many things about Lot, and you know what happened, as God brought him out of Sodom and he fled, his wife turned and turned into a pillar of salt as she looked back at what she was leaving. But we find that Lot was the ancestor of Moab and Ammon that we read of here in Judges chapter 4. Lot was a man who is the epitome of someone who chose the flesh rather than the spirit. Because Lot chose to pitch his tent in the well-watered plain of Sodom, with those worldly people, his children learned the ways of Sodom, his wife died because of Sodom, and we read that his own children were also his grandchildren, through incest that I believe his daughters learned in Sodom.

What you have here is the archetypal breakdown of the family unit in Sodom - why? Because they chose the flesh rather than the spirit. Those are the ancestors of Moab and Ammon; and Moab and Ammon, the fathers of those people, were the children of Lot's incestuous relationship with his daughters when they got him drunk and slept with him.

Then we have Esau who is the father of the Amalekites - and you remember that Esau was the brother of Jacob. Jacob was chosen, Esau was hated, and Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew. He sold his right, as being the eldest son to have the blessings of God upon him, for a bowl of stew to feed his flesh. Now here's the warning: how did Israel get in the state that they are in Ehud's day? It's because they chose the flesh over the spirit. Make sure, people in our building today, that when you make any choices you do not determine those choices by the flesh, because you never know where it will lead to. Never believe the lie that sins of the flesh have no consequence, because here we see that the sins of one generation can actually reach forth many, many, many generations, and contaminate another.

Now in verse 11 when Othniel died, we see this cycle again: the people chose flesh, and they began to worship Baal again. I'm not going to go into it this morning once more, but if you were here a few weeks ago you would know what this Baal worship was. It was the worship of a fertility god, and they worshipped this God through sexual immorality. Here the people are going back again to their old ways, their old fleshly ways, and God allows Eglon to come in and discipline as the King of Moab, set up his headquarters in Jericho, and he brings these other confederate people together, these other nations - the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Amalekites - and he reigns over God's people from Jericho. That's the city of the palm trees, Jericho, in verse 13. For 18 years they are under the iron fist of Eglon.
What do you know about Jericho? Can you tell me? We're asking the question: how did they get into the mess that they're in? What was the present threat? Not only did they choose the flesh rather than the spirit way back in Lot's day, but we're finding that Jericho was the place where there was the first victory in the conquer of the land - but what's happening in Jericho now? Well, Jericho since that has become cursed, and now Eglon is using it as his military headquarters to oppress God's people. In other words, the place of their initial victory had now been conquered by the enemy. The flesh was reigning in a place where the spirit once had sway.

Am I speaking to someone here this morning, and you have allowed the devil to steal your victory, and it's through the flesh. Maybe when you were first saved you had great victory over the flesh, that's the old nature within you, that desire and lust for sin. But as we speak, where you are now, you're defeated in the very place where once you knew a great emancipation, a great freedom. We need to beware of allegorising and just using this text as a representation, but there's no doubt in my mind that Eglon, if he represents anything, represents the flesh. How could you miss it? Verse 17: "He was a very fat man". He was obese, speaking of his indulgence. To look at, he was not admirable - that's what the flesh does to us. Then we read that he pampered his senses in verse 20, he built his own private chamber that he sat in in the summer, and he was lazy. There he was, and that's what happens when you feed the flesh, you begin to pamper yourself and become lethargic. Then we read that when Ehud stuck that dagger into him, forthwith came out the dirt - he was filthy. That's what flesh results in: not only pampering the senses and indulging your desires and passions, but it manifests itself in filthiness that others can see.

A medical member of my family was telling me just yesterday, as I told him what I was going to preach on this morning, that there's a medical authority book called 'Trauma', and it says that this story is probably the first written reference to the large bowel trauma. He pierced the large bowel, and forthwith came out all that dirt. It's speaking of inner corruption that is in all our hearts, in our sinful nature. Paul could say, 'In my flesh dwelleth no good thing'. If you want to read the works of the flesh, you can read it in Galatians 5:19, but what I'm wanting to say to you is to learn from Israel's lesson the threat, the danger, the potential danger of indulging the flesh as even a child of God. They had only themselves to blame for the ruin of their homes, their health, their happiness, because of sins of the flesh! Then again, they just turn to the Lord as a last resort, and He delivers them. Is that not the cycle that many of you find yourselves in? Sins of the flesh, then you repent of sorts, and confess your sin, and then you're back to square one again - God restores you, but you're in your sin once more like a pig returning to the trough, like a dog going back to its vomit. That is you as a sinner, that's what we're all like, our old sinful nature. That was the reason for their present threat, they didn't walk in the spirit, they walked in the flesh.

Secondly I want you to see the chosen saviour. Well, verse 15 tells us that this saviour was weak in the flesh, verse 15 tells us: 'The children of Israel cried unto the LORD, the LORD raised them up a deliverer, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man lefthanded'. He was weak in the flesh. Now, if you know anything about the tribe of Benjamin, you know that Benjamin means 'son of my right hand'. But in 1 Chronicles 12:2 we read that the tribe of Benjamin was ambidextrous, they could use either their right or their left hands, and the instance that's used there is that they could throw a stone with a sling with right or left. Verse 15 can actually be translated that 'he was a man handicapped in his right hand'. So you can imagine this: here's a man coming from a tribe that is ambidextrous, and he's not like everybody else in that he's just right-handed, but he's not even like the people in his own tribe where he can use both hands, he can only use his left hand. Often in the ancient world...
someone who was lefthanded, not to cause offence to anybody here today, was frowned upon - sub-standard, and even disabled in a sense. Of course you're all clever today, but then it was different - in fact, the word 'sinister' which we use for something wicked is a Latin word that means 'left-hand'. Someone with skill is said to be 'dexterous', which is Latin for 'right-handed'.

So you can see how, in the ancient world, this man Ehud would have been seen as deficient in some sense. Ehud had a handicap that in many people's eyes would have disqualified him from being used of God, but that was the very reason that God chose to use him - why? That no flesh should glory in His presence. You see the type of men that God chooses, it is those who accept themselves as they are. Those who know their weaknesses and their own limitations, and are willing to let God use them regardless of those things. Isn't it wonderful that what this text is telling us is that God can use us, whatever our restrictions may be?

Oh there are many stories I could tell you this morning about people like Joni Eareckson, who was paralysed very young, and the many people that she has blessed in her life of ministry. But one I want to share with you, that most of you will know already, is our dear brother Andrew Watkins, who provides the Preach The Word website. If you don't know who that is, Andrew Watkins is a young man in Portadown who was (as I quote him in an article he wrote not so long ago for LifeTimes), he was diagnosed at 17 years of age with a progressive muscle wasting condition. Yet he's ministering through this website. Let me tell you his story in his own words, just a few lines. He said, having been diagnosed at 17 with this progressive muscle wasting condition, he subsequently left work as a computer programmer, and he says 'I was left wondering what God could possibly have planned for my life. But I needn't have worried, He had more in store for me than I could ever have imagined, and I've proved that He "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20)'. He's reaching the whole world with the Gospel as we speak, in five years 312,000 have entered into this website - one day last month he sent out 67 requests for Gospel Packs. Since he's been offering free CD-ROMs, he has given out 120,000 sermons all over the world. Here's how he finishes his article: 'Let me finish by encouraging anyone reading this article: perhaps you feel that there is little or nothing that you can do for the Lord? Perhaps, like me, your plans have suddenly been shattered and you're at a loss to understand God's purpose in it all? I assure you, speaking from my experience, when God says: "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11) - He means it! His ways are best and He makes no mistakes - remember:

There's a work for Jesus ready at your hand,
'Tis a task the Master just for you has planned'.

You see Ehud accepted his weakness, his lefthandedness, but he used his weakness for the Lord! Hudson Taylor, the father of the China Inland Mission, was asked why God chose him to do this great work, and he said: 'God chose me because I was weak enough'. Are you weak enough? Some of you are too strong, too headstrong, too smart for God to use. God said to Abel: 'What is that in thy hand, Abel?'. 'Nothing', he said, 'Just a little lamb' - but he offered that little lamb to God, and from it came a sweet smelling savour unto God's nostrils. 'Moses', God said, 'What is that in your hand?'. 'Nothing but a staff, Lord, a staff for my flock'. 'Take it, and use it for me', God said - and with that he wrought more things than great Egypt had ever seen. 'Mary, what is that in your hand?'. 'It's nothing but a pot of sweet smelling ointment, Lord' - but with it she anointed the feet of the Holy One of God, and the Bible says that the fragrance not only filled the room, but has filled the world where the story has been recounted in the preaching of the Gospel. 'Poor widow, what's that in your hand?'. 'Just two
mites, only two little mites' - but it was all she had, and she gave it, and her story of the two little mites has prompted the humblest souls in the giving of all that they have. 'Dorcas, what do you have in your hand?'. 'It's only a needle, Lord'. 'Take it, and use it for me' - and she warmed the poor and clothed the needy of Joppa with a little needle. The song puts it: 'Little is much when God is in it'. Here was a handicapped man, but God used him because he gave God his all.

Thirdly and finally, not just the present threat and the chosen saviour, but the story of salvation. This is wonderful! What a courageous man he was in spite of his disability! Apparently he couldn't gather together a band of men to join him, so he went to the king alone, he risked his own life, he walked into the palace, into the personal chamber of Eglon. Undeniable bravery! That's what we need today, we need men and women who are brave for God! But he also used strategy - some people that are brave for God haven't many brains at times. He was strategic, he put great planning and ingenuity into this. If you look at it, he made himself the leader of the commission that brought the tribute of the people, the money, to Eglon, verse 15. He then secured a private audience by returning to Eglon, claiming that he had a message from God - it's hilarious, isn't it? 'I have a message from God for you', and it's a dagger! He devised a quiet and quick way to kill him, because he had the dagger on his right thigh, and the guards would have checked probably the left thigh, because most people were right-handed, and if you're right-handed you go to the left thigh to unsheath a dagger - but he had it on his right. Then we see that he overcame the problem of how to escape without getting caught, what did he do? He locked Eglon in his private chamber to delay discovery of the body, and three times we read in verse 25 and 26, 'Behold, behold, behold' - and that's in the Authorised Version, not giving you the whole sense, it's the sense of surprise. Again and again and again they were surprised! What happened? This is what it actually says, his servants thought that he was using the toilet facilities, and were so embarrassed to go and disturb him that they didn't go in - and there he was, lying dead! You can see how they all were laughing about it.

What I want you to see is not only his courage and his strategy, how we need to be courageous, how we need to be planning everything that we do for God - but thirdly, it was a concentrated effort, it was a focused effort. You see, Ehud dealt with the cause of all the problems. He could have raised an army together, he could have fought in a long drawn-out battle against these three tribes in an effort to break their power, and it would have cost a lot of time, money, effort and human lives - instead he went to the source of all their suffering, the man that was on the throne. Can I ask you: who is on the throne of your life? Is it the flesh, or is it the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ? How often do you hear about people going into the doctor's surgery and being treated for the symptoms rather than the cause of their problem? Often the cause of our problem, as the people of God, is the one that is on the throne, it is the old man, our old nature, our flesh - and we're feeding him, we're bringing tribute and obescience to him rather than to Christ! Whereas the cry of the Christian ought to be, as Paul, 'I am crucified with Christ; I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. And the life which I now live, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me, and give Himself for me'. The answer to the victory of the flesh in anyone's life is the cross of Christ, where He has put to death our flesh if we would only believe in Him and accept His gift. One author has said: 'No left-handed saviour can break us free from our tyrant of the flesh, but there is One with nail-scarred hands who can and who does'. The only tragedy is, we so seldom cry to Him and depend upon Him, and live in Him!
Can you see the similarity, as we close this morning, between Ehud and Christ? You say, 'How? What similarity is there?'. God chooses to save His people where they are, in the midst of their own mess. Can I read you the words of an author that I think puts it very very well? 'Yahweh is not a white-gloved standoffish God, out somewhere in the remote left-field of the universe, who hesitates to get His strong right arm dirty in the yuck of our lives. The God of the Bible does not hold back in the wide blue yonder somewhere, waiting for you to pour Chlorox and spray Lysol over the affairs of your life before He will touch it. Whether you can come comfortably, put it together or not, He is the God who delights to deliver His people even in their messes, and likes to make them laugh again. He is the God who allows weeping to endure for the night, but sees that joy comes in the morning'.

Is that not what we have in Hebrews, where it says of our Lord Jesus: 'Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted'.

Could you be sitting in our meeting this morning as a Christian or as a non-Christian, saying 'Oh God, if only I could get victory over the flesh', or 'If only I could get back to my Jericho, the place where I once was' - but the enemy has come in, the victory has been stolen. Listen: there is a Great High Priest whose ministry is to prevent us from sinning, and when we do sin, to recover us from sin. 'My little children', John said, 'These things I write unto you that ye sin not, but if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous'. Before the throne of God above, I have a strong, a perfect plea, a Great High Priest whose name is Love, who pleads and intercedes for me. Your Saviour is God's choice. His plan was God's scheme - can I ask you: are you not glad?

Father, we thank You for a Saviour who is the anointed one of God. Lord, we would have chosen a different one, but yet, our Father, You have given us Your only Son as an effectual Saviour, as one who has wrought with His own blood our salvation. Help us to appreciate Him, and help us to allow Him to be on the throne of our lives, and not flesh. Whatever our human incapacities and disabilities may be let us realise, as the great apostle Paul did, that Thy strength is made perfect in our weakness. For we ask these things in the Saviour's name, Amen.
Now we're turning in our Old Testaments to the book of Judges, just after Joshua, chapter 3 this morning. Whilst we had quite a substantial reading last Sunday morning as we looked at 'Ehud, The Handicapped Hero', we have only one verse to read today and it's found in chapter 3, and this time verse 31. I want just to draw your attention to the fact of where it is found in chapter 3, of course it is at the end, but you remember last week we read on a couple of verses into chapter 4 if memory serves me correctly, maybe just the first verse. So we find verse 31 right in the middle of the account of Ehud's deliverance of God's people, as he assassinated Eglon, that great fat ungodly King. So this verse is right in the middle, and that's important as we'll see in a moment or two. We'll just read together verse 31: "And after him", that is, after Ehud, "was Shamgar the son of Anath, which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad: and he also delivered Israel".

In chapter 5 and verse 6 is the only other mention of him, "In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways". That was just a way of dating a particular time in the history of the Israelites, by saying it was 'In the days of Shamgar, and the days of Jael'. It was a great privilege, it's like saying 'In Victorian times in Britain, we did such and such', and so it was an honour to have your name attributed to a particular time period in Israelite history. So although there's only one verse mentioned in the whole life narrative of Shamgar, verse 31 of chapter 3, we see that he must have been a very important person in the folklore and the history of the Israelites.

I want to call him 'Shamgar, The Unconventional', and that is my title for today's message. Of course, as we've been going through this series already, and as we will find in subsequent weeks, all of these Judges have their own unconventional traits. But even the very record of Shamgar, in the fact that it is only one verse, is extremely unconventional. I wonder had you ever heard of Shamgar before you came to church this morning? It's hardly a household name among Christians today. He's even less known, perhaps, than Ehud who we thought of last week. When I told some folks that I was going to preach on Ehud last week, the reaction I got was 'Eh, who?! And after the meeting some people said to me, 'I've never ever heard that portion of Scripture preached upon'. Well, you've probably never heard of Shamgar either, and in fact his whole life story is reduced to just one sentence.

Most of the commentaries on the Judges limit his life to being put together in one whole chapter with the other two Judges we've already dealt with - Othniel and Ehud, and then Shamgar. He's given a paragraph or something. Many of the sermons I read on this chapter 3, they usually lump Shamgar in with the previous two also. I don't know whether this has ever happened to you, I'm sure it has done if you have a television, but you're watching maybe a film or a documentary and you're really engrossed with it - and all of a sudden there's an interruption, and there's a newsflash. It might be something very important, but it's not too important to you, it has interrupted your train of thought - and whilst you have been in some kind of suspenseful attention sitting at the edge of your seat, that has all been suspended there and then. Well, that's a bit like what we have here in a literary sense,
because we’re reading down this story of Ehud and Eglon and his assassination - we looked at it last week, all the gory and graphic account of how Ehud assassinated Eglon with a do-it-yourself dagger, how he was left-handed and in those days that was a handicap, how strategically he planned his escape route and so on, how because of his exploits the children of Israel had peace for some time. All of a sudden, like a newsflash in the middle of that account which is so graphic, we have a matter-of-fact statement in verse 31: 'After him', Ehud, 'was Shamgar the son of Anath, which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad: and he also delivered Israel'.

Now I'm sure you've heard the saying: 'Little is more', and that's particularly prevalent, I think - not that I know much of it - in art and décor today. Minimalism, I think it's called, and little is more, it says more to have little. Well, what we need to ask this morning in the fact that this man's life is only given one verse, is: what is the more that the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us through the little that He has actually said about Shamgar? I think there is a lot more, little is more in this verse, there is something substantial that God's Spirit is wanting to communicate. Now, it is true that we don't know much about him, but let's explore this morning what we do know about him and see what we can learn from it.

The Philistines are mentioned in the verse, and so we know that Shamgar lived at a time when the Philistines were starting to flex their military muscles in the southwest corner of the land. Now we know that the Philistines eventually became a great thorn in the flesh of God's people. But at this time, they were starting to just become prevalent as the oppressors of Israel. So, to meet the need of the hour at this time, God raised up this man called Shamgar. Now scholars and commentaries, as we shall see, not only debate where this man came from, what his nationality was, but even whether or not he was actually a Judge, whether we can really classify him as among one of the Judges today.

You see right away, when there are so many questions asked about this character, how unconventional he is. He is not an Othniel, who is almost perfect, the most upstanding Judge, perhaps, that we have in this book. He is not an Ehud who, though he had a handicap, he had great ingenuity, showed great strategy and wisdom and stealth in the way that he delivered God's people. Here is Shamgar, an ordinary everyday man, but he is the man that God chose to raise up to deliver Israel and strike down the Philistines.

Let me show you how unconventional he is from what we know about him. Now the first - I contradict myself a little, because this is a little uncertain - but he may have had an unconventional upbringing. Now, I say he may have had an unconventional upbringing, because his family background is very confused. Scholars are not clear on this issue, and so we must tread carefully on how we apply these facts, but the reason for the confusion in Shamgar's family background is because Shamgar is not a Hebrew name. It would be good to write that in the margin of your Bible, if you take Bible notes, it's not a Hebrew name - in fact, it is a Canaanite name. We see that he was the son of Anath, and scholars have debated that Anath might distinguish and designate a place of his family origin, because there is a Beth-Anath in Galilee region, and there is a Beth-Anath down in Judah. But others feel that, perhaps, son of Anath probably means 'a man like Anath' who was a renowned warrior. So this man, Shamgar, was a man like 'a son of Anath', the great warrior in their history.

However, others have pointed out, and I favour this particular view, that Anath was in fact a Canaanite goddess. She was, in all likelihood, the goddess of war and sex, and the sister and the wife of Baal, the god that the Canaanites worshipped. On that basis, many feel that Shamgar wasn't even an Israeliite, he was a Canaanite with a Canaanite name, and he had a
Canaanite father who was named after a Canaanite goddess. Then there are others who feel, well, he probably was an Israelite, but in all likelihood his family, because they lived in Canaan, had assimilated and capitulated to the paganism that was all around them. They had become infected, contaminated by the spirit of the Canaanite age. In other words, the family became so submerged in the world system of that day, and had imbibed the spirit of the age, that they had actually taken worldly and godless pagan names for themselves, and been brought up in that atmosphere.

It is the archetypal backslidden family, if you like. A group of children, or grandchildren, that eventually grow up, and they have been born into a godly home, but they reject that heritage and that influence that they have had. They go their own way, and though there is a remnant of the truths that they have been taught and disciplined in, they reject it and they adopt everything that is of the world. Maybe you're here today and you find yourself in the same scenario. Your family, generations ago, may have had a godly influence, but now you have rejected that. You're not antagonistic towards it, but you've made your own choice, and your choice is the choice of the world rather than that of God.

If you remember, Othniel, that we looked at a number of weeks ago now, had a very very illustrious family connection, because he was the younger brother or perhaps the nephew of Caleb. His family background would have been influential in making him the man of God that he was. But it seems that Shamgar did not have the same privilege as Othniel. Now, you might think that that has disadvantaged Shamgar - and in a sense it has. We ought always be very thankful to God - and I address the young people today and children who have been brought up in Christian homes - you have a lot to give thanks to God. But isn't it encouraging to know that, whatever your upbringing has been, brought up in a non-Christian home, perhaps going as far to say a paganised worldly home, that you can still be someone who is chosen by God and used of God. Isn't that wonderful? Sometimes in Christian circles you'd think that anyone who was brought up in a non-Christian home didn't matter, sometimes that's what we glean when we hear testimonies. But yet what an encouragement it is here to see that grace, God's grace, knows no prior qualifications. Shamgar's background, we believe, was essentially pagan, yet God used him.

Now, we're more certain of these facts: he was an unconventional warrior. He may have had an unconventional upbringing, but he was an unconventional warrior - because not only was he a pagan, but he was a peasant. We know that from the weapon that he used. It says that he used an ox goad to slay these 600 Philistines. An ox goad was used by a farmer, or a farm labourer. So in all likelihood that's what he was, a farmer. Now, I ask you: if you were wanting to defeat 600 Philistines armed to the teeth, who would you nominate? Would you nominate an accomplished warrior or a farmer? You can just imagine him with a bit of straw hanging out of his mouth, and the cap turned round!

Othniel had a great past victory to his name, we read about that, didn't we? How God used him! Remember how he answered the challenge of Caleb to take the Canaanite stronghold, Kirjathsepher or Debir, and through that great victory he won Caleb's daughter as his wife. He had an illustrious victory to his name. Yet Shamgar has nothing like that on his CV. Shamgar is just an ordinary five-eight farmer. He isn't even a soldier. Yet again, what we are seeing here is that God's choice is not our choice. As we read, I think it was last week, in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 27 - and we'll repeat this right throughout Judges, because this is a spiritual truth - 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.
We might well ask the question: how did such an insignificant man like Shamgar get into this position of being God's chosen deliverer of His people? The only explanation I have to this, and I'll go into it in a bit more detail later on, is that God must have touched this man's heart. He has nothing else going for him other than that the grace of God must have reached him and touched him and enabled him to be God's man. Matthew Henry puts it well like this, he pictures how it must have been when Shamgar heard God's call, took up the ox goad, left his oxen, and went to fight. 'It is probable', he says, 'that he himself was following the plough when the Philistines made an inroad upon the country to ravage it. God put it into his heart to oppose them, the impulse being sudden and strong - and having neither sword nor spear to do execution with, he took the instrument that was next at hand, some of the tools of his plough, and with it he killed 600 men and came off unhurt'. We read in the book of Samuel chapter 10 that Saul, when he was going to be King, he went home to Gibeah, and it records that 'there went with him a band of men, whose hearts God had touched'. He was an unconventional warrior, he was an old farmer, yet God touched his heart. That says something to us this morning.

Then thirdly, he was unconventional in that he used an unconventional weapon. The enemy oppressors, we know this from 1 Samuel 13, had confiscated the weapons of the Israelites. They took their weapons of war off them in case they would rise up against them. If you like, God's people had been disarmed by the world, by their enemies - and I think that's what's happening today. The church is being disarmed, it's being told a lie, and the lie that it is sold it has bought, that it is powerless to face this secularist, pluralist world. So we feel powerless, we feel unable to overcome everything that is against us day by day. Yet what we see here in Shamgar is: he was an overcomer. He might have been from a pagan background, he may have been a peasant, but he was an overcomer. We know this because, even though he had no weapons to his name and no one in Israel had, he grabbed the closest thing to him that was like a weapon, and he used it.

So he takes this ox goad, it was probably a strong pole about 6 feet long, and at one end there was a sharp metal point for prodding the oxen. At the other end, in all likelihood, there was a spade for cleaning the dirt off your plough. Now he used this unconventional weapon because it was all that he had and the need was great. In other words, what Shamgar was communicating by his action was: 'The cause is too great for me to just sit here on my farm and do nothing. There's too much at stake'. He didn't say, like the man in the book of Proverbs, 'There's a lion in the street, so I'm not going to go out of my house'. The lion in the street, the Philistine, didn't matter to Shamgar. We read in 1 Samuel 13 that many of these Israelites who had their weapons confiscated, they took their farming instruments. They sharpened their forks and their axes, their ox goads for weapons - and Shamgar was one of them. He used what was at his disposal. He wasn't a warrior like David, he wasn't like Jonathan, he might have had a weak weapon - but I want you to see this this morning: whatever the weapon was that he had, because he had dedicated it to God, God had anointed it, and God anointed it with such power that he slew 600 Philistines!

His motto was: 'Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might'. Now, if we look at God's deliverers for a moment, they seem to have an interesting selection of weapons. We think of Shamgar's ox goad, but then Ehud's dagger, a home-made one, last week. Then in chapter 4, we'll see later that Jael used a hammer and a tent peg. Gideon used horns and torches in chapter 7. In chapter 9 we find a woman used a millstone. In chapter 15 Samson used a jawbone - all unconventional weapons. I want to turn your attention for a moment or two to 2 Corinthians chapter 10, so that we can apply this in New Testament truth.
Second Corinthians chapter 10, Paul says in verse three of 2 Corinthians chapter 10: 'For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh'. Remember we saw that last week? The problem with the Israelites in their downfall was that they walked in the flesh, not in the spirit. If Eglon symbolises anything, it is the flesh. 'For the weapons', verse 4, 'of our warfare are not carnal', or fleshly, 'but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds'. They mightn't be weapons that the Romans had, or the Greeks had, but they're mighty because though they are weak in man's eyes, God has anointed them. He has anointed them to do this, we see in verse 5: 'Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ'.

In Shamgar we see a man who obeyed God and defeated the enemy, even though his resources were limited. Now is that not encouraging? People say in the church, especially in the West, 'Things today are not as they used to be' - don't they? 'Things aren't the way they used to be'. Whenever your romantic age of church utopia was, I don't know when it was, the 50s, the 60s, the 20s, the 1859's, whatever it was - I grant you that things are not what they used to be, but the message of Shamgar and the Judges is: though every man does that which is right in his own eyes, God is still the God He always has been! It's time we got this thinking out of our minds! I know all too well that I am no Spurgeon or Wesley or Whitefield, but instead of complaining about that fact that is all too real, what Shamgar did was he took whatever he had, and he gave to the Lord whatever the Lord had given to him. When he gave it to Him, the Lord used it!

Joseph Parker, that congregational preacher who was a contemporary of Spurgeon's, said: 'What is a feeble instrument in the hands of one man, is a mighty instrument in the hands of another. What is the distinguishing factor?', he goes on to say, 'Simply because the spirit of that other burns with a holy determination to accomplish the work that has to be done'. What makes a difference? The heart! Whether your heart is touched enough by God to see that there is a need, and to rise to meet that need - a heart for God, and a jealousy after God's glory!

This weapon, I think, probably would have required an increased patience and persistence on the part of Shamgar. Some believe that Shamgar didn't kill these 600 people in one go or in one place - I believe that if God wanted him to do that, he could have done it, but I feel that this was probably over a protracted period of time. Day by day Shamgar would go out as some kind of assassin, and take off one at a time, day after day, week after week with this ox goad - doing it for God until this great total accumulated of 600. It needed patience, it needed persistence, because he could only use what God had given him, but he used it - and no matter how long it took, and whatever effort was for the taking of it, he did it.

He was doing as much as he could with the limited resources that God had given him. Ehud was a handicapped hero, he was the left-handed one. I know that some of you were very offended who are left-handed, but we could have sang, 'Oh what can left-hands do to please the King of heaven'. That's what it's all about: whether it's little hands or left hands, or handicapped hands - if they're given to God, they're God's hands! Are you getting the point?

Well, here was his secret. Yes, he may have had an unconventional upbringing, he was an unconventional warrior, he used an unconventional weapon - but he was empowered by an unconventional God. Shamgar's courage was born of his faith in God. One thing, if anything, we learn from chapter 3 of Judges as we've been in it for three or four weeks, is that our God and the God of the Judges is the unconventional God. Isaiah 55 says: 'How high as the
heavens above the earth are, so higher are God's ways and God's thoughts than our ways and our thoughts'.

Let me leave this thought to you, how he was empowered by an unconventional God, under three headings. One: this unconventional God uses completely different personalities. This unconventional God uses completely different personalities. You will not find, though you look for it, in chapter 3 a stereotype of a Judge. Now we do have a prototype, but there is no stereotype of the personality of a Judge. If you looked at Othniel, like me, you probably thought: 'Lord, I could never live up to that man's standard'. Obviously God could use him, he was a man of proven ability, he had superior character, he had spiritual depth, he was from the finest family background. Yet right away, if we try to second-guess God in the type of man that God uses when we look at Othniel, when we look at Ehud, God breaks the mould and makes another one. Here is a man with a serious limitation. He might have been prominent in his society, he was brave, he was capable, but he was handicapped. He had a handicap that in many people's eyes would have disqualified him from being a saviour to Israel. You might think: 'He might have had a handicap, but I don't even feel that I'm an Ehud. I'm certainly not an Othniel, and I'm not an Ehud'. But praise God for little Shamgar and his one verse! Surely you can identify with him, one who was a peasant, one who was a pagan, yet God raised him and God used him!

Now, don't misunderstand what I'm saying: I believe that both Old and New Testament teaches that there are standards of holiness, and consecration, and devotion to the Lord that are, in a sense, pre-requisites to being personally used of God. But what I am saying, and what the Scriptures are saying is: there is no personality mode that God uses and none other. That is tremendously liberating: you can be who you are, and God can use you. You don't need to strive to be like someone else, God made you the way you are, and God can use you the way you are. Of course, I'm not talking about sin or anything like that. You have to repent of your sin and be done with it, and so on. But what are the weaknesses in your life? Who can you identify with? Othniel, Ehud or Shamgar? Whoever you are, listen to God's voice: He will use you if you realise the next two points...

Here's the second: this unconventional God not only uses completely different personalities, but He strengthens the weakest people. He strengthens the weakest, even the prototype, Othniel, the ideal Judge that we saw at the beginning, with all his abilities, with all his talents, with all his success and all that was going for him - what did we see that first week? That none of those things were the reason why God used him, in fact the thing that he had in common with all the other Judges, with all the other differences and contrasts between them and he, was that the Holy Spirit came upon him and used him. Isn't that wonderful? In Isaiah 40 there is that wonderful passage of Scripture that describes how even the youths shall grow weary and faint, but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. Do you know what the Hebrew literally means there? 'They that wait on the Lord shall exchange their strength'. In other words, the picture is you with your depleting strength, and maybe just weakness and emptiness, come to God and as you wait upon God He exchanges for your weakness His omnipotent strength.

You look at God's heroes, not only in the Bible but in Christian history, the Brainerds, the Mc'Cheynes, the Wesleys and the Whitefileds, the Coopers - and all of them were very weak men, but in whom God's strength was made perfect. Can I tell you today: whoever you are, wherever you are, God has a place for you, and your limitations are not a problem to Him! The question is: have you accepted yourself? I'm not talking about all this nonsense about self-esteem and all the rest, but I'm talking about the way you are, the personality you are -
not your sins, not traits that you could be doing without, but I'm talking about just who you are. Have you accepted yourself, because God does! Maybe you keep getting hung up on limitations that you have, maybe that's why you don't rise to your feet in the prayer meeting, or you don't announce a hymn. Well, realise today that God accepts the limitations that you have! If you are to give them, and have faith in God that He accepts them and He is greater than them, He can use you to His glory! He could actually use you more than He has used anybody in your day and age, for that's what we have here.

Hudson Taylor, I quoted him last week, but I quote him again this week - as he looked back over 30 years during which he had seen 600 missionaries respond to the vision to reach China for Christ, he summarised what he had learned in these words. I read some of them last week, but I didn't read all of them, here is the full quotation: 'God is sufficient for God's work. God chose me because I was weak enough. God does not do His great works by large committees. He trains someone to be quiet enough and little enough, and then uses him'. Quiet enough, little enough. This unconventional God strengthens the weakest, and if you realise that He uses completely different personalities, and you come to Him with your weakness, your emptiness, your inability, He will meet it with His omnipotent, His almightiness.

Thirdly, the second thing you really need to realise is that this unconventional God's strength is perfected in those who dare to trust Him. It is perfected in those who dare to trust Him. Shamgar, Ehud, Othniel, Samson, Gideon, Jephthah, Jael - we'll go through them all eventually - all were different, all delivered God's people in different ways, but all had one thing in common: they had courage to take a risk and to step out by faith for God. They were bold enough, in a godless generation where everybody did that which was right in their own eyes, to believe what God said, to take God at His word and to confront the enemy. Boy, that's what we need today. As E. M. Bounds said in that little book that I'm continually plugging to you, 'Power Through Prayer', says: 'God is not looking for new methods, new programs, God is looking for men who will be filled with the Holy Ghost, who will take Him at His word and blaze a trail for God'. God works through men like Shamgar, unconventional - maybe we would say 'nothing going for him' - but completely yielded to God. The little that he was and the little that he had was given over to the Lord.

Matthew Henry sums up, as he often does in his little quips in his commentary, this Judge in these words: 'First of all see', he says, 'that God can make those eminently serviceable to His glory and His church's good whose extraction, education, and employment are very mean and obscure. He that has the residue of the Spirit could, when He pleased, make a ploughman a Judge, and make a fisherman an apostle'. Secondly he says: 'It is no matter how weak the weapon is if God direct and strengthen the arm. An ox goad, when God pleases, can do more than Goliath's sword - and sometimes he chooses to work by such unlikely', or I could say unconventional, 'means, that the excellency of the power may appear to be of God and not man'.

Well, we've finished chapter 3. Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar have shown us the way to serve the Lord: the answer is to follow them. Let's bow our heads.

Our Father, we thank You for those words in the verse that has been our consideration this morning: 'He also delivered God's people'. Lord, we thank You for that 'also', we thank You for the interruption in the story of Ehud to tell us of a simple man whose life was completely dedicated to God, because he saw the need and God had touched his heart. He didn't have much going for him, but all that he had: 'What I have', he could say, 'I give Him, I give Him
my heart'. Lord, whoever we are today, whatever our circumstances may be: may we all give You our heart devotedly, unreservedly so that You, perhaps unconventionally, may use us for Your glory, Amen.
Now we're turning in our Bibles to the book of Judges chapter 4, and we have been going through a series intermittently - with some interruptions for obvious reasons - in the book of Judges, entitled 'Men for The Hour'. We've looked at a number of the Judges already. We've looked at Othniel, Ehud, and last week we looked at Shamgar. This morning we're going to cover really two chapters, although we're not going to read those, but we're going to cover the subject matter of both chapters 4 and 5 of Judges - looking at Deborah, who I have entitled 'The Exceptional'. Deborah, the exceptional.

We'll read all of chapter 4 together: "And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, when Ehud was dead. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, that reigned in Hazor; the captain of whose host was Sisera, which dwelt in Haroseth of the Gentiles. And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD: for he had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel. And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedesh Naphtali, and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand. And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go. And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honor; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and he went up with ten thousand men at his feet: and Deborah went up with him. Now Heber the Kenite, which was of the children of Hobab the father in law of Moses, had severed himself from the Kenites, and pitched his tent unto the plain of Zaanaim, which is by Kedesh. And they showed Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam was gone up to mount Tabor. And Sisera gathered together all his chariots, even nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people that were with him, from Harosheth of the Gentiles unto the river of Kishon. And Deborah said unto Barak, Up; for this is the day in which the LORD hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the LORD gone out before thee? So Barak went down from mount Tabor, and ten thousand men after him. And the LORD discomfited Sisera, and all his chariots, and all his host, with the edge of the sword before Barak; so that Sisera lighted down off his chariot, and fled away on his feet. But Barak pursued after the chariots, and after the host, unto Harosheth of the Gentiles: and all the host of Sisera fell upon the edge of the sword; and there was not a man left. Howbeit Sisera fled away on his feet to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite: for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said unto him, Turn in, my lord, turn in to me; fear not. And when he had turned in unto her into the tent, she covered him with a mantle. And he said unto her, Give me, I pray thee, a little water to drink; for I am thirsty. And she opened a bottle of milk, and gave him drink, and covered him. Again he said unto her, Stand in the door of the tent, and it shall be, when
any man doth come and inquire of thee, and say, Is there any man here? that thou shalt say, No. Then Jael Heber's wife took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died. And, behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said unto him, Come, and I will show thee the man whom thou seekest. And when he came into her tent, behold, Sisera lay dead, and the nail was in his temples. So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel prospered, and prevailed against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan”.

The Bible is one message, we know that, it all points essentially to God as the Saviour and Redeemer through our Lord Jesus Christ. Although the Bible is one message, it is often delivered in different forms. For instance, in the book of Romans you have a book of doctrine; then you have in other books, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, narratives, Gospel narratives recording the life of our Lord Jesus here on the earth. Then there is another medium in a sense, which is drama, there are some great dramatic stories in the Bible - and here we have a great drama, the judgeship of Deborah, and the slaying of Sisera by the hand of Jael - another man who lost his head, we didn't know we were going to hear about three of them this morning!

Now in every drama it’s important to know the characters. If you ever should lift a play of Shakespeare, you will find in the first few pages that near the contents page there is a page that depicts the acts and scenes, and near it is the ‘dramatis personae’, that will be the title that is given, the ‘dramatis personae’. In other words, it lists all the characters and tells you a little bit of who they are and about them, so that you can understand the story a little bit more. You can't fully understand any story unless you know a little bit about the characters. So, what we're going to do this morning is home in on the primary characters in this great drama.

The first two that I want us to look at are Jabin and Sisera. If you like, in this drama, Jabin is the villain, the baddie. Sisera is his partner in crime, his right-hand man, he is the Captain of his armies. My mind - very unsanctified! - went to James Bond, and I wouldn’t advise you to watch those films, but nevertheless often the baddie in James Bond has a sidekick, a heavy. Sisera is Jabin’s heavy. Jabin is the king of Hazor in Canaan, he is a tyrant, like all the tyrants that we find ruling over God’s people with a hard clenched fist. For 80 years under the judgeship of Ehud, the people of Israel have known peace and victory. Then after Ehud you have Shamgar, who we looked at last week, and he brought victory temporarily upon the people after Ehud had died, and they went back to their sins once more.

Now we find in chapter 4 that the Israelites behaviour is going through the cycle again, and repeating itself once more. It’s the pattern that we read about in our first study in chapter 2 verses 10-19, what is it? Well, if you look at it in verse 1 of chapter 1, they sinned, they did evil in the sight of the Lord. Remember that the evil that kept repeating itself in Israel was the worship of Baal, that fertility god, and all of the aspects of worship that were so vile and immoral and an abomination in the sight of God. Then in verse 2 we find that God raises up an oppressor to discipline His people because of their sin, and this is what He does in Jabin, the Canaanite who reigned in Hazor. So the people are oppressed again, they’re suffering because of their sins. Then again the cycle in verse 3 is supplication: they sin, God causes them to suffer, and then they cry unto God - verse 3. Then we find in verse 4, which is probably the primary message of the whole of the book of Judges, the message that God is a
God of salvation, that God raises up the deliverers, and here He does it again in Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth.

Now, just before we go on any further to look at these two characters Jabin and Sisera, does it not astound you how the people of Israel still have not learnt the message? They still haven't got the point! God wants them to repent completely and genuinely, yet they still go round in this circle of defeat, the circle of sin and then supplication, God saving them, and then they go back to their sin as soon as the Judge dies. We can criticise it, but if you're honest with yourself, many Christians find themselves in this same vicious cycle. They feel they can't get out of it. They feel they want to get out of it, but they are continually defeated, that temptation always takes them.

Well, listen carefully to the victory again that we have before us through the deliverer - Deborah, the exceptional - today. What I want you to see before we look at her, or any of the characters, is the difference between religious reformation and spiritual revival. This is terribly important. These people called out to God, and in a sense through the Judges they reformed their external behaviour, there was a religious reformation but there was not a genuine spiritual revival. Reformation is that which temporarily changes the outward conduct, while revival permanently alters the inward character. Israel, throughout the Judges, is like the man in Jesus' parable who got rid of one demon, and the house of his life was swept out, and another seven worse demons came along and inhabited him. The people of Israel seem to get worse and worse after every reformation, because the empty heart is prey for every form of moral evil. Until we realise that what we need is not a reformation but a spiritual revival in which the Holy Ghost takes charge of His church and His people, we will go through this continual cycle of sin over and over again.

Let me say this: these reformations were effected largely by outside pressures. Maybe there's someone in your life, and they want you to be like this, they want you to be like him; or there's a church - though a church should instruct and exhort and encourage - that wants you to be a certain way. That's only right, but you're trying to fulfil their desires and live up to the expectations of others and you're failing! Because although it's good to give instruction from the word of God - and we must always do it - if we're to have genuine revival in our lives, God must do an eternal work by His Spirit, external reformation will not do.

R. Kent Hughes wrote a book on the Beatitudes, and his title is intriguing - he entitled it 'Are Evangelicals Born Again?'. That's a good question, isn't it? We might have all the trappings, but are we born-again - do we have the life of God in our bosom? Are we living the life of Christ? That is the true life that He wishes us to portray. That's the reason why, even in the church today, every man does that which is right in his own eyes. It's why it's going on in the world, lawlessness and chaos and anarchy - because there's no true repentance. That's what I fear at times, there's no deep work of God that has been done in people's hearts. Do you know that? True repentance does not consist of an experience of the supernatural. People say to me: 'Oh, I felt the Lord that night I was saved, I felt His presence and His touch' - all that is tremendous, but has your salvation been manifested in a departure from evil? Repentance is the true fruit of faith in God. Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 and verse 19: 'Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity'. Well, my question to you is what Israel needed to answer: is the prayer of your heart, 'Lord, create in me a clean heart'?
Let's look at Jabin, this King of the Canaanite stronghold Hazor, and his commander Sisera who boasted 900 chariots of iron, with which he held the Israelites under dominion for 20 years. We see here that this oppression brought a cry from God's people, and God who - remember we thought last week is unconventional, the God who is the unpredictable, surprises the people and does again a new thing: He raises up a woman to be the deliverer. Deborah, she is the heroine of this drama. Her supporting actor, if you like, your male lead, is Barak. Deborah, the woman of faith, the woman of courage, her name means 'bee'.

Now let me just say a little bit of warning before we study Deborah this morning. Some people use Deborah as an excuse for overturning New Testament injunctions regarding the role of women in the church. I have a lot of time for Deborah, as you will see in a moment or two, but we need to remember that the Old Testament Israel is not the New Testament church. The New Testament teaches in 1 Timothy 2 and verse 12 very clearly that we are not to suffer women to usurp authority over the men in the assembly, nor to teach. That's what God has said, whatever our society may think of it. Secondly, we need to remember that the days of the Judges was a time of declension. There was obviously a need of an exception in this particular circumstance - but, having said all that, we cannot diminish the fact that Deborah is an exceptional woman. Whilst we must always keep within the biblical boundaries concerning male and female roles in the church, God used a woman, and used a woman here in a way, I believe, some of the men were uncomfortable with.

She was, as we see in verse 4, a Judge and a prophetess. We see that God led her by His Spirit to summon Barak to deliver Israel in verse 6. She sent for Barak, and called him in the name of the Lord God of Israel to command the people. Then we see in verse 8 that he refused, and Barak said, 'Unless you go with me into the battle, I won't go'. Then we see that in verse 9 Deborah agrees to accompany him to battle, but she tells him that because of his reluctance to lead the people, that the victory promised to the Israelites will be attributed to the hand of a woman. Then in the midst of the battle in verse 14 we see that it is Deborah who encourages and inspires Barak, she says 'Up; for this is the day in which the LORD hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the LORD gone out before thee?'. Then in chapter 5, we'll not have time to look at it of course, but she sings a great song of victory unto the victory that the Lord has brought to the Israelites. Even in chapter 5 she rebukes the tribes of Israel who didn't rise up and didn't help the cause of God - what a woman! What a woman!

Twofold encouragement from Deborah the heroine, and from Barak, her supporting actor, that I want to leave with you. First of all: isn't it wonderful that the weaker vessel is a vessel in which God's power can be displayed? We have been looking at male weaklings in this book. Some of them had great handicaps, Ehud was left-handed, Shamgar was probably a farmer who had no weapons or no military skill, but the point of this book if there is any point is that God is the deliverer of His people! God delights to deliver through weak things, so that the excellency of His power might be displayed, and praise should come unto God rather than men. Here we have a Judge who is the weaker vessel, but the weaker vessel in this period of Israel's history is the vessel in which God's power can be most perfectly displayed.

Now I believe, in a sense, that it was an act of humiliation for the Jews, who lived in a male dominated society, to be delivered by a woman. They wanted, perhaps, a mature and a male leadership. Indeed, Isaiah 3 and verse 12 tells us: 'As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them' - that was a detrimental statement. Could I just say, to make an application to the church of Jesus Christ today, I believe leadership is at a low-ebb more than it has ever been, not just in the political world and in family life, but also in the
church - and, can I say, especially among men. Whether it's feminism or political correctness, something in our society has emasculated the leadership role. So, whilst women are more empowered in our age than they have ever been, and I don't think that's necessarily a wrong thing or something unwelcome, many men are confused and demoralised concerning their role in society and the home and the church. I say to you today: one of the reasons why women are taking leadership positions in the church of Jesus Christ is because the men have become more effeminate in their role in the church, and lie back and let them! It's time for you men, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 16, and we have sung, 'Quit you like men!' - act like men and be strong!

But nevertheless. God gave His people a woman Judge. He was treating them like children, I believe, but yet we need not underestimate the fact that there are some notable women in the holy Scriptures. Let me name a couple of them to you: Ruth, a faithful woman; Hannah, an ideal mother; the Shunammite woman, the hospitable woman who brought the prophet in and fed him and gave him rest; Esther, the self-sacrificing woman, the woman who was prepared to go in before the King and say 'If I die, I die, if I perish, I perish'. In the New Testament there's the Syro-Phoenician woman, a woman of great faith - Jesus said there wasn't such faith in all of Israel. Mary Magdalene was the transformed woman, delivered from her sin and iniquity. Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus, the chosen woman of God. Mary of Bethany, the woman who is immortalised by Christ because she poured out that ointment, and Christ said that wherever the Gospel would be preached her name would be mentioned. Martha, the industrious woman; the woman at the well, the evangelising woman; Anna, the praying and fasting woman; Dorcas, the benevolent woman who used her needle and thread to clothe the people of Joppa; Lydia, the businesswoman, who being converted opened her home to the church; Priscilla and Phoebe who served the church of Jesus Christ, serving women. Incidentally, the word that is used for Phoebe's service is the word that we use for 'deacon' in the New Testament.

There are many special distinctions of women in the Bible. Did you know that the last people at the cross were women? The first to the tomb was a woman. The first to proclaim the resurrection was a woman. The first preacher to the Jews in Luke 2 was a woman. Those that attended the first prayer meeting in the upper room were both men and women, the women were there. The first to greet the missionaries in Europe in Acts 16 were women. The first convert to Europe in Acts 16, Lydia, was a woman. Here we have in the Old Testament, Deborah, a woman who says of herself in her song in chapter 5 and verse 7: 'I Deborah arose, a mother in Israel' - a woman! I almost said, 'Hallelujah for women' there, but I may pay for that later on!

The fact of the matter is: whilst we believe in the teaching of the New Testament regarding the role and responsibilities of women, sometimes we denigrate what women can do for Jesus Christ. There is an encouragement that the weaker vessel is a vessel in which God's power can be displayed. But secondly, looking at Barak, though at first he was reluctant, he is commended of God. Barak was a bit like Moses, who said 'I can't speak. You're not going to send me, are You?'. He was a bit like Gideon, who said 'I am of the least of the tribes in Israel'. A bit like Jeremiah, 'I'm only a child, I cannot speak'. Here is Barak, he's reluctant, he says: 'I'm not going to go unless you go with me'. Yet in Hebrews chapter 11 verse 32, Deborah is not mentioned, but Barak is mentioned along with Gideon and other of the Judges for his great faith - isn't that an encouragement? As we look at Deborah, or we look at Barak, or we look at Othniel, Ehud or Shamgar, what God is saying is: 'I use weak people'. In 1 Corinthians chapter 1 that we have read so many times, that is what is outlined for us: God
chooses the foolish things that He should confound the mighty, and that His glory should be known.

We've looked at Jabin, the villain, and his partner in crime, the captain Sisera; Deborah the heroine, and the supporting actor, Barak. But thirdly let us look at the Lord, the Lord is in this drama, in fact the Lord is the writer, He is the director, He is the producer. In other words, He is seen and depicted as the one who is in charge of the war and in charge of the weather. The Lord is behind all of the scenes that occur here in this drama. He's not only controlling the enemy army, but He is bringing a trap before them and He's controlling the weather itself and using a storm to defeat Sisera's troops. The message here is: God is our salvation, God has always been the salvation of His people and He always will be such.

The daily notes for the Scripture Union depict this historical scene. Let me read it to you: 'Barak openly showed his force of 10,000 on the southern slopes of Mount Tabor. Sisera arose to the bait, he and his troops crossed the dry Kishon riverbed at the fort just south of Harosheth. They raced southeast along the ancient highway toward Taanach. Israelites from the south, from Ephraim entered the valley of Zaanaim and joined forces with Barak, his northern troops in the valley of Taanach, south of the Kishon. Deborah called for the attack in verse 14, 'Get up! Go!'. The footmen went against the iron chariots, and at the critical moment the rain fell from the hand of God turning the plain into mire, utterly confounding the chariots and horses. The advantage was now fully with the infantry, those on foot. Barak pressed the attack, Sisera was separated from the men and fled. The leaderless troops, not used to fighting on foot, ran to their base. The rains continued, the Kishon rose to a torrent. Those who were not slain by the Israelites in pursuit were swept away by the Kishon as they tried to cross the ford of Harosheth'.

This was an unexpected victory, why? Because it came directly from the hand of God. When you're weak enough - this is the message now - when you're weak enough and low enough, God's power will come upon you and demonstrate what He can do! Then fourthly, another character is Jael. I've called her 'the undercover agent' in this drama. She is the wife of Heber, and Heber the Kenite was a neighbour who was at peace with Jabin. He was at peace with him, he was quite happy to live in his kingdom boundaries, and so he was sort of in cahoots with him. But we find that as Sisera runs from Barak and his armies, that he seeks refuge in the tent of Jael. As he goes into that tent she gives him food, she gives him lodging, and while he sleeps, what does Jael do? What a hostess! The hostess with the mostess - she takes a hammer, she takes a tent peg, and she hammers it into his temple! It says she actually hammered his head to the ground!

Then as Barak passes by, she goes out, calls him in - 'Is that the boy you're looking for?'. She was fulfilling verse 9, you remember Deborah said to Barak that Israel would be delivered from Sisera by the hand of a woman - it wasn't Deborah, it was Jael. God used Deborah, who's a mere 'honey bee', to cast down the human reason and the kingdom of the flesh in Jabin when it exalted itself against the knowledge of God. The judgment came upon him, 'Barak' means 'lightning', the judgment of God came upon Sisera and his troops. Here is Jael, which means 'climber' and she uses a tent peg - which is a witness to the fact that she was a nomad, because the women pitched the tents in those days, the good old days! - and she uses this tent peg and this hammer to slay God's enemy.

Does Paul not say in 2 Corinthians that the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual to the pulling down of strongholds - mighty through God, casting down imaginations, every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing into captivity every
thought to the obedience of Christ. Now, how do you view Jael? This is a difficult book, Judges, isn't it? It's not the kind of book that you read as a scriptural reading when you're going to preach on the Sermon on the Mount, to love your neighbour, and love your enemy, and turn the other cheek. Would you bless Jael, or would you blame her for what she did? Imagine this: she invited Sisera into her tent, she welcomed him, she treated him kindly, she told him not to be afraid. So ultimately she was deceitful. The Kenites were at peace, as I've already said, with Jabin - so was her husband Heber - and so she violated a treaty and an agreement with the people. She gives Sisera the impression that she would guard the door and keep him safe, and she broke a promise therefore. Then she kills a defenceless man under protection - we would say that makes her a murderess. Yet Deborah sang in her song in chapter 5 verse 24, look at it: 'Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent'. The only other woman that is said of in the holy Scriptures is the Lord Jesus Christ's mother.

What's the point? Well, let's not read back into an era of the Judges spiritual standards that are taught by the Lord Jesus or by the apostles, and let's keep in mind as I said last week that this was a time of oppression. If you look at verse 30 of chapter 5: 'Have they not sped?', this is the troops of Sisera, 'Have they not divided the prey; to every man a damsel or two' - what does that mean? Ultimately, if this evil man Jabin and his captain Sisera had overcome the people of Israel, he would have led the daughters of Israel away, and ultimately raped and pillaged the nation. These were wicked men, these were oppressors, these were the vilest most brutal creatures on the earth. But the fact of the matter is, no matter how terrible the bondage was, Deborah was God's deliverer, chosen of God - and His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts not our thoughts.

I'm going to leave with you finally the chorus that we find in Deborah's victory song in chapter 5. It does three things for us that bring this drama into focus and put it into context, which is almost synonymous with the context of our day and age in which we live. First of all we see from her victory song the details of the desperate days in which they live. Chapter 5 and verse 8, look at it: 'They chose new gods'. Spiritually they chose new gods, they rejected Yahweh the God of Israel, the covenant God; and they chose Baal and Ashteroth the Canaanite gods. That is what is happening today in our age. People in Ulster and the United Kingdom are rejecting their heritage. I watched 'Question Time' on Thursday evening, there was a man on it from 'Christian Voice' - and whilst I might question some of the things that they have done, the fact of the matter is everyone...it was almost like a setup, an ambush, everyone just came upon him to reject his Christian views! That is the world we're living in. One lesbian even said: 'Your God who you claim has created the world', and put at His feet guilt for some of the things that are going on in our universe. This nation has chosen other gods, but make sure that we don't: materialism, sectarianism, factionalism - we could go on and on and on...comfort.

Not only spiritually were they desperate days, they were socially desperate days. In verse 6 we read: 'In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways'. Do you know what that means? You couldn't go out at night. You couldn't walk along the highways, the main roads were empty - does that sound familiar? Wasn't so long ago that our main roads were empty, but for a lot of thugs. People had to go round the byways, they had to go the back roads. In verse 7: 'The inhabitants of the villages ceased', the people who lived in villages had to leave their homes and move into the cities. In verse 8, even the cities were not safe, there was war at the gates and the people were disarmed. The city under siege, yet the people weren't equipped - verse
8 says there wasn't 'a shield or spear seen among forty thousand in Israel?'. They felt inhibited. What a day!

In that day, Deborah and her song denounces those who stood away from the work. Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh were those who came to help, but Deborah - and God's Spirit records for us perpetually those who did not help - she said: 'Reuben, he stayed behind in the sheep folds looking after his own interests in comfort and affluence. Gad, did not cross the Jordan, he was so lazy, so pampered, he didn't want to get up and fight. Dan remained in the ships. Asher sat idly at the seashore having his holiday!'. God still notes those who fight in His battle, and those who stand by and spectate. Zebulun and Naphtali were outstanding, so much so that Deborah says they didn't go for any spoils in the battle, in other words they fought without being paid. Meroz is cursed in verses 23 to 27, singled out for failing to come to Jehovah's help.

Here's the third thing that I want you to notice and finish on: the details of the desperate day that denounces those who stood away from the work, but the delight in God's deliverance. There's a holy sarcasm - you didn't know that existed, perhaps - in chapter 5 in verses 28-31. 'The mother of Sisera', Deborah says, 'looked out at a window, and cried through the lattice, Why is his chariot so long in coming? why tarry the wheels of his chariots? Her wise ladies answered her, yea, she returned answer to herself, Have they not sped? have they not divided the prey; to every man a damsel or two; to Sisera a prey of divers colors, a prey of divers colors of needlework, of divers colors of needlework on both sides, meet for the necks of them that take the spoil?'. She envisages Sisera's mother standing at the window looking for him coming back, 'Where is he?' - but he's not coming, because he's got a tent peg in his head! God delivered the people, and the message is that Deborah delighted in God's salvation. That's why they can rejoice about such a horrific scene and drama, because it came from the hand of God - delighting so much that verse 31 says: 'So let all thine enemies perish, O LORD: but let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might. And the land had rest forty years'.

I think you'll agree she was an exceptional Judge, wasn't she? But may God give us, in such desperate days when so many are standing away from the work of God, delight in a new deliverance from His holy hand.

Father, we give thanks this morning for our great Deliverer, the Captain of our salvation, the Captain of the Lord of hosts, our Lord Jesus. We pray, we hope from hearts truly repentant and filled with faith, that You will come and deliver us again in the desperate dark days in which we live, both in state and church. Oh God, may every man put his hand to the work, and every woman. May we know what it is to delight again in the deliverance of our God. Hear us we pray, and bless us as we wait in this place upon our God. Amen.
Men For The Hour - Chapter 6
"Gideon, The Fearful"

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Judges chapter 6 is where we take our reading from, Judges 6, and this morning we're beginning to look at the character of Gideon - the fifth Judge. We'll spend a number of weeks looking at Gideon, for he's such a substantial character among all the Judges, but this morning our title will be 'Gideon, The Fearful'.

Verse 1 of chapter 6: "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD: and the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel: and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strong holds. And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them; And they encamped against them, and destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it. And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto the LORD. And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD because of the Midianites, That the LORD sent a prophet unto the children of Israel, which said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage; And I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all that oppressed you, and drave them out from before you, and gave you their land; And I said unto you, I am the LORD your God; fear not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but ye have not obeyed my voice. And there came an angel of the LORD, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him, and said unto him, The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valor. And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then show me a sign that thou talkest with me. Depart not hence, I pray thee, until I come again, and bring forth my present, and set it before thee. And he said, I will tarry until thou come again. And Gideon went in, and made ready a kid, and unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour: the flesh he put in a basket, and the broth in a pot, and brought it out unto him under the oak, and presented it. And the angel of God said unto him, Take the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock, and pour out the broth. And he did so. Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the LORD departed out of his sight. And when Gideon perceived that he was
an angel of the LORD, Gideon said, Alas, O LORD God! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face. And the LORD said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die. Then Gideon built an altar there unto the LORD, and called it Jehovahshalom: unto this day it is yet in Ophrah of the Abiezrites" - verse 24 will be our final verse.

'Gideon, The Fearful' - Warren Wiersbe says Gideon started his career as somewhat of a coward. In chapter 6 that we've read, we find that of him: he was a fearful man. Then in chapter 7, through most of chapter 8, we find that he turned into a conqueror, one who God uses after breaking him and melting him, moulding him and filling him. But sadly as we'll see in chapter 8, the remainder of it, he also became and ended his days as a compromiser. A man who was a coward, then a conqueror, and then ended his days, some would say, as a compromiser. There's more space devoted to the Judge Gideon, 100 verses or so, in the book of Judges than to any other Judge. We're going to follow his progress this morning and in subsequent weeks in the will of the Lord.

What I want you to see first and foremost, as we have learned from each of these Judge characters, is the condition that was recurrent in the nation. We find that outlined for us in the first two verses of chapter 6, and really again it is a reciprocation of the pattern that we saw in chapter 2 and verses 11 through to 19, another cycle of backsliding among God's people. 'They did evil', verse 1 says, 'in the sight of Jehovah: and the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years. And Midian prevailed against Israel: and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strong holds'. You would be forgiven, I'm sure, for asking the question: when are these Israelites going to learn the lesson? This is the fourth time they have fallen into the same trap. After Deborah and Barak, and after the great song that we read in chapter 5, they have been emancipated from their enemies. God has had mercy on them and heard their cry, and delivered them. But now again they fall into the same recurrent condition of backsliding, they fall into the same sin that was their besetting sin in the beginning: they did evil in the sight of the Lord - and often that is just a synonym, another phrase, for 'they followed Baal and Asherah' those wicked immoral gods and goddesses.

You see, sin is not a privilege to the child of God. That's what God, through His Spirit is communicating to us through the Judges. Of course, it's not a privilege to anybody, sin is more like a poison, but we seem to think at times, even as believers, that we are missing out if we don't partake of certain things that are found in the world. The Israelites could learn a lesson, God was trying to discipline them as sons and daughters in the covenant: 'Sin will harm you, it'll take you further than you want to go, and rob you of the blessings that I have promised you'. Through discipline He wants them to learn: 'Ye are bought with a price, ye are not your own. Glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God's'. Of course, we know that whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. Here we find again He has to discipline His people.

This time the cane of discipline that He uses are the Midianites, and they were simply a Bedouin tribe of marauders from the north-west part of Arabia. They dwelt in tents, and they rode upon camels, hence some of the verses that we read this morning. They were also the people that sold Joseph into slavery, they had been the arch enemies and previous historical enemies of the children of God. But we see here that they are prevailing over God's people, look at this phrase, don't miss it: 'The hand of Midian prevailed'. Now here is a lesson, if ever there was one for every child of God in this place today: the enemy always prevails when you give in to sin. The enemy will have you cowering if you give him a foothold in your life.
Here you have the people of God, look at verse 2: they’re making dens in the mountains, they’re hiding, cowering in fear from these Midianite oppressors. The hand of Midian is prevailing against them - it's a pathetic picture for us, isn't it? When we consider, if we look back at chapter 4 and verse 24, we read there: 'And the hand of the children of Israel prospered, and prevailed against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan'. So they have come from the position of spiritual victory, where their hand was prevailing over their oppressors, to actually have the hand of their oppressors upon them and crushing them - what a lesson! I wonder am I speaking to someone here this morning, and you're a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you're a child of God, but at this present vantage point in your Christian experience you are overcome by the enemy. The hand of Satan, whether through the world, through the flesh, or through his own minions, is prevailing over you, is oppressing you - you're overcome!

Three very practical lessons, that I have learned through studying the condition that was recurrent in the nation here again, I want to leave with you. The first is this: how the Lord has to withhold blessings from us at times to get us to see our great need of Him. The Lord was disciplining His people, the Lord was withholding blessing so that the people would come and ask for it, because there was a stage at which they didn’t even think they needed it - they were rich, they were increased in goods, they were floating along on the winds and waves of previous experience and triumphs. But God had to take away from them spiritual victory to make them realise that they still needed to rely on Him.

The second lesson I have learned is similarly from our perspective, how it is only in times of difficulty - whether they be temporal or spiritual - that we seem to cry for God’s aid. Isn’t it? God often has to bring us into a predicament, has to corner us in some difficulty until we start to seek Him early, and then find Him. Then the third lesson I have learned is that even when we do seek Him at times, often it can be shallow, it can be superficial. That's what we find in the life of Israel here in the Judges, that's the way their repentance was. It wasn't a true, deep, meaningful repentance; because each time they went back to their sin. We must always beware of such decisions and commitments that are only superficial and shallow.

Now you might be sitting here and thinking: 'Well, I'm being overcome by the devil and by sin and by evil in this world, how do I know whether or not my initial repentance was superficial and shallow?'. Here's the easy answer: are you finding yourself, at this moment, in the vicious cycle that the Israelites found themselves in? They're now in the fourth cycle of sin, sorrow, in crying out to God for repentance and mercy, they are restored, and lo and behold they're back like a pig wallowing in the mire, they're like a dog going back to their own vomit. Second Corinthians 7 verse 10 teaches us that godly sorrow that works repentance is not to be repented of. If you have known true salvation, your repentance will be such that you will have a deep sorrow for your sin that has led you to full restoration - I’m not saying you can never be backslidden, of course you can, but there's something wrong if you're continually falling, getting up again, falling, getting up again, and never ever experiencing true victory in the life of faith.

The condition that was recurrent, is it recurrent in your life? I call it 'roller coaster Christianity'. Someone else has said it's the 'Grand Old Duke of York' spirituality - when you're up, you're up, and when you're down, you're down, and when you're only halfway up, you're neither up nor down. You don’t know where you are this morning, sometimes you're on the peak of your roller coaster, other times you're in the depths of the valley. I tell you today, from the heart of God, because it's the spirit, I believe, of this book of Judges: God needs more than that from you! But on a note of encouragement: you can expect more than that
from the Christian life - and marrying those two statements together, God has promised you more in Christ! But yet, this is the condition that is recurrent in your life as well as the Israelites, and I have to warn you: if you never ever rise above this recurrent condition, you will experience the enemy's oppression and the result of it as they did.

What was that? Well, it was a harvest that was condemned, in verses 3 to 6 we read of this. Some of you - I dare not say 'grumpy old men' - but some of you, when you get your daffodils pulled out of your garden, well, you feel it, don't you? You don't like when the vandals come along, and the teenagers, and start to mess up your handiwork. Well, that's correct, but that's not your livelihood - you're not relying on your little patch in the front garden to feed on and to keep you alive. These Israelites were, and here these Midianites were coming, this Bedouin tribe in their tents, and waiting until the Israelites were asleep or preoccupied, and then they would come in and wreck their livestock and their agriculture. They would take their camels and ride over all their produce and fields of crops. There they are, continually out on the periphery of God's people, trying to intimidate them, demoralising them. How do you think they felt, when they have waited all to harvest, and then the crop is flattened by mere vandalism and terrorism?

You see, what the Midianites wanted to do, and I want you to note this please because there's a spiritual principle behind it, they wanted to take the ground from under the feet of the people of God that God had given them. They wanted the land back. God had given them the land, promised them the land, but the enemy wanted to pull it from beneath their feet - and that is always the enemy's tactic. We, as the New Testament people of God, are not living in a particular land that God has given us, but we have the promises, the spiritual promises, that we read of in Ephesians in chapter 1, in heavenly places in Christ. We read in Ephesians chapter 6 that we're in a battle, not to get the victory, we have the victory in Christ, and He has put us on the victory ground through His cross work and His resurrection - but it is the devil's ploy and scheme to push us off the ground and make us think we're losers.

That is what the Midianites were trying to do: 'They came', it says, look at that, 'as grasshoppers', verse five, 'for multitude'. Children of God today are facing a multitude of locusts that are ready to eat their harvest of spiritual fruit. As Martin Luther could say in those early days of Reformation, and it's still applicable to us:

'Still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great
And armed with cruel hate
None else on earth is his equal'.

Now what I want you to notice is that often the Lord allows the enemy to overcome His people when they're in sin to discipline them. That's what happened Job, now he wasn't in sin as such, but the reason why all that came upon him did come upon him was that he might be purged, that he may be brought nearer to God and see God more clearly. But there are times when God allows us to be disciplined because there is sin in our lives.

Turn with me for a moment to Haggai, if you can find it, and chapter 1. Haggai chapter 1 - if you find Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, after Haggai, Zechariah - it has fourteen chapters, so it's an easy one to find, and then before it Haggai chapter 1. Here's an account of just this, God disciplining His people because of their sin, verse 3: 'Then came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled', your fancy, luxurious, 'houses, and this house', God's house, His temple, 'lie waste?
Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD. Ye looked for much, and, lo it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house. Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit. And I called for a drought upon the land, and upon the mountains, and upon the corn, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil, and upon that which the ground bringeth forth, and upon men, and upon cattle, and upon all the labour of the hands'.

Now this is a principle, we're all very familiar with the principle of 'You reap what you sow' - but here is a principle that says: there are some times that you don't reap what you have sown. There are times when you sow, and you reap nothing, it comes to nothing. You say: 'How can that be, and why would that ever be?' - if the seed that you sow is contaminated by sin! I'm not going to spend too much time going into this, but this is a spiritual law of discipline: God can cut holes in your pockets so that the more you put in, the more falls out. God can blow upon your riches, God can give you the opposite to the Midas touch, and everything you touch breaks or rots or is destroyed. Now we do not live by the natural laws of the land of Israel that the Old Testament saints were under, but this same spiritual law applies to us in a spiritual sense. Amos chapter 8 and verse 11 said: 'Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Jehovah'.

There is nothing new under the sun, and God still disciplines His people for disobedience. 'How does He do it?', you say, 'Does He still withhold harvests?'. Well, I don't know if He withholds physical harvests or not, but I'm almost certain that He does withhold spiritual ones. I ask you: what other explanation can there be, if the Lord Jesus said in John 4 and Matthew 9: 'The fields - look up! - they're white unto harvest. They're ready to be reaped', and yet if a harvest is withheld and there's so little fruitfulness, what other explanation can there be other than that there is a transgression of this spiritual law of discipline in sowing. Though we sow and sow and sow, God can blow upon it, God can cut holes in our spiritual pockets so that it all vanishes away. As the hymn writer put it, you cannot be channels of blessing if your life is not free from all sin - that's it!

Now we see that when God's people cried out for mercy and help, God on this occasion did not immediately deliver them as He had in the past. He sends a prophet, and the prophet brings an indictment to them in verses 7 and 10, and he leaves them hanging at the end of the message, he doesn't give them any hope at all really. He just tells them that they have not obeyed God's will. But what he does do, and I want you to notice this, he reminds them of God's past deliverance of His people. 'Remember Egypt, remember how God delivered you out of Egypt, gave you all the covenant blessings. He drove out your oppressors from before you', and the implication that the prophet is bringing to the people is: is your God not this God, can your God not do the same? 'This is the point that you're missing, your God is the same, but', mark these words, 'ye have not obeyed My voice'. Do you see that in verse 10?

God hasn't changed. I wonder is this a personal word to someone here in our meeting this morning. Maybe you're asking the question that Gideon asked, and we'll get to him in a minute in verse 13: 'Why then is all this befallen me? Why am I undergoing this discipline?
Why is there a spiritual harvest in my life that seems to be condemned, and what I try to do for God fails continually, and I feel so impotent in a spiritual sense? Could it be that God is withholding the blessings from you, in order that you might see that there's something in your life where you are not obeying His voice?

Well, for Gideon, there was a crisis as God's word and God's ways seem to clash. I'm not suggesting there was sin in his life, but in a sense there was because we find here that Gideon is an extremely fearful man. Like the nation, he almost typifies it, for in verse 11 he's hiding, cowering behind the winepress threshing wheat. Now normally wheat would have been threshed out in the open air in order to blow away the chaff, but here he is hiding because of the Midianites. Basically what this is communicating is that he's just eking out a living, he has an impoverished existence. Does that not speak to us, as believers today, when we think of the great wealth that we have in Christ in heavenly places, the victory that we're meant to enjoy as Christians - yet so many believers are just existing, they're just saved and stuck, they're ticking over!

Well, the Lord comes to such mouse of a man as Gideon, and He says - and this is remarkable in verse 12: 'The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valor'. Now, that was too rich for Gideon, even if it was from an angel - because the implication of what he says in verse 13 is: 'Well, if I'm such a mighty man then, and if God is with us the way you say He's with us, why? Why is the land in the condition that it is? Why is our harvest condemned?'. In the psyche of Gideon there is a clash, a crisis, as God's word seems to clash with His ways.

How many times do we ask the question: 'Why?'. Personally, and as the church, and as a body of God's people in this land, we ask: 'Why? If God is with us, if God is blessing us, if all these words are true in this book, why? Why does this happen? Why does this not happen?'. Usually the reason why we ask 'Why?' is because we walk by sight and not by faith. Now what am I talking about? Well, turn with me for a moment to 2 Kings 6 to give you an illustration of this. Second Kings chapter 6, and here you have the servant of Elisha who sees God's enemies surrounding the nation, the Syrians. In chapter 6 of 2 Kings, verse 15: 'The servant of Elisha was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha'.

A little girl on one occasion was listening to the great stories of the Bible that her mother told her about Moses, and Joshua, and Samson, and Daniel. Finally she ended by saying: 'Mummy, God was much more exciting back then'. Is that how we feel at times? Gideon said: 'Where is the God that our fathers told us of?'. Is He really around today in the 21st-century postmodernist society? We ask: 'Why does this happen to me personally if God is in my life? Why is there a lack of blessing as it used to be in the church?'. Maybe our question progresses, as it did for Gideon, to say: 'Where are the miracles of our fathers? Did not God, our God, bring up Israel from Egypt?'.

Now, there are such pious pukes about who would come and censure Gideon for saying such things. You get them sometimes in prayer meetings, when you start to get real with God they come around and say to you: 'Now, you shouldn't really say that, you know'. I know that we ought not to get familiar with God in our address to Him, but Gideon is not talking from the vantage point of doubt here - he's not doubting God or testing God. This is not over-
familiarity, he's not dictating to God as the Almighty, but he's standing on the vantage point of faith and he wants to prove God, he wants to know that God's promises are true. This is the point of this passage, I believe, God loves to show Himself true to His promises! He loves to show Himself as faithful to answer prayer that is prayed on the foundation of His word.

The old saints of God used to call this 'holy argumentation'. If you bought off the book stall at the week of prayer Spurgeon's little book of sermons on prayer, I think it's called 'Praying Effectively' or something like that, 'Effective Prayer' [See Appendix] - he has a sermon in it on Job 23 verses 3-4 where Job says: 'Oh that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat! I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments'. Talking about how we bring the promises of God and plead them before God. How do you interpret a verse like Isaiah 45:11, God says to His people: 'Concerning the work of my hands command ye me'. Staggering, isn't it? It's not presumption, now, we want to be careful of that, but God is saying: 'I have put myself at your disposal through the exceeding great and precious promises in Christ'. Gone are the days, it would seem, when the violent storm the heavens to take blessings from God with forceful faith and righteous argument. Not because God is reluctant to give us the blessings, but God is trying to teach us, God is wanting to bring us into His school. He wants us to reason with Him, that He might bless us.

Now let me ask you: have you ever been in a situation where God has made the heavens brass, where He has made the earth barren and dry? Do you know what He is doing? He's wanting to bring you into a place where you don't just call in desperation upon God as a last resort, that's not what we're talking about, but you're calling upon God in faith as your only hope - that's different. Is He pushing you into a corner to challenge Him according to His words? Oh, some of the accounts of revival are staggering. One young man in Lewis, when he was praying, prayed like this: 'Lord, Your honour is at stake'. A wee woman that met Duncan Campbell, along with her sister had been praying for a revival on that island, was praying to God and was heard to say: 'Lord, if You don't do this upon Your promise, I don't think I could ever trust You again' - upon the promise! She wasn't asking God to do something He didn't say He would do. Faith that is prepared to either break down or breakthrough is what God wants! Like Rachel, to come, because she had a promise that she would have children, and say 'Give me children or I die!'. That's what we're talking about.

Well, God told them that the commission from Him remains the same. Whether the condition of the nation was recurrent, and the harvest was condemned, and there was a crisis in his mind because God's word and God's ways seemed to clash, God told him: 'The commission from me remains the same'. Verses 14 and 16, and I would urge you to study this portion in comparison and parallel with Moses' call - it's almost identical, and the excuses that Moses and Gideon give also. But this is the pre-incarnate Christ, this is the Angel of Jehovah - look how Gideon addresses Him in verses 13, 15 and 22, he calls him 'the Lord', and He speaks as the Lord. Here he is before the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus tells him four things: 'Go in this thy might'. Two: 'And thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites'. Three: 'Have not I sent thee?'. Four: 'Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man'. What promises! If Gideon could only embrace them, those promises would equip him for everything that lay ahead.

But Gideon wanted a confirmation that the Lord was still with His people. In verses 17 to 24 he got it, he got this offering and made it for the Lord Jesus in pre-incarnate form. He brought it to Him, and in verse 21 we read that fire came out of the offering, out of the rock beneath it, and this supernatural sign of fire consumed Gideon's offering to show that it was accepted with God. But what it did to Gideon was, it filled him with awe and fear, because what God
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was saying was: 'Thou shalt see now whether My word shall come to pass unto thee' - I'm confirming it for you! That's not a sin, by the way, we need to believe God's word, but sometimes in His grace He confirms it for us.

Let's finish on this note: the crux of Gideon's problem. You find it in verse 11, verse 13, verse 15, verse 17, verse 22-24 - what is it? He's fearful! A prophet's sent to the people, he still fears. The Lord Jesus Christ as the Angel of Jehovah appeared before him, He shows him a supernatural sign of confirmation that God is still with him and his people, yet he's still fearful. If Gideon had a besetting sin, it was fear. Is that your besetting sin? Anxiety, worry, call it what you like, it's still fear - and how debilitating it is! The fear of man brings a snare, Proverbs 29 says, it's paralysing - it takes away spiritual, and even at times physical power. Yet look at Gideon, and we'll show his progression over these next weeks: look at the mighty warrior he became! Why? Because, in his weakness that he admitted, God's strength could be made perfect when he believed what God had said.

When I was reading and studying this, I asked the question: why does God describe Gideon as if he were the opposite of what he clearly was. Here he is, a mouse of a man, hiding in dens like the rest of the people behind the winepress. Why does He describe him as a mighty man of valour? Because God saw Gideon's potential if he embraced the divine power. Can I put it like this: God saw not just what Gideon was presently, He saw what he could be if he believed God. It's like a sculptor looking at a great clump of rock, he doesn't see it as an ugly piece of rock, he sees it as a piece of art once he's finished with it. Before God could do a work through Gideon, God had to do a work in Gideon - and it's the same with us, and when he came to the point of a sense of his own weakness and impotence, then he became a vessel meet for the Master's use.

One weak man with God became the majority. Oh, if there's a lesson in Judges it's this: to be confident of this very thing, that if we give our lives to Christ and acknowledge the weaknesses of them, He that has begun a good work will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. He gave him His peace: Jehovah - Yahweh - shalom, 'The LORD, my peace'. He spoke His peace into the fearful heart of Gideon, and that's what we need. Now here's the point, please don't miss it: God spoke to him, faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God, and in Hebrews 11 we read that he is in the hall of faith - a great man of faith, because faith comes by hearing, he believed what God said, and God gave him His peace and His strength.

Now can I leave you with this intrinsic thought: where did he get it? He got it in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, when the fire of God came upon him. That's the open secret - it's no secret at all. In the presence of Jesus, in a crisis of faith, he turned from the fearful to the faithful. That can happen to you too.

I read a story this week, listen to it, and I close with it. In May 1855, an 18-year-old boy went to the deacons of his church in Boston. He had been raised in a Unitarian Church, not believing in the supernatural deity of Christ, the resurrection, the blood and so on. In almost total ignorance of the gospel he came to them, but when he had moved to Boston to make his fortune, he began to attend a Bible-believing church. Then in April 1855 his Sunday School teacher had come into the shop where he was working, and simply and persuasively shared the gospel and urged the young man to trust in the Lord Jesus. He did, and now he was applying to join the church. One fact quickly became obvious: this young man was totally ignorant of Bible truth. One of the deacons asked him: 'Son, what has Christ done for us all, for you, which entitles Him to our love?'. His response was: 'I don't know. I think Christ has done a
great deal for us, but I don't think of anything in particular as I know of'. Hardly an impressive start, you would say. Then years later a Sunday School teacher said of him: 'I can truly say that I have seen few persons whose minds were spiritually darker than was his when he came into my Sunday School class, and I think the committee of the church seldom met an applicant for membership who seemed more unlikely ever to become a Christian of clear and decided views of the gospel truth, still less to fill any place of public or extended usefulness'. Nothing happened very quickly, as you can imagine, to change their minds; and the deacons decided to put him off for a year of long instruction to teach him the basic Christian truths. Perhaps they wanted to work on some of his other rough spots as well. But not only was he ignorant of spiritual truths, he had trouble reading, writing, and his spoken grammar was atrocious. The year did not help very much, but since it was obvious that he was a sincere soul, they accepted him into the church membership. 'Over the next years, I'm sure', the writer says, 'that many people looked at that young man convinced that God could never use a person like that' - if they did, they had written off Dwight Lyman Moody.

God used him, because there are no lost causes with God. God's grace and God's love to Moody transformed him into the one of the most effective and significant servants of God in church history, a man whose impact is still with us today. This is the spiritual truth of Gideon and all the Judges: He does not see us just for what we are, but for what we can be if we believe Him and allow Him to work in our lives.

'The Midianite is in the land,
Bleak devastation reigns.
Charred fields and looted granaries
Give witness to their gains.

A lonely figure threshes there
'Neath Ophrah's grizzled tree,
Then stunned, he looks
To find himself in regal company.

The Angel of the Lord, no less,
Now graces Gideon's view.
'I've come to vanquish all your foes,
My weapon will be you!'

My Lord, what instruments have I
To drive the tyrant hence?
Just two, but all sufficient they -
FAITH and OBEDIENCE'.

Our brother George Bates, a couple of weeks ago, said during his preaching: 'If you fear God, you'll fear nothing or no one else'. That's the message in summary this morning: what are you fearing, what sin is in your life that you won't let go of? Maybe God has called you to the mission field to be an evangelist, to be a pastor or teacher, but you haven't answered His call, you've not obeyed His voice. Maybe it's something very very simple, and God has withheld His spiritual harvest because of it. Trust God, believe His word, leave your sin and embrace the Angel of Jehovah, the Lord Jesus.

Father, help us all to be at His feet, like Gideon, humble, saying 'I am the least'. May we, like the Baptist, decrease ourselves, deflate our egos, that we may uplift Christ. Let us always
know that we have the Saviour with us, for then we can go without any fear as we follow in His footsteps. Oh, to know 'I am with thee always, even unto the end of the world. Go and make disciples'. Thank You for Your word, and may it find a resting place in all our hearts, for Christ's sake, Amen.
Now we're turning in our Bibles to the book of Judges chapter 6 for our reading. You remember - maybe you don't remember! - it was about three weeks ago when we last looked at Gideon, but the last title we had was 'Gideon, the Fearful'. We looked at verses 1 to 24, and how God encountered Gideon and called him to be the Judge and deliverer of God's people against the Midianites. This morning we're going to look at Gideon, this time under the title 'Gideon the Faithful', and our reading will comprise of verses 25 through to verse 35.

So let's begin at verse 25: "And it came to pass the same night", that was the night in which Gideon encountered the angel of the Lord, and we'll recap a little bit over that previous experience, but that same night "the LORD said unto him, Take thy father's young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove that is by it: And build an altar unto the LORD thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down. Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as the LORD had said unto him: and so it was, because he feared his father's household, and the men of the city, that he did it by night. And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was cast down, and the grove was cut down that was by it, and the second bullock was offered upon the altar that was built. And they said one to another, Who hath done this thing? And when they inquired and asked, they said, Gideon the son of Joash hath done this thing. Then the men of the city said unto Joash, Bring out thy son, that he may die: because he hath cast down the altar of Baal, and because he hath cut down the grove that was by it. And Joash said unto all that stood against him, Will ye plead for Baal? will ye save him? he that will plead for him, let him be put to death whilst it is yet morning: if he be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar. Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, Let Baal plead against him, because he hath thrown down his altar. Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the children of the east were gathered together, and went over, and pitched in the valley of Jezreel. But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet; and Abiezer was gathered after him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh; who also was gathered after him: and he sent messengers unto Asher, and unto Zebulun, and unto Naphtali; and they came up to meet them".

Now we began reading at verse 25 about this night, and you remember what happened during this night, comprised and recorded for us in verses 1 to 24. We're confronted in verses 1 and 2 with the condition that was recurrent in the nation again, the nation had fallen into sin - and as it is put so graphically for us in verse 1 and right throughout the book, the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. That is really a phrase that encompasses Baal worship, they started to worship the false god Baal and turned their back on their covenant God Jehovah. So this was a recurring problem, again and again and again, after each Judge who was raised to deliver them died, the people went back to their old sin of Baal worship. But we see specifically here in verses 3 to 6 that the harvest was condemned as a judgment upon the people for their backsliding on this occasion, and we saw, taking spiritual
Then we saw in verses 12 to 13 and verse 15 that Gideon personally experienced a crisis, because as far as he was concerned it seemed that God's word, what it was saying, and God's ways, how God was leading His people in providence, were clashing, they were contradicting one another. Now the obvious reason for that was because of their sin, and God wanted them to see their sin. But God also wanted to bring them to the knowledge of who He is in His promises, and what He had done for the people in the past. Then we see that in verse 14 and verse 16 God again commissions Gideon with the promises that He is still the same God as He has always been, and as He was with Gideon's fathers, He would be with him and the people if they followed Him once again.

Then we saw a sign in verses 17 to 24, God confirmed that He was still with the people in a miraculous way, and the fire came out of the rock whilst the Angel, or the Lord Jesus Christ, the Angel of Jehovah was with Gideon. We saw also the crux of Gideon's problem in verse 11, verse 13, verse 15, verse 17, verse 22, verse 24 - his problem was fear. The Lord Jesus Christ, as the Angel of Jehovah, was confronting Gideon with his problem, and trying to get him to the place where he could overcome it and be the Judge of God's people.

Can I ask you this morning: have you ever had a crisis experience in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ the way that Gideon had? Have you? I'm not talking about salvation, although it may happen at the same time as conversion, but I believe all of us need to get to a place, even after conversion, where we have a crisis experience where God's call comes to us - because we're continually like the Israelites, in a condition of recurrent falling into sin. OK, I know you repent when you're converted at first, but the Lord Jesus Christ has taught us that we need to continually repent, and there comes a time in our lives when we have ceased to repent for so long, and sin has built such a wall between the fellowship that we ought to have in our souls with God our Father that there needs to come a crisis, where God needs to call us again to consecration, to commitment to Himself.

As this happened in Gideon's life he was given at this crisis time not only a call to consecration and commitment, but a command. God's command was that he had to comply with God's Word. In other words, at this crisis experience that Gideon had in the presence of Christ, where God called upon him to commit himself again, to consecrate him to His service, He commanded him to obey. Please do not miss that, because the theme of all that we will study this morning is the ramification and the results of obedience to God in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the Christian's duty to obey God's word.

So we're looking at how Gideon was faithful in this particular regard. Let me leave four points with you this morning. The first is: obedience to Christ for Gideon, and indeed to us, meant entire consecration. Obedience meant entire consecration. We find this in verses 25 to 27. In verse 25 we read: 'The same night', Gideon was called to destroy his own father's altar that his father had erected in their homestead to Baal. It was an ordinary altar, but in a sense it was very elaborate - much more elaborate than altars of Jehovah, the altars of Jehovah were very simple, yet the altars of Baal were quite elaborate, sometimes studded in stones and jewels. Beside the altar was a wooden image, and it was the Asherah pole. Now verse 26, where it mentions a grove, is speaking of this altar to Baal. Some translations translate the actual image beside it as 'Asherah pole', so these were places of worship that represented Baal and his wife god 'Asherah'. The practice of the worship of these two gods we've looked at and touched in a very superficial way because it's vile, and we wouldn't like to go into the details of it in a family service, but the fact of the matter is: the worship of these gods was
such an extent of sexual immorality that this was the reason why God was disciplining and judging His people.

They did evil, as verse 1 of chapter 6 says, in the sight of the Lord. Indeed, archaeological excavations have discovered in Meggido, not far from Ophrah where Gideon lived, a 26 foot square, 4.5 foot high altar and monument unto Baal and Asherah made of stones and cemented by mud. So this was not some little grove that was above his fireplace that he bowed down to in his living room, this was something that was quite substantial and was probably outside in his garden or his yard, for want of a better phrase. God commanded Gideon - now I want you to gauge the ramifications of this - to go to his father's house and his father's grove, his father's altar unto the god Baal and Asherah, and destroy it! Now how would you feel if God commanded you to do a similar thing? Keeping in mind again that Gideon's besetting sin was, what? Fear! If Gideon was fearful at the best of times, how afraid must he have been to carry this out towards his own father's house? Proverbs 29 tells us that the fear of man brings a snare, but the fear of man - isn't it multiplied and amplified when it is the fear of men and women in our own family? You know and I know that it's hardest to be righteous, and take a godly stand, and even witness to those in our own family. To his credit, Gideon was faithful, he obeyed God.

Now let me say that when we come to the New Testament Scriptures, the child of God, the Christian, is called by God in a similar way. What am I talking about? Well, when you're converted, and you turn your attention to the things of God, often your experience has been that family and friends, and neighbours and work colleagues, don't understand. They may even oppose your new life, they may make it hard for you as a Christian. It would be no different than the Lord Jesus Christ, if that were the case, for we read in John chapter 7 verse 5: 'Neither did his own brothers believe in him'. Indeed, when we come to Luke's gospel, and we read in chapter 8 of Luke's gospel and verses 20 and 21: 'And it was told him', the Lord Jesus, 'by certain which said, Thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to see thee. And he answered and said unto them, My mother and my brethren are these which hear the word of God, and do it'. Then in Matthew's gospel chapter 19 and verse 29, we read there also that the Lord Jesus said: 'And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life'.

You see, commitment to Christ, we find, whatever age it may be in, often sets us at odds with the world and even with our family. We have to, at times, go against our family's wishes and break our family principles, or absent ourselves from certain family practices. Indeed, the Lord Jesus teaches further in Matthew's gospel chapter 10 on this regard, verse 34 He says: 'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it'.

You see, the Christian is called, like Gideon was called, to entire consecration even if it means going against those who are in our families, even the nearest and dearest to us in human terms. I wonder have you entirely consecrated yourself to God as a Christian? Or is there an area of your life, it may not be particularly this area of family and friends, but it may be another that I don't know of but God knows and you know - and you're holding it back from
God. One writer has put it well regarding the story of the rich young ruler: 'Jesus did not hand the rich man a decision card and tell him to check the box beside 'Follow me', instead He exposed the moral man's transgression of the first commandment, and called on him to smash his idol, then he could follow Christ'.

God and Christ requires all men in every age to smash their idols. What is your idol? Now don't say: 'I don't have one', we've all got one! The question is not whether we have one, or maybe more than one, but what we have done with them - whether we have smashed them:

'The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to take it from Thy throne.
And worship only Thee'.

Have you done this? Elijah said there can be no limping between two opinions, between God and Baal. This night, the same night, this altar in the heart of Gideon and his family was broken down - and how many rival altars to the altar of God in our hearts have been broken down in the dead of night when a saint of God has encountered the Saviour? Have you ever had a night in your life like this, whether it's on your own or it's with a group of God's people, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, just as Gideon experienced, touches the very thing that you don't want to let go of but is causing your lack of blessing. You see Gideon had to learn, and his family, and the nation, that the Lord's altar and Baal's altar could not stand side-by-side, for it was a direct contradiction of the first commandment: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me', or, as some translations put it, 'beside me'.

Our nation needs to realise this. We have to say that we must welcome all peoples of all races and all creeds and cultures, and I believe we must defend the freedom for them to worship their god in their way, but we as a nation must maintain the heritage that we have and the church. We must realise that in a pluralistic society that God will not share His glory with another. Whilst our society may be a tolerant society, our God Jehovah is a jealous God. Israel had to realise that before any Judge could declare war on Midian, they had to declare war on Baal.

To Gideon's credit he was faithful, and in verse 27 we read that 'Gideon did as Yahweh', Jehovah, 'had commanded him'. Now some blame Gideon for demolishing Baal's altar by night, because he feared his relatives and the city fathers, but at least he obeyed God. He may have been fearful - but do you know what he did? There's a significance of it: Joash, his father, was obviously the local shrine keeper for Baal and Asherah worship, and he probably intended sacrificing this young bull. So you see the significance, even the irony and the humour of this in God's mind, that he is taking the young bull that would be sacrificed to Baal, and he is using that very bull to pull down the altar and the Asherah pole. This second bull was seven years old, the Bible tells us, and that is exactly the time that Midian reigned over Israel. So what God was communicating was 'This sacrifice of obedience to me is what will break the iron grip of oppression upon the people of God', and from that moment on the oppression of the Midianites went up in smoke just like the sacrifice.

My friend, I can't be more plain to you this morning: whatever that altar is upon the heart, whatever is taking the place of Christ in your life, whatever is going before God or beside God, whatever is preventing you from being entirely consecrated to the cause of Christ, it needs to be put on the altar, it needs to go up in smoke - and until you do that, you will not know victory in your life! It's as simple as that! Obedience meant entire consecration.
But obedience also meant secondly, we see from verses 28 to 30, enduring opposition. What a furore there was in the town! Alexander Whyte very perceptively remarks: 'The worshippers of Baal never neglected their morning devotions. 'Early will I seek thee', they could say to their god with truth and good conscience'. When they went for their early morning quiet time to the Baal shrine that particular morning, god was gone! Imagine in the market the traders of Ophrah, discussing with one another, the women at the well, the council elders: 'Did you hear what happened last night? Our monument, our sacred divine monument, desecrated! Lord Baal's altar! Asherah, our lady's icon has been wrecked, wait till we get our hands on the one who has done this! We must eradicate this religious fundamentalism from our midst!'. Isn't it mighty to see that, when even one man in a godless community starts to live for God with all that he has, it can shake that whole community for God?

You see it in the apostle Paul, in Acts chapter 19 people were getting converted, and they were leaving the worship of the goddess Diana, Diana of the Ephesians. There was a great riot that transpired in the city of Ephesus, because those tradesmen who were making the little icons and idols were losing out on money because people were turning to Christ, turning their back on their idols. What a lesson there is here, whether it's the Old or the New Testament, that when you touch people's idols they go mad! You can preach about a nice miracle man called Jesus and people will tolerate you for a while, but if you preach against sin, just like He did, they'll do what they did to Him. I'm telling you: you preach about alcohol, preach about porn, preach about adultery, preach about apostasy in the church, preach about idolatry and Roman Catholicism and other religions and other cults, and people will lynch you - and they'll queue up to do it, even in the church!

When someone starts to get serious about God, even in the church other people become uncomfortable - because what you're doing is you're disturbing their slumber and their sleep. Do you know what the problem is in the church today? Maybe it's not so much in this church, but in the church at large, particularly in the West, no one is against anything. Everyone is for everything, it seems, and because of that no man's hand is against us. But Paul told Timothy, a young pastor: 'Those that live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution'. Inevitable was the fact that if Gideon was obedient, it would mean enduring opposition not only among his family, but among his friends and the people of the city. It was John Wesley that said: 'If you're on fire in the pulpit, men will come to see you burn'. He started to get worried when he wasn't getting bricked when he was preaching! Gone are those days.

Obedience also effected conversion. It meant entire consecration, it would lead to enduring opposition, but it also effected conversions - verses 31 to 33. In the morning, when the people got up and saw that their idol and altar was desecrated, the men of the city were ready to kill Gideon. Just like the wee fellow that breaks the window, you go round to the father's door - and all the people went round to Joash's door, and said: 'Where's your son?'. This wasn't going to be a reprimand, this was going to be a slaying, they were going to kill him! I want you to notice: whose altar was it that was desecrated? Joash's. Who was most likely in charge of that altar, as a representative of the religion in that town? Joash. When they come to Joash's door, Gideon's father, what does he say? 'If Baal is truly god, he should be able to defend himself'. Joash is basically saying that if he is divine and supernatural and all-powerful, let him sort my son out himself. He even went as far as to say that if anyone espouses Baal worship, he should be executed and not my son. From that day forth Gideon was nicknamed 'Jerubbaal', which means 'let Baal plead for himself'.

Now let me show you, before we look at Joash, Gideon's father's conversion, let me show you
Gideon's conversion. You remember that his besetting sin was fear. Now listen: if your besetting sin is fear, anxiety and worry, you need to learn what Gideon learned. What was that? The effect of his obedience to God did not have the ramifications that he feared with the people of the town or with his own father. Tearing down the altar, he would have feared that his father would have turned against him. Tearing down the altar, he would have feared that the people would have turned against him - and although initially that may have been the case, we find that both father and people were converted.

What the lesson here? First of all, if you're worrying, half the things that you worry about - more than half, in fact nearly them all - never ever happen. Gideon learned that, but he also learned that the tables are turned when one man believes God, even when it's with imperfect faith. Do you remember the man whose daughter was ill, and he came to the Lord Jesus and said: 'I believe, help thou my unbelief'? Here's Gideon, wracked with fear, it's his besetting sin, and God comes and tells him to pull down the altar and the Asherah pole of his father, and he goes and does it by night. You might say: 'That's terrible Gideon, you're full of unbelief, going and doing that by night' - but don't miss this: he obeyed God! With the little faith he had, he obeyed God. What's the lesson here? It's simply the lesson that's right throughout the Bible: God honours even little faith, mustard seed faith. If you have faith like the grain of a mustard seed, you'll be able to move mountains, Jesus said. I think of that little woman who had that issue of blood for 12 years, and she hadn't even the guts to come to Jesus personally face-to-face and ask Him for help. So, what did she do in the crowd? She goes and touches the hem of His garment - did Jesus say, 'No, I'm not going to heal you'? It says in that very moment she was made whole. He did call her out, He did get her to confront her fear, but fear was not a grounds for Him refusing to heal her - was it? She had a lot to learn, and she had only little faith, but God honoured that faith. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, but praise God: he came to Jesus!

Gideon was beginning to learn the power of faith in his walk, and from that small act of simple mustard seed faith, he was converted into a mighty man of faith that we read of in Hebrews chapter 11. He was converted, just like Jesus said to Peter: 'Peter, Satan has desire to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith fail not, and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren'. Gideon's act of timid obedience turned him into a mighty man of valour, one who is known as one of the greatest warriors that ever was. Now I'm saying to you this morning: you go to God with whatever you've got, whatever little faith or belief you have or conviction, take it to God, use it for God, and God will strengthen you. Paul could say to Timothy: 'Even when we believe not, he is faithful, for he cannot deny himself'. Gideon comes out of this whole escapade a hero, and in a fact what has happened is: he has been reborn, he's even given a new name - 'If Baal is god, let him defend himself'. You'd hardly recognise Gideon.

Then we turn to the conversion of his father. His father, when they come to his door, says - if I can paraphrase it - 'He doesn't need any help from Ophrah's town council to maintain his honour. If Baal is a god, he should be perfectly able to zap my son himself'. It sounds a bit like Elijah when he was on the mount. Remember the prophets of Baal were there, and he challenges them, and when they come and make their sacrifice they begin to cry and wail, rip their clothes and cut their flesh. Do you remember what Elijah says? Can I paraphrase it for you, because the meaning isn't all clear in our English translation: 'About noontime Elijah began mocking them. He said: 'You'll have to shout louder', he scoffed, 'for surely he is a god'. The Hebrew rendering literally means this: 'Perhaps he is in deep thought, or he is relieving himself, or maybe he is away on a trip, or he is asleep and needs to be wakened' - do you see the scorn that the great prophet Elijah speaks to these prophets of Baal with?
Then we read in 1 Kings chapter 18 that he lifts his eyes to God, and he says: 'LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, Jehovah, he is the God; Jehovah, he is the God'.

'If Baal is god', Joash said, 'Let him be god'. I'll tell you, do you know what God's looking for in these days? He's not looking for wet blanket Christians. He's looking for men and women of faith, who will be willing to challenge the status quo of our pluralistic ecumenical age, and prove that God is the God who answereth by fire - not with a mouthful of verbose claims and evangelical cliches that mean nothing, but with a life that proves, that effects conversions.

Gideon's obedience effected conversions in his family in a way that he could never have imagined. Was it Gideon's personal stand that awakened a spiritual awareness in his father? Perhaps. Or maybe Joash was just longing for someone in his family to take the first step, he didn't have the courage to do it himself. But yet, when Gideon took that stand, God converted his father. Maybe there's someone here this morning and you're a wife of an unbeliever, or you're a husband of an unbeliever, can I encourage you from the words of 1 Corinthians 7 and verse 14 and 16? 'The unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy', verse 16, 'For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?'. Save them by what? Your godly example.

What stand do you take in your family? What kind of husband are you, or wife are you, or father, or mother, or child? What example do you give to the rest? Do you know what the lesson was God was teaching Gideon here? He had to take his stand in the home before he could take his stand in the battlefield. Because he was obedient, he was converted, his father was converted, and thirdly we see that the people were converted - because we read in verse 33, if you look back at Judges chapter 6, that the people rallied round. The tribes round about came to the cause. Do you know how your stand can affect other people? It's hard to make that stand at times, especially when it's against your family, when it's against even perhaps the church system or trend that is happening, when it's against the spirit of the age - but don't underestimate the effect it can have!

Joash's words to the city men reminded me of something that happened in the life of John Knox, the great reformer in Scotland. In the year 1548 he was a prisoner on a French slave ship, he was chained to a rowing bench and lashed constantly by the guards. He was there because he preached the word of God, the gospel, and he opposed the Roman Catholic system which of course was the majority church of that particular day. One day a Lieutenant on the ship brought aboard a wooden image of the Virgin Mary and demanded that all the slaves kiss it. Of course, Knox refused to kiss it, and then it was pushed violently into his face. Do you know what Knox did? He grabbed it, he threw it overboard, shouting: 'Let Our Lady now save herself, she's light enough, let her learn to swim'. You might think that's ungracious, but the fact of the matter is: when Knox was not struck down by divine anger, two things happened. Never again from that event were believers required to engage in Roman Catholic exercises against their wishes, and the second thing that happened was: men started to look to John Knox as their leader, and eventually the Scottish Reformation was the result. Do not underestimate how your obedience can affect not only your own life, but your
family and even a whole nation!

Fourthly and finally - we have seen that obedience to Christ meant entire consecration, enduring opposition, effecting conversion, and finally: experiencing unction - verses 32 to 35. 'Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, Let Baal plead for himself', and when we go down to verse 34, and after all the tribes came round, 'the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet'. When God calls us to do a specific job for Him, and when we move out in obedience to that call, you can be sure that God will equip you. God never calls us and then fails to equip us. Now 'Midian' means 'strife', and there was strife in the land, and Gideon has had this meeting with the Lord Jesus Christ in the middle of the night, he's had this struggle with his own fears, God has called him and commissioned him and asked him to consecrate himself to the cause. He has now commanded him, but you might say: 'What has changed the situation in the nation? What has turned the strife and sin into almost a reformation for God? The situation hasn't changed yet, what was it that changed it?'. What was the instrumental fact that made the great difference? Verse 34 is it: 'The Spirit of Jehovah, Yahweh, was put upon Gideon'.

Now the Authorised Version doesn't render this in its full extent, in fact very few translations do. Do you know what this literally says, verse 34 that's translated 'the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon'? It literally means, now please catch this: 'The Spirit of Yahweh put on Gideon' - the Spirit of God put on Gideon, or 'the Spirit of God clothed Himself with Gideon'. What was the secret? It's not by might, it's not by power, it's by my Spirit saith the Lord. The Spirit of God clothed Himself with Gideon, the word is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe a man putting on his clothes, or a warrior putting on a suit of armour. It's like putting on a glove! Could I translate it like this in a sort of paraphrase: 'The Spirit of the LORD put Gideon on like a glove'.

One of the professors at Dallas Theological Seminary, Howard Hendricks, years ago used to say to his students - I quote him: 'Men, every morning I pray, 'Lord, here am I. I want to be your suit of clothes today. I want You to take me and use me. Lord, just walk around in me today". Obedience meant experiencing unction for Gideon, to the extent that the Spirit of God took him as a suit of clothing and lived in him.

There's one thing about a suit of clothes: it doesn't fight the wearer, sure it doesn't? You put it on and it should stay there. It submits to the human body, doesn't it? Wherever you go, whatever you do, your clothes move with you. That's the way we ought to be as believers, we ought to get to a place of consecration, no matter what the opposition may be. We need to get to a place of surrender, submission, that we're on our face before Christ the risen Lord, and we're willing to be His clothes in our world. The trouble is, we're not often a passive suit of clothes, we grieve the Spirit by our sinfulness, we quench the Spirit by our selfishness, and we're told that we need to continually be refilled by the Holy Spirit. Isn't that why Paul said in Ephesians chapter 5, speaking as it was almost of the days of the Judges you would think, but it was his day and it's our day: 'See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be continually filled with the Spirit'.

Are you filled with the Spirit? Maybe you don't even know how to answer that question, maybe you think that's a pentecostal or charismatic question - it's not. That's what makes the difference. When a group of British ministers were discussing the advisability of inviting D. L. Moody for a crusade in the mainland, one man asked: 'Why must it be Moody? Does D. L.
Moody have a monopoly of the Holy Spirit?’. Quietly one of the other ministers replied: 'No, but it is evident that the Holy Spirit has a monopoly of D. L. Moody'. Does the Holy Spirit have a monopoly of you? Are you His glove? Do you realise that Baal must go before Midian can? If we're ever to have victory in our lives, in our church, in the nation: the personal altars in our hearts and our homes must fall. God's altar must be rebuilt, and God's altar cannot be built until Baal's altar is destroyed - because God will not share His glory with another, and the place we must begin is our own backyard. Entire consecration, obedience even if it means enduring opposition, but praise God: it will mean effecting conversions in our own lives, in our family, in our church and in our nation; and we will experience the unction of God in our lives in a way that we have never done - if, like Gideon, we are faithful.

'Trust and obey,
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey'.

Let's all bow our heads. Now let me say this: most Christians, especially those who have been converted at an early age, find the need at some stage in their life to make a second, or a third, or fourth or more decision to re-consecrate their lives to the Lord. You're not superman or superwoman, and you need to repent of something in your life, don't you? You know what that idol is, and this morning I'm calling upon you, and God is calling upon you through this word, to cast down that altar, cast down every idol, and raise a monument in your life to the true and the living God.

Father, hear our prayer, glorify Your name. Oh, for the day when You'll be exalted again among all our people, for Christ's sake we pray, Amen.
Judges 6, and the title this morning - I keep forgetting to give it to these boys at the back, but they're very gracious and patient with me - 'Gideon and the Fleece'. The first study in Gideon, as we are going through a study in the Judges entitled 'Men for the Hour', the first study that we looked at in Gideon was 'Gideon, The Fearful', and then last week we looked at 'Gideon, The Faithful', and this morning we're looking at this quite controversial passage of Scripture 'Gideon and the Fleece'.

Beginning to read chapter 6 and verse 36, and after all that transpired - and if you don't know what that is, you need to read the rest of the chapter: "Gideon said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said, Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said. And it was so: for he rose up early on the morrow, and thrust the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water. And Gideon said unto God, Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once: let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. And God did so that night: for it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground".

Now if you don't know the background, God has called this fearful man Gideon to fight His battle. He has been called to fight the oppressors of the people of God in the land, the Midianites. Of course, the people were in this predicament because of their sin against the Lord, but in His grace, as we have found as we go round in a cycle time after time, again and again in this book, God raises up deliverers - 'Judges' is their name - to deliver His own people when they cried upon Him. So Gideon has been raised up as God's new deliverer to deliver the people from the hand of the Midianites, and God has called him to go and fight against these Midianites, but Gideon wants a pledge from the Lord that what He has said will happen, that he will have victory, that the Lord will be with him.

The first pledge that he seeks is that, as he puts out this fleece, a coat of a sheep, that dew would fall on the fleece of wool, but that in the morning there would be no dew roundabout on the ground - that all the dew that fell at dawn would just fall upon the fleece, none on the ground round it. Then we find that that isn't good enough initially for Gideon, and he asks a second pledge. The following night he asks that the dew would fall around on the ground, but that the fleece would be bone dry. So those are the two tests or signs that Gideon has asked God to give to him as a pledge: first of all the fleece is to be wet, the ground is to be dry; and then the next evening the fleece had to be dry, and the ground had to be wet.

Now this is a very difficult passage to understand - maybe you're sitting here thinking: 'How's he going to apply this passage to us this morning?'. Well, that is where the controversy enters in: how do you apply a passage such as this? There's a great divergence of opinion regarding what it means, and how you apply it to the present day in which we live. Of course, the reason for the controversy is because the underlying subject of these verses is the great subject of guidance, one many of us are confused about, a problematic issue that many of us
haven't come to the secret of yet. So, it should be no surprise that there's a great variety of opinion on a text such as this.

Then this problem of guidance is added to when we read in the New Testament, in Ephesians 5:17, Paul says: 'So then, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is'. So it's not good enough to say: 'Look, I'm so confused about this issue of guidance, and there are so many different ways that seem to be set forth in scripture to find out God's will, that I've just come to the conclusion that we're not really meant to know God's will, we just walk as near to Christ as we can and everything that happens - Kay-sera-sera - is meant to be'. But Ephesians says: 'Don't be foolish, you need to understand what the will of the Lord is'. You can know God's will - that adds to this great problem of guidance, because so many of us don't know how to find it.

So how do you find it? Well, some people say you find it by putting out a fleece. Not literally! But asking a sign from God, asking a pledge from God. Now generally there are three views regarding this passage of Scripture, and I've tried to sum them up like this: first of all, there are advocates of putting out the fleece. These are people who say: 'Well this, what Gideon did, is a method of discerning God's will and we should practise it today'. Then the second interpretation is those who are opponents of putting out the fleece, and they say: 'No, it was a sin for Gideon to put out the fleece, because it betrayed his unbelief. He should have just taken God at His word, God had given him promises and he should have believed it, that should have been enough'. Then there's a third group of people, and this is the understanding approach: these folk recognise that Gideon did lack faith, and he did betray unbelief in a sense, and he should have just believed God. They also recognise that putting out a fleece, just as Gideon did, is not a pattern that we should be using today for discerning God's will. But these folk, the 'understanding approach', they also recognise that God graciously condescended and gave the signs to Gideon that he requested - in other words, God recognised Gideon's faith even though it was very weak, and He still gave what he needed in order to assure him.

Now, which am I? Well, I'm in number three, the understanding approach, and I'll show you why as we go through our study this morning. But let's deal with each of them individually - you might think this is a bit technical, and it certainly is very practical, but I hope of the end of this morning's lesson you will have gleaned a great deal that will help you in this area of guidance and knowing God's will. First of all, let's look at the advocates of putting out the fleece. They believe that what Gideon did, testing God in this way, looking for a sign, they believe and advise that we should do it today in order to discern the will of the Lord personally for us. Of course, it involves asking God to fulfil some condition that we lay down: 'Lord, You do this and let me see this if this is Your will - give me a sign'.

There was a lady in the United States on one occasion who wanted to go to the Holy Land, Israel, and one night she read about the trip in the brochure. She read down the whole itinerary, she looked at the guides and the places to visit, then she noticed that she would be flying, if she went out, on a Boeing 747. As she was going to sleep that night, just about to close her eyes, she prayed to the Lord and said: 'Lord, is it Your will that I should go to Israel?'. She committed herself to Him and then she went to sleep, and she woke when her alarm went off in the morning - and guess what the time was on the alarm clock? 7:47 - and right away she thought: 'Right! That God's will, I have to go to Israel!'. Many people seek God's will in the same way, and that could be said in a sense to be those who put out a fleece - but I'm not sure that it is, and I'll show you what I mean in a little moment or two.
Many people who advocate putting out a fleece, they lay down their own conditions before God for a sign like this: 'Lord, if Pastor Smith rings before midnight, I’ll know that it's your will', or, 'If the weather changes by tea-time, if it rains or if it clears up, I'll take that as a sign from You'. Now maybe you're sitting here this morning, and you're saying: 'Well, can God not do that? Can God not make Pastor Smith ring before midnight? Can He not change the weather before tea-time?', and I say yes, of course He can, but the problem is: so can the devil, and so can Pastor Smith of his own volition ring you before tea-time, and the wind can change. It's not necessarily God changing the wind directly to show you His will, but it could just happen because of the weather. Hence a lot of this putting out of the fleece, or what people claim it to be, is a lot of hot air. The tragedy of it is that such practices have wrecked lives as people have made monumental decisions based on nothing more than the changing winds of circumstance.

Don't misunderstand me, you'll see a little bit later that circumstances are not unimportant when we discern God's will, but circumstances and signs must be interpreted always by the word of God, otherwise they are subjective, there's nothing to test them by. Now maybe you're objecting, and you're saying: 'But God did this for Gideon'. Well, I ask you: did He do that for Gideon? This is where many advocates of putting out the fleece fall down. What did God do for Gideon? Did He do what the advocates of putting out the fleece today claim is done for them? The answer I think is categorically 'No'.

Let me show you on two counts why that is the case. Gideon was not looking to his fleece for guidance, now please note that. He was not looking to the fleece for guidance, he was looking to the fleece for confirmation of guidance that had already been given to him by the word of the Lord. God had already told him through the scriptures, or through the spoken word in his day, what to do. So he was just seeking assurance of his success. So to pluck this out of the book of Judges, and misrepresent it and misapply it as a way to be guided by God today is doing despite to the word of God.

Secondly: Gideon asked, please note, for a supernatural sign, he asked for the miraculous - not a natural sign, but a supernatural one. What Gideon asked for would never have happened without the direct intervention of God. But today many advocates of putting out the fleece test God and ask God for a sign that could happen naturally, without any divine intervention - Pastor Smith ringing before midnight, the weather changing before tea. Hence they can often be misled. When you're being guided of God, you need to know somehow that it is unmistakably God that is speaking to you - and Gideon knew that because God did the impossible. So, be careful if you're one of these advocates: note that Gideon did not seek guidance, but confirmation; he did not seek for a natural sign, but a supernatural sign.

Now let's look for a moment at the opponents of putting out the fleece. Now, if you have a pen and paper it would be good for you to take some of these notes, because you'll never remember it - I couldn't remember it, so I'm sure that you'll not, but they will help you. Opponents of putting out the fleece go further than the two points I've already shared with you, and here's a number of them that I've tried to summarise from some of the commentaries that I've been studying this week. First of all they say that Gideon was sinning against God, because in verse 36 and verse 37 of the chapter God had revealed His will to Gideon. God had already told Gideon what His will was, so Gideon knew it. In verses 12, 14 and 16 we see that God gave a commission to Gideon, told him that He would be with him. In verse 21, if you look down at it, you remember that God had already given a miraculous sign to him - and the Angel, who we believe was the Lord Jesus Himself, calls out of this offering that Gideon had brought of food, fire to come out of it that devoured it, and that was a sign.
toward Gideon. Then in verse 34, you remember when he was called upon to pull down his own father's altars to Baal and Asherah, that the Spirit of the Lord clothed Himself with Gideon - what else would he need, they say, other than God to use him in such a great triumphant victory.

They move on from that, that God has revealed His will to Gideon, to say secondly: therefore fleece-setting is evidence of doubt and not faith. This showed that Gideon was doubting and was not exercising faith. They point us to verse 36, where Gideon says, if you look at it: 'If thou wilt' - 'If you're going to do this, God', Gideon says, 'show me a sign'. They say right away: 'Why would he say 'If you're going to do it', if he really believed that God was going to do it?'. Then when he asks for the second sign in verse 39, he approaches the Lord like this: 'Let not thine anger be hot against me', almost knowing that what he was doing was wrong. Saying, as we would say: 'Lord, I know what You've said, but I'm still doubting, just give me one more sign'. He's struggling with fear and unbelief, they say.

Of course, there are Scriptures that support this because if you turn to Matthew 12 and verse 39, the Lord Jesus said: 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas' - an evil and adulterous generation seek signs. Then in 1 Corinthians we read again in verses 22 and 23: 'The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness'. So the New Testament definitely doesn't authorise sign-seeking, in fact on the contrary.

Then a third objection that they have to putting out the fleece is: they believe that fleece-setting is dictating to God, telling God what to do on your terms - 'Lord, show me this, and then I'll believe'. Indeed, one author put it like this, and I quote: 'When you think about it, Gideon's request was both absurd and presumptuous. Why should God suspend the laws of nature because a man told Him to?'. Then fourthly, opponents of putting out the fleece say: 'Well, these signs did not solve the problem'. The first sign, incidentally, could have had a natural explanation, because the moisture of the dew would naturally be absorbed by the fleece and dry up quicker on the hard ground. Obviously wool retains moisture for longer. Maybe after that first sign, Gideon would say: 'Now, was that a coincidence? I mean that has a natural explanation, was that a coincidence?'. So that sign was not enough, he needed another sign, and the problem was that the next time he still needed to believe God in spite of the sign, he still had to take a step of faith. So what these opponents say is that signs don't present certainty and produce it in your heart. At the end of the day, you've got to believe God.

Yet, I have my own objections to it, and I believe everything that has been said there by those opponents, but here's a question for you all: do you never have spiritual victories and then doubt God? Are you never in the same position as Gideon was? Do we not all, no matter who we are or what our previous spiritual highlights have been, do we not always need assurances from the Lord, because we're so weak? Sometimes when we read the Scriptures we're so inhuman about the characters that we read about. I think when I get to heaven, certainly, and probably you too, I'll have to apologise to Jonah and to Peter and to Gideon - all these men that I've slated because of their unbelief! But the question is: where are you? Where am I? What would we have done in this particular situation? Where are we regarding faith, believing God? You have to remember, and put yourself in Gideon's shoes: here's a man from a pagan background. Though he was from the children of Israel, his father was the chief man in charge of the shrine of Baal and Asherah, he had been brought up in paganism even though he was a Jew. He was a fearful man, fearful of God's enemies, fearful of his own
family and the people in his own town - and now God is calling him to do something that has seemingly impossible odds.

If you look at chapter 7 and verse 12 you see this, 'the Midianites and the Amalekites', who he was going to fight, 'and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude'. The number was 135,000 of these Midianites versus 32,000 of the Israelites, and we know and find out next week that that 32,000 Israelites was whittled down further and further and further as a test of their faith in the Lord. But be gentle with Gideon, that's my plea. Be human when you're thinking about him, put yourself in his own shoes and ask yourself: if you were going to do battle with 135,000 and you only had 32,000 on your side, what would you feel like, no matter what God had told you?

Then secondly, the Lord gave signs before in the Bible, and gave one to Gideon already. In verse 21, I spoke about it, this meal that the Angel of the Lord brought fire out of and consumed - the Lord knew that when He was calling Gideon, he needed a sign to assure him. Incidentally, note that on that occasion, or on this occasion, God did not rebuke Gideon. Whether it was right or wrong, God obliged Gideon, gave him what he felt he needed. Now Gideon wasn't the first, by the way, to ask a sign of God - when he was promised all blessing, Abraham, when he was promised to inherit the land Abraham replied to the Lord Jehovah: 'Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?'. 'How will I know?', and God wasn't offended in the slightest. The Bible records that God gave him a vision of a furnace and a flaming torch, and God confirmed it to him.

Thirdly, regarding what that writer who I quoted to you said, 'When you think about it, Gideon's request was both absurd and presumptuous. Why should God suspend the laws of nature because a man told Him to?' - well, God suspended the laws of nature in the past because a man told Him. Turn with me to Joshua chapter 10 for a moment, keep with me, Joshua chapter 10 and verse 12: 'Then spake Joshua to the LORD in the day when the LORD delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the LORD hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the LORD fought for Israel'. Now that doesn't mean God never answered a man's request before or after, but it means in that sense of holding the sun still, it never happened before and it never happened again.

Israel, God said to them, 'Prove me now'. God said to King Ahaz: 'Ask of me a sign'. Now, if it's so sinful, why would God ask a man to ask Him for one? This is why I belong to the third group, the understanding approach to putting out the fleece. I don't believe, as the opponents of putting out the fleece believe, that it is advisable to do it, I don't believe it's biblical to do it in the light, particularly, of all that we find in the New Testament regarding guidance. The ideal is to just believe God's word with all your heart, but please do not miss the point of this passage: regardless of the fact that Gideon had weak, imperfect, doubting faith; God stooped, God condescended to his request. That's the point! Though he may not have been perfectly right, God answered him. Let's face it: is every prayer request that you make perfect?

Can I let you into a secret, in case you don't already know it: there isn't one prayer that you have ever prayed that was perfect. That is why you need the Holy Spirit as an Advocate, that is why you need the Lord Jesus Christ as a Great High Priest on the right hand of the Father to
present your prayers perfect, because they are so imperfect. But here's the lesson, don't miss it: we have a God who, even when we don't do things particularly correct, is gracious, He is patient, He is long-suffering, He has a desire that we should know His will even at times when we're not seeking it in the right way. Psalm 103 verse 13: 'Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust'. Thank God that Gideon didn't fall into the hands of some Bible commentators, but fell into the hands of the Lord! Amen? Isn't that what David said when he was being judged by God for numbering the people? He was given a choice how God should judge him: 'And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait: let us fall now into the hand of the LORD; for his mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man'. It's better to fall into God's hand than man's.

Many of us, I know this morning, including myself, are trembling Gideons when it comes to doing God's will. If you read most of the stories of the giants of Scripture and the giants of church history, they were all the same, they all had their doubts, they all had their struggles and fears. Maybe this wasn't sin in the sense of complete unbelief, but maybe Gideon was just being hesitant regarding what God had said. Have you ever been hesitant? Are we anything else than hesitant at times?

One person has said: 'It was not the absence of faith, but the caution of faith that we see here'. He knew the great cost if this thing went wrong, and he was only human like you or me! One commentator says: "God said it, I believe it, that settles it' may be a snazzy bumper-sticker theology, but it doesn't always neatly cover the struggles of believing experience'. That's the way it should be: 'God said it, I believe it, that settles it' - is that the way we always behave? But isn't it wonderful to know that even when we don't just get there all the time, God is a God who is gracious.

Am I telling you to put out the fleece? No, I'm not, this does not sanctify the process, but it does mean that the Lord at times honours our faith even when it is very weak. Isn't it lovely that our Lord, a bruised reed shall not break, a smoking flax shall He not quench? Isn't it wonderful that your God is a God who is not ashamed to stoop down and to reassure us in our fears and in our doubts? Imagine your three-year-old daughter or son, or niece or nephew, and they come in gurning their eyes out because the neighbour's dog nearly bit their head off - what would you say? 'You're a cissy! You're a chicken! Go back out there and face that Rottweiler, or whatever it was!'. Do you think God is like that with us? He is patient even in our weaknesses, and think of it: He doesn't mind humbling Himself in order to bolster our fragile faith. That's why God gave in, because this man we read of in Hebrews 11 became this mighty man of valour, this warrior, this man in the hall of faith. God recognised him, would he have got there if God hadn't condescended in this way regarding his wavering grip on His word?

One has said: 'God is so eager to do just that, that He has provided a table instead of a threshing floor, and bread and wine in place of a feast'. If you were with us this morning breaking bread and drinking the cup, do you know what those were? Signs. Why? Because we are weak and forgetful. The Lord knew that we need signs, and I believe that the purport of this passage is, like the wee man who said 'Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief. I'm nearly there, but I'm not all the way' - praise God that our God is not one that says, closing the door behind you, 'Well, go away and come to me when you've got it'.

Let me leave with you in the last few moments the ideal method for knowing God's will, and if you want to know more of this see the study I did in 'Back to Basics' not so long ago, number
6 on 'Guidance' - but I'll leave you with an overview of all of this. Sidlow Baxter said: 'The faith which always needs supernatural signs and wonders is still in the kindergarten'. How do we get out of the kindergarten? John says in 1 John 5:4: 'Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith'. Romans 10:17 says: 'Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God' - if we're to have faith to believe in God's guidance, where do we get it? One: the principles and precepts of the word.

There are seven of these, here's the first - the principles and precepts of the word, even Gideon found out God's will from the word. Although he maybe doubted a little, he had an objective base for what God wanted him to do: 'Thy word is a lamp on to my feet, and a light unto my path to guide', the Psalmist said. Now this is done in two ways by God: first, specific commands, 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not'. Then secondly, general principles right throughout the whole of the Scriptures. Why not go out and drink yourself silly as a Christian? Because there are many weaker brothers who become alcoholics from it, if that's your problem there's the guidance this morning in two seconds, a principle in God's word that we're not only to look after ourselves but look after other brothers. We're to read both the commands, specific, and the principles, general; and prayerfully apply them to our lives - because God's word never contradicts itself.

A man on one occasion came to R.A. Torrey and said that God was leading him to marry a certain woman, she was a very devoted Christian he said, and they were greatly drawn to one another and began to love one another. He felt that God was leading them to be married. R.A. Torrey replied to the man, 'You're already married, you already have a wife!'. You see, obviously God's word does not contradict another part of God's word, no matter what the subjective leading that you feel might be. Sometimes I hear: 'Well, God showed me, or God told me' - well, if it's against this book, you're lying or you're being misled!

Secondly, peace of God in our hearts. Not only the principles and precepts of the word, therefore you need to study them not just in emergency matters, but in the small everyday things of life day by day. But secondly, you need to know the peace of God in your hearts - Colossians 3:15 says that the peace of God ought to rule our hearts. That Greek word for 'rule' is the verb form of the word for a judge in public games, or an umpire or referee in a sports match - someone who decides upon disputed matters. If you don't know what to do, then he will decide for you. Philippians 4 tells you about that - be anxious about nothing; all things by prayer and supplication, make your requests known unto God...and the peace of God will rule your hearts and minds - 'rule', the same word. The peace of God.

Thirdly, persuasion given by the Spirit. We find this in Psalm 37 and verse 4, the Psalmist says: 'Delight thyself also in the LORD: and he shall give thee the desires of your heart'. God places, by His Spirit, specific desires in your heart so that you might, in the cycle of prayer, ask for what He has given you to desire. So the cycle goes round, and God gets His will done on earth as it is in heaven by these persuasions given by His Spirit. Psalm 145 speaks of the same, where we read in verse 19: 'He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him: he also will hear their cry, and will save them'. Now guard against sudden ideas that just flood into your mind, or impulses due to emotional tenseness you're going through - test all these subjective experiences by the objective word of God, and distrust anything that robs you of the peace of God.

So: one, the principles and precepts of the word; two, the peace of God in your heart; three, persuasion given by the Spirit - four, the providence of circumstances. Now, this is only when
you have the word of God for something - number 2, number 3 and number 4 only apply when you've got God's objective word on the matter, the principles and precepts of the Scriptures agree. But when that happens, the Lord may arrange circumstances for you in such a way that it indicates an open door or closed door. So if God gives you leading through His word, and then He opens the door and there is this persuasion and peace in the heart, you can know that this is God's will.

Fifthly there is perspective of other believers. This is one that is often missed, perhaps because some people's perspective leaves a lot to be desired, but nevertheless in the scripture, in Proverbs chapter 11 verse 14, we read: 'Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety'. Now advice is only as good as the source that you're getting it from, so go to spiritual people, seek their counsel, those who have experienced guidance in their life, those who know the things of God - and remember: too many cooks spoil the broth. Don't go to everybody in the church!

Sixthly - and these next two, six and seven, are often missed, and I don't want you to miss them because these are the key to guidance, I believe. Personal surrender to God's will. First there are the precepts and principles of the word; the peace of God in your heart; persuasion given by the Spirit; the providence of circumstances; perspective of others - but all those five will mean nothing, in fact you'll probably not get any of them, until you have personal surrender to God's will. In other words, God is more concerned about what I am - the hangup often in this dilemma of guidance is: 'What should I do? Where should I be? Where should I go?', but God is wanting you to ask the question 'What should I be in the sense of my character, my person, as a spiritual entity?'. God is more interested in what you are - do you know that? Maybe someone says: 'Well, David, I've been trying for years to find God's guidance on this particular issue, and I just can't find God's will on it'. Maybe the problem is that there is another area in your life where you're very gladly not seeking any guidance from the Lord, and you're being disobedient? The question is, if you want to know God's will in your life: are you willing to be guided whatever the cost? The cost is that you give your whole life to Him! Maybe you've found out His will in a certain area of your life and you don't like it, and that's why you're not getting guidance in another area. You see, guidance is not just to enable us to fulfill God's will, it is to enable us to bend our own will - not bend His! To break us, and not just to be guided, but to be used by God. All things hang on complete surrender to the Lord.

On one occasion there was an ocean liner that sank off the Irish coast years ago. The maritime world was bewildered because the ship's captain was an excellent seaman, and no one could figure out what the cause was. Divers were sent down, and one of the items that was brought up was the ships compass box. As it was opened, they found a point of a penknife blade inside. Apparently, while cleaning the compass, and unwary sailor broke off the tip of his knife - it became lodged inside the device, and just one tiny piece of metal was enough to cause the compass to give a bad reading. The result was the ship took a wrong course and crashed, and people perished. Romans 12 says: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, and then you shall know what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God'. Tozer said: 'The man or woman who is wholly and joyously surrendered to Christ can't make a wrong choice, any choice will be the right one'.

Then seventh, not only personal surrender to God's will, but private communion with the Lord
Jesus. God doesn't just want to give you guidance, He wants to give you the Guide - that's what the whole Christian life is about! The Lord said: 'My sheep hear my voice', and they follow Him - do you hear the voice of the Shepherd? Do you spend time with Him? Are you alone to listen to Him? That's what happened to Gideon: he was alone that night, and he encountered Christ. That's the key to guidance: if you know the Shepherd, and your life is completely surrendered to Him, you'll be guided - you can't go wrong! As Luther said: 'I know not the way He leads me, but well do I know my Guide' - do you know Him?

Ancient sailors of the seven seas, from the Phoenicians to the Vikings, all fixed their sights on the heavens, on the polars and on the Pole Star - in particular the North Star, which is the brightest star in the sky, and indeed the most reliable of all guides because it sits still, it does not move. On one occasion an artist drew a picture, and it represented a night scene. There was one solitary man rowing a little skiff across a lake. The wind is high and the storm blows and billows the white and crested waves, they rage around this little frail bark. There's not a star in the sky, it's all bleak and dark except one: one shines through the dark above the angry sky. That there voyager is pictured in the painting fixing his eyes, and he keeps rowing on and on and on through the midnight storm, and written beneath the picture are these words: 'If I lose that, I'm lost'. If I lose that, I'm lost.

You need to be guided through the principles and precepts of the word, through the peace of God in your heart, persuasion given by the Spirit, providence of circumstances, the perspective of others, personal surrender to God's will - but if you lose sight of Jesus, communion with the Lord Jesus, you'll be lost. There's a hymn I love, most people don't know it today - don't worry, we're not going to sing it! - but it goes like this:

'O pilgrim bound for the heavenly land,  
Never lose sight of Jesus'.

If you keep your eye on Him, you'll not need to put out any fleeces - He'll lead the way if you will follow.

Our Father, we're ashamed that at times we criticise men like Gideon. We know that he maybe didn't believe as he should, in the way that is required; but yet, our Father, which of us have done that? We pray that we will learn how to do it more, the ideal way to seek Your will, but those of us who are so weak - all of us Lord - we thank You for signs of Your grace that You've given to us that were not required. But teach us to fix our eyes on the Saviour, and to give our lives and will completely over to Him, that we may know what it is to acknowledge Him in all our ways, trusting in the Lord with all our heart, not leaning to our own understanding, and then He shall guide our paths. Lord, draw us nearer to Him, and then we'll know that we are in the centre of Your will. Hear our prayer, and bless us as we go our separate way - and we do pray: lead us, Heavenly Father, lead us, Amen.
Now we're turning to Judges chapter 7. Judges chapter 7, and we'll take time to read all of this chapter:

"Then Jerubbaal, who is Gideon", verse 1, "and all the people that were with him, rose up early, and pitched beside the well of Harod: so that the host of the Midianites were on the north side of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley. And the LORD said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me. Now therefore go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead. And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand. And the LORD said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many; bring them down unto the water, and I will try them for thee there: and it shall be, that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I say unto thee, This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go. So he brought down the people unto the water: and the LORD said unto Gideon, Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink. And the number of them that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, were three hundred men: but all the rest of the people bowed down upon their knees to drink water. And the LORD said unto Gideon, By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place. So the people took victuals in their hand, and their trumpets: and he sent all the rest of Israel every man unto his tent, and retained those three hundred men: and the host of Midian was beneath him in the valley. And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Arise, get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thine hand. But if thou fear to go down, go thou with Phurah thy servant down to the outside of the armed men that were in the host. And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet in every man’s hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers. And he said unto them, Look on me, and do likewise: and, behold, when I blow with a trumpet, I and all that are with me, then blow ye the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and say, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon. So Gideon, and the hundred men that
were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon. And they stood every man in his place round about the camp; and all the host ran, and cried, and fled. And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host: and the host fled to Bethshittah in Zererath, and to the border of Abelmeholah, unto Tabbath. And the men of Israel gathered themselves together out of Naphtali, and out of Asher, and out of all Manasseh, and pursued after the Midianites. And Gideon sent messengers throughout all mount Ephraim, saying, come down against the Midianites, and take before them the waters unto Bethbarah and Jordan. Then all the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and took the waters unto Bethbarah and Jordan. And they took two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb; and they slew Oreb upon the rock Oreb, and Zeeb they slew at the winepress of Zeeb, and pursued Midian, and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side Jordan”.

Now, our first week's study in the life of Gideon was entitled 'Gideon, The Fearful', and we have found out what a fearful character Gideon was. Yet in the subsequent week we found out that Gideon was also a faithful man, and he took his fears to the Lord. Now, that was not without questions and doubts, yet nevertheless he took them to the right place and he argued them through in the presence of, we believe, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who was the Angel of Jehovah that we read of in this story. So up until now we've seen that Gideon, and particularly this story that we'll consider this morning, in particular shows us that weakness and faithlessness is not the same thing. Did you hear that? Gideon shows us, and particularly the story that we will consider this morning, that weakness and faithlessness is not the same thing.

Let me explain: you can be strong and also be faithless. You can be naturally strong, both physically and mentally, emotionally and even in a spiritual sense other than the true spirituality that you find in Christ - you could be a very strong religionist in a quasi-spiritual sense. But contrariwise you can also be weak and full of faith, and that's what we're going to see this morning, and indeed that's what we see, I believe, through all the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 and right throughout the whole of the word of God. This teaches us, if ever a character in the Bible did, that you cannot be, in fact, a person of faith without first of all being weak and recognising your own weakness.

The fact of the matter is, we tend to think of the faithful, particularly in a spiritual Christian sense, as being those who are the strong. The unfaithful are those who we think of as being the weak. I think, perhaps, that the value system of our own society has contributed to that view. For instance, some of you can remember your schooldays, some of you haven't got that long ago to remember them - you were taught, perhaps, evolution. Some of our young children, even in primary school, are taught this. They are indoctrinated by this idea of the survival of the fittest, that it was the strongest who crawled out of that primeval soup millions and millions of years ago, who survived; and they killed off their rivals and ate them, and then, as it were, grew upon their strength and became stronger. There's this philosophy right throughout evolution that it is the survival of the fittest - only the strongest in our world survive, and the weakest die. Now often that is translated into our world in ways that, perhaps, we're not so perceptive of - yet even in education we see this. You're only really important and counted if you go to university, some think, or if you're a highflyer and you get all 'A's in your GCSEs or your A-levels, if you have a good career and you keep climbing the
ladder - that gives you worth in the worldview that people have in our day.

There is a lot of egoism about. There are a lot of self-image gurus who tell you that you need to love yourself, and whilst there is a measure of truth in the fact that you need to have self-acceptance, they go over the top and tell you that you almost need to worship yourself, and provide so much comfort and luxury and pampering for yourself that it becomes, in a biblical sense, sin. You can go into a bookshop today and find many self-help programs in book form and cassette form, you can even put some of them on in the middle of the night and listen to them, and supposedly when you're unconscious your subconscious takes it all in. All of it is an attempt to get us to search for the strength that is in all of us, they tell us - search, as the song says, for the hero that is inside yourself.

Now, there's an obvious assumption made that the fittest are the strongest, and therefore the strongest are the most successful. We as the Christian church, and as individual Christians, need to be very very careful that we don't imbibe that same value system to the extent that the world has. In a Christian church today, contemporarily speaking, that shows less difference between a Christian and a non-Christian, I think we have swallowed this great lie. Let me show you how we can succumb to it. Many Christians and churches believe that the bigger the church, the more successful it must be. That is false. Some believe that the size of the congregation reflects the success of the preacher. That may be true on the level of a human sense, but it certainly is not in a spiritual sense. Some think the size of the building reflects the success of church programs, that may be the case on a human level, but is it in the eyes of God a successful church? Some think that the size of our bank balance reflects how much God is blessing us, is that the case? Others believe that the number of young people that come to your church reflects how relevant your church is - is that so?

Now, those things that I have described in a Christian context, they all describe success to a certain extent and on a certain level, but they should never ever be construed as spiritual victory or as the triumph of faith. These things may be success in a human sphere, but in no sense are they success in God's eyes. We have to get rid of the 'strength breeds success' attitude, for it is in fact the antithesis of God's way. We will see this in Gideon this morning, for in this passage we shall see how to be triumphant for God, God's way. How to be a victorious Christian God's way; how to be a success, in other words, in God's eyes.

First John 5:4 reads: 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith'. Faith is the key, but note what we said at the very beginning: faith and weakness are not necessarily cancelling each other out. We tend to think of people with faith as being strong, but what we're going to see this morning is that it is the opposite: that people of faith are the weakest people in the world. Now let me show you this from this account of Gideon as a fighter. First of all, what I want to share with you is found in verses 1 to 3, and then in verses 4 to 8, and it's simply this: if you're going to have victorious faith and be a success in God's eyes, you have to be broken down. You must be broken down. Now in verses 1 to 3 we find the first sifting of Gideon's army. If you look at it and glance at it you'll find that Gideon had 32,000 volunteer soldiers. God said to him: 'Gideon, I want you to whittle this down', and eventually it came to 10,000 - 22,000 were subtracted from his ranks. Now, how was that done? Well, upon the authority of Deuteronomy 20:8, which reads like this: 'The officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart'. He told the fearful, the fainthearted to go home - and 22,000 of them left, and left Gideon with 10,000!
Now you might say: 'Well, that just doesn't make sense!' - and it doesn't make sense. If God wanted Gideon to be a victor, and He wanted the Israelites to overcome the Midianites, it does not make sense to break down the army, to subtract 22,000 from them. But I ask you the question: in whose mind does it not make sense? In your mind, in my mind, but God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. In verse 2 this was the thinking behind what God did: 'I want you to make them this small', He says in effect, 'because if you don't they will vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me'. You see, God wanted Gideon's faith not to be in his strength or in the strength of the numbers of his army, God was going to teach Gideon and the army this lesson: that there had to be a breaking of false faith and false security and of false reliance, before true faith and true victory could take the field.

Then we have the second sifting in verses 4-8, and this simply goes like this - the second test: the surviving 10,000 soldiers were asked to drink at the river. Basically those who got on their knees to drink from the water, probably lapping up the water with their hands, they were eliminated - God didn't want those. Those who got down on their belly and lapped up the water like a dog with their tongue were kept, and there were only 300 of those. So it goes from 32,000 to 10,000, and now from 10,000 to 300.

Now, the question is: what was the significance of this second sifting and this second test? Well expositors, and I've read quite a few preparing for this morning's message, there's different interpretations of this, and you may have heard certain interpretations at Sunday School, you've maybe even taught it, you've maybe even preached on it. There are those who say: 'Well, you see those who took the time to kneel down, and to cup their hands, and to lap up the water with their hands, they had taken their eyes off the enemy. These people were showing the flesh, whereas the ones who quickly fell on their belly, and lapped up the water quick and ready like a dog, and then got quickly on their feet again - they kept their eye upon the foe, they were disciplined and self-sacrificing'.

Now, what is the problem with that interpretation? Well, the problem with it is there are those who take the opposite interpretation and see those who got on their knees as the spiritual ones, and those who got on their bellies as the fleshly ones. But the main problem with any interpretation like that is that the text, the Bible doesn't tell us that - and it's dangerous reading between the lines, what the Holy Spirit has not revealed to us. The other thing is that, whether they kept their eyes on the enemy or took their eyes off the enemy, as far as I'm concerned, is a red herring - because the enemy was miles away, and they would have had to have binoculars to keep their eyes on the enemy!

The sad thing about it is this: if we are looking in the 300, or the ones who left, for virtue or strength in either group - even the first group that we've talked about who were sent home, the 22,000 - we are missing the whole point of what God was doing, and the reason why God chose them in the first place. What am I talking about? Well, I believe that all the Lord was doing in this first sifting in verses 1 to 3, and the second sifting in verses 4 to 8, was He was indiscriminately whittling down the army to show that if they were going to be victorious it was going to be His doing. Sure, if these 300 were mighty men they could have walked away like peacocks, and said: 'Well, it was because we lapped up like a dog, and didn't kneel down and do it with our hands'. We're missing the point, the whole point was that God didn't care, in one sense, how He whittled the numbers down - that was the purpose: to show that no matter how He did it, and how few were left, if there was going to be victory it was because He was with His people. Do you see it? Often we miss the real point of Scripture and make
some clever point that isn't even there, and the sad fact is that we end up contradicting the very point that God is trying to make. What is it? Verse 7, He said: 'By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand' - even by these!

Now Gideon's faith was being tested, that's for sure. Was his faith in the strength of his armies, or in the strength of his God? That's a good question. I know you have faith, but the big issue is: where is it? Can you say with the Psalmist in Psalm 118, I was reading it this week, verse 6: 'The LORD is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me? The LORD taketh my part with them that help me: therefore shall I see my desire upon them that hate me. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes'. If God tested you, or tested me the way He tested Gideon, how would we fare? To prove whether Gideon was trusting in his armies or in the Lord, He took away his crutch, the only strength he had. Through Gideon's actions he had raised up an army, a faithful army of faithful men - and now God was coming and decimating it, and turning it to 1% of its original number! What was God doing? He was taking away his crutch.

Have you got a crutch? Is it necessary for God to take it away before you'll really trust in Him and Him alone. Trevor was telling the children this morning about how Satan challenged God concerning Job. The accusation of the devil was that Job didn't really have faith in God, but Job's faith was resting in the material blessings that God had given him. 'Take the crutches away', Satan said, 'and Job will fall and so will his faith, and he'll turn and curse You'. Do you remember what Satan said to God in chapter 2 of Job? 'Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life. But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face'.

We are going to see this morning in the time that is left that the victory that is wrought by faith has only glory in it for God. It is impossible to understand in any other way than the fact that God has taken the field, and God has wrought the victory. You see, people who live by faith - and I'm not talking about faith missions or anything like that, I'm talking about everyday people who live trusting the Lord - they know their own weakness more and more as they more and more depend upon the Lord. Is that a revelation to us today? People of faith are willing to be known for what they are: weak, helpless. You see, when you see yourself as God knows you are, the outcome is that you are broken, you're broken before God and it is then that brokenness that brings in the blessing.

Let me put it in Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12:10: 'For when I am weak, then I am strong', or as F. F. Bruce paraphrased it, 'My power is most fully displayed when my people are weak'. My power is most fully displayed when my people are weak! The Lord is saying: 'I am the Lord, it is my name, and my glory will I not share with another'.

If you look at verse 8 you see the weapons this army carried, not only were they few in number, verse 16 outlines it as well, but what strange weapons they had: a torch, a trumpet and a jar. Paul said: 'The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but spiritual' - they would have to be, for this army wasn't going to do anything with a torch, a trumpet, and a jar without God! I don't know whether you read much of Christian history, I try to read as much as I can and particularly biography - but it's an astounding fact that the men that God used, particularly in awakenings and revival, were men who the rest of society would have considered to be the weakest of the weak, the runt of the litter.

I was reading this week about William McCulloch, who was used in revival. He was the parish
minister in Cambuslang in Scotland about 1740, and he was a scholarly pastor. He excelled in the Biblical languages, especially Hebrew, but he had very little gift in the pulpit - he could hardly preach. In fact, his own son described him as, I quote: 'Not a very ready speaker, not eloquent. His manner was slow and cautious'. In fact the people of his day called him an 'ale minister', because when he started to preach everybody went out and quenched their thirst at the local inn with ale! He wasn't anything to listen to, yet the fact of the matter is that William McCulloch was chosen of God to prepare the way for a revival in Cambuslang, and later, after he was used of God, George Whitefield - a mighty gifted man, filled with the Spirit - came and preached and many were converted. But arguably it was not the human dynamism of Whitefield, or the eloquence of that great evangelist, but it was this man William McCulloch in his weakness and his brokenness that God used to prepare the way. Do you see this? This is where spiritual victory and success is: you must be broken, God has to sift you, once, twice, however many times it's necessary.

Then secondly, what I want you to see is you must be broken, but you must be built up. Now Gideon is quite an unheroic hero, he certainly is no John Wayne filled with true grit. But perhaps you're saying: 'Well, surely these great heroes of faith are not all weaklings?', no, don't make that assumption, I'm not making that equation at all. If we look at Hebrews 11, you don't need to turn to it necessarily, we find that men of faith were far from weaklings: 'What shall I say more of Gideon, of Barak, of Samson, of Jephthae; David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions. Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens', and so on and so forth. But there is the key: out of their own weakness God made them strong, they became strong but their strength was not their own strength, it was the strength of the Lord. Incidentally, it was not a false weakness, it was not a weakness induced by mere modesty. Weakness was their real condition, and they knew all about it too - but once they were broken down, once they had been sifted of their own false illusions of themselves and their strength, they had to then be built up again by God in the strength of the Lord. As Jude says, they had to be built up in their most holy faith. The Lord was coming to Gideon, after breaking him down, decimating his army, giving him these pathetic weapons, and now He wants to encourage his faith and weaken his fear.

He did this in two ways, first of all by fellowship, and I think this is beautiful. In verse 10, God is so merciful, isn't He? He says: 'If you fear to go down, Gideon, take with you Phurah, your servant, with you to the host'. God has been so merciful to Gideon, and He's so merciful to us. Gideon needed someone beside him, he needed fellowship. Ecclesiastes 4 outlines this for us: 'Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up'. Isn't it amazing how God provides for us? If we would only open our eyes to see it! Fellowship for when we are in weakness. If we are only willing to confess ourselves as weak, so often God will bring along a companion who will share in our danger and stand by us, like Phurah stood by Gideon.

God supplied Gideon with a Phurah, David with his Jonathan, Paul with his faithful Barnabas - we could go on and on and on, and He'll do the same for us if we look for it. You see, some of us shut ourselves up in our grief, or in our pain and don't let anybody in. Some of us can remember situations in which we felt dreadfully alone and fearful, and how often the Lord in His mercy sent someone to our side, and God helped you through a friend. That's what God's doing for Gideon - I just love the way the Lord is portrayed in this story. The Lord doesn't say: 'Would you go yourself, you cissy, how many promises do you need? How many signs do
you need?'. God says: 'Look, if you need somebody to go down with you, there's Phurah, take him with you'.

Phurah was Gideon's friend in need, do you have a friend in need? Don't worry, I'm not going to sing any Disney songs! But it's true, the fact of the matter is: a friend in need is a friend indeed. But maybe the question should be asked, not 'Do you have one?', but are you one? Are you a friend in need? Do you know something: the church is the fellowship for the Christian, and fellowship is essential to our victory and our success when we're fearful, when we're fretting, when we're weak. Who of us isn't weak? It's not all those people that are bereaved, and all those people who are ill that we apply this to, it's all of us! We're all weak and we all need each other!

He had to be built up by fellowship, but then secondly he had to be built up by another supernatural sign that we find in 13 and 14. The sign simply was, they were eavesdropping - not to sanction that in anyway! - but they were listening in to a conversation of the Midianites, and this man had had a dream about a barley loaf that had rolled down the hill and hit a Midianite tent and destroyed it. His mate said to him: 'There can be no other interpretation than that this is speaking of Gideon and the armies of the Lord'. Now, that gave great faith to Gideon. How could we ever criticise him with the fleece when we see that the Lord gave him a sign here to help build up his faith, to help banish his fears - 'As the father pitieth his child, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him'. He remembers that we are dust, He knows our frame - thank God that He is the way He is!

This enemy assured Gideon that the battle would be his. Suddenly Gideon grasped it from the mouth of the enemy - what was it that he grasped? Listen: the foe that he feared had already been defeated, and he was hearing it from his own mouth, and victory was assured. Maybe you're saying: 'I'd love a sign like that' - you have a sign like that. Do you know what our sign is? Our sign is the sign of the cross. Not the literal sign of a cross, but what happened on the cross, where Jesus died for our sins and when He rose again the third day in glorious life that is endless - what does that portray? It portrays that our foe is defeated, there's nothing to fear. This is the sign that God has given us: he is a defeated foe!

Oh to God that we would know what John says in 1 John 3 and verse 8: 'For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil'. The devil has been mastered by the Lord Jesus, and since Calvary Satan's way has ever been downward. Now you would think it was his heyday, wouldn't you? He's having his innings at the moment, but the fact of the matter is: his outcome is not in question. He is plodding towards his execution, and he knows it, and we need not cower before him. He does possess great power, and we cannot face him on our own strength, but our Lord is greater than he is - and greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world!

Surely that deserves a hallelujah? That drove Gideon to his knees, and we find in verse 15 that he worshipped, he grasped it and he fell and he worshipped. He had to be a sincere worshipper before he could be a successful warrior. That's the secret, if there is any, to spiritual success and the triumph of faith - what? We need to be broken worshippers at the foot of the cross, where Jesus bought the victory for us. If you ever get up from that cross you're in trouble. If your head or your heart ever gets filled with pride, and you think: 'I can do this myself, you know I was weak when I was first saved and all the rest' - maybe you were relying more on the Lord when you were first saved, when you were weaker!

You must be broken down and built up, and then do you know what will happen? You'll beam
out! If you're broken down and the Lord builds you up, you'll beam out! Gideon returned with this assurance in his breast to the Israelite camp with built-up faith. He divided the 300 into three companies of a hundred soldiers, with a trumpet and earthenware pitcher, and a lamp inside it - and they all marched to the fringe of the Midianite camp. As, when appointed, the signal was given, they blew the trumpet, they broke the pitchers, and the light was let out - and they all cried 'The sword of the Lord and Gideon!'.

Gideon was the example for them to follow, look at the change in this man's life. In verse 17, one translation puts it like this: 'Watch me', Gideon says, 'Follow my lead', Gideon says, 'Do exactly what I say' - he had come a long way, hadn't he, from the winepress? He was no longer asking, as he had in chapter 6 verse 13: 'If? Why? Where? Lord show me'. This story of Gideon began with a man hiding in a winepress, and in verse 25, if you look at it, it ends up with the enemies of God, the princes of Midian and those nations being slain at a winepress. Where Gideon had his fearfulness, he was now having divine victory!

Now God gives His own interpretation, I believe, to this incident in 2 Corinthians 4 and verse 7, if you care to turn to it. Verse 4 we'll read: 'If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world', that is Satan, 'hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us'. Paul is saying Christ dwells within the Christian, and our body is like an earthenware vessel, and it's only as we are broken, constantly broken - verse 9: 'Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed', and so on - as we are broken and delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the light of the knowledge of Christ, the knowledge of God and the face of Jesus, can shine forth to others.

Oh, do you see it? It's so simple, yet it's so profound: 'Lord, bend that proud stiff-necked I, help me to bow the head and die, beholding Him on Calvary who bowed His head for me'. He must increase and I must decrease. You've got to be broken down, friends, you've got to be built up - and only then will you beam out. Do you see yourself as insignificant this morning? Can I tell you something: you can't be too small for God to use, but some of you need to realise you can be too big for Him to use. If you want the credit for what God's doing, He'll not use you. That's why, when you look around, you see God moving in miraculous ways through some of the very weakest people, the people who are careful to give God all the glory. Does it bother you that you're not very significant? Does it discourage you that you've no prominent gifts? Praise God! You're just the kind of person that He uses! Do you see it? Some of us are walking around: 'God's lucky He has me, isn't He? I'm a natural leader, I'm a natural preacher, I'm a natural organiser. I can do this, I can do that' - if you're like that, you're in for a bitter disappointment, if not now then at the Judgment Seat. We need to alter our current stereotypes of what a servant of God in Christ is. We dupe ourselves into thinking that it's someone dynamic, it's someone assured, confident, brash, fearless, witty, adventurous, glamorous with one or two appearances on Christian television or radio - nothing of the sort! It's someone who is broken.

Some of the oddest souls in creation have been mightily used of God, because God brought strength out of their weakness and shone the very face of Jesus Christ out of their brokenness. Gideon the fighter: may we all know what it is to be broken down, to be built up, and to beam out.
I wonder is there someone here and you're not even a Christian. Well, you know, the formula is no different for you: you have to be broken down of your own self-sufficiency, the thought that you're good enough, that you're not one of these sinners that needs born-again. You have to become weak, Jesus said, like a little child, and repent of your sins and confess it. Just say what you are in God's eyes, know it and say it, and you are to be built up at the foot of the cross too, by the precious blood that was shed to make you right before God. By faith, embrace that gift of salvation there, and say: 'Lord, I'm a sinner, and Jesus died to save me. I want You to save me now', and you'll beam out from this day forth, that's for sure. Is there a backslider here, and the cracks have been plugged up by your own pride, and you've stopped beaming? It's time to get broken again. I'll tell you this: there's not one of us here today that doesn't need a fresh breaking, not one - and if you think you're that one, God help you for you're in need of it more than any of us.

Lord, all we can say is as we sang at the beginning: 'Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Break us, melt us, mould us, fill us. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us'.
We're turning this morning to the book of Judges again and chapter 8, and we have been going through, with a few interruptions here and there for obvious reasons, a study entitled 'Men For The Hour' in the Judges - the characters who are called Judges in the book of Judges. We have been spending quite a number of weeks on this character of Gideon, and I want to deal with him again this morning in what is probably the final study in the life of Gideon, and it's very appropriate for the fact that today is New Year's Day, and we're looking ahead into the unknown. We spoke last evening on a message specifically to do with the New Year, if you weren't there, well I'm sorry that you weren't, but you can get the tape recording - and why not get that message for the New Year. We'll be looking at Gideon this morning, but it has a slant and an aspect upon the relevance of this particular time of year as we'll see later on.

We're going to begin reading at chapter 8 and verse 22, we'll summarise, when we look at it later, what has come prior in this chapter to these verses that we're going to read. But let's take it up from verse 22: "Then 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. And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you. And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey. (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) And they answered, We will willingly give them. And they spread a garment, and did cast therein every man the earrings of his prey. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was a thousand and seven hundred shekels of gold; beside ornaments, and collars, and purple raiment that was on the kings of Midian, and beside the chains that were about their camels' necks. And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house. Thus was Midian subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted up their heads no more. And the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon. And Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house. And Gideon had threescore and ten sons of his body begotten: for he had many wives. And his concubine that was in Shechem, she also bare him a son, whose name he called Abimelech. And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age, and was buried in the sepulchre of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baalberith their god. And the children of Israel remembered not the LORD their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side: Neither showed they kindness to the house of Jerubbaal, namely, Gideon, according to all the goodness which he had showed unto Israel". Amen.

I don't know whether you can recall, with all the interruptions - and let me just say in parenthesis there a big thank you for your prayers over the last number of weeks at the birth of our little son. We appreciate your prayers, and both Noah and Barbara are doing very well, and also of course your gifts to us, both for Christmas and for the birth of the baby - we're very grateful. But if you can remember back when I was last with you in the pulpit on a
Sunday morning, we were studying through the life of Gideon. We began with 'Gideon, The Fearful', and we saw that this man was wracked in his original state by anxieties and fears and inadequacies. Then we looked further at 'Gideon, the Faithful', and how, when God called him to destroy the shrine that was erected in his father's property to Baal and to Asherah, he very timidly, it has to be said, obeyed - but yet he obeyed. Even during the night he broke it down, but he did it, and he was faithful. We began to see a progression in this man's life. Then we saw, spending a week looking at the subject of guidance in 'Gideon and the Fleece', how we can discern God's will in our lives. Then the last study that we did was 'Gideon, The Fighter', and how Gideon, on a human level, with very little resources - only 300 men - destroyed the army of the Midianites. It wasn't really Gideon of course, it was the Lord; and the Lord was teaching Gideon that if he was going to succeed and have victory in life in his judgeship, and if the children of Israel were going to succeed with God, they would have to realise that their victory was in Him and not by the arm of the flesh.

Sadly this morning our title is 'Gideon, the Fallen'. Someone has said well, 'It is not how you begin a thing that matters, but how you finish it'. What a good motto for the New Year that is for us on this New Year's Day, when we consider the many resolutions that people make - and if you're honest, you'll have to admit that very few of us see them through until January 1st the next year. But this story has so much to teach us any day in the year, indeed whatever stage of life we are in as a Christian. It's especially relevant, I have to say, for those of you who are nearing the end of the journey.

We have watched as Gideon the fearful graduated through God's academy to become Gideon the faithful and Gideon the fighter. Ultimately we see him being formed by God's Spirit into a hero, and we know that because when we turn to Hebrews 11, the hall of faith in the New Testament, God's Holy Spirit has the record there that Gideon was a great man of faith, named with many other great giants of the Bible. Yet here, solemnly and poignant.ly, we are considering the end of Gideon's judgeship under this title 'Gideon, the Fallen'. I think there is perhaps little else more tragic in life than a fallen hero. Some of you have had your heroes, whether in the secular or sporting world, or even in the church; and it's hard to watch them fall when they fall from such great heights. It's tragic to see a hero of the people fall, but what is more tragic is when a man or woman of God falls. It is bad for the people who look up to them, but more than that it is bad for the witness and testimony of God itself, and the world warms its hands at the thought of the fires of shame - yet how often it happens. It is perhaps happening more today than it has ever done.

Let me just say by way of preface and warning, as we enter into this study this morning: we all have to say, as we look at this fallen hero, Gideon, 'But for the grace of God, there go I'. There are none of us here today immune from falling. First Corinthians 10:12 reminds us: 'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall'. We have to ask the question today: where did it all go wrong for Gideon? Can I summarise it by giving you what I feel is the bottom line? The reason for Gideon's fall was simply that he got too big for God to use, too big for God to use. That often happens. At first, a man is humbled that God should ever call him, maybe he's even fearful or uncooperative, as Moses was before Gideon was. If you turn back to chapter 6 for a moment and verse 15, we see the humility of this man. As God calls him, he says: 'Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house'. That's where this man started: God called him in this humble state, though he was fearful and anxious.

God begins to take him through a process, through His school, if you like, and He journeys him through the low valley of humiliation to show Gideon that he's right, he is nothing and the
Almighty is everything. If he's going to succeed as a leader of God's people, he has to keep always in view his low state and God's high state and necessary provision for him in the work that he has to do. It is at this point that Gideon learns that it is in his weakness that God's strength will be made perfect. If you look down to verse 34 of chapter 6, you'll be able to read this. At that point, when he realised his weakness but then was enabled to look to God for grace and help: 'The Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon', we noted how the Hebrew literally reads 'clothed Himself with Gideon and he blew a trumpet'. He led the people of God into great victory.

All of a sudden this man who is humble at the beginning, sees his humility and his inability, he is caused to see that with God's Spirit, when he is low, the Spirit of the living God, like a low valley, will flow through him to the river of living waters. God is enabled to do mighty things through this broken pot vessel, Gideon. Even in a miraculous way God's power is evidenced in his life, and we see that if you turn and remind yourself of chapter 7 and verse 2: 'The LORD said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me'. God did a miracle, He whittled Gideon's armies from 32,000 down to 10,000, and then down to 300 - and armed with nothing but pitchers, lamps and trumpets, they trounced the enemy of the Midianites. That was to show that God gave them the victory!

But sadly we're here to memorialise the fact that somewhere along the way Gideon forgot where the source of his power came from. Somewhere, somehow he began to see himself as strong, he began to view himself as gifted and successful, wise and knowledgeable - and before long the Lord is left outside the door, because Gideon's ego takes over an area and territory that was once the Lord's domain. Let me say to all of us this morning, and I include myself in these remarks, that this has always been one of the devil's more subtle and yet successful strategies. We should not be surprised at that, because of course that's how Lucifer fell himself. As one has said, pride was the sin that made the devil the devil. Lucifer's job, as the Sun of the Morning, as the light bearer, was as a cherub to reflect the glory of God - he had no glory of his own, though he was a glorious creature, the glory in him was a reflection of the glory of God. God had created him to reflect and display the wonder and light of the Godhead. Yet we read in Ezekiel 28:17, God says to him in condemnation: 'Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty'. He began to think that he had something going for himself, and there is where the very first fall took place. Gideon's fall is along the same lines: he began to forget where the source of his power came from, and thought there was something in himself.

Now let's look more specifically and ask: how did this fatal fall occur in Gideon's life? The first thing I want to leave with you today is: his fall came shortly after a great triumph. This is a lesson we all do well to learn, this is often the tact of the enemy: that it is after the spiritual mountain tops that the valleys come, and the challenges, and the falls. You remember it was Elijah on the Mount, as he challenged the prophets of Baal in a great victory, after which the devil came to him and whispered in his ears that he was useless, and God had finished with him, and he's down in the valley and he's ready to die, for he's not as great as his fathers. Gideon's fall too came shortly after great triumph. I wonder, just in a way of caution: has the last year been a good year for you as a Christian? Praise the Lord for that! I don't want to pour cold water on it at all, I want to rejoice with you - but be very careful, because don't think or assume right away that this year must be the same. Andrew Bonar said well: 'Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle'.

Now, what we see here is a great victory of Gideon, another one. We see in the first number
of verses that we did not read this morning in chapter 8 that Gideon deals in a textbook manner with division among God's people. Now anyone who has ever been in leadership, and who has experienced division among God's children, knows that is one of the most difficult situations to deal with. Gideon had four conflicts in his life that we know of: first of all there was the conflict with his own heart, the fears that he had. Then after that there was the conflict with Baal in chapter 6, as he pulls down the shrine of his father, and in effect goes against his family and his neighbourhood and the whole religious system of the time. Then thirdly he has this fight and battle with Midian in chapter 7, and he trounces those armies with 300 men. But now his final battle, and incidentally the battle after which he falls in chapter 8, is the battle with Israel, a battle with God's people - isn't that ironic?

Of course, he knew how to deal with the problem people among the ranks of the saints. Let me share a little bit with you, because it sets the scene of this great triumph before Gideon's fall. First of all, there were those in the crowd of God's people who were critical of Gideon, they were resentful. Critical people are often resentful, and we find them in verse 1: 'The men of Ephraim said unto him, Why hast thou served us thus', chapter 8 verse 1, 'that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites?'. Ephraim was angry, they were miffed with Gideon. Gideon had left them out when they were going to fight the Midianites, and therefore they did not share in the glory of Gideon. In other words, they felt that their importance had not been recognised.

Now Ephraim is a tribe here which epitomises people, whether they're children of God or not, who are often filled with a sense of their own self-importance. I don't know whether you know any saints like this or not, I do - I'm not going to name them from the pulpit! - but they often get offended when you don't make enough of them. They have this attitude if you bypass them: 'Oh, I wasn't asked. I wasn't recognised, or I wasn't consulted, or I was overlooked. I have been totally ignored in this whole affair'. Well, Ephraim was like that, he was a prima donna. If you want to put it in a New Testament light, he was Diotrephes, who loved the preeminence, he loved to be made much of, recognised. Incidentally, isn't it interesting that this dispute many many hundreds of years ago among the children of God is fuelled by pride? Pride, the sin that made the devil the devil; and pride, the sin that has divided God's people down through all time, and which probably is the seed of every sin imaginable.

Let me ask you the question: how would you deal with these Ephraimites? 'Oh, you didn't consult me!' - critical and resentful - 'We weren't in the victory!'. Well, I imagine a lot of Ulster Christians would say: 'Those boys need to be brought down a peg or two, someone needs to tell them a few home truths, and I'm the one to do it'. But Gideon's quick-witted proverb was what did the trick, in verse 2: 'He said unto them, What have I done now in comparison of you?'. He panders a little bit to them in the proverb, and he says: 'Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?' - and Abiezer is simply the house of Gideon. He's saying: 'Your vintage wine, what you have done, is it not greater than what I have done and my people?'. You see, Ephraim killed two of the leading kings in the enemy ranks, and what Gideon was saying was: 'You've knocked down two of the big guns, and we've been dealing with the smaller ones. You're really greater than we are at the end of the day'.

Now we need to ask the question: is that the truth? I'm not saying that Gideon was telling a lie, but was it really greater for Ephraim to kill two kings than for Gideon to attack 135,000 men with 300 and to conquer them? Of course it wasn't - but you see, what we need to see is that in the mind and the heart of Gideon he was prioritising. He wasn't playing fast and loose with the truth, but with a godly pragmatism Gideon realised that the unity of God's people at
this time was more important than personal pride. Someone has said: 'It takes more grace than I can tell to play the second fiddle well'. Gideon was willing to play the second fiddle so that, whether he was wrong or mistreated or criticised, it didn't matter, what was important to him was that the people of God were one, not that he was vindicated.

He says in verse 3: 'God hath delivered into your hands the princes of Midian', and he names them. He blows them up a little bit, he doesn't come down on them like a ton of bricks - and this shows to me the great discernment that Gideon had as a leader of God's people, which is so lacking today. How did Gideon meet resentful criticism - and we've all faced it? He met it with gentleness, a gentleness that defused the situation completely. He was following, whether he knew it or not, Proverbs 15 and verse 1: 'A soft answer turneth away wrath'. We don't often get soft answers, but that was what was necessary at this particular time. Those who were critical and resentful in Ephraim, Gideon met them with gentleness and the unity was maintained.

Then there's a second group, and they were the cynical. The cynical tried to discourage Gideon - we see them in verses 4 and 5: 'Gideon came to Jordan, and passed over, he, and the three hundred men that were with him, faint, yet pursuing them. And he said unto the men of Succoth, Give, I pray you, loaves of bread unto the people that follow me; for they be faint, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian'. Now you imagine the scene: 300 tired warriors, they're absolutely exhausted. They've gotten a great victory for God, they're seeking refreshment in Succoth among their own people, and one of these Israelite towns on the other side of Jordan closes the door upon them, and says: 'Go away! We don't want anything to do with you!'. Imagine this! Gideon's 300 men have won a victory, and these people of Succoth should have appreciated what God had done through them, through Gideon and his 300 men. He had liberated them from the oppression of the Midianites, but instead of appreciation, what do they get in return? Discouragement. All these soldiers wanted was a drink of water and a piece of bread, but the attitude of the people of Succoth was cynical. They were saying, in effect: 'Why should we help you? You still haven't won the war! You may have won a little battle...' - and maybe they were thinking in their subconscious, 'What if you don't win the whole war, if we help you the Midianites will come back and they'll sort us out because we give you a hand in the matter'.

It's true, though I don't like saying it, that the Lord's people can be very discouraging at times. I have to say to you that there's an element of realism that is needed if you do anything for the people of God, that if you don't accept that they can be discouraging, you'll not survive in church life - because saints are only sinners saved by grace. There could be times when we feel we ought to be appreciated, but all we get is discouragement. The fact of the matter is: the danger is that Gideon at this point could have said, like some of us do at times, 'I'm jacking this in, I am wasting my time, I'm not doing this any more!'. The problem is when the discouragement that we face from even the people of God becomes disillusionment, we allow it to affect our spirit. Though Gideon, I'm sure, was discouraged at the resentfulness of the critical, at the lack of appreciation of the cynical who discouraged them, Gideon was determined that he would not be disillusioned, he would not be set off course from the calling of God.

He refused to be deflected from God's purpose on his life, and he promised to come and visit these men in Succoth and after the battle, and he did - and, boy, did he visit them! How did he meet discouragement? He met it with perseverance, with tenacity, with steadfastness. He reminds me a little bit of Nehemiah - you remember he was up building the walls in Jerusalem, and Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem sent their friends to call him down from the
wall, to distract him from the work of God, and he sent messengers back to them saying: 'I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease whilst I leave it and come down to you?'. I think it was Livingstone who said: 'God loves plodders'. Gideon was able to discern how, with a soft answer, to answer the critical and resentful; but how, also, with harshness and with steadfastness and sternness to address the cynical who were going to discourage him. What a leader! What victories these were!

Then thirdly there were the flatterers who sought to exalt him. In verse 22 we read of them, because of his great victories that we've mentioned: 'Then 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'. 'As a reward for delivering us, we appreciate you at least: be our King!' - well, we find that Gideon resolutely resisted the pressure. He declared to them that the Lord would rule over them, not a King. What a man, eh? We might well say: 'Where did he go wrong?'. Can I say that this is so subtle that it is frightening to me, because from this moment on, just after this, without so much as a murmur of prayer for direction from God, we see that after refusing the throne Gideon announces his own strategy to the people in verse 24. 'Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey' - the Lord isn't mentioned from the mouth of Gideon for the rest of the record that we have of his life and his judgeship.

He now announces to the people his own strategy, what he thought was the answer for the people. Albeit unconsciously, Gideon at this point took a direction, and that direction was to take the driving wheel of the people of God, effectively, out of the hands of the Almighty and into his own frail grip. Now I have no doubt he was well-meaning and sincere, but his fall came just after great triumphs, when he simply took one step too far ahead of God. I don't know about you, but that scares me.

His fall came shortly after great triumph, but then secondly his fall began when he leaned on his own understanding - his strategy! He may have followed the wisdom of Proverbs 15 verse 1: 'A soft answer turneth away wrath', but he mustn't have read, or at least he had forgotten Proverbs 3:5-6: 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your path'. You see, in chapter 7 and verse 2, if you look at it for a moment, you will remember that God chose to deliver the people through 300 Israelites so that it would be seen that God had delivered them and it was not their own hands, lest they vaunt themselves against God saying 'Mine own hand hath saved me'. But now Gideon is beginning to lean on his own hand, his own understanding, and he's not trusting in God to do the impossible.

I know that I preached to you not so long ago on King Hezekiah, under the title 'The Best of Men, A Man At Best'. In 2 Kings 19, this man who finished his life in dishonour also, when he received the letter from King Sennacherib, and all the threats and vaunting and blasphemy against the Living God, likening Him to the other gods of the nations, we see that Hezekiah took that letter from the hands of his messengers, and the Bible says he read it, he went up to the house of the Lord, and he spread it before the Lord. If you ever get a letter like that, that's what you need to do, spread it before the Lord. Let me say to you at the beginning of this New Year: that's where we need to be as children of God. Whatever happens, we ought not to take a step - and you have no idea how this is speaking to my own life - without spreading everything before the Lord. It's important - why? Because Gideon shows us that one wrong step can lead to depths of depravity that are unbelievable, because thirdly: his fall ended in open idolatry and blatant hypocrisy.
Imagine that this one, Gideon, who had destroyed his father's shrine to Baal when he was a young man, now as an older man in later life he becomes the actual instrument of the devil to reintroduce such idolatry to the nation! Isn't that incredible? In verse 27, if you look at it, back in Judges 8 we read: 'And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither prostituting after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house'. What did he do? He got all the earrings of the Ishmaelites and all their ornaments made of gold, and put them in the melting pot and he made a gold ephod. Now an ephod was the priestly garment, and from these spoils of war the ephod, which was part of the High Priest's attire - a sleeveless tunic that was worn over other garments, made of very costly materials, gold, blue, purple, scarlet, fine linen - he made a gold one of these, and it became a snare to him. Now I don't know whether you know this, but attached to the ephod in the Old Testament priest there were not only twelve jewels that represented the twelve tribes of Israel, but there was a pocket, and in the pocket resided the Urim and the Thummim. Now the Urim and the Thummim were the instruments whereby the people of God of old discerned the will of God in particular matters.

I believe with all my heart that Gideon's intent was to remind the people that they wouldn't have a King, that the Lord would rule over them, and maybe the Urim and the Thummim was a reminder that they were to be guided by the sovereign providence of God - but the irony is this: though this might have made sense to Gideon, God wasn't in it! He may have done it for the right reasons, it may have given the right message; but it was from the wisdom of a man, not the will of God. Here's a warning, if ever there was one, for all of us: never ever replace divine wisdom with human strategy. There is nothing - I don't care how many letters you have after your name, or how many seminars you have been to, or books you have read - that can replace God's word, that can replace the Holy Spirit and can replace believing prayer: nothing!

Idolatry from the man who trounced it in the past, but also hypocrisy because, after rejecting the throne, he lived the life of a King. In verses 29 to 32 it describes the lifestyle, effectively, of a monarch. Gideon said: 'I won't be King, my son won't be King, my grandson won't be King', and then he goes on as a Judge to retire, not as an army officer or as a Judge, but more like a monarch. He's wealthy, partly from the spoils of battle I imagine, and partly from the gifts of the people. We read on that he has many wives, he has at least one concubine. His wives bore him seventy sons - it doesn't mention the daughters, how many they were. His concubine bore him one son, and in fact the son that his concubine bore him he named Abimelech - and do you know what that means? 'My father is King'!

'There's a wee bit of a contradiction here', you say. I think it's more of a compromise. We see from the rest of the book of Judges, subsequent verses after chapter 8, that this son Abimelech later tried to live up to his name as the son of the King, and he tried to become ruler over all the land. Gideon seems to have tried to assume priestly duties with his ephod; consulting God, perhaps, on behalf of the people. What's the lesson here, my friend? It is complete hypocrisy! His private life did not measure up to his public confession. Did you hear that? Listen to me: his private life did not live up to his public confession. He says to the people with his mouth: 'There'll be no King ruling over you. I'll not be it, nor my son, nor my son's son. The Lord will rule over you', and then he goes on to live like a king. Isn't it true that many believers begin with a blaze of glory, but they end in a bog of shame. We have to say, sadly, so many great and useful men and women of God, before they finish their course they write, or they say, or they do something - and, though it may not undo all the previous work that they've done for good, it leaves some kind of a blemish on their good name, and a question mark on their testimony.
I wonder is there someone here this morning and you're beginning the Christian life? Can I give you this warning: stay humble. R. A. Torrey wrote a book entitled 'Why God Used D. L. Moody', and I've recited this to you before, but there are very few other things have impressed my life as much as this quote. He warns young men and women that humility was the secret to this man's ministry, and they ought to make it the secret to their lives. I quote him: 'Oh, men and women! Especially young men and young women, perhaps God is beginning to use you. Listen: get down upon your face before God. I believe here lies one of the most dangerous snares of the Devil. When the Devil cannot discourage a man, he approaches him on another tack, which he knows is far worse in its results; he puffs him up by whispering in his ear: "You are the leading evangelist of the day. You are the man who will sweep everything before you. You are the coming man. You are the D. L. Moody of the day"; and if you listen to him, he will ruin you'. Listen to this: 'The entire shore of the history of Christian workers is strewn with the wrecks of gallant vessels that were full of promise a few years ago, but these men became puffed up and were driven on the rocks by the wild winds of their own raging self-esteem'.

Someone said to me once: 'Stay low, don't blow, and go slow'. Are you beginning the Christian life? Stay humble. Perhaps you're nearer the end of the Christian life - can I ask you: are you still humble? Have you ever been humble? I'm led to believe, I haven't had it documented for me, that RAF fighters during the Second World War made most of their mistakes not when they were out in the dogfights over the seas and oceans of Europe, but they made the most errors when they were coming in to land. They were all tense up there in the air fighting for their lives, but when they were coming in they began to relax, feeling that they had made it - and they dropped their guards, and many died.

In the course of his final series of Bible lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, Harry Ironside said in his prayer, listen to this: 'O God, keep me from becoming a foolish old man'. What a prayer! Could you pray that? Dr Culbertson retired as president of Moody Bible Institute, and he heard that the trustees were planning to name a building in his honour. He protested, and do you know what he said? 'Men, you do not know how I will end'. It's not how you begin that matters, it's how you end. Take heed, he that thinks he stand, lest he fall - and the most spiritual Christian may fall, and that's why we need to keep our eyes on the unfailing example of the Lord Jesus. It's interesting to contrast Abraham's reaction after his battle with the kings of the plain, with Gideon's here - because after that victory, Abraham took nothing for himself, but he made sure that others received the spoils of the victory. We actually read that he especially refused to take anything from the heathen King of Sodom. In Genesis 14 verse 22 he says to the king of Sodom: 'I have lift up mine hand unto the LORD, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, That I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, of that which is from you, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich'. What a difference!

Do you know how Abraham spends the next chapters of the record in Genesis? Fellowshipping with another King, Melchizedek, a type of our Lord Jesus Christ - he kept his eyes on the unfailing example. Micah could say that God has showed us 'O man, what is good; and what the LORD requires of us', this year and every day, 'to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?'. I'm not really concerned this morning how you began the Christian life, I'm not concerned how you went on in your early days, and the trail you blazed for God. I'm asking you this morning: how are you now? How are you going to end? As a bitter twisted old man or woman, or as someone who has just passively let the flame go out in their heart? As we begin a New Year, may we all be able to say - whatever happens,
whether the Saviour comes or calls us - like the apostle, as he looked up from the chopping block: 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith'.

Lord, we borrow the words of Jude and say that we long that glory should be brought unto Him who is able to keep us from falling, to present us faultless before the throne of the Glory on high. We do not want to bring shame upon the testimony of God. We want to tread and take each step carefully. Lord, forgive us and help us to forget the past and press on for the high calling of God. Lord, all of us fall from time to time, but though we fall seven times, may we rise again to the glory of God - and if we get up, Lord, keep us up; that it may never be said of us that we turned and forgot our first love and source of power, and lent on our own understanding. For us as individuals, this we pray, and for the Iron Hall as a church - God forbid that we should ever live for a name or a reputation, but let us live with our eyes firmly fixed on Christ, the unwavering example. Amen.
Now we're turning again this morning to the book of Judges, this time chapter 11 - and, ironically, it is the 11th study we have made so far these Sunday mornings in our series on the characters of the Judges entitled 'Men for the Hour'. We're looking at a new character - we have spent several weeks, I think five in total, looking at Gideon - and this week we're going to do, hopefully in one session, a study of Jephthah. The title is 'Jephthah, The Reject'.

We begin at verse 1 of Judges 11: "Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, and he was the son of an harlot: and Gilead begat Jephthah. And Gilead's wife bare him sons; and his wife's sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou art the son of a strange woman. Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him. And it came to pass in process of time, that the children of Ammon made war against Israel. And it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob: And they said unto Jephthah, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon. And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, Did not ye hate me, and expel me out of my father's house? and why are ye come unto me when ye are in distress? And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, Therefore we turn again to thee now, that thou mayest go with us, and fight against the children of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead. And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head? And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, The LORD be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words. Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and captain over them: and Jephthah uttered all his words before the LORD in Mizpeh".

Then verse 29 of the same chapter: "Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon. And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering. So Jephthah passed over unto the children of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD delivered them into his hands. And he smote them from Aroer, even till thou come to Minnith, even twenty cities, and unto the plain of the vineyards, with a very great slaughter. Thus the children of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel. And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the LORD, and I cannot go back. And she said unto him, My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the LORD, do to me according to that which hath
proceeded out of thy mouth; forasmuch as the LORD hath taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies, even of the children of Ammon. And she said unto her father, Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows. And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months: and she went with her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she knew no man. And it was a custom in Israel, That the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year".

Scandal had been rumored in Ramoth-Gilead. It was said that one of the village's leading citizens had become involved in an illicit sexual affair with a local woman of the street. In Ramoth-Gilead few secrets were held, like any village or town even in our own province, and bad news travelled fast. One can just imagine the local gossips going early to fill their waterpots at the public well, and lingering long in order to savour every sordid morsel as it came to light. It soon became evident that the rumour was true. Gilead, this man in the city of Ramoth-Gilead, that was his name, had been publicly named as the father of a child that was being carried by a common prostitute. Unlike many men who walk away from offspring born under such circumstances, Gilead, to his credit, we find takes full responsibility for his act. When the infant was born, he takes it into his home and effectively raises it as one of his own family.

It's all conjecture, reading between the lines, but we must wonder what his wife must have felt with that child in the home, knowing the failings of her spouse. But we read from God's word that in process of time other sons were born to Gilead of his true wife, and those sons would have taken their place in the family circle and hierarchy. We find that it wasn't long after those sons were born until they grow, and they look down on this son of a prostitute and their father, and they begin to see him in a different light. They played with him as any other of the children when they were toddlers, but as they grow and as they become aware and conscious of these weightier matters in life, they realise that this one - as far as they're concerned - is unworthy of the family name, and certainly unworthy of the family privilege.

As the animosities between these young men heighten, Gilead's health begins to decline and eventually he dies. Now, with Gilead's restraining hand away from this situation, the smouldering resentment between these brothers and Jephthah comes to the surface. When the issue of the will, the inheritance of their father, comes to be settled, Jephthah's illegitimacy is thrown in his face by his half-brothers. You can just imagine it: 'You're not even one of our family! How can you expect to have anything in our father's will? You're only a son, an illegitimate son of a harlot!'. Eventually we find in chapter 11 and verse 2, that it came to the brothers driving Jephthah out of the home: 'Gilead's wife bare him sons; and his wife's sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou art the son of a strange woman'. In other words, what they were saying is: 'Jephthah, you don't belong! Whatever the reason was our father brought you into our home and treated you like another son, you don't belong. He's gone, and you need to get up and go!'.

Now it is apparent that Jephthah made an appeal to the elders of the city, which of course was to no avail. Verse 7, when he comes to the fore in this whole situation in the land, we read that he says to these elders who have requested his return: 'Did not ye hate me, and expel me out of my father's house? and why are ye come unto me now when ye are in distress?'. As leaders and elders in the town, they should have been the ones to protect those
who were vulnerable. But like many, even in our own day, they fell into the trap of making a child pay for the mistakes of its father. One writer has said: 'In so doing, they joined the sanctimonious village snobs in opposing a youth who was guilty of nothing except being born'.

How many times has this story been repeated in history? Imagine it, a child born under some cloud of shame, or into a dysfunctional family, and as they grow that cloud seems to hover over them and grow larger and larger, and others delight in pointing out its presence over their head and reminding them of their shameful past. There are many like that in our society. Whilst we do not take personal responsibility away from any, the fact of the matter is: there are those who, by nature of their birth and the prejudice that comes to them because of their birth, aren't given a chance in their family or in general society. They're rejected without trial by those around them. There are many, if we broaden out this example, many who have been wronged through no fault of their own. Because of something that someone else has done to them, they seem to be destined to live under the mantle of the transgression of another.

We could all sum it up in one word: rejection, whether rejection as a child, rejection as an adolescent, as a teenager, as a young adult, rejection as a spouse, rejection as a father or a mother. We could go on and on and give myriads of examples, but the fact of the matter is: many who experience rejection do exactly what Jephthah did. What was that? They react to rejection by running away. That's what he did. We read in verse 3: 'Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him'. He ran away, he drifted, essentially, from bad to worse; and we find that he found himself in bad company - and, as the saying goes, 'Birds of a feather flock together', and I imagine that a lot of these same young men came from similar backgrounds and may have been outcasts and rejects from their own home and society.

So Jephthah goes to Tob, a city north-east of Ramoth-Gilead, and he becomes a leader of this group of outlaws, bandits. He's a kind of Robin Hood figure. He's essentially not bad in and of himself, but he is the victim of his own circumstances that have been foisted upon him, and he lands in amongst all this other group and becomes a natural leader of them. Let me say, before we look any more Jephthah, that I believe that the author of the book of Judges is trying to depict for us in Jephthah's personal circumstances, Jephthah's rejection, how Israel, God's people, had rejected their God, covenant God, Jehovah. Now, I believe this is evident, if you look at it - we don't have time to read the verses in chapter 10 verses 6-18 - but we see again the shameful account that has been a cycle right throughout this book. God's people find themselves under the oppressive hand of another nation attacking them - and what do they do? They call to God, and God tells them that they are under this discipline of punishment because of their sin, because they've gone after Baal and Asherah, false gods of other nations. Then they cry unto God, it would seem, in genuine repentance - even though we have found out at times it is superficial - and God answers them in mercy. Peace reigns in the land because a Judge, God's saviour and deliverer for that period of time has come and been raised up by the Almighty to bring peace to the nation. But when that Judge dies we see over and over again that they go back to their old ways.

Here we see this typified, if you like, for us in the life of Jephthah. The nation is powerless before their enemies, the Philistines and the Ammonites, because they have sinned against God once again. In verses 10 to 16 of chapter 10 we see that they cry out to God, and God refuses their first plea. He doesn't answer them, and He cites several instances of past deliverances, and reminds them that after each of them they had turned away - verse 13 of chapter 10: 'Yet ye have forsaken me, and served other gods: why should I deliver you any longer?'. Of course, God wanted to see within their hearts true repentance. That's why, at
first, He doesn't listen to them until, as we see in verse 16, He is sure that they have put away their idols: 'And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD: and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel'.

He wanted to make sure that the repentance was not superficial, it was genuine; and the evidence would be in the works that outflowed from it - in other words, that they put these gods away from them for good, and then He would have compassion upon them. Now here is an elementary lesson not only regarding salvation, but the Christian life, and it's this: God is not mocked, and whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. God knows whether repentance is genuine or superficial, and God is angry, and God disciplines even His people when they play fast and loose with Him; when they think that they can just get away with sin, and in the next breath confess and repent of their sin it would seem, and God just forgives them and restores them to fellowship - and then they go through this Israelite cycle again of sin and shame.

I wonder is there anyone here this morning that's playing fast and loose with the Almighty? I think it's interesting that Jephthah agreed to be the people's saviour, as we will see in a few moments, but he only agreed on the condition that he would be their Lord as well. In verse 9 of chapter 11, if you look at it, it reads: 'And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head?'. He was wiser than many children of God today, he realised that you can't have your cake and eat it. You can't have Christ as Saviour, and then say: 'Well, I'm going to be in charge of the rest of my life. I'm on my way to heaven in a boat, but Christ is not going to have my life'. Jephthah knew that if this was going to work he would have to have charge of them. If your Christian life is going to be - and I use this term advisedly - a success, victorious, and fulfil the purpose for which God saved you and Christ died, you've got to realise that it's not all about getting your sins forgiven and getting a free ticket to heaven, it's about being surrendered to Jesus Christ as Lord. So, what an elementary lesson.

Then we see also in the same way, the elders who once rejected Jephthah, and ejected him out of the town, are now requesting that he returns as saviour. I just wondered as I was studying this, whether or not Jephthah felt used. Do you ever feel like that? Maybe people who have rejected you return to you and they're wanting a favour, wanting you to do something, and you feel like saying: 'Aye, you're only interested in me when you're looking for something'. Here we have it here, but it led me to the question: I wonder, as we see this as a mirror example of what Israel was doing to God, I wonder did God ever feel used by Israel. His people? I know we have to be careful in trying to guess the thoughts of the Almighty, but the mirror image is here, isn't it? How many times do we come to God, and I say it reverently: you use Him like some kind of divine salvation slot machine - we put our prayer in and we hope to get the results out! We almost expect it as a right, don't we? He's obliged to do it.

But the point, really, that I want you to focus on this morning is that when God again wanted to deliver Israel from this awful predicament that they'd brought themselves into, who did He choose? He chose a reject. I love this verse in verse 1: 'Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor', and in the same sentence, almost without blinking, the author says, 'and he was the son of an harlot'. The plainness of Scripture, he was a reject from his family and his society. He was the underdog - could we say: he was the despised and the rejected of men? I think it is plain to see the parallels in this saviour with the great Jehovah's Saviour in the New Testament, our Lord Jesus Christ. When you consider that there was a shadow over
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His birth, of course He was virgin conceived, and that is the truth of the miracle of Christmas time that we've just celebrated - but nevertheless people levelled at Him the fact that He was of illegitimate birth, they rejected Him on that ground. The society in Israel, His brethren in the religious establishment, but also His kith and kin round about Him rejected Him and effectively ejected Him from Jerusalem. John 1:11: 'He came unto his own, and his own received him not'.

When we turn to the book of the Acts we find that it is written there, as Peter preaches this sermon to the religious council in chapter 4 and verse 10, he says: 'Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth', a despised town, 'whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved'. This Jesus Christ of Nazareth that you despise, that you crucified, God raised from the dead - it was God raised Him! He was the stone rejected by you, but you've got to realise that there isn't salvation in any other - do you see the parallel? Jephthah had been rejected because of his birth, he had been thrown out of the city, and now after a period of years the elders are coming cap in hand, tail between their legs: 'Could you come back and help us?'. They had realised that there was salvation in none other.

I don't know what reputation he had got as he was in Tob with this band of no goods, outlaws. He had probably got a reputation for bad, but nevertheless they knew he was a fighter, they knew he had been successful in what he was doing there, and he was a Gileadite so he could help them. It's the same with our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, isn't it? Because we read in Zechariah and chapter 12 that there's a day coming, yet future, when Israel will look upon Him whom they have pierced, the One who they rejected and ejected and crucified, they'll look upon Him and they'll say 'Baruch Ha Ba B'Shem Adonai', 'Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord'. 'Baruch Ha Ba B'Shem Adonai', 'Come Lord Jesus, and be our Saviour'. The poet put it like this:

'They cried for God to send a man to slay cruel Ammon's hand,
He made his boast and then swept down to claim Jehovah's land.
Their hero by design must know bold courage, virtue, truth,
Be of the proper heritage, twice blessed with strength and youth.
God made His choice, and shocked them all when He revealed His aim
To use a harlot's outcast son, one Jephthah was his name'.

This is a tremendous character, Jephthah the reject, because if you're a reject today for one reason or another - maybe it's questionable birth, and it has haunted you right throughout your whole life. Maybe it's family dysfunction that you have been born into, or that your own family has known. Maybe it is the sense of being forsaken by another. Maybe you have been orphaned or divorced through no fault of your own. Maybe you have been abused, mentally, emotionally, sexually, or in a mere physical way. The result of this has been that you live day by day with an inferiority complex that has been foisted upon you. Do you know what can often happen? When a person with that type of background becomes a Christian, they think that because of their past they are disqualified from doing anything for God or being anything for God. They feel a real underdog in the things of God.

Now I would have to also say that sometimes Christians - yes, that's right, Christians - can reinforce this attitude, this perception in their minds. In effect, sometimes you hear them
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saying words in kind: 'Now you know that because of your past, you'll not amount to anything in the church. Maybe we'll spring on you some night when we're looking for a good testimony, but don't you think that you'll be able to do too much because of the baggage that you have'. Christians often have a canny knack at keeping their rejects at arms length. I even heard a brethren man say on one occasion - and the brethren have a lot of good to say, but this is what he said: 'A person can be fit for heaven, but not fit for the assembly'. Now I know there's church discipline, and I know there's rules and regulations, and I'm not saying that we open up the boundaries of church fellowship to everyone and anyone, of course not. But that attitude that keeps rejects from families and societies at arms length could not be further from the truth, and I believe that the devil would love to keep people in that pathetic state of mind - but here we have the Almighty God choosing an unlikely saviour, if there ever was one, a son of a harlot! If you look into the law, we don't have time, into Deuteronomy; you'll find that the son of a harlot was prohibited from the congregation of Israel. You work that one out, I cannot.

The lesson that we have is simply: God chooses what men reject - is that not an encouragement to you, if you find yourself as one of life's rejects? I don't use that disparagingly, I'm not trying to enforce you in that type of mindset, I'm trying to let you see that God chooses what men reject. God chose this man Jephthah, and we read in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 1 and verse 27: 'God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath 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, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are'. First Peter 2 talks about the Lord Jesus as being that stone that was rejected of men, but was chosen of God.

There are more rejects in the Bible than Jephthah. There are the other Judges - what a band of a motley crew they are. There's Joseph in the book of Genesis, you know the story, rejected by his brothers - and then what happened to him? He eventually became their saviour, their deliverer! When we read the story of David we find it took him seven years to gain the full support of the twelve tribes of Israel, he didn't have it all on a plate right away - he was rejected, and then he became the greatest king ever. Even Paul the apostle, when he was converted to Christ, was rejected by his former companions in Judaism and then by the Christians, who he had come to as a brother, he is held in suspicion. For three years he's on his own in isolation in Arabia, and God reveals to him many of the mysteries of the New Testament there - but he was a reject! God chooses what men reject!

You may not know that Alexander Whyte, who was a well-known minister in the Free Church of Scotland, St George's Edinburgh in the late 19th century, an outstanding preacher and writer - many of his character studies are wonderful - but many do not know that in 1836 Janet Thompson brought him into this world out of wedlock. But that didn't matter to God, because God chose. Jephthah found, like many rejects before him, that through a period of isolation he was undergoing, maybe unconsciously, a process of preparation. In verse 4 of chapter 11 we read these wonderful words: 'And it came to pass in process of time'. He had been rejected, he was in isolation, but he was being prepared because, being faithful to God in the waiting time, he found out not only that God chooses what man rejects, but God uses what men reject. The big question that I want to pose to you this morning, particularly if you're one of those in the category of being rejected, is: what is your attitude to your rejection? God doesn't hold it against you, and if He doesn't hold it against you, why should you let it hinder you from being used of God?
Now we didn't have time to look at Abimelech, who you'll remember was Gideon's son who turned out to be a real bad egg - but when you compare Abimelech to Jephthah we find that their circumstances were similar to begin with. Abimelech was the son of a concubine of Gideon, but Abimelech brought shame to Israel; yet Jephthah brings joy and glory and blessing to Israel, though he was the son of a harlot. What was the difference? I can only imagine that the difference is his attitude to his rejection. He was not going to allow his past to burden him in such a way that he would not be faithful to God in the small things, and when he remained faithful to God his hour came when God chose him as God's man for the hour. My friend, I'm saying to you today that if you accept and embrace the rejections of your life, bring them to God but embrace them and accept what they are with a positive attitude, your opposition will one day turn to opportunity. As Psalm 27:10 says: 'Though mother and father forsake me, the Lord will take me up' - for what man rejects, God chooses.

Jephthah is a kind of Cinderella story, the reject elevated to a place of honour and authority. The only problem with the Jephthah story is it doesn't end happily ever after, because after the great victory that God gave him over the Ammonites and Philistines, he experienced anything but happiness. We read about that in verses 29 to 40 of chapter 11. Before he went into battle we were given a glimpse of what he said to God, he made a rash vow that he would devote to the Lord whatever first came out of his doors. Verse 31, look at it: 'It shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering'. The Lord gave him victory, and as he returned to the house, to his horror and ours as we read the narrative, who trundled out but his only daughter whom he loved with all his heart!

What lesson can we possibly learn from this? I was sharing this with Barbara during the week, and she said 'How can you apply that one today?'. Well, it's simply the opposite to what we've already said: God chooses what men reject, but God rejects what men choose. What am I talking about? Well, Jephthah was no more immune to danger in victory than his predecessors were in the book of Judges. Like them, his personal strength became his weakness.

As we read his story we find out that Jephthah was an expert negotiator, and I'm assuming that because I can't imagine how else he could keep a band of no goods together up there in Tob - he must have been great at debating and keeping peace among those thieves and criminals. When we come to his conversation with the King of Ammon in verse 12 of chapter 11, we find that he asked the question: 'Why are you invading us?'. The reply comes from the King of Ammon: 'Because Israel took away my land at the time of Joshua, so I want you to return it peacefully'. The King of Ammon made an accusation: 'Israel has taken my land and I want them to return it', and so Jephthah negotiates, and he argues first of all from history, and he tells them: 'We didn't take the land from the Ammonites but from the Amorites' - verses 15 to 22. Then he argues from theology, he says: 'The Lord gave us this land, we can't surrender it to you', verses 23 to 25, 'We didn't take it, the Lord give to us, and we didn't take it from you'. Then thirdly he argues from reason, he tells them for 300 years they have lived in the land, yet they haven't come to claim it until now, and it's too late to make land claims now. What skill he had as a negotiator!

But do you know what he does? That was his strength, and now we see he overplays his hand, and in a momentary attempt at a pious bargain with God to get the victory over Ammon, he effectively bargains with God and says: 'If You give me victory, whatever comes out of my front door when I return home I'll sacrifice it to You as a burnt offering'. Now God rejected that: what man chooses, God rejects. God rejected it as a basis for victory - don't
you think for one minute that God gave him the victory because he made this vow! Far from it. You see, God's word had been given to Jephthah, and that was enough. But you say: 'God made Jephthah honour his vow', He did, and do you know why He made him do it? Out of discipline. Jephthah decided to vow this vow to the Lord, and I use that word 'decided' because this was something that God did not require of Jephthah. It was in a moment of overzealousness with the prospect of victory in his head that caused him to make this hasty vow, but it was the promise of God that mattered more for victory - not anything that Jephthah would do for God. Victory would be based on God's word and God's power, not on some bargain that Jephthah made, bending God's arm up His back.

First Samuel and chapter 15 and verse 22 I think is a great commentary on this event. You remember God said to Saul through the prophet Samuel: 'Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams'. Have you ever considered that obedience doesn't just mean doing all that God has asked you, but not doing more than God has asked you? The tragedy of the story is in the fact that although this was not required of God, indeed it was rejected; because he had vowed a vow to the Lord, God required him to keep his word. Deuteronomy 23:21 says: 'When thou shalt vow a vow unto the LORD thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee'.

A vow in the Old Testament was a purely voluntary act, but once the vow was made you were committed before God, and for that very reason God warns against taking vows in a rash or thoughtless way. Because he had opened his mouth to the Lord, in verse 35 he says: 'I cannot go back, I can't take it away'. What a warning that is to all of us, not to make any commitment to God carelessly or thoughtlessly. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes: 'It is better that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay'.

Now there is considerable disagreement as to what Jephthah did to his daughter. One view is that he killed her and sacrificed her, and offered her as a burnt offering - and that is probably the most obvious initial reading of the text before us. However the idea of human sacrifice in the Bible is repulsive to God, He condemns it in the law in Deuteronomy 18. Jephthah would have known God's law, he was no country bumpkin. The other common interpretation is that Jephthah gave his daughter to be a perpetual virgin in the service of Jehovah. Whatever came forth his doors, the sense of verse 31, if you look at it your margin may render it this way: 'Whatever comes out of the doors shall surely be the Lord's, or I will offer it upon the altar for a burnt offering' - the word could be 'or' rather than 'and'. As we go down the passage, we find that she requests to bewail her virginity on the mountains, and all these daughters of Israel go with her. We find in verses 37 to 39 that it's commemorated from this day on in Israel, of how she bewailed her virginity in this way. I believe the meaning was this: she was dedicated to the Lord, probably to the service of the tabernacle as a perpetual virgin. She couldn't marry and Jephthah wouldn't have any children and progeny to his name.

Whatever the meaning is, what is the lesson? We should never make rash promises and vows to God. If we open our mouth, God will require us to pay what we have said. There are great consequences when we vow to the Lord. Let me share in closing what the consequence of overzealousness was for Jephthah. Do you remember his background? He was treated with cruelty, he experienced gross injustice by his brothers and townspeople. He had been forced to bear the consequences of an act which he was completely innocent of. Others decided his fate for him, condemned him to it whether he agreed with it or not - and then what happens? In a moment of overzealousness Jephthah does precisely the same thing to his own daughter that had been done to him. She became the sufferer of the lot of the consequences of her
father's ill-advised act.

How often it happens to the best of us, Satan seems to take great delight in manoeuvring us into positions where we impose on others the very things that have been great sources of trial to us. Are we guilty like that? Guilty of enforcing on people standards that we set for them, and we forget at times how we chaffed under the impositions that we felt were unfair in bygone days. Maybe we're parents and we make the mistake of attempting, without any explanation, to impose things on our children that we ridiculed and resented when our parents did them towards us. Apart from those things: here we see in Jephthah a fallible saviour, and a saviour who perpetuated upon his descendants his own sin and fate. But isn't it wonderful today that we have a Saviour in Christ Jesus who followed the will of God perfectly, who knew the mind of God completely, who displayed the power of God fully - and He now has made His descendants, in the Spirit, more than conquerors through Him who loved us; so that we, as Hebrews says, have a Great High Priest who can be touched with the feelings of our infirmities - why? Because He was tested in life in the flesh in all points as we are, apart from sin.

Isn't it wonderful that though we are a reject today in man's eyes, God chooses what man rejects. Let us be careful not to make a choice that God would reject in our lives, and impose upon others the rejection that we have found - but let us rejoice in our wonderful Saviour, in whom we have full complete and eternal salvation. May God bless His word to our hearts.

Father, help us all to realise this morning that it doesn't matter who has rejected us if we are accepted in the Beloved. Father, let none make the false conclusion that because men have rejected them for no fault of their own, that God has rejected them for His choice and His use. May we all realise today that there is a work for Jesus ready at our hand, it is a work the Master just for us has planned, may they haste to do His bidding, yield Him service true. May they say today: 'Lord, forgetting the past, I press on for Your call'. Bless this word to every heart we pray, and may it make a difference, for Jesus' sake, Amen.
Men For The Hour - Chapter 12
"Samson, The Promising Start"

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Now let us turn in our Bibles to the book of Judges again - chapter 13 this morning. If you're a newcomer, a visitor with us today, we have been studying the book of Judges, or at least the characters of the judges in the book of Judges over the last eleven weeks. This is our twelfth week, and we have looked at them as individuals, and spent a number of weeks on some of them - Gideon, for instance, we spent I think five or six weeks on him. We're starting another character, indeed probably the one who will be the last character in the series, and he will take a couple of weeks as well - that is Samson. This morning we're looking in chapter 13 verses 1 to 23, and our title is 'Samson, The Promising Start'.

We begin our reading at verse 1: "And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren, and bare not. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto the woman, and said unto 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, neither eat any unclean thing: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb to the day of his death. Then the woman came and told her husband, saying, 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: But he said unto me, Behold, 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 to the day of his death. Then Manoah intreated the LORD, and said, O my Lord, let the man of God which thou didst send come again unto us, and teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born. And God hearkened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of the LORD came again unto the woman as she sat in the field: but Manoah her husband was not with her. And the woman made haste, and ran, and showed her husband, and said unto him, Behold, the man hath appeared unto me, that came unto me the other day. And Manoah arose, and went after his wife, and came to the man, and said unto him, Art thou the man that spakest unto the woman? And he said, I am. And Manoah said, Now let thy words come to pass. How shall we order the child, and how shall we do unto him? And the angel of the LORD said unto Manoah, Of all that I said unto the woman let her beware. She may not eat of any thing that cometh of the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing: all that I commanded her let her observe. And Manoah said, Though thou detain me, I will not eat of thy bread: and if thou wilt offer a burnt offering, thou must offer it unto the LORD. For Manoah knew not that he was an angel", or "the angel", "of the LORD. And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, What is thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honor? And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret? So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered it upon a rock unto the LORD: and the angel did wonderously; and Manoah and his wife looked on. For it came to pass, when
the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on it, and fell on their faces to the ground. But the angel of the LORD did no more appear to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was an angel of the LORD. And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God. But his wife said unto him, If the LORD were pleased to kill us, he would not have received a burnt offering and a meat offering at our hands, neither would he have showed us all these things, nor would as at this time have told us such things as these". We'll read verses 24 and 25 as well: "And the woman bare a son, and called his name Samson: and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol".

'Samson, The Promising Start'. I think few stories are more tragic in the Scriptures than Samson's. There are many fallen heroes that we have even encountered over the last number of weeks, and right throughout from Genesis to Revelation that we could cite, but it seems that there is none greater than Samson. I used to play a bit of rugby - I wasn't good at it by any stretch of the imagination - but I always remember our coaches telling us that the bigger they are, the harder they fall. It's the same regarding the heroes of God that have fallen in the past. Samson was a great man, a great man of faith, a great man of God, chosen of God, yet he had a great fall. We shall see over these next weeks, specifically this morning, how Samson started out with great promise. We'll see a little bit in verses 24 and 25, but in subsequent weeks it will become more clear how God's power was uniquely imparted and displayed through him. We will see that the outcome of that power was that he proved himself in the service of Jehovah, he did many great exploits for his God.

This week we're seeing him as the child of promise, and all the potential and the prospects that are unlimited to him because God chose him from before his birth. Not only did God choose him, but God promised to fit him to overcome the enemy that held the Israelites in an iron grip, that is the Philistines. Yet this great hero, Samson, became the fallen hero. How the mighty have fallen - because the very enemy that God chose him, raised him and fitted him to defeat and overcome, overcame him!

Someone has said he was 'a He-man with a she-weakness' - bold before men, Samson was weak before women, and couldn't resist telling them his secrets. Empowered by the Spirit of God, he yielded his body to the appetites of the flesh. Samson means 'sunny', or 'sun-like', or 'little sun' - and isn't it a tragedy to think that one who was born with God's blessed sun rays of honour upon him, dies in complete darkness having his eyes put out by his enemy, blinded by the enemy. The enemy that he was raised up to conquer ends up conquering him, and launching the son of light into darkness.

Let me say, before I go on any further, I want you to understand completely how I'm going to apply the character of Samson, and indeed the promising start that he had in his birth. I believe Samson's history is an illustration of Paul's warning that we find in 1 Corinthians 9:27 that reads: 'But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway'. Samson was a castaway as Paul has cited it. Now I know that in Hebrews 11 and verse 32 the writer tells us that Samson was a great man of faith. He had faith in God's word, but apart from that reference to him there's very little else can be said to his credit right throughout the word of God. What I'm saying to you this morning is this: you could have your faith in God, as Samson did, and many people today do. They profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, they have trusted in God for their salvation, but their life doesn't go anywhere after that. They receive from God all His provision, they are blessed with everything in the Lord Jesus Christ, but they neglect their
spiritual lives and the enemy overcomes them.

We as Christians, once we come to faith in the Lord Jesus, have great potential. There are great prospects ahead of us, and yet the question I’m asking us today in the light of this life of Samson is: what have you done with your potential in Christ? I know you have faith in God, but what are you doing with the resources that God has given to you? What are you doing with the prospects that God has set ahead of you as His divine sovereign will, if you would only obey and follow Him? Paul says: ‘Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning’, and this is a great lesson to us - the promising start of Samson, and we need to look at it in great detail, and take heed if we think we stand, lest we fall.

Now these first three verses we find the seventh time in the book of Judges, we read that again the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They kept going in this cycle of sin, and this is now the seventh time they find themselves in this merry-go-round that is not so merry. We find also that the Philistines enslaved Israel for forty years. Now let me just say this: if you count up all the years that Israel were oppressed by other nations, you will find that the Philistines oppressed them the longest. So first of all, this is the seventh mention, the seventh cycle of when the children of Israel were in bondage. We find it is the longest cycle, for forty years, and then we find added to this that the deliverer isn't even born! The one that God has raised up hasn't been born yet! Then we find, a little bit different to all the other accounts of the oppression of Israel's enemies and God raising up a deliverer, that on this occasion there is no evidence in the text whatsoever that Israel cried out to God for deliverance. All the other times they did, whilst it was superficial and the repentance was very shallow at times, we find that they never even called to God on this particular instance.

Now that tells us many things, but one thing I believe it tells us is this: there was something peculiarly binding about Philistine bondage. The Philistines really had them, they had them for forty years to such an extent that they didn't even feel the need to cry out to God. There was no deliverer raised up in the nation that was alive, God had to send a new one into the barren womb of Manoah's wife. Now we see this in the apathy of the people, if you turn to chapter 15 and verse 11 we read that the Israelites addressed Samson: 'Three thousand men of Judah went to the top of the rock Etam, and said to Samson, Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us? what is this that thou hast done unto us? And he said unto them, As they did unto me, so have I done unto them'. Those who should have had gratitude for being delivered from the Philistines, they were quite happy to be oppressed by them!

Now what is the reason for this? Let me just say, before we give you a reason, it is very frightening for me to consider, as we look at this thought, how quickly we as Christians can become accustomed with our status quo. We can begin to accept what we are as Christians: we believe in Christ, we have faith in the Lord Jesus, and yet all the blessings of God are at our disposal - but we're just content to sit and be stuck for the rest of our Christian existence. What then made the Philistines especially dangerous? I believe it was the method that they used. The Philistines were great in military strength, the reason being they had learned to smelt iron. Because of that they could overrun all armies with direct attack because of the great advanced weapons that they had, and that's the way the other nations tried to overcome Israel - didn't they? They tried to conquer them by their military might - but that is not how the Philistines come. We find that the two main weapons that the Philistines used were: one, trade; and secondly, intermarriage. I could put it like this: business and pleasure, and they mixed the two.

Now let me illustrate this for you: if the Israelites wanted an axe or a plough, they had to go
to the Philistines to get it, they had to go to their oppressors. If you want evidence for that, you find it in 1 Samuel 13. If they wanted to marry the sons or the daughters of the Philistines, the Philistines had no objection to them doing it, indeed they encouraged it because in it they saw that they were getting a stranglehold over God's people. Slowly, through business and pleasure, through trade and intermarriage, they were choking them to death - and it was through compromise and assimilation with the Philistines that God's people were being overcome. Now please note this: it was not military might and dominance that conquered God's people here, but it was both spiritual and cultural seduction. Not the sword!

What was it that caused God's people not even to feel the need to cry out to God for deliverance, and look for a saviour? It was materialism, and it was sensuality! Spiritual and cultural seduction, assimilating with the background of the world, compromising in its principles. The two results that we find from that were spiritual apathy - they didn't even see their need, they didn't see themselves as God saw them, and even when Samson tried to deliver them they were trying to hold him back! 'Samson, don't rock the boat, we're quite happy the way we are!'. Spiritual apathy and loss of distinction - they were assimilating, blending in, you wouldn't see the difference any longer between God's people and the Philistines, because they were intermarrying and they were related to one another.

Now let's see, with that backdrop of Philistine oppression, the deliverer that God sent - Samson and his promising start. First of all I want you to see that he was a child of promise. He was a child of promise: God's people needed a deliverer, and God sent them a child of promise. We've read about that, first of all he was a child of promise in his miraculous birth. Now how often do we read the Scriptures, and we find that when God needs to send a deliverer, He sends an angel to visit a couple, and usually the woman is barren and cannot bear children, and God's angel promises them a baby. When He wanted a nation, He came to Abraham and Sarah and He gave them Isaac. When He wanted a deliverer from Egyptian bondage, He came to Amram and Jochebed, and gave them baby Moses. Later when Israel needed a revival, He sent the baby Samuel to Hannah. Praise God, when we come to the New Testament, we read in Galatians that when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth a Son, made under the law and born of a woman. God sent baby Jesus to Mary.

Now, babies are very fragile things, but have we not learn as we've gone through the book of Judges thus far that if it tells us anything, it tells us that the things that are weak in the eyes of the world are the things that God can show His might through, and confound the strong things in our world. Like Sarah, and Hannah, and Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, Manoah's wife was barren, she was infertile. To her sterility the Bible adds obscurity, for it doesn't even give us her name - she is Manoah's wife, and then she becomes Samson's mother. God is using, effectively, a woman who, in biblical terms, is a nobody.

Now let me bring this all together for you: we are God's people, we have faith in God, and we are children of promise in the fact that we have had a miraculous birth. We are nobodies, we are not a people and God has made us a people, and we have been born again not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. We are children of promise, we have had a miraculous birth, the new birth - John chapter 3. Samson had it too - not only was he a child of promise in his miraculous birth, but also in his many blessings. In verse 5, if you look at it, the angel said 'You will conceive', and at the end it says, 'he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines'. In verse 24, at the end of the verse it says, 'and the LORD blessed him'. How could he not be blessed? He was born miraculously, but he also had the promises of God given to him. The potential, the prospect of this young man is unlimited because God is with him. Let me say this: he had the
best spiritual start in life that anyone could wish for!

Have we not had that best start also? It was read for us in the Breaking of Bread, Ephesians 1 and verse 3: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places'. Corinthians tells us that 'all the blessings of God are Yes and Amen in Christ'. We have everything because we have the Lord Jesus. We have a miraculous birth in the new birth, regeneration. We have many blessings in Christ, but the great question that begs this morning is: what have we done with our spiritual birth and our spiritual blessings that God has given to us? There are many untapped resources in the lives of ordinary Christians today. I just wonder, when we get to heaven, will God show us a whole load of unopened parcels that would have been ours when we were on the earth, but we neglected our salvation to such an extent that we have to wait till heaven to get them, if we get them at all.

He was a child of promise, as we, in his birth and his blessings. But what I want you to see secondly is that he had godly parents. John Wilmot, who was the Earl of Rochester, said: 'Before I was married I had three theories about raising children, now I have three children and no theories'. It's a hard thing to raise children in a day like Samson's day or our day. Here we see a helpful guideline for any parents in the meeting this morning in the parent's example of Samson's mother and father. Verse 8 tells us that they prayed for him: 'Then Manoah intreated the LORD, and said, O my Lord, let the man of God which thou didst send come again unto us, and teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born'. Now many believe that Manoah's wife prayed, like Hannah and like Mary, that God would send a deliverer to take them from under the oppression of the enemy. Now it doesn't say that in the text, but I'm sure that that is the case - but they prayed for him in another way, because we find out at the beginning of verse 8 that Manoah asked God that he would be shown how to teach and bring up the child. Then in verse 12 we read the same: 'Manoah said, Now let thy words come to pass. How shall we order the child, and how shall we do unto him?'.

They not only prayed for him, and I would say to you that they prayed for the child before it was born - but secondly, they sought divine guidance for the upbringing of this child. They wanted God to teach them how to prepare Samson for the divine purpose in his life. Now God revealed to them that this was going to be a mighty man of God, and now they're coming and saying: 'Lord, how can we raise this young child for Your glory? How can we prepare him for the glorious honour that You have upon him by using him?'. They wanted to honour God in raising their child for His use.

Can I ask you: what are you preparing your children for? Education is good and ought not to be neglected, and a career is advisable to keep body and soul together, but the bottom line is: many, in favouring those first two options, have neglected the spiritual welfare of their children and of their home. Manoah did not. They sought divine guidance, he and his wife, in the upbringing of Samson before he was even born.

Then thirdly we find in verse 15 that they also cherished the presence of God, specifically the presence of Christ in their home. Verse 15 reads: 'Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, I pray thee, let us detain thee, until we shall have made ready a kid for thee'. Of course it was his wife who saw the Angel on the first two occasions, and then she brings Manoah to see Him, and Manoah cherishes the Angel of the Lord's presence so much that he wants Him to stay, and he wants to make a meal for Him. Now we have every reason to believe that the Angel of the Lord here is a pre-incarnate form of our Lord Jesus, a Christophany. It was the Lord Jesus who is visiting the home here, the Lord Jesus is the expression of God often in the
Old Testament, but in verse 22 - if you want proof of it - Manoah actually says: 'We have seen God'. He thought he was going to die, and in verse 18 he asks for a name of this Angel, and the Angel says: 'Why do you ask, seeing it is secret?'. But if you look at the margin of your Bible, you will see that it says: 'Seeing it is wonderful', and many believe, including myself, that this is actually a classification of the name of this Angel, 'Wonderful'. Isaiah 9 and verse 6 says: 'His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace' - this was Christ! Samson's parents cherished His presence, they wanted this Angel of the Lord to stay. Do you cherish the presence of Christ in your home?

Then fourthly, they had brought offerings and made sacrifices for the Lord, verses 16 and 19. The Lord Jesus wasn't going to sit at the same level, as it were, of these human beings in an ordinary human meal, but He encouraged them to make an offering to Jehovah - that's the only thing that He could receive. So they did it, they offered up sacrifices - can I ask you: do you, in your home, with your children, offer up spiritual sacrifices unto God? It used to be called the family altar, it probably presently doesn't exist - and I know it's hard.

Then fifthly we find out that they feared the Lord, verse 22. They had prayed for him, they sought divine guidance in his upbringing, they cherished Christ's presence in their home, they brought offerings and made sacrifices for the Lord, and they feared the Lord. 'We shall surely die', Manoah said, 'because we have seen God'. I don't know whether you agree with me or not, but I think perhaps the woman - Manoah's wife who is unnamed - perhaps was more spiritual than Manoah himself, because the Angel revealed Himself twice to her. Then when he thinks that the Lord is going to kill them in verse 22, she exclaims: 'Well, the Lord wouldn't receive a burnt offering and a meat offering at our hands, neither would he have showed us all these things, if He was going to kill us'. She was a wise woman, and often that's sadly the case in many Christian homes today - that it's the woman that has to keep the Christian testimony.

We must move on. I want to ask you, in the light of Samson having not only the best spiritual start he could have in life, he had the best family start, the best family background that anybody could want - but the question is: what did he do with it? Children, you're here this morning: what have you done with your home life? The family heritage, the parental example that you have been given through God's Spirit in your parent's life - what have you done with it? Even if you don't literally have Christian parents, I'm sure that there is some godly example that has been in your life: how have you reacted and related to it? Those that have prayed for you, sacrificed for you, tried to instruct you? Parents, have you done your best, with God's help? Now I know that many of you have, and many of your children are wayward today - but can I just say to you that the devil can use this as a great instrument of punishment in your mind and heart, by telling you that you must have done something wrong if your children are not following the Lord today. Can I say this: you could do everything that Samson's parents did, and more, and your children will still not necessarily follow the Lord. Do you hear that? It does not mean that they will go the right way, even if you do right by them.

Often we hear quoted Proverbs 22:6: 'Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it'. Can I tell you that the book of Proverbs is not a book of promises - it is not a book of promises! Now it's still God's word, it is a book of wisdom and a book of advice, that's why you sometimes get contradiction in it in the sense that on one occasion it tells you to answer a fool, and on another occasion it tells you not to - because different circumstances dictate different wisdom and different behaviour. What that proverb is saying is that you try and do your best for a child, and it will not forget it, but it doesn't necessarily mean that everything that you have taught them they will obey. My friend, in
Ezekiel 18 - that's a good chapter for you to study if you're hammered by the devil regarding this - it says that 'the soul that sinneth, it shall die, and the father will not be punished for the sins of his son, nor the son for the father'. We go through the whole word of God and we find that good men had bad sons, and bad men had good sons. Sure the disciples, didn't they come to the Lord Jesus in John 9, and say about the blind man: 'Did this man sin or his parents, that he was born blind?' - and the Lord said: 'Listen, neither!'. Don't let the devil hammer you with that thing.

Now, I know that some people hammer their children with the Bible - and that's why their children are wayward, and I'm not espousing that. But what I am saying is: you're not responsible if you have done your best, and let me share a verse with you - and we have to be careful how we use a verse such as this. This is for both those who have wayward children and those who point the finger at those who have wayward children, Isaiah chapter 1 and verse 2 - note it down - listen: 'Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me'. God's children rebelled against Him!

What have we done with the family and the blessings that God has given to us? He was a child of promise in his miraculous birth and his many blessings, he had godly parents who prayed for him and sought guidance for him, who coveted God's presence in the home for him, and sacrificed for him - but then, I want you to see thirdly, he was set apart as holy. What a promising start he had, verses 4 to 7 tell us that he would be a Nazarite from his birth. Now 'Nazar' in Hebrew means 'to separate', and it simply means he would be a separated one, a holy one for God's special uses. Another word that we use in the New Testament for 'holy and separated' is 'sanctified'.

Now there were two types of Nazarites, there was the temporary Nazarite who put himself under this particular Nazarite vow, that I'll explain in a moment, just for a protracted period of time. Then there is a perpetual Nazarite, and there's only three of them in scripture, people who were Nazarites all their life. There is Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist in the New Testament. Now let me say that Jesus was not a Nazarite, people often think He was, He was a Nazarene - that designated where He came from, not a vow that He was under.

But this was a vow, the vow of a Nazarite, that you took upon yourself - but if you were a perpetual Nazarite, someone from birth to death, it was something that was by divine appointment, God had chosen it for you - and that's the case for Samson. The rules of the Nazarite were: one, his hair was to go uncut - that was a sign of the crown of divine royalty upon him. He was chosen of God, it was his outward testimony, that people would know what he was. Secondly he was to refrain from the fruit of the vine, no strong drink, and it wasn't just that he wasn't to get drunk - he wasn't to touch wine or grapes or raisins, and all of that signified luxury, for wine is the fruit of affluence, the best that this world can offer. It was to signify that he was not to live for the pleasures of the world, but the pleasures of God. Thirdly, he was not to contact with dead, forbidden things; dead bodies, and death in general he wasn't to touch. We know from the Old Testament that to touch a dead thing made you unfit for Tabernacle service, which was fellowship with God. That signified that this man, because he wasn't to go near dead things or touch them, he was to be in constant fellowship with the Lord. This was to be an extra special consecration, so much so that the Angel tells his mother that she is to obey these rules until the child is born.

Now what do these vows of Nazariteship mean? It means that this man was dedicated and consecrated completely to God. God's mark was on him. Separation to God also involves
separation from something else, and that separation from something is sin. Now let me say it was perfectly acceptable, indeed advisable, for men to cut their hair in that day. It was perfectly OK for them to drink wine in that day, it was perfectly OK for them to touch even their own dead relatives, but to this man things that were acceptable for others became inappropriate for him, because he was God's man, he was a Nazarite. Now let me say this to you: Paul spoke to the Corinthians, and he called them saints, called saints by God; and he told them that they had to be separate, they had to be the temples of God's Holy Spirit, they were not their own, they were bought with a price - and, in fact, he says to them: 'All things are lawful to you, but not all things are helpful'. It all depends how high you want to go with God. You're not your own, Christian, you're set apart as holy, just like the Nazarite - though the rules are very, very different.

The fact of the matter is: here is where Samson's downfall came, he came as close to these forbidden things as he possibly could. We'll find this out as we go through our lessons each Sunday morning, but one instance was that he took the honey out of the carcass, another is that he wielded the jawbone of an ass, he even visited vineyards even though he never got drunk. He was continually sailing close to the wind. His weakness was: the vows he was under as the calling of the saint of God, he tried to throw the bondage from off his shoulders. He despised his heritage of birth, he was like Esau who sold his birthright.

Now here's the principle, please don't miss it, friends, this morning: Samson's setting apart as a Nazarite teaches us that strength comes from separation from the world. If you want spiritual strength - do you see it? Because when he lost his separation, and the sign of his separation was his long hair, and when it was shorn he lost his strength. Here's a thought that has been given to me over recent days: the last vow to go of the Nazarite vows in Samson's life, was that of his hair - that is the outward appearance. If he was walking down the street with his long hair, he could have been breaking the other two laws, drinking wine, touching dead things, and no one would have known - and they would point the finger and say: 'There's a Nazarite', but he was anything but! But then when his head was shorn, everybody could see that his consecration and his testimony was gone. What's your testimony like this morning? Are you in cahoots with the Philistines, with sensuality, with materialism, with the enemy? Paul says in Romans 13: 'Put away all those filthy works of the flesh, put them off, and put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ'.

He was set apart as holy, but fourthly and finally I want you to see that he had experienced the power of God's Holy Spirit. What a promising start he had: a child of promise, godly parents, and set apart as holy - and then he experiences God Spirit, verses 24 and 25: 'The woman bare a son, and called his name Samson: and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times in the camp of Dan'. It's stated that four times the Spirit of God came upon Samson, that's more than any of the other Judges. While other Judges were said at times to be clothed with the Spirit of God, it's only said of Samson that 'the LORD blessed him'. Now that means that the hand of God was upon Samson in a special way, and the Lord demonstrated to his parents, as the Angel wondrously went up into heaven in that flame of fire upon the altar, they were showed by God in verse 19 the deep, deep power of God that would be coursing through the body of this servant of God, Samson.

Let me say this to you: we're not told that Samson was a giant, and we're not told that he had bulging biceps. In fact, I'm inclined to believe that he was just an ordinary 5'8", maybe even six-foot man - but he was no different than the rest of the crowd, except he was set apart for God, and that was the secret of his power. The secret of Samson's great strength
was his Nazarite vow, and that Nazarite vow was symbolised by his unshorn hair - but the
source of his strength was the Holy Spirit of God. But what I want you to see: such a
promising start, a child of promise from birth and in the blessings, with godly parents and a
godly upbringing, set apart from birth with these vows upon his life, come upon by the Holy
Spirit on occasions, but when he lost his consecration he lost his power!

We saw in the life of Gideon at the very end, and wasn't the title something like - at least if it
wasn't the title, the introduction was: 'It's not how you start, it's how you finish that matters'.
We saw that it came to the end of Gideon's reign as Judge, and what did he do? We found
that there was a great gulf between his public pronouncements and his private life. He had
lost his power. I don't know how you feel at the end of a study like this morning's, but the
way I feel is: I look into the face of Samson, the corpse, with his hair shorn, then grown
again, and his eyes plucked out - and I say, 'Oh, Samson, oh Samson, what could have
been!'.

Friends this morning, what would he have been if he had held his consecration? What would
he have been if he continued in the place God had placed him and blessed him in? The other
judges had military victory, Samson would not have. Samson would not overthrow completely
the Philistines, he would not prevent complete defeat - he would accomplish a partial victory,
he would begin to deliver the people. But he wasn't, at the end of his life, even though he
killed more in his death than he did in his life, he couldn't look up like Paul the apostle to
heaven and say: 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith'.
Friends, it is a fact and an awful reality that many Christians, as they stand before the
Judgment Seat of Christ, will stand there with the dismal prospect of being at home with the
Lord's business unfinished on earth. For we shall all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ,
that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according that he hath done, either
good or bad - and the two great predominant thoughts there are reward or regret.

What will it be for you, my friend? Such a promising start, all the blessings of God, maybe a
godly upbringing, maybe you've set yourself aside for God as holy, to be used of Him. Maybe
you've had great experiences of the Holy Spirit's usefulness in your life - but where are you
now? I never ever fail to think of this poem when I talk about the Judgment Seat:

'He would have me rich, but I stand there poor,
Stripped of all but His grace.
And memory will run like a haunted thing
Down the years that I cannot retrace.

My penitent heart will well nigh break,
With tears that I cannot shed,
And I'll cover my face with my empty hands,
And bow my uncrowned head'.

Some of you have had a very promising start, some of you young people here today - but on
that day of judgment, will we be left standing with uncrowned heads, with empty hands,
heard to say to ourselves: 'Oh David, Oh David, what might have been?'.

Our Father, none of us are as we should be, or even what we could be - but Lord, we want, as
we expressed in our hymn earlier, to be nearer, and we want that our consecration will be
more definite, and more obvious, and that our separation would be greater...not isolation, but
a holiness that in the midst of the world shows forth God's glory to those who are dark in sin
and nature's night. That others would look upon us and see that we are set apart for God, but
that the power would be manifest in our lives that attributes our separation unto God. Lord, if
there are those who are sailing close to the wind, Lord we pray that You will make them
aware of their great negligence and of their great loss on that awful day when the wood, the
hay, and the stubble go up in smoke. Let none of us say: 'Oh, what could have been!', but let
us use the promising start of our birth and our blessings, and the instruction we have been
given wherever, and our sanctification in Christ, and the Holy Ghost who has been given to us
as Your gift - may we use it all, that we may be able to say, 'I have fought a good fight'. In
Jesus' name we pray, Amen.
Men For The Hour - Chapter 13
"Samson, The Broken Vows"

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Turn in our Bibles for our scripture reading just now from Judges chapter 14, Judges chapter 14 - and if you're new to us here in the Iron Hall today, we have been travelling through a journey, looking at the characters of the judges within the book of Judges in the Old Testament. We're almost at the end of that journey, we're looking at the last character, the last Judge - at least in the book of Judges - that is brought and presented to us, and it's the character of Samson. Last Sunday morning we looked at 'Samson, The Promising Start', and this morning in chapter 14 we're going to look at 'Samson, The Broken Vows'.

Verse 1 of chapter 14: "And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines. And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife. Then his father and his mother said unto 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? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well. But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel. Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath, and came to the vineyards of Timnath: and, behold, a young lion roared against him. And the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand: but he told not his father or his mother what he had done. And he went down, and talked with the woman; and she pleased Samson well. And after a time he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion: and, behold, there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcass of the lion. And he took thereof in his hands, and went on eating, and came to his father and mother, and he gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcass of the lion. So his father went down unto the woman: and Samson made there a feast; for so used the young men to do. And it came to pass, when they saw him, that they brought thirty companions to be with him. And Samson said unto them, I will now put forth a riddle unto you: if ye can certainly declare it me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty sheets and thirty change of garments: But if ye cannot declare it me, then shall ye give me thirty sheets and thirty change of garments. And they said unto him, Put forth thy riddle, that we may hear it. And he said unto them, Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness. And they could not in three days expound the riddle. And it came to pass on the seventh day, that they said unto Samson's wife, Entice thy husband, that he may declare unto us the riddle, lest we burn thee and thy father's house with fire: have ye called us to take that we have? is it not so? And Samson's wife wept before him, and said, Thou dost but hate me, and lovest me not: thou hast put forth a riddle unto the children of my people, and hast not told it me. And he said unto her, Behold, I have not told it my father nor my mother, and shall I tell it thee? And she wept before him the seven days, while their feast lasted: and it came to pass on the seventh day, that he told her, because she lay sore upon him: and she told the riddle to the children of her people. And the men of the city said unto him on the seventh day before the sun went down, What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion? and..."
he said unto them, If ye had not plowed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle. And
the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and slew thirty men of
them, and took their spoil, and gave change of garments unto them which expounded the
riddle. And his anger was kindled, and he went up to his father's house. But Samson's wife
was given to his companion, whom he had used as his friend". Amen, and we know that the
Lord will bless the reading of His own truth.

Now we saw last week in our study of chapter 13 that Samson was a man of God, a Judge
raised in Israel who started off with a promising start. We found that out as we looked under
a couple of points that were illustrated for us in that chapter. First of all, we found out that
Samson was a child of promise. In other words, first of all he had a miraculous birth. His
mother was barren, she was infertile, but God miraculously in a supernatural way allowed her
to give birth to Samson because the nation needed a deliverer. Then we saw that he was a
child of promise in the sense that he had many many blessings, he was born with great
potential and prospect. If you turn back for a moment in chapter 13 and verse 5 we read that
the Angel said: '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'. So right before his conception God had promised,
through the Angel, that this would be the man who would begin to deliver Israel from the iron
fist of the Philistines. In verse 24 we read also that 'the woman bare a son, and called his
name Samson: and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him'. As far as I'm aware, that's the
only Judge that it is said that God blessed them.

So, this was a child of promise, and that's why Samson had a promising start. He had great
prospects and potential for God. We saw added to that fact was the family background that he
had, and we found out in chapter 13 that he had very godly parents. They were parents who
prayed for him, they also sought guidance from God regarding his upbringing. We saw that
they cherished the presence of Christ in their home, they asked the Angel of the presence of
the Lord to stay with them, and they brought offerings and sacrifices to the Lord - they were a
couple, parents who feared God. So that added to Samson's promising start - not only his
miraculous birth, and his many blessings, but the godly parents that brought him into the
world and brought him up.

Then we saw that he was set aside as holy unto the Lord right from before his birth, for he
was to be a Nazarite, the Angel told Manoah's wife. There were three vows that a Nazarite
was under: first, his hair was to remain uncut; secondly, he was to refrain from the fruit of
the vine; and thirdly, he was to touch no dead thing. We saw last week that that was the
secret of Samson's strength: his separation from the world. We see that right early in his life,
he is promising and showing great prospect because he actually proves himself in the service
of the Lord in his own home environment. God's power had come upon him, verse 25 of
chapter 13, if you read it: 'The Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times in the camp of
Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol'. Great potential, great prospects, a child of promise in his
miraculous birth, his many blessings, he had a background of having godly parents who
brought him into the world and brought him up, he was set apart as holy by God and by his
parents, and right at the beginning of his ministry - if you like - he is proving himself in great
Holy Ghost service for the Lord.

Right away we have a lesson here: when God chooses a man, or indeed chooses a woman, He
sets them apart for Himself like Samson. Here was a young man set apart to overcome the
enemy. However, the tragedy was that Samson's enemy and God's enemy overcame him. We
learnt last week that Samson means 'sunlight', or 'sunny', and this young man ended his life
in darkness, blinded by the enemy that he was supposed to conquer. We might well ask the question: how could someone like Samson, with such promise, such potential and prospect in life, descend to such a pathetic shadow of the man that God intended him to be? That is a valid question, but we might well ask the same question of ourselves, because last Sunday morning we saw that we - as Christians in the New Testament era - we mirror many of the promises, the prospects and potential that Samson had in his early years. We are in Christ, we saw from Ephesians 1 and verse 3 that we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. We couldn't have a better start - and some of us, even in this congregation this morning as well as last Sunday morning, have had the family prospect and promising start of godly parents. They have brought us up in the fear and admonition of the Lord, yet how far short have we fallen from what God has planned and intended us to be? Why should it be in Samson's life that, with such a promising start, he messes it all up? Why should it be in our lives that with God on our side and all the blessings of God for us, that we should hit so many spiritual dead ends and come to nothing?

Well, the simple answer is found in our title this morning: broken vows. Samson was under the vow of the Nazarite, and we saw from Deuteronomy 23:21 last week that when you utter a vow to God, you have to keep it, or God considers it sin. Another passage on vows is found in Ecclesiastes 5 verses 1 to 5, verse 2 says: 'Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few'. Verse 4: 'When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay'.

Now vows, generally speaking in the Old Testament, were voluntary things - but Samson's was not. God had chosen Samson as a Nazarite before his birth, that meant that after he was separated from his mother's womb he was to be set apart unto God. It was through this separation and the vows of consecration that the power of God would rest upon him in fullness, and God would begin to deliver His people from the Philistines. Now Samson did not make the vows himself. We might well say: 'Well, that's not a bit fair. Why should Samson be held to something that he did not do of his own volition, that God imposed upon him?'. We need to see it as a great privilege: Samson had the greater privilege of being handpicked by God, being set apart for God's use.

Now my friends, I want you to see the stark reality of the parallels that are in the Christian life here - they're staring us in the face and we need to see them. As Ephesians 1 verse 3 says, like Samson and his promising start, we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, everything is going for us; in the same way, Ephesians 1 and verse 4 tells us that we are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. We have been handpicked as Christians for God, and the reason Ephesians 1 verse 4 gives us is that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love. The privilege of God's grace towards the Christian means that we have been chosen of God out of a world that is dying and damned, and we are set apart to be servants of God in holiness and separation from the world. Once we were slaves to sin, but God has taken us from being slaves to sin to servants of His holiness. But what many believers fail to recognise is this, and I want you to hear this this morning: is that you're either a slave to sin, or you're a servant of God - there's no in between. You're either one or the other. Many people who trust Christ fail to see this: they praise God for being set free from the bondage of their sinful habits and the prospect of judgment in hell, but they think that they're now free to do whatever they like - that's not the case. You now have the privilege, and I want to put it in a positive light, a privilege of being a servant of God - but you're not free to do as you like. As Paul put it in Corinthians, 'Ye are not
We have, in other words, obligations to God - a bit like vows. We have been set apart for God's use, and if we do not honour our vows of separation, just like Samson we will have no power, personally, in our Christian life - and corporately we will become useless in the hands of God for His service. We end up not living for the purpose and the intention that God's grace has chosen us, and set us apart for - we are wasted, shipwrecked, useless, disqualified for God. Let me just say that many of the points that I'll be hitting on this morning apply to all age groups in our gathering, but particularly to young people - because Samson was a young person here in chapter 14, and many of his experiences you will face, young people, as you go through life. The choices that you will make will greatly affect your spiritual life, just as it did Samson's.

So let's embark upon our study this morning, chapter 14, looking first of all at verses 1 to 4. We see here that his downward spiral of breaking his consecration to God started when he rebelled against his parents. Now, if you're a parent here this morning, you will know that you live daily with a thousand fears of the life choices your children may or may not make - especially today when parental control is largely breaking down. We've even got to the stage, in Europe at least, where if a parent doesn't comply to the child's wishes, they could end up in court! Now, don't forget that Samson's day is not a million miles away from our day - chapter 21 verse 25 tells us that 'Every man did that which was right in his own eyes', because there was no king, no law or restraining force in Israel. We could translate that for our purposes this morning: 'Every child does that which is right in their own eyes', there's no restraint. That was Samson's primary problem in the home, and it's a problem in the home even today.

We read that, as the Lord Jesus' return comes nearer, 2 Timothy 3 verses 1 and 2 tell us that 'in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy'. This rebellion in Samson's life was evidenced first of all in his demanding attitude. In verse 2: 'he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife'. In verse 2 he says 'I have seen', and then he says later 'she pleaseth me well', and in verse 3 your margin should read that it means 'she is right in my eyes'. 'I've seen a girl, and she's right in my eyes, therefore get her for me!' - you see that he's telling his parents what to do, he's not asking them for permission.

Is that not the spirit of the age today? Young people, and not just young people, what they see with their eyes and their heart's desire, they take with their hands - 'If I want it, I'll have it. If it feels right, it looks right, it satisfies me; well, then I'm going to take it to myself'. That is the mark of a materialistic, or a hedonistic society, a society that is drunk on pleasure, a society that has rejected the rule and reign of God. What you see in society is reflected in individual lives in cameo, and we see people living like this: they are living by sight and not by faith. What they see, what they feel, they're living a sensual existence - and this was Samson's problem. In the home he was rebelling against his parents, and it's seen in his demanding attitude where he saw this woman - he began to walk by sight and not by faith. As we go through Samson's life, we find that his eyes where one of his biggest problems. He couldn't control his eyes, he lusted with his eyes, he was guided by his eyes rather than the law of the Lord.

We see it in chapter 14 verse 1: 'I have seen', he had seen a woman in Timnath. When we turn to chapter 16 and verse 1, 'Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot, and
went in unto her'. Verse 21 of chapter 16: 'But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house'. His eyes were his problem, and eventually his eyes would become his downfall and he would lose all sight because of his sin through the eyes. I don't know whether you've noticed, you're definitely blind if you haven't, that we live in a voyeuristic world. You only have to look at things like 'Big Brother', and how people are obsessed with looking into the lives, the personal lives of other people - voyeurism. Satan, the Bible has told us, it is his age-old tactic to use eye-gate more than perhaps anything else to entice and seduce us to sin. The proliferation of pornography everywhere is a case in point regarding that.

Well, Samson had great physical strength, at times he had great spiritual strength as the power of God came upon him - but when it came to women he had no strength, he had no control over his fleshly appetites. Now young people, listen to what I'm saying, and I want to address this in a delicate way: the sexual urge is something very, very strong. If you do not control it, it will control you! Proverbs 6 and 27 tells us: 'Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?'. Many young people and older people today are ignited, completely consumed by lust - and I would say it's perhaps harder to protect yourself and be pure in this society today than it has ever been. I wonder have you got eye trouble? Well, 'eye trouble' is only the symptom of 'I trouble' - because Samson's prime problem was that he was not living to please the Lord, he wasn't even living to please his parents, he was living to please himself. It's seen in this demanding attitude: 'I have seen, she pleases me, she's right in my eyes, get her for me!'.

Then secondly, his rebellion against his parents is seen in the unequal yoke, verse 3. His father and mother said: 'Is there not a woman among the daughters of your brothers, among all the people who you can take a wife? Why do you have to go to the uncircumcised Philistines?'. Now how many times has this scene been repeated in Christian homes down through the years? 'Mum, Dad, I've seen a girl, I want to marry her'. 'Great!', the parents say, 'Where does she worship?'. 'She doesn't'. 'She doesn't? When did she become a Christian?'. 'She's not'. 'Doesn't the Bible say, son...'. 'I don't care what the Bible says! We're in love, and it doesn't matter what you say, what the Bible says, I'm going to marry her!'.

Here Samson is in the same situation - maybe you're finding yourself in it as a parent. Well, there's nothing much you can do my friend, only pray. Samson's parents reasoned with him from the Scriptures, 'Is there not somebody of your own people?'. Now you young person, talking to you now: if you have got to the stage where reasoning from the Scriptures with you is a waste of time, you're on Samson's slippery slope. You're not listening to God's word and verses that are quoted, you're on the downward spiral. You present the Scriptures to many, especially young people today, and the answer they give you is: 'So what? Everybody's doing that now, even Christians are doing it - I'm going to do it, whatever you say, whatever you do'. I ask you young person: is that reasonable, to give answers like that to God's word? Are you just going to go ahead even if it hurts your parents, even if it hurts God? Now go right ahead and do it, you're free to do whatever you like - but don't say that it's of God. You see, that's what many people are doing: they're actually bringing God and incriminating Him in the sins that they're committing against Him.

Now somebody will turn round and say to me: 'Well, doesn't verse 4 say in this passage that
God was in this unequal yoke with Samson? God allowed this to happen, Samson was looking for an occasion against the enemy'. Now look at verse 4: 'But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines'. I often hear this said from Christians, they say: 'I went out with a non-Christian, and they got converted, it must have been God's will', or 'I left my wife and I married a non-Christian, and they eventually got saved, God moves in mysterious ways' - well, He really does, doesn't he?! In code, what they're saying is this: 'This was of God's will to do what I did, because the outcome was desirable for me' - do you know what that is? That is pragmatism, and it's not found in the Scriptures, it is 'the end justifies the means'. Paul spoke against it when he said in Romans 3:8: 'Shall we say, Let us do evil, that good may come?'.

How many are saying today: 'But by doing this as a Christian, and going here as a Christian, and experiencing this as a Christian, it helps me to relate to the unconverted and non-Christian world'? My friend, you're missing the point: Samson's story, like the rest of the Scriptures, teaches us that the only way we can help the lost world is with the power of God in our lives. The only way we can have the power of God in our lives is through separation from that same world, and separation unto God. So what does verse 4 mean then? Well, when it says: 'He sought', 'Father and mother knew not that he sought an occasion against the Philistines', the 'he', I believe is speaking of God and not Samson. Do you know what that means? Even though Samson was rebelling against God's influence in his life with a demanding attitude and an unequal yoke in the face of his parents and the Almighty, God would still have His way. Rebellng young person in the meeting this morning, this is the lesson that you need to see: don't you think you're going to be able to defy God by the choices that you make, and just get away with it without any consequence. In fact, the more you run away from God, all you're doing is hurting yourself rather than submitting to God's will. Like Samson, God's going to have to take you up a rough road to show you the hard way! Parents, if your child has taken the wrong way, take heart - because this is wonderful: the Lord is not limited to your children's wrong choices. Hallelujah! Does that not give you hope? The lesson here is that when God is not allowed to rule, He overrules! We'll see how a little bit later.

Then we see secondly that Samson's downward spiral of broken vows took another step down when he renounced his vows in verses 5 to 9. He rebelled against his parents, and then he renounces his vows. Now we read that when Samson and his parents went down to Timnath to make arrangements for the marriage, Samson appears to have gone off the road on his own away from his parents, and he went on a detour into the vineyards - and there, we read, a lion attacked him. Now a vineyard is a dangerous place for a man who's not supposed to have anything to do with grapes, and I just wonder did God send this lion across his path to warn him that he was on the wrong path? I wonder have you taken the wrong road, and there have been lions come across your way to tell you that you're going the wrong direction? You're flying close to the wind, and God is trying to tell you tenderly, but you're not having it! So God's going to have to be a little bit more severe.

We read that weeks later Samson returned to claim his bride the same way, and he turned aside again to the vineyard - and I wonder was he turning aside to gloat over his victory over this lion that he tore apart like a young goat? Now he had already been defiled by going into the vineyard as a Nazarite, and now the Bible tells us he sees in the carcass of the lion a bees' nest with honey in it. He reaches in - he's not meant to touch dead things - and he touches it, and he eats of the honey. Then he takes the honey home and gives it to his parents, and doesn't tell them it's defiled food. Now, here's the lesson: Samson renounced his vow of separation without actually renouncing it - did you get that? Samson renounced it without
actually renouncing it - you go through this passage, you'll not find one place where he says: 'I'm going to start drinking wine now, I'm going to cut my hair, I'm going to start touching dead things'. It came gradually, subtly, in a deceiving way. I'm sure if you had stopped him and said: 'Samson, are you a Nazarite?', he would have stood up tall and proud in his strength and said: 'I am' - but do you know something? His life was a shambles!

There are many Christians and, like Samson, as far as anybody knows they're still obedient to their dedication and obligations to God - yet the inner symbols of their consecration are null and void, they're gone! Samson began to value his consecration to God less and less, he became comfortable with his broken vows without actually articulating it with his mouth. This doesn't just apply to young people, my friend this part really applies to more mature folk. I hear them saying from time to time, very wisely: 'Oh, I used to believe that doctrine', or 'I used to take my stand against those things', or 'I used to be more dogmatic', or 'I used to be more fanatical, but I have mellowed and I just don't see things the way I used to see them'. Do you know why you don't? Because the Philistines have put your eyes out! You've got too close to the world, and the world's got too close to you. Sometimes I feel like saying to older folk who say those things: '...and you also used to know more blessing! And used to see more souls saved, more lives touched, more answers to prayer!' - but you see, the secret to power is consecration and separation from the world and to God.

A lot of people in Ulster get one half but not the other, they separate from the world and they think that's what it is to be holy: 'Don't do this, don't do that, don't do the other'. Separation is not just from something, it is unto something - and it's useless unless you're separated completely and concentrated unto God. His first spiral down in broken vows was rebelling against his parents, then he renounced his vows by going into the vineyard, by touching the dead thing - later on, of course, he got his hair cut, and we find that later in our studies.

Thirdly, here's another step downward: he made a joke of his behaviour, verses 10 to 14. Now I don't know about you, but I love a good laugh. It's healthy, at times, to laugh at yourself, and even laugh at Christians - believe it or not! But humour is often a mechanism whereby, when we can't face something face-to-face, we laugh at it and joke about it. There is a problem, as a Christian, if we start to joke about sin, if we poke fun at those who are trying to avoid sin and live holy lives, if we start to accept the world's caricature of what a Christian is, and we start to agree with them about how we view Christians - that's a problem.

Now, I would have to say there are some people - sometimes young people, not always - who can't be serious about anything. I would have to say there's something wrong with someone who has to joke about everything around them and everything in the church. There are some people who just need to grow up, they need to take their sin seriously and start to take their consecration to God seriously. This was a sign of Samson's backsliding: he treated his sin and the vows of holiness that were upon him flippantly. He talked about his faults and his backslidings frivolously. We see him at this wedding feast, perhaps, and he gives this riddle as an offering to his thirty companions. He says to them: 'If you get it right, you'll get thirty complete outfits, and if you don't get it, then I'll get the thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes'.

The riddle is found in verse 14, if you look at it - it's simple when you know the answer! 'Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness', of course the eater is the lion, and out of it came the food - that is, the honey - and out of the strong lion came forth the sweetness of the honey. In verses 15 to 18, when the men failed to guess, they went to Samson's wife and said: 'Persuade him to tell us, or we'll burn your father's
home and all your family and your possessions'. She went and hounded him and nagged him, and eventually he gave up the answer. In verses 19 and 20 we see that Samson lost the deal, and he had to go and kill thirty men to get the clothes.

Now what are we seeing here? Here's a man who has rebelled against God's influence coming from his parents, here is a man who has renounced his vows by his actions, here is a man who is starting to joke about his sinful behaviour - and where is it leading to? He thinks he's leading away from God's will - now God, we will see, is getting him exactly, in a sense, where He can use him again; but not in the blessing that He wants to give him. We find that this sin is leading to more anxiety, more agony, more tragedy in the life of this man Samson. He feast with the Philistines, he associates with them more and more on a social basis. He begins to play riddles with them, and all the while, what is he disclosing? Not his strength as a man of God, but his weakness as a sinner!

Listen to me this morning, whatever age you are: if you are more comfortable with the people of this world, doing what they do in worldly pleasures and so on and so forth, and you aren't meeting with God's people and doing the holy things of God's church - I say to you: you've lost your consecration. It's gone! It will lead inevitably to further sin and further disgrace. Samson should have been out making war with the Philistines, but he was drinking wine with the Philistines, he was having a feast - and the only thing that could get him going to fight them was when his personal interests were at stake, and it was a spirit of vindictiveness that got him to get on his feet and to go and slay them. No longer was he fighting to uphold the glorious name of the Lord, but he was fighting to fulfil his own will.

He rebelled against his parents, renounced his vows and made a joke of his behaviour - but I want you to see finally: the Lord had the last laugh. You see, when God, as I've said, isn't permitted to rule in our lives, He overrules and He works His will out regardless of our decisions. See it: God used this event to give Samson occasion to attack the enemy. He was going down to marry her, to bring them into his family, but because of this event and the sour way it went, Samson ends up in verse 19 of chapter 14 killing thirty men. Then in chapter 15, the first five verses, we find that he burns up the enemy crops and he slaughters a great number of Philistines in verses 7 and 8; in verse 15 of chapter 15 we see that he slays a thousand men. Now Samson hadn't planned these things, but God worked them out just the same. My friend, you cannot run away from God, especially if you're a child of God! You try and do it your way, God will have His way, He will have the last laugh - the only tragedy will be: you will lose even what you thought you were going to gain in the world. For, when Samson returned, he lost the wife that he'd left his home for, and it was his companion who took her.

There's a wee verse in Proverbs says: 'The way of the transgressor is hard'. You know, we often apply that to people who aren't saved in the Gospel meeting, but it's of double force to the true child of God who has chosen to desecrate a life that was once consecrated to the Lord. Have you made your vows to God in some meeting, some altar call, some decision? 'Lord, I'll give you my life, I'm saved but I'm going to give you my life, I'm going to live for You, I'm going to go wherever You tell me to go, I'm going to do whatever You tell me to do' - if you're not going to pay that vow, shut your mouth and don't say it! Because God could have His way, even if you change your mind. Now God is a gracious God, my friend, don't let me make you think this morning that He's a severe God - He's not. But if you have uttered your voice to God, and you have broken those vows, my friend, God will have the last laugh.

As a Christian, are you going to work with God or are you going to work against God? Either
way, He will work what He wants - the big question is: whose side will you be on? Samson had his broken vows, what a promising start - where is your consecration today? Is it still on the altar, or does it need to be put there again?

Our Father, we thank You for choosing us in Christ, lavishing us with blessings. Lord, we thank You that we have been set apart and sanctified in the Saviour to be of the Master's use. But Lord, how often do we get sidetracked? How often do we renounce our vows without uttering an audible renunciation of them? How often do we do touch dead things? How often do we drink of the pleasures of the world? How often are we walking around, and our outward signs of consecration are there, but our life internally is a shambles in Your sight? Lord, forgive us, have mercy upon us. We have so much going for us in Christ, and yet indiscipline in our lives, unrestraint, flying close to the wind makes us devoid of divine power. Lord, may Your power rest afresh upon us all today, as we reconsecrate and rededicate our lives to You. For the glory of Christ we pray, Amen.
Men For The Hour - Chapter 14
"Samson, The Vengeful Victor"

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Judges chapter 15 again, and you'll remember if you were with us in previous studies of Samson, if not the other Judges, that we began looking at 'Samson, The Promising Start' - his birth, and his parentage, and the promises of God that were given to him, the great potential and prospect that he had. God had chosen him to do a great work, and to begin to deliver the Israelites out of the oppression of the Philistines. Then we moved on to see how Samson, as a Nazarite, had taken three vows - and we looked at those in great detail - how he broke his vows before God and began to lose his consecration towards God, which was the first step to losing his power. This week we're looking at 'Samson, The Vengeful Victor', and that title will become clear as we go through our study.

You'll have noticed that Samson is a bit of a contradiction in terms. Indeed, someone has described him as, I quote: 'A mystery wrapped in an enigma' - now I know that's a description of something else, but nevertheless that could be an apt description of this man of God - a mystery wrapped in an enigma. What is the enigma and the mystery? Simply: how could God use a man like Samson? You should be asking that question if you've been with us, or if you've ever studied Samson in any detail, because the flesh and the Spirit both appear to be dominant in the life of this man, in the one character and personality. We, as evangelicals, are so used to hearing messages about being crucified with Christ, being mortified in and to the flesh; and therefore, if we're dead to ourselves and sin, being alive unto God and being filled and controlled by the Spirit. But at times, you'll have to agree with me, because it's there, Samson seems to be controlled by both flesh and spirit.

I think Billy Graham once preached a sermon on Samson and called him 'God's Delinquent' - it's a good title, for that's just what he is. He's somewhat of a contradiction in terms, and the New Testament does teach us that we are to mortify the flesh and live to the Spirit. Indeed if you turn with me for a moment - and I want you to keep your finger or a marker in this passage of Scripture, because we're going to look at it later - Galatians 5 verses 16 and 17, we read these words: 'This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth', or strives, 'against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would'. Now Paul here seems to reinforce us in our first assumption, that is that you can't be a person who is at the one time filled with the Spirit of God, yet full of fleshly impulse and passion. The one is contrary to the other, the one strives and wars with the other, therefore walk in the Spirit that ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

Well then, how can we explain Samson? Of course, we know that God's word does not nor cannot contradict itself. Well, let me clear up, hopefully to your satisfaction, this seeming contradiction. First of all we need to realise that God, when He presents Samson to us here in the book of Judges, indeed any of the Judges that He presents us with, is not presenting us with an ideal deliverer, saviour or man. It's important to lay that down, indeed the emphasis is the opposite: that God is presenting us with a series of men who are extremely weak, and it is actually their weakness that qualifies them for use in God's hand. Samson, essentially, was a product of his time. In Judges 21:25 we read these words that apply right throughout this
book: 'there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes'.

Samson was a vulgar deliverer for a vulgar age, but at no time during the whole of the account of his life here does God ever condone Samson's behaviour. We see, in fact, God's Spirit reveals clearly to us that his behaviour in the flesh led to his demise.

So we ought to be careful right away not to use Old Testament incidents like Samson, that at times seem to be unclear, to reinterpret New Testament truths which we know are absolute - that is, that you're to walk in the Spirit and not fulfil the lust of the flesh. These two, generally speaking - the principle of the flesh and the Spirit - are contrary and contradict one another. The lesson, secondly, that we are meant to get out of the life of Samson is not, as I've said, the acceptability of this Judge or any Judge, it is the opposite - but rather the central story is of the extraordinary power of God, that's the writer's point, that's the Holy Spirit's point. It is simply that God's extraordinary power can be brought out of defeat, and the defeat of personal lives can be changed into God's victory, to such an extent that God's great enemies are subdued by weak people who are essentially failures.

Did you get it? God's point is not to give us a man like Samson and say: 'If you live up to be like him, you'll be able to do the exploits that he did' - no! God is showing us His power that can even work through a man like Samson in all his weakness and immorality. You see, the theme of Judges is not the Judge's rule, but God's overruling in a chaotic society where even His own servants completely fail and go AWOL, out of control. I hope you've seen that over these weeks: it is the amazing story, in a society who did everything they thought was right, and in a group of even God's deliverers whose moral lives left a great deal to be desired, that God still has His way, God still fulfils His word; and even when the materials that are available to Him are substandard, He's still able to do according to His sovereign purpose.

Now, hopefully that clears up how God could use a man like Samson - we're not in New Testament times, God is using what's there, but in no way does God ever condone Samson's fleshly behaviour. Yet here we see Samson's flesh coming to the fore once again in chapter 15. This time it is manifesting itself in revenge. Now we've seen how lustful and passionate Samson has been, and now we're turning to a sin that perhaps is not so blatantly obvious, and that is revenge. Of course you've heard it said: 'Revenge is sweet', but what we will see in this chapter is that revenge solves nothing, indeed revenge spirals out of control. Yet most of us here this morning would have to admit that, like Samson, there have been times in our lives when we have been genuinely wronged by another, and we feel justified that if we could just get revenge we would take it.

I read of a newspaper story about a man in Washington in the States, he was so enraged over his wife's filing for divorce that he bulldozed his three-bedroom $85,000 home. What he did was perfectly legal, because before he bulldozed the home he went and got a demolition permit. All the neighbours looked out their curtains and saw him demolishing the house, and they rang the police. There was a bit of a debacle and a commotion, until he produced this permit he'd bought for $11.50, and that was the chaos over - it was his legal right, he was entitled to do it. Yet he did it out of revenge. He was within his rights, so he felt that he could justifiably level the place.

Our hero Samson had a few things in common with that demolisher of his house, though he wouldn't have needed a bulldozer - he could have done it himself! Unrequited love was his problem, uncontrolled rage was his heart's possession, and his attitude was that his vengeance was justified in what we see him do in this chapter. He even says it, out of his own mouth he testifies in verse 3: 'Samson said concerning them, Now shall I be more blameless
than the Philistines, though I do them a displeasure'.

So let's look first of all at the vicious circle of vengeance that we see here exemplified in Samson. When we act in the flesh, out of this revengeful attitude and tendency, it often spirals out of control into a tit-for-tat vendetta of retaliation. When we take revenge we find that it often escalates completely out of control, it becomes a game of ping-pong, one-upmanship. We see this between Samson and the Philistines, they're both trying to outdo one another in their reprisals for their feeling of being rightfully wronged. As we look down these verses we see that these reprisals accelerate in their intensity. The retribution is graphically presented to us. Samson has been wronged, so he's going to get vengeance. When he gets and takes vengeance, the Philistines feel wronged and they're going to get Samson back. Samson and the Philistines both feel that revenge will solve their problem.

If you look at verse 7, Samson says: 'Yet will I be avenged of you, and after that I will cease'. He's under the impression that once he gets his revenge, that will be the matter over. But the problem never ends, it spirals out of control - the Philistines return in verse 10, if you look at it, to say: 'to do to him as he hath done to us'. 'We're going to get him back' - and then Samson justifies himself once more in verse 11, look at it: 'As they did unto me, so have I done unto them'. There's no end of paybacks!

Now let's look at them individually, as this ping-pong ball goes from one to the other. Samson returns to his wife in verse 1, he must have been married to her, and in his rage because of the riddle and how it went against him because his wife was in cahoots with the Philistines - she got out of him the answer and he had to go find these thirty garments, and he killed thirty men to get them and bring them back. He goes off in a rage, but when his anger has subsided, I wonder did his lust again come to the fore. You can imagine the scene - I don't think it was Valentine's Day! It was a lovely day about May time, and there's a knock on the door, and there stands Samson with a young goat under his arm - a bit like a box of chocolates or a bunch of flowers! That's literally the sense here, and there's a twinkle in his eye and he wants to kiss and make up - not with his father-in-law, but with his daughter.

Again we see in Samson the carnal selfish nature. Now can you imagine how daddy-in-law felt? I imagine a tension headache started, and nauseous churning in the stomach because he, as we read, gave Samson's wife to his best man because he didn't think Samson was coming back again. You can just imagine him saying: 'Samson, we have a problem! Your wife has been married off to your best man'. We read that in verse 20 of chapter 14, Samson's wife was given to his companion - that means 'best man' - whom he had used as his friend. So Samson returns, his wife is given away, and then we see that the Philistine father tries to get back at Samson, if you like, by justifying his action that couldn't be justified. In verse 2 he said: 'I verily thought that thou hadst utterly hated her; therefore I gave her to thy companion'. 'I thought you weren't coming back, you had rejected her!' - and do you see what he does? 'Is not her younger sister fairer than she? take her, I pray thee, instead of her'. 'I've given her to your best man, but here we have a newer, slimmer model here in the younger girl. Why not take her, Samson?'.

Again we see that the father-in-law was clued in to Samson's fleshly nature - but what the father-in-law had overlooked, though he understood his lust well, was the fact that he had great pride. That great pride overtook him: Samson had been wronged, Samson would have his revenge. So the ping-pong ball goes back to Samson: he decides, 'I'm going to burn their fields'. So he catches 300 foxes, the Authorised Version says, the word in Hebrew could equally be translated 'jackals', which is probably correct because they run in packs. He tied
them two-by-two together, and a torch between their tails, lit it and set them among the fields. As they try and run from one another they go into chaos, halting between one another and in their group, and so the fire is moving all around these fields. The wheat is burned, we read, the vineyards are destroyed, the olive fields of the Philistines are totally in cinders - verse 5 outlines that for us.

So the ball is now in Samson's court, he has knocked back to them - now they're going to knock it back again. 'We're going to get back at Samson, how can we do it?'. He finds out that the reason why Samson has avenged himself is because his wife has been given away, so the wife and the father-in-law are the problem - so 'We'll sort them out!'. In verse 6 we read: 'Then the Philistines said, Who hath done this? And they answered, Samson, the son in law of the Timnite, because he had taken his wife, and given her to his companion. And the Philistines came up, and burnt her and her father with fire'. They discovered the reason of Samson's revenge, it was his lust, and they killed Samson's wife and her father. It's interesting, to prevent that happening in chapter 14 was the reason why Samson's wife had betrayed him in the first place, because the Philistines threatened to burn her and her father - and in the end it happened. You can't compromise with evil and get away with it.

Then Samson again has the ball on his side, and in verses 7 to 8 we see that he goes and kills a great number. He smites the Philistines with a great slaughter: 'He smote them hip and thigh', verse 8, 'with a great slaughter: and he went down and dwelt in the top of the rock Etam'. Can you not see so graphically the bloody price of tit-for-tat vengeance? What happened essentially to Samson was, he ended up punishing himself. His wife was killed, he ends up dwelling alone in Mount Etam - and now, as we are about to see, even his own people turn against him. Verse 9, the Israelites come up to him after the Philistines have come to them and asked where Samson is. The Philistines bring an army up to the Israelites, and the Israelites realise that they're looking for Samson. But it's interesting, isn't it, that the Israelites come to Samson and say: 'The Philistines are looking for you, and we want to give you over to them'. The Israelites were not ready to fight the Philistines.

In fact, they even give the reason in verse 10: 'The men of Judah said, Why are ye come up against us? And they answered, To bind Samson are we come up, to do to him as he hath done to us'. This thousand went up to Samson and said: 'Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us? what is this that thou hast done unto us? And he said unto them, As they did unto me, so have I done unto them'. In other words, they're saying: 'We don't want to be delivered, we're quite happy, and you're causing all this problem and chaos. We're happy to dwell as slaves in servitude. We are at peace, we're at peace with the Philistines, we're at peace with ourselves. You want to ruin all that, and we've had enough, they have had enough of you! There are 3000 of them come up to get you, and us thousand are going to give you over to them'. The Israelites were not ready to fight the Philistines.

So, it's difficult, isn't it, to be a leader when you don't have any followers? It's interesting that this is the only time during Samson's judgeship when the Jews were able to muster together an army. They couldn't do it to fight the Philistines, but all of a sudden they could get a thousand to bind Samson with two new ropes, and hand him over to the enemy. So Samson surrenders to Judah. Judah promises: 'We'll not kill you' - very nice of them - 'but we'll hand you over to the Philistines, and they will'. Then Samson allows them to bind him with these cords, and we see that he ends up hurting himself again because of revenge. It was Warren Wiersbe who said: 'As Christians we need to beware of hiding selfish motives under the cloak of religious zeal and calling it righteous indignation'. Did you hear that? As Christians we need to beware of hiding selfish motives under the cloak of religious zeal and calling it righteous
indignation. Personal vengeance and private gain, rather than the glory of the Lord, has motivated more than one crusader in the church.

It's amazing to me in church life how many people are just waiting to score a point against another brother or sister in Christ. Some have many many points, maybe you heard about the fellow who was told by his doctor: 'Yes, indeed you do have rabies', and upon hearing this the patient immediately pulled out a notepad and a pencil, and began to write. Thinking that the man was writing his will, the doctor said: 'Listen, this doesn't mean that you're going to die, there's a cure for rabies'. He says: 'I know that, I'm making a list of the people I'm going to bite!'. That is the fleshly nature that often raises its head in us. We've got points to score and we're waiting our time, and whether it's against the pastor or the elders or another member, we'll get the boot in when we get the chance!

Is that your attitude? Turn back to Galatians chapter 5, just before Paul addresses the idea of the flesh contrary to the Spirit, it's very interesting the example he gives of the flesh in verse 15: 'If ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another'. That's where revenge ends, that explains why God has told believers to let Him take care of vengeance - God is the one to whom vengeance belongs, Psalm 94. 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord', Romans 12. You see, as Christians we have been wronged many a time by those outside Christianity and within it - but God's word teaches us that we must allow God to settle things for us and set them right. We're never to take things into our own hands. Christ is our example: when He was reviled, He reviled not again; when He was wronged, He committed those things that He was wronged in to His Father who judgeth rightly.

Is that what we do? It's the attitude of the preacher who refused to take revenge, and he said: 'I'm not going to get even, I'm going to tell God on you!'. That's it, isn't it? We all feel it, don't we, when we're wronged? We're only human, but what do we do? Do we tell others, or do we tell God? The fact of the matter is that these things would never have happened to Samson if he had kept his vows and his consecration to God. However, and this is what I want you to see, this is the message of the Judges, despite his waywardness the ways of God were not thwarted! God got His way! It's just a pity Samson hadn't gone God's way to get it, it would have cost him a lot less pain - but it didn't thwart God's plans!

We've seen the vicious circle of vengeance, but this is the victory of God's Spirit in all things. Samson realised that if he didn't give himself up to the enemy, the Philistine army would bring untold suffering to the land, so he surrendered. If he defended himself he would have to fight his own people, and he didn't want to do that; and if he escaped, which he could have easily done, he would have left a thousand of Judah easy prey for the army. There was something heroic about what Samson did here in his decision, but the men of Judah didn't see it - they just wanted rid of this bad thing. This is what I want you to see: though Samson has many bad points, there's one redeeming feature that distinguished him from the rest of the Israelites here - courage! When all of them were willing to surrender to the oppression of the Philistines, Samson, though with all his faults, had great courage - Hebrews 11 verse 32 calls it faith, faith in God!

The Philistines shout in verse 14 against Samson, and the sense is that the Spirit of the Lord rushes upon Samson and the cords are broken from off his arms. In verse 15 he slays a thousand with a new jawbone of an ass - now 'new' means that it wasn't as brittle as an old one, and it may also mean that the teeth were still in it, which was a vicious weapon. Can you imagine what the Israelites thought when their prisoner all of a sudden disappears, and his ropes fly off, and he grabs the only weapon he can get, and he slays a thousand men - and
again they didn't bother joining in. Even the weapon was unclean that Samson used, he wasn't to touch any dead thing - so even in the victory of God he was being disobedient to God's law and the vows that he had taken. It doesn't seem to make sense: all the sense we can make out of it is that God was going to have His way. Even though Samson was a crooked stick, God would draw a straight line with it.

In verse 16 we find that Samson, after this victory, slaying a thousand Philistines with a jawbone, he writes a song. Samson: 'With the jawbone of an ass', he says, 'heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men'. Samson had a way with words. At his wedding feast, you remember in chapter 14 verse 14, he devised a clever riddle; and after this great victory he writes a poem based on the similarity between two Hebrew words - the word for 'donkey', 'ass', 'hamor'; and the word 'heap', which is 'homer'. The great victory is rendered by Moffat in his translation: 'With the jawbone of an ass have I piled them in a mass, with the jawbone of an ass I have assailed assailants' - that's the sense. Then in verse 17, after singing a song, he casts away the jawbone of the ass and he calls this place 'Ramathlehi' - which means, it may say in your margin, 'The casting away of the jawbone'. But please note, now watch this: a vicious circle of vengeance, his flesh comes to the fore again, but whilst he's in the midst of need God's Spirit rushes upon him. Now mark this: with God's Spirit upon him, he lifts an unclean thing. He slays a thousand Philistines, and after it he throws away the jawbone, he sings a song of victory - and God is not mentioned by him in any of it.

What do you think that indicates? It indicates, surely, the vulnerability of God's servant after a victory - but we see this all through Samson's life. In verse 18, when he throws the jawbone away, we read that he's thirsty and he cries to the Lord in his first. Why was he thirsty? I believe the Lord was reminding him that without His Spirit, he was nothing! Samson hadn't got this point yet. There's one stage later in this story where he actually goes out, and he doesn't realise that the Lord isn't with him because his consecration outwardly had completely gone. He needed to realise how vulnerable he was without the Spirit of God - so the Lord let him get thirsty.

Do you know this is the first time you hear Samson pray? What's he praying for? The needs of the body - a sensual, fleshly, material man. If he had only prayed for his needs in the spirit with the passion he prays for a drink - 'Are You going to let me die? I had great victory today, are You going to let the victor die?'. If only he had prayed for guidance from God as he did for water, and said: 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver me from evil', he would have been a great man of God, and a great victor of faith. Someone has well said, listen to this: 'He that goes before the cloud of God's providence goes on a fool's errand'. If you run ahead of God, do things in your own steam, on your own strength, you'll end up running back with your tail between your legs. If you forget that you're nothing of yourself, whatever anybody has done to you, and God is everything - if you're going to do anything for His glory it will be through His power. It was a puritan who said: 'As sure as ever a Christian carves for himself, he'll cut his own finger'.

Samson was starting to carve for himself, and he was full of slices and gashes. Only when he began to suffer in the flesh was he ready to give glory to God. Only when he wanted something from God was he concerned about the uncircumcised Philistines. They didn't concern him when he was down having his drinking parties, when he was down rifling their women - but when he needed something! How often are we like that? It betrays fleshly nature in us. When we're sick and on our back: 'Lord, I'm going to give You everything, I'm going to serve You' - and then when you're up, what happens? Do you serve Him with everything?
In verse 19 the Lord provided water for him, the Authorised says 'out of the jaw', the Hebrew also can mean 'by splitting the rock at Levi' which is probably the right sense - because God wouldn't have given him the water out of something that was unclean to him. All of a sudden his spirit revives - God honoured him, this is the story of the Judges. 'What is that?', you say. God's people are sinning and following Baal, and then they get oppressors upon them - God's chastisement for their sin and waywardness. Then they cry out to God in a superficial repentance: 'Lord, deliver us from our oppressors', and what does God do? He raises up a deliverer in a Judge, and they deliver Israel. God is given glory and the Judge reigns over the land, and then the Judge dies and the people go back to their sin again!

Here you have it in Samson. He's thirsty, he is in need, God gives him water; he takes it, he's revived, and he returns to his selfishness. Once again, as in the song to himself, this name that he gives to the place where he drank the water in verse 19, 'Enhakkore, which is in Lehi unto this day', means 'the well of him that called or cried' - it doesn't mention God. His subject is the one who cried for the water, Samson. Yes, he was a man of courage and faith in this instance, but through a great victory in chapter 15 God is warning Samson graciously: 'If you don't be completely controlled by the Spirit, rather than the flesh, it's going to all end. You need to be guided by the Spirit rather than the flesh'. God is warning him graciously, mercifully - would he listen? No! He continues in his carnality, his lust, his vengeful spirit, his anger and his prayerlessness.

Do you display these works of the flesh in your life? I'm warning you from God's word: you're heading for a calamity just like Samson. Do you know why? Because no man is strong against a foe that he secretly admires. The Philistine way of life was in Samson's heart, and the Israelites and Samson realised this to their detriment, that they couldn't slay a way of life that they loved secretly. What is it secretly in this world's system, in your flesh, that you admire? That's why you can't mortify it, that's why you can't crucify it, and it has taken you captive in your heart! God is going to allow you, perhaps, man or woman, to play the fool - must He let you be taken captive before you realise? Must He let you lose your sight, lose your liberty, lose your wife, lose your family, lose your freedom?

What a wonderful gift hindsight is, and that's what we have. We can look back over all of Samson's life, and do you know what we find? This is the first time he prayed, do you know when the next time he prayed is? When he died in chapter 16 and 28: 'Strengthen me this one last time, Lord'. You know there's a lesson I learned this week through various circumstances, and through my own quiet time, and it applies so appropriately to this story, and I want to share it with you. It's simply this: often my fear and my reluctance to fully consecrate to God is usually due to cost - isn't it? It costs me too much. But do you know what I fail to appreciate? A lack of consecration and a lack of purity will cost me far more. Samson learned that lesson the hard way. Will you say today:

'Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free. Force me to render up my sword, and I shall conqueror be. I sink in life's alarms when by myself I stand; Imprison me within Thine arms, and strong shall be my hand'.

Lord, help us all to be able to say with our Lord: 'Not my will, but Thine be done'. Lord, we pray that we will crucify the passions and lusts and vengeful spirits of the flesh, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ, His attitude. Lord, we pray that we will know the power of God fall on us, and Christ will be seen in us. Let us always remember, whatever victories we have in this
spiritual life, that it's nothing of ourselves but it's all of God. Lord, let us all consecrate our lives afresh at this moment: make me a captive, Lord, then I shall be free. Amen.
A gain we're looking at Samson, and I think this is our penultimate study in his life - we'll look at one more, week after next in the will of the Lord. We're looking at chapter 16, and you'll remember in chapter 15 last week we looked at 'Samson, The Vengeful Victor' - well, this morning we're looking at 'Samson, The Lustful Loser'.

Chapter 16 verse 1: "Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot, and went in unto her. And it was told the Gazites, saying, Samson is come hither. And they compassed him in, and laid wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, saying, In the morning, when it is day, we shall kill him. And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, 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. And it came to pass afterward, that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. And the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and said unto her, Entice him, and see wherein his great strength lieth, and by what means we may prevail against him, that we may bind him to afflict him; and we will give thee every one of us eleven hundred pieces of silver. And Delilah said to Samson, Tell me, I pray thee, wherein thy great strength lieth, and wherewith thou mightest be bound to afflict thee. And Samson said unto her, If they bind me with seven green withes that were never dried, then shall I be weak, and be as another man. Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven green withes which had not been dried, and she bound him with them. Now there were men lying in wait, abiding with her in the chamber. And she said unto him, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And there were liers in wait abiding in the chamber. And he brake them from off his arms like a thread. And Delilah said unto Samson, Hitherto thou hast mocked me, and told me lies: tell me how canst thou say, I love thee, when thine heart is not with me? thou hast mocked me these three times, and hast not told me wherein thy great strength lieth. And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death; That he told her all his heart, and said unto her, There hath not come a razor upon mine head; for I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man. And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying, Come up this once, for he hath showed me all his heart. Then the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and brought money in their hand. And she made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went
from him. And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he knew not that the LORD was departed from him. But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house". Amen, and we end our reading at verse 21.

Let us just bow together in a brief word of prayer: Father, we're coming this morning to a very very sensitive subject, and we just pray for wisdom, for guidance and discretion, and yet on the other hand we need bluntness in order to face some of the awful realities of temptation and sin that we are confronted with on a daily basis. Lord, we pray too for an open heart to receive God's word. We pray that we will be real with ourselves, that we will not apply God's word to another, that we will see ourselves and our habits and our sins the way You see them - and Lord, that we would deal with them the way Samson did not deal with them, and the way that You have told us to deal with them. So Lord, we pray for Your grace, we pray for Your strength, and most of all we pray for the Holy Spirit to be ministering as He alone can do; for we ask these things, asking too for deliverance for any who are bound with the sin of lust, for Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.

'Samson, The Lustful Loser' - and again we see his carnal nature on the throne of his life. In chapter 15 that carnal nature was displayed in his desire for revenge upon his enemies. But now, as we have seen before, his sexual lust dominates his character in chapter 16. It was Charles Swindoll who said well: 'Samson was a he-man with a she-weakness'. Now for most men, if they're honest, lust is or at some time has been a problem in their life. We must be honest with ourselves, and like Samson we find that if we don't conquer this particular sin early in our lives, it will conquer us. In spite of Samson's godly upbringing, his elevated position as a Judge in Israel, right throughout his whole biography we find him constantly elbow-deep in a cess-pool of immorality. It's quite hard to understand, but in our introduction last week - if you weren't here, get the tape - we tried to explain how God could possibly justify Himself in using such a man steeped in sin. But we see it clearly right throughout his whole life, that he had a problem with his flesh - specifically in the area of lustfullness.

The first recorded words that we hear from Samson's mouth are in chapter 14 verse 2: 'I saw a woman' - that's the first thing we hear him say! Then we see from verse 3 of chapter 14 that he is attracted to the opposite sex strictly on the basis of outward appearance: 'Get her for me, for she pleases me', or 'for she looks good to me'. Now we find in chapter 16 that, having judged Israel for 20 years, he visits once more his old habit of chasing women. We read in the first three verses that he met a harlot in Gaza, and finally from verse 4 on we read of his encounters with Delilah. Samson's problem was that he never faced and dealt with and conquered this old habit of lust. Indeed, we read at the end of the chapter in verse 20 that he was so preoccupied with his lustful desires that he didn't even know that the Lord had departed from him: 'I will go out as at other times', he says, 'and shake myself. And he knew not that the LORD was departed from'. It had intoxicated him to the extent of being unreasonable and irrational.

Have you a problem with lust? What is your Achilles heel? Is it lust? Most men, if they're honest, will have to admit that they do have a problem. It may not be an actual problem of committing adultery or fornication in a literal sense, but it certainly will be a mental problem. It's a problem for us all, myself included, and it must be dealt with, because it's in our flesh - no-one is born without it, it is sin, for we are all born in sin. The great question is whether we, unlike Samson, face it and conquer it. Don't be sitting here like 'Holy Joe' in denial, for I don't believe you. First Corinthians 10 verse 12 says: 'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth
take heed lest he fall'. If you are ignorant of your own fleshy potential, and even arrogant in your seeming ability to conquer it in and of yourself, you're in for a big fall. The reason being that lust is at epidemic proportions in our society today, probably due to the proliferation of sensual images that are all around. The explosion of pornography on the Internet, in the media, right down to just advertisements on the television or in the newspaper for ice cream and cars - everything is sold by sex, because sex sells.

It would be hard not to have a problem with lust - I'm not exonerating you from it, or condoning any problem that you or I may have - but the fact of the matter is: we live in a sensually saturated society. When you meet that with the magnetism of our old fleshly nature, fallen and depraved, it's a recipe right away for disaster. Most of the men know what I'm talking about, but it's not confined to the males - it's a problem for everyone. Let me just say that although we're focusing on the problem of lust this morning, your Achilles heel might be something else. It might be a sister sin to lust, which is covetousness - for that's what lust is, isn't it? You can covet your neighbour's husband or wife, and so on and so forth, you could covet their car, and their house, and their job, and their nice flashy clothing. It could be hatred, it could be revenge that we looked at last week - it could be so many sins. If you want a catalogue of them, look at Galatians 5 and you find the works of the flesh there - and I'm sure that you have found one of them a problem, if not all, at some stage in your life.

Whatever your problem may be, your Achilles heel is your point of extreme vulnerability. It is your weak spot in your walk with God. God's Word puts it like this: it is your besetting sin. It's the thing that always trips you up, pulls you down. It is that thing, like Samson, if not dealt with it will be your undoing. Do you know where the term 'Achilles heel' comes from? It's very instructive to our issue at hand to find out where this phrase was derived from. It comes from Greek mythology - Achilles was the son of Peleus, King of the Myrmidons, and Thetis a sea-goddess was his mother. Achilles was the greatest, and the bravest and most handsome warrior in all the army. One of the tales in the mythology of his life tells about how, as a child, Thetis, his mother, held young Achilles by the heel and dipped him in the waters of the river Styx. These waters had mythological power and value, and as Achilles was dipped into them he became invincible and invulnerable - that is, every part of him but the heel which his mother held him with, it wasn't dipped in the waters. So that small part of his body, untouched by the water, remained vulnerable whilst the rest of him was invincible. It's just at that point, as you read the story of his life, he received one day in the battle an arrow right in his heel and it killed him. His point of vulnerability was his point of undoing. His Achilles heel described his weakest point of vulnerability.

Is lust yours? If you're a male I would hazard a guess that it is. It was Samson's problem too. God had strengthened Samson, God had protected Samson, and in the midst of gross immorality at times - so Samson, somewhere along the way, if not from the very start, had got it into his head that he was getting away with it. 'If he had gotten away with it that long, he would always get away with it'. You see, he thought fleshly tendencies were inconsequential to what he was before God as a Judge. I mean God's Spirit kept coming, rushing upon him. He was getting the victory over lions, great armies of Philistines - why would it not always be the case? What we're going to see this morning in chapter 16 is that Samson's private indiscretions led to a disqualification in the power of God on his life; but they also led, those private indiscretions, to public disgrace. It is simply God's law of the harvest, it caught up with him - it will catch up with us all! What is it? God is not mocked, whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. Whilst God's wheels may grind slowly, they grind surely.
So let's look first of all at his private indiscretions. Already he has got into trouble with one woman privately, you remember the woman he had married and then she was given to his best man, and all of a sudden his revenge explodes. We looked at that last week. But now we read again that Samson takes the geographical journey downward in verses 1-3, and he travels to Gaza. Now we have already read, though we didn't highlight it over the past weeks, in chapter 14 verse 1 we read: 'Samson went down to Timnath'. Then in verse 5 we read: 'Samson went down, and his father', and then we read in verse 7 of chapter 14, 'Samson went down' again, and then in verse 10, 'Samson went down'. All of Samson's geographical journeying is always down, but it's not just geographical, it's spiritual! For each time he travels down, as he does now in chapter 16 to Gaza, he gets into trouble.

Not only is he travelling down, the Bible tells us that he is crossing the border from God's land of promise, Canaan, to the forbidden territory of the enemy. Can I say there's a very valuable lesson, because often our problems with lust and indeed any sin, comes when we start to flirt with it, when we start to cross the border - coming out of what God has told us to dwell in, and taking a step too far, pretending to ourselves it is innocent, it's not going to lead to any problems. Yet we push God's boundaries into enemy territory, and we become more vulnerable to the enemy's attack. We don't often see that at the time: but that's the fact of the matter.

This incident in verses 1-3 of Samson with this prostitute from Gaza is not well-known, but it seems that Samson again gets away with it as he has always done. All of a sudden these Philistines hear he's in Gaza, and they come round and surround the city, the gates are shut and Samson, with great strength and the power of God upon him again, lifts the very gates and the posts and all and runs up the mountain with them. You can just imagine the Philistines standing watching him with their chin hitting their boots - they can't believe it! There he is, coming from a prostitute's house, the power of God the next moment is upon him - and he gets away with it as before, and again with the help of God!

Do you know what this incident is doing for us? It's preparing us for what is to follow - Delilah, Samson's downfall. It is teaching us simply this: what Samson had sowed in Gaza with the prostitute, indeed what he had sown in his whole life of immorality, he is reaping in Sorek with Delilah. We're not completely sure when this event took place, but it was probably at the end of his 20 year stint as a Judge. Twenty years or more he had gotten away with it, twenty years or more God seemed to have blessed him in the midst of it - but Samson was to find out in this chapter that his private indiscretions were not inconsequential. They had grave consequences - because he had failed to check the impulses that began early in his career, 20 years later they slay him.

Are we really aware of the deceitfulness of sin? I don't think we are: certainly not of the deceptiveness of our own hearts, because often when we sin, we do exactly what Samson did - what is that? You say that you're going to get away with it, don't you? Otherwise you wouldn't do it! If you thought you were going to get caught, you wouldn't engage in it - but you deceive yourself! That's why the Bible says that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, you can't know it. Many sins, including lust, we excuse. Maybe Samson began to excuse the sins, 'Look, this is just the way I am, this is Samson, everybody knows this is Samson! God's great strongman, but God's delinquent! A bit of a lady's man, is Samson! I can't help it, it's natural! I can't resist it!'.

It was Oscar Wilde, who had many lusts of his own, who said: 'I can resist anything except temptation'. Sometimes we get that mentality, don't we? We think our temptations and our
falling to them are excusable for whatever reason, and Samson, I think, concluded the same: 'This is just the way I am, but it doesn't really matter because God still uses me'. What he failed, fatally, to recognise was that by stealth, sin's deadly edge was going to sever the source of his divine power that he presumptuously was taking for granted - because God wanted him to realise that sin is not a pleasure, and sin is not a privilege for God's people; sin is poison! Oh, so often we have a taste for it.

You remember I shared with you last week that I'm learning in my own personal life that my fear and reluctance to fully consecrate to God is due to cost; but I fail, however, to appreciate that the lack of consecration, a lack of purity, will cost far more. We see that illustrated for us amazingly in Samson's life - it cost him everything. The Song of Solomon calls these type of sins, and it doesn't have to be lust, 'the foxes that spoil the vines' - the little things that eventually take their toll weigh so heavy as to cause disaster, and there is surely none more deadly, especially in our day, than lust.

I think it's brilliantly illustrated in this story about North Alaskan Eskimos - I've used it before, I don't apologise for using it again. The Eskimos in North Alaska, until recently, lived as they had 500 years ago - all their livelihood came from the polar bear. The meat was their food, the fur was their clothing, the fat they used to cook, the bones and teeth of the bear they used as tools and implements. They developed this indigenous way of life - it was ingenious. What they would first do to catch a polar bear was, they would kill a little seal. They would take that seal, and drag a trail of blood along the ice, leading to a central location. What they would do there was take a dagger with a two-foot long handle, and they would plunge it into the ice. It was a double-edged blade, and upon that blade they would put the carcass of the little seal. Before long the polar bear would pick up the scent of the trail of blood, and start to sniff and lick it, and easily find the meat. There he would be, devouring this delicacy very quickly, the Eskimos were smart enough to know never to use a large animal, never to give him too much meat, to keep him hungry. So what would happen, in his incredible hunger, he would eat the seal completely - just like a wee fellow licking the cake spoon after his mummy has done the baking, this polar bear would go on licking the blade over and over again and again. The more he licked, what would happen? The more he got! But at some point he failed to realise that he was starting to lick his own blood! The lust of it eventually killed him.

That's what happened Samson. In verse 4 we read again: 'Samson loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah'. He gets around, doesn't he? It's amazing to see him falling into this same sin once again. Sorek is near home, by the way, he hadn't gone that far - you need to go that far. We're astounded to again see him sleeping on the lap of a wicked woman - what's he doing? He's again toying with temptation, but this time he hasn't suspected that Delilah is also playing a game with Samson. He had met his match. Three times Delilah enticed Samson: 'Where does your strength come from?'. Three times he lies about it. Three times she has, probably in the chamber behind in her home, these heavies from Philistia ready to duff him in when they find out where his weakness can come from. Each time Samson lies to each of Delilah's enticements, it brings him nearer to the truth - there's a lesson. The more you lie, and the more you try to cover up, often the more the truth comes out.

We might stand back and be astounded at Samson's...the incredulity of this situation - how could he be so stupid!? Did he not realise that Delilah was asking him the question because she was in cahoots, and going to get paid by the Philistines? Should he not have awoken to this when he woke up with himself bound? Why didn't he see it coming? Do you know why? The lure of lust - that's how powerful it is! Proverbs, which poses itself often as a book of
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wisdom from a father written to a son - and I would encourage many of you young men to read the book of Proverbs, particularly the first ten chapters or so. Proverbs 5 is a good one, but we'll read from Proverbs 7, we read of how intoxicating and alluring lust can be, Proverbs 7:21, speaking of a woman like Delilah: 'With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him. He goeth after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks; Till a dart strike through his liver; as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life. Hearken unto me now therefore, O ye children, and attend to the words of my mouth. Let not thine heart decline to her ways, go not astray in her paths. For she hath cast down many wounded: yea, many strong men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death'.

I wonder was Solomon thinking of Samson when he wrote those words? Lust distorts reason, it anaesthetised Samson's brain and his body - and it does the same to us, but often we are willing captors! The problem here was that eventually this woman wore Samson down. Dale Ralph-Davies, a commentator, puts it like this: 'Can you imagine the scenes behind verses 15 and 16?' Let's read it together: 'And she came unto him and said, How canst thou say, I love thee, when thine heart is not with me? thou hast mocked me these three times, and hast not told me wherein thy great strength lieth. And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death; That he told her all his heart'. Davies says: 'Can you imagine the scene? Delilah likely turned on the relational arguments about trust and intimacy, and about how we must all be vulnerable, and that women really do crave men who are willing to be the latter. Delilah suspected her psychology would be all the more convincing while she spread her long soft hair against Samson's mighty chest, and stroked his biceps with her soft hand'.

'You said you loved me, prove it! Tell me where your strength lies'. Amazingly Samson, with the very words that could have been the vow that had been vowed to God, he told her where his strength lay - 'I have been a Nazarite unto God', verse 17, 'if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man'. He told her, and she was sharp enough to inform her Philistine paymasters, 'Get the job done quickly!'. All of a sudden, Samson awakens, goes out as he had at other times - but he was just like any other man. Asleep on the knees of a compromised situation, he was robbed of the power of God.

Can I ask you - I ask myself, and have done - are we asleep, any of us, on the lap of a compromised situation? It will rob you of the power and the blessing of God, that is for sure. Samson's secret of strength lay in his obedience to God, and it was maintained by his separation unto God - but at this point his outward show of that separation, his long hair, was shorn. Everything had gone, he had lost it all! His private indiscretions led to what? His power disqualification - verse 20: 'The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist', or knew, 'not that the LORD was departed from him'. That means: 'I will go out as I have time after time' - he had done it, hadn't he? But God said: 'Not this time! Not this time, Samson!'. He became what the New Testament calls in the words of the apostle Paul, 'a castaway'.

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 9 so I can show you this, 1 Corinthians 9 verse 27, Paul says: 'I keep my body, and bring it into subjection', it should be 'I buffet my body, and bring it into subjection: lest by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway'. The New American Standard version says: 'I myself should be disqualified'. It is talking about sports here, and training - he's talking in verse 26 about how he runs, not
uncertainly, or boxes, not as one that beats the air. But when he enters into this competition of the race of God, into the games of holiness, he does not want to be disqualified - not keeping the rules himself, while he has preached them to others.

Great loss now marks Samson's life, just like what Paul has talked about in 1 Corinthians 9. First Corinthians 3 tells us that many will suffer loss at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and their work will be burnt up - this is what happens when you have private indiscretions in your life, particularly this of lust of mind or heart, or actually in the flesh, you will lose out! Samson loses his royal crown - that's what his hair signified - he loses his crown! The New Testament tells us again in 1 Corinthians 9 and verse 24: 'Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible'.

You can lose your crown through private indiscretions. The Lord Jesus spoke through John, and wrote to the church at Philadelphia in chapter 3 of Revelation, and in verse 11 said: 'Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown'. Just like Paul was talking of, because Samson had become undisciplined in his bodily life, he lost his crown, he lost his prize, he lost his hair and then he lost his power. Then he whose name means 'light', lost light, and he lost his sight! He who was the freedom fighter of Israel lost his liberty as he's bound and overcome by the Philistines. Ultimately he loses his usefulness for God, he becomes disqualified in God's service!

Do you know there are three people in scripture, including Samson, who are especially identified with the darkness? It says that King Saul went into the darkness to get his last minute help from the witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28. Then we read of Judas, that he went immediately out, and it was dark, after betraying the Lord Jesus - John 13. Saul lived for the world, Samson lived for the flesh, Judas lived for the devil and gave himself up to him - and all of these three went into darkness, and incidentally all of them ended up ending their own lives! Samson sinned against the light, now his eyes are put out. The lust of the eye had led to the loss of his eyes - disqualified.

His private indiscretions, disqualification in power, and then it led to his public disgrace. In verse 21 the Philistines took him and put out his eyes, brought him down to Gaza and bound him with fetters of brass, and he did grind in the prison house. The strongman of Dan taken captive, become a slave of the enemies in their camp, his eyes gouged out of his head, made a grinder in a Philistine prison. One has said: 'Lust, the giant killer, binds, blinds and grinds'. Samson found out that his private indiscretions, if not confronted and conquered, would lead to his public disgrace! Numbers 32:23: 'Be sure your sin will find you out'. It happens in the life of pastors, elders, deacons in churches. It happens in marriages, it happens in families, it happens in businesses - private indiscretion bringing public disgrace.

Warren Wiersbe said: 'When Samson consorted with Delilah in the Valley of Sorek, he never dreamed that what they did together would be made into a Hollywood movie and projected in colour on huge screens! It has been, hasn't it? His sin is infamous - what was done in secret! Swindoll says: 'The swarthy pride of Israel, who once held the highest office in the land, was now the baldheaded clown in Philistia. A pathetic shell of humanity, his eyes would never wander again. His life was once filled with promise and dignity, but was now a portrait of hopeless, helpless despair. Chalk up another victim for lust. The perfumed memories of erotic pleasure in Timnath, Gaza and the infamous Valley of Sorek were now overwhelmed by the putrid stench of a Philistine dungeon'. He being dead, yet speaks.
Friends, especially young people - and I speak to my own heart, for I am as susceptible as any of you - be warned. If you lust, you'll be a loser. Let me show you how you can be warned. First of all: Samson toyed with temptation - he toyed with it. Moral compromise always makes us vulnerable. We go over the borderline of God's precepts and principles into enemy territory, and we're making ourselves open for an attack. He responded to the temptation. It came in many attractive packages, and he responded to it - you don't need to respond! He even took himself into wrong company, feasting and flirting with the Philistines.

First Corinthians 15:33 says that: 'Bad company corrupts good morals'. When we toy with temptation it traps us!

'What's the answer?', you say. The Bible answer is so simple, that many have stumbled at it because of the simplicity - what is it? Run! Run away! Flee sexual immorality, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6. He says to the young man Timothy in 2 Timothy 2: 'Flee also youthful lusts'. We see it exemplified in Joseph, Potiphar's wife pleads with him to lie with her - and he runs and leaves his coat with her, and says that he will not do this thing against his master, or against God. What a young man! He didn't toy with temptation - are we toying with it? Am I toying with it? As we channel-hop, sitting on the sofa; as we surf the web - are we toying with it? As we read The Daily Star, or The Sun - 'Oh, we're only reading the news' - don't give me that! I know what I would be doing if I was reading it. Do we toy with temptation in our relationships, in the workplace, in the church? You'll get trapped!

Secondly, he took God's blessing for granted - his parents. 'No, I'm not listening to them'. His vows: 'Well, I was born with them, I didn't ask for them'. The power he enjoyed, this was a man who experienced charismatic power, but he took it for granted, so God took it off him. Not only did he toy with temptation and take his blessings for granted, but he failed to listen and he failed to pray. We read at the very beginning of his life that God told his parents that he would begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines - he only began the job, he never finished it, it remained for Samuel and David in the later years to finally defeat the Philistines. We read in 1 Samuel 7 that by one prayer, Samuel the prophet did more by one prayer than Samson did in his whole life. We don't read of him praying often, do we? We don't read of him listening too much? James 5: 'The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much'.

Then fourthly, not only did he fail to listen and pray, he lacked discipline. Do you know: it is impossible to be undisciplined and stable at the same time? I know a lot of folk who are very gifted, great promise - but do you know what their problem is? They squander it by indiscipline. It's the same in this area of lust, in any area of sin. Proverbs 25:28: 'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls'. Proverbs 16:32: 'He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city'. Samson had taken many cities, but he couldn't rule his own spirit. There are people who have power to conquer others and win arguments and debate theologically, but they can't conquer themselves!

He set the Philistine fields on fire, but he couldn't control the fires in his own lust. He killed the lions, but he couldn't put to death the passion of his flesh. He could easily break the bonds of men upon him, but he couldn't get rid of the shackles of sin that gradually grew stronger than his soul - because he lacked discipline. Then fifthly: he toyed with temptation, he took God's blessing for granted, he failed to listen and to pray, he lacked discipline - but fifthly, he proudly thought something was special about him. 'I'm Samson!' - Proverbs 16:18 says: 'Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall'. Do you know what half the battle is? Being man enough or woman enough to admit where your weaknesses are,
and to put safeguards in place to protect you from them. Are you walking around like a peacock, with your nose stuck in the air: 'That would never happen to me!'? My friend, beware - you're a Samson waiting to happen, and so am I.

Job, who was a righteous man - none other like him, God said - said in chapter 31 verse 1: 'I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?'. Flee! If you're in this trouble, seek help. If you're in this trouble, put safeguards in your life. If you're in this trouble, do something about it before it's too late - like all of us have, because all of us have had the problem.

Can I give you a bit of hope at the end to take heart? The devil tells you it's impossible for you to overcome - listen to God's word, 1 Corinthians 10 verse 13: 'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful', you're not alone, everybody is struggling, especially in this world - but God is faithful, 'who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able'. Don't believe the lie of the devil that you can't resist, you can! 'He will with the temptation also make a way to escape', there is a fire exit out of every sin, especially lust, 'that we may be able to bear it'.

Have you fallen? Praise God, if you repent of your sin and confess your sin, He is faithful and just to forgive you your sin, to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. You don't need to use this message as another guilt trip - you're delivered! But if you're in denial, you need help. Praise God, that help is there. Why not ask the Saviour to help you, comfort, strengthen and heal you? He is willing to aid you, He will carry you through.

Our Father, we remember the words of Your blessed Son, our Saviour, the Lord Jesus, when He said to those religious hypocrites: 'Let he that is among you without sin cast the first stone'. Lord, we're not in the business of casting stones at anyone today, because I am the first one who couldn't cast - for every time any of us point one finger, there's always more pointing back at us. Lord, I know what my heart is like, and what my mind has potential to do. Lord, we all are surrounded in this world with so much that can cause us to fall if we yield to the temptations. Lord, we pray that we will, all of us, be able to admit to our failure and shortcomings, will be enabled to confess it, to be cleansed of it, to repent from it, and if necessary to seek the help to put safeguards and barriers up against it in order that we will be delivered from it - that we should not, like Samson, lose our crown. Lord, help us to realise that there's more at stake from not being consecrated to God, than the loss that we will incur by giving up everything to Him. Impress Your word upon all our hearts, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.
As I said earlier, I may well minister to you from a couple more instances that we read about in the final chapters of this book, but essentially this is the end of our character studies - the title is: 'Samson, The Blind Visionary', or you could entitle it 'Samson's Last Stand'.

We'll read from verse 21 to the end of chapter 16: "But the Philistines took him", Samson, "and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house. Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven. Then the lords of the Philistines gathered them together for to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice: for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand. And when the people saw him, they praised their god: for they said, Our god hath delivered into our hands our enemy, and the destroyer of our country, which slew many of us. And it came to pass, when their hearts were merry, that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison house; and he made them sport: and they set him between the pillars. And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars wherupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them. Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport. And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life. Then his brethren and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the buryingplace of Manoah his father. And he judged Israel twenty years".

'Samson, The Blind Visionary' - we have followed this man in his life and we have seen that, because of his sin, the light increasingly was being blotted out. A man whose name actually means 'Sun' or 'Little Sun', is now known for darkness - because of the lust of his eyes, his eyes have been put out. What we need to see this morning is that the loss of his eyes, the loss of his ministry and the loss of his witness, have driven him into a place where he is now going to rediscover the grace of God. If you like, through his loss, he is going to gain.

Isn't that what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 10? 'He that loses his life for my sake shall find it'. In the blindness and in the prison, Samson is going to see things that he never saw with all of his lifetime of light and sight. He's going to see how he failed God, he's going to see the consequences of his unholy life, he's going to see what his life should have been in sanctified holiness and consecration unto the Lord. He's going to see on the one hand what his life of ungodliness has cost him and cost the nation, and the antithesis: what would have been and could have been, if he had been faithful unto God's call upon his life, and he had been
obedient to His commands. With his blindness he will see with greater spiritual sight and focus than he ever did. In this prison he will have more freedom than he ever had in the days when he strode unafraid upon Philistine territory.

What is the lesson? It is simply this: at times God must abase us before He can exalt us. Many ask the question why that must be, and I don't claim to have all the answers - but I imagine, certainly from the lesson that we have before us, that one of the reasons that God must abase us before He can exalt us is that we will not willingly, of our own volition, humble ourselves in the sight of Almighty God. Because we won't do it, God cannot use us the way He wants to use us, so He has to do it. When God humbles a man or a woman, He does a good job of it.

What did he see in his blindness? Well, first of all I want to draw your attention to the fact that he saw the disastrous consequences of his compromise. Those disastrous consequences of compromise I have put into two sub-points which are these: he saw his humiliation, and then secondly he saw his capitulation. Proverbs 13 verse 15 says: 'The way of transgressors is hard'. Samson was finding out that for many years he thought he had gotten away with his sin, but all of a sudden in the end what he had sown all those years, he was now reaping - and what a whirlwind he had reaped. His transgressions had brought hardship, and this was how God was humbling him. The compromising of his consecration to God led, first of all, to humiliation.

It's very graphically outlined for us in the passage. We find that he was blinded. Blinding is often the way that our compromise humiliiates us - his name meant 'Sun', yet he has no light at all any more; and that is a consequence, spiritually, of what happens to us when we compromise on our consecration to God, when we're not the holy Christian that we ought to be. Let me put it like this: if we are dabbling with sin, and like Samson we are stepping into enemy territory that God has forbidden, we'll not be able to appreciate spiritual things the way we should. We'll not be able to perceive, to focus as we ought on spiritual realities and truths. That's why, let me say to the church here, we should never ever pander and make decisions for people who are carnal and unspiritual, because they don't appreciate spiritual things. Now I'm not claiming to be high and mighty above everybody else, far from it - but God's word is clear that the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God, they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned. I know we often apply that to the unconverted, but don't forget that Paul was also writing to many carnal Christians who were fleshly, just like Samson.

Samson had become blind to the effects of sin and compromise in his life - and my friend, the same will happen to you and to me if we compromise upon our consecration. Not only is there blinding, there is a binding effect when we compromise. You see, Samson reasoned in his heart and mind that he was choosing freedom rather than the binding restrictions of God's law and vows, isn't that right? That's often the way we think today. When we usurp ourselves against the authority of God, and decide to transgress His laws and choose our own way, we feel that we are choosing the way of freedom, the way of self-expression, the way of liberty. But the fact of the matter is, we see that the truth is the opposite - that is the lie of the devil. He has come to steal, to kill and destroy - Christ came that we should have life. Young person dabbling in sin, don't believe the lie of the devil that you are free, that you're enjoying liberty and satisfaction.

The problem came to Samson that the ropes that he once snapped like burning threads, became a bondage upon him that had overcome him. Years ago he could have broke away
from them, but now not only was he blinded, he was bound. The blinding and the binding effects of sin and compromise in the life! It will happen to you - I know you think you've got your sin and compromise under control, you're controlling it; but my friend, it will not be long until it's controlling you and everything will be out of control.

Then there was not only blinding and binding, but there was grinding. We find that he was a slave grinding in the prison house - verse 21 - what does that tell us? Well, Samson's will was no longer his own, he was serving the enemy. That is what happens when we compromise with sin, even as Christians. We begin to serve the devil rather than serving God, and we need to realise that as Christians, even, we are not free agents. 'Ye are not your own', the Bible says, 'Ye are bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body'. If you're not a slave to sin, you're a servant of God. If you're a servant of God who is wanting to throw off the yoke of God's authority and Lordship in your life, you're in danger of becoming a slave of the enemy - grinding as one of his clowns.

He did become a clown of the enemy, because there was blinding and binding and grinding, and then there was scorning. They poked fun in their drunken orgy. They said: 'Get Samson out, and we'll have a good laugh! Let's have some fun!'. The word for 'sport' is just an old word for 'entertain'. 'Let's ridicule him and scorn him!', who knows what they did to this once giant and conqueror of God. Compromise with sin had made him the clown of the enemy that the world would laugh at. The Psalmist said something similar when he said in Psalm 31: 'My strength faileth because of mine iniquity, and my bones are consumed. I was a reproach among all mine enemies, but especially among my neighbours'. This is what can happen, even when a child of God compromises with sin - the world can ridicule and laugh and scorn at us!

Maybe you're sitting there thinking: 'But I don't understand, why would God allow one of His children, one of His prestigious servants, to go through all this humiliation?'. I wonder am I speaking to someone in our gathering, and you're experiencing just this? You're a Christian who is compromising your consecration, and you're finding the way hard. Do you know why you're finding it hard? Because God is making it hard for you! Let me read you some words from Hebrews 12: 'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?'. If you're having a hard time when you're compromising, the reason it's hard is because God is making it hard - and He'll make it more hard, because He loves you if you're truly His son. The writer goes on to say how fathers in the flesh do the same for us, they rebuke and discipline and chasten us after their own pleasure. They do it for our profit - how much more profit does God do it for in our lives, to bring forth righteousness? He ends this passage by saying in verse 12: 'Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees'. Realise that the weakness that God, perhaps, is allowing in your life, is because He loves you and because He wants to bring you out of that compromise to a place of victory.

He saw the disastrous consequences of compromise in humiliation and then capitulation - what does that mean? How often have you heard it said by non-Christians - I hear it more than enough - 'When I sin, I'm not harming anybody, only myself'? That is another lie of the devil. Paul said, in a different context somewhat: 'For none of us liveth unto himself'. We live unto God, but we also have responsibilities to those around us - as John Donne, the poet, said: 'No man is an island'. Our sin often affects others, even when we think it's just affecting ourselves. We see it in Samson's life: his sin affected his parents, his disobedience in marriage. His anger affected his wife and his father-in-law - they were both burnt by the
Philistines. His sin affected the whole nation, he would only begin to deliver the nation from the Philistines, he wouldn't leave them with a finished work.

What we often fail to appreciate is how our compromise inhibits the cause of Christ. It is effectively capitulation with the enemy against the cause of the Gospel - it advances the enemy's cause! Now I want you to think about this for a moment: you remember the scissors that were used by the Philistines to cut off Samson's hair as he was resting on the lap of a compromised situation in Delilah's house. Did you ever ask yourself the question, why they didn't just slit his throat with the scissors? Why didn't they just finish him off? What if he was lying again, as it were, and misleading her, and it wasn't through his hair that his strength came? Do you know what that tells me? The devil sometimes has more use for a backslider than he has for a dead Christian. What possible use could he have for a backslider? Capitulation - to bring God's cause into disrepute, to inhibit the cause of Christ, and to advance his own.

This was seen in verse 23, his compromise was used as ammunition for the enemy. They said: 'Let's have a party and praise our god, Dagon, for he has delivered us from the hand of Samson'. They gave praise to their god - and I think of all the pains Samson had to endure, none was so hard to bear as the blasphemy of his own God, Jehovah, and the realisation that it was his compromise that caused it. Our compromise causes capitulation in giving ammunition to our enemy.

Then secondly, in verse 24, we found out that the capitulation, in a similar light, gives vindication to their claims - what do I mean? Well, Proverbs 14 and verse 12 says: 'There is a way which seemeth right unto a man', and these Philistines believed that Dagon was their god, and that their god would answer their prayers. They have become entrenched in that belief by the compromise of a child of God. It gave, it would seem, vindication for their claim that their god Dagon was greater than Jehovah, the God of Israel. Do we entrench others in their godless lifestyles because of our backsliding? Oh my friends, I hear as often as the statements of the unsaved that I mentioned to you, this statement on their lips about the converted: 'If that is what a Christian is' - you listen now, because people say it about some of you - 'If this is what a Christian is, I want none of it'.

You see they're good people in a human sense, I know they're depraved and all the rest, but they're good people - they're upstanding in the community. They pay a hundred pence to the pound, and when the believer doesn't - and many of them don't - they can see through it! False Christians confirm these sinners in their false ways. As a preacher who I heard lately, asked the question: 'As Christians, are we selling ourselves for more than we're worth?'. What does that mean? We're making the claims, telling people all about this Christian life, we're selling it - but we're not worth what we're selling it for! Our lives don't measure up to it, and therefore they see that - they're not stupid - and they conclude that the whole thing is empty, and their way is superior, or at least equal to ours.

This is what happened: Samson's compromise gave vindication to their claims and their God. Now, praise God that God mercifully takes care of His wandering children to such an extent that He doesn't give us an easy time of it. It was as Samson saw his life from the perspective of this prison, when his sight, humanly and naturally speaking, was taken from him, he began to see spiritual truths that he had never seen before in all his carnal exploits for God. His life took a monumental turn, because finally he grasped the truth that is right throughout the whole of the book of the Judges, and specifically in these character studies - what is it? That God must give us His strength if we are to overcome the world and to overcome the enemy -
the strength will not be your own, it must be God's. Samson the strongman never saw it before.

So I want you to see not only that he saw the disastrous consequences of his compromise, but he also saw the restorative influence of God's grace. There he is, sitting in that prison cell, and I'll tell you: if any man or woman in history could have felt justified in thinking that they were beyond redemption, they were beyond God's forgiveness and restoration in their life, it was Samson. He appeared to have fallen so far, disgraced himself so completely, that no possibility was there of redeeming service for the Lord. You remember, I told you in our last study, about his private indiscretions that disqualified him for the power of God being upon his life, and led to public disgrace that we're looking at this morning. We meet so many, and they describe and express the same thing from their heart, that they view with tearful nostalgia some past indiscretion, some sin, some iniquity, and they just feel that they'll never be able to rise again over it and do something for God.

Samson found that, praise the Lord, in that prison cell, after all that humiliation and stripping of worldly strength, that God Jehovah, the God of Israel, is the God of the failure. He was the God of David, wasn't He? David, who committed adultery, who murdered, who numbered people, and sinned in indulging his family at times. He was the God of Peter, who denied the Lord Jesus Christ with oaths and curses. He's the God of Samson, and He's your God, my friend! I'm not excusing any sin, but I wonder has God got you in a place like the prison that Samson was in, and He's blinded you for some reason, He has hemmed you into a corner. Oh that you would discover like the poet, when he said:

'The night can bring no darker thought
Than that within the failure wrought
Who wreathes of family, friend and name
With emblems of some public shame
Would cause to wonder if could be
One such could e'er forgiveness see.

Now hear the word direct and true:
I'm Saviour of the failure too!
Then quit the place of dark remorse
To find in Christ life's future course'.

First John 1 verse 9: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. We go to Hebrews chapter 11, the hall of faith, and someone has said God's 'Hall of Faith' could equally well be entitled 'God's Hall of Reclaimed Failures'. There's hardly one mentioned who didn't have a serious blemish on their life! That is the great principle of God's grace: what is it? The spiritually successful is not the person who never fails, it's the person who learns to accept God's remedy for their failure - and that is the blood of Jesus.

I know we're to go away and sin no more, but praise God there is restoration - and Samson found it out. In his time of reflection in prison here is what he did, look at verse 22, it says: 'His hair began to grow' - do you know what that speaks to me of? Repentance. His hair began to grow - the verse is not concerned so much with what was happening naturally on Samson's head, rather it is focusing on what was going on supernaturally in his relationship with God. The hair was his crown of consecration, it was beginning to grow - and as Samson's repentance grew, his locks of hair grew. Old Spurgeon said on one occasion: 'The Philistines
should have sent a barber into that prison cell everyday to keep him shorn'. After his penitence came God's omnipotence through his life.

Do you find yourself in one of the disastrous consequences, or all of them, of your compromise? Are you in that prison cell? Are you feeling that God could never ever do anything through you again? Well, what you need to do is repent like Samson, you need to agree with God concerning your sin, and you need to be willing to turn from it and forsake it for ever. You need to confess sin, if it is public, to others who you have sinned against. Put everything right as far as you possibly can on a human level, and your hair of consecration will grow again.

Then we read in verse 28 that Samson called upon the Lord. He saw the restorative influence of God's grace in repentance and now in fellowship. Samson called upon the Lord. You remember it was said of one in the New Testament: 'Behold, he prayeth!' - and the sign that his relationship had been restored with God was that he opens his mouth. Now he hadn't been praying very many days, and for a long time we saw he hadn't prayed at all. This was only the second time we find him praying at all in the narrative of his life, but the fact of the matter is: God heard and answered his prayer, and that was a sign, surely, that he was in fellowship with the Lord. Things had been put right! The Psalmist says in Psalm 66: 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me: But verily God hath heard me; he hath attended to the voice of my prayer'.

Do you see what his prayer was in verse 28? 'Only this once, Lord, strengthen me only this once' - someone has said: how many times did Samson say that when he was in a heated, tempting situation? 'Lord, I'll only commit this sin once' - but now he's been turned by God's grace to come to God and be willing to lay down his life, and die in self for God. How's your fellowship with the Lord? What is it? It is the realisation of the abiding presence of Christ in your life and experience, and it's a developing and a deepening of your love for Him and His love for you. I'll tell you this: that is the key to going on with God - fellowship. I'm not talking about fellowship with God's people, though that is important and you'll not go on with God without that. I'm talking about private communion with the Lord. It's not just separation from the world - people talk about consecration as not being worldly, and that's one half of it - but it's consecration to the Lord! Separated from the world, but separated to the Lord. If you're just separated from the world, Christian, you're a Pharisee. To be holy you must be separated unto the Lord, and that's fellowship.

Thirdly - there was repentance, fellowship - and the third thing he saw that was an influence of God's restorative grace is found in verse 28: 'Remember me, strengthen me', he prayed. It was a dependence on the Lord. He had got to the place of humility, where he had a sense of his inadequacy: true humility before the Lord. He was running around the Philistine territory thinking he was the man, he was the man for the hour, he was strong, he could defeat the enemy - and God had to bring him to a place where he's saying, 'Remember me, strengthen me'. He's ready to accept death, rather than live his days in defeat - and that, at this moment, is what makes him great. He's willing to squander his whole life for one moment where he knows that he's nothing without God!

Do you have dependence on God? This is the difference between Samson and so many modern-day Christians. He had repented of sin - you might think you just do that when you're saved, but you've got to do that every day, taking up your cross and following Christ. He had fellowship with the Lord, that's not something you do on a Sunday where you're sitting in your nice fancy suit, and with your hat on your head - that's something you do every day, every
day. He had dependence on the Lord. My friend, listen: he knew that throughout his life he'd been depending on the flesh, and now he realised that if God was going to do something it was going to be all of God and nothing of him. Here's the difference between him and us: even at the end of a compromised and shameful existence, he was willing to do something about it!

Repentance led to fellowship, led to dependence, and then it lead to action. We read in verse 29 that Samson took hold, and then we read in verse 30 that he bowed himself with all his might. Those are action words, taking hold, bowing down with all his might! What was the remedy to Samson's compromised situation? It was resolution, action - after repentance, of course, and fellowship and dependence - it was doing something! Where are you this morning? Wait till I tell you something: if you think I'm talking to people who have gone out with guns and shot folk, or people who are presently stealing, or dabbling in immorality like Samson - you've got it all wrong. I'm talking to everybody, because all of us compromise in our mind and in our heart, and with our tongue and in all sorts of actions, every day of our lives. We all need to repent daily, and that is the conduit of God's blessing that comes via consecration - when we repent, and fellowship, and throw ourselves completely on God for dependence, and do the will of God.

If ever there was a day when we need to be doing God's will, it's today my friend! This series is called 'Men for the Hour', and we live in the same day where every man does that which is right in his own eyes. We live in a promiscuous society, a compromised spiritual group of God's people, and we need to get up and repent, and fellowship, and get dependent on our God again, and do something! So much inaction, so much apathy! In World War II Sir Winston Churchill was heard to say: 'This is your imperial hour, whatever you do, do it now!'. That's what Samson realised: 'If I am ever going to do anything for God again, I need to do it now. I need to seize the day!'. Maybe you're sitting here this morning, and you're at the end of a wasted life: wasted on material possessions, wasted on selfish ambition, wasted on fleshly lusts. Perhaps you're just resigned to that wasted life, you think: 'It's too late, I can't do anything about it'. My friend, Samson this morning tells you: 'No! It's not too late! Do something now with what you have left of your life!'. Redeem the time, Paul said. We sang:

'I would the precious time redeem,  
And longer live for this alone,  
To spend and to be spent for them  
Who have not yet my Saviour known'.

Solomon said: 'The end of a matter is better than the beginning'. My friend, the end of your life could be left with the epitaph that you've done more, almost, at your death than you did throughout your life because of the restorative influence of the grace of God upon you - even in spite of your compromising. It is reputed that Napoleon was once asked: 'How did you have so many victories in your life?'. Listen to his answer, because there's a twofold truth in it. He said first of all: 'I never hesitated'. Then secondly, listen to this, he said: 'There was always time for a victory before the sun went down'.

Is your sun going down? I'm telling you there's time for a victory. There is time for a victory in your life, and whilst I know Samson's victory was a hollow one in terms of a holy life, at least he had victory at the end. Most of Samson's years were tragic, yet God seemingly chose to remember the moments of faith and penitence. If I had been writing his story, I would have written him off as a failure and an abject sinner - but God remembers him because of his faith in Hebrews 11:32. There are places throughout Philistia, and throughout God's land -
Timnath, Ashkelon, Gaza, Hebron - and they're all known because of the exploits that Samson did for God. I know he had a sinful life, but is there any place in this province or in your years that are marked because of your spiritual exploits? This man was God's man for the hour, God's champion to such an extent that many believe that when the Philistines later on in their history presented Goliath before Israel, that it was their version, they were fielding their long sought answer to God's man Samson. He was great, and I know his life was a mess, but at least he had some great victories for the Lord! He had some - I'm asking you: have you got any? What have you done for God? What are you going to do for God in the time that's left?

Let me finish with this story: during the American Civil War, the news spread that General Grant had been drunk at the battle of Shiloh. About 11 o'clock one night, President Lincoln received his friend A.K. McClure, and McClure was on a mission - he was a spokesman for a number of the Republican army. He pressed his argument for almost two hours, on how unpopular Grant was with the men on the ground, and therefore Grant should be removed and dismissed so that Lincoln, the President, would retain the country's confidence and the confidence of the armies. Throughout McClure's tirade, Lincoln didn't say a word, he didn't interrupt. Then, as McClure himself reports it, and I quote to you: 'Lincoln remained silent for what seemed a very long time. Then he gathered himself up in the chair and said in a tone of earnestness that I shall never forget: 'I can't spare this man. He fights!'".

The only time Samson was really strong was when he was fighting for God, and God honoured him because, unlike the other Israelites, he didn't roll over and play dead in the warmth of the status quo. He allowed himself in whatever measure, and especially at the end, to become a man for the hour. The question this morning is: will you be that man? Will you be that woman?

Let's all bow our heads. One day in the 1800s, a minister by the name of Rev Moore, from the pulpit addressed the congregation and said: 'Do something more for God'. Four young men met together in a little cottage in Kells, and prayed down God's blessing in revival that came in 1859. Do something more for God!

Lord, help us to forget those things that are behind. We know that we'll be disqualified from certain things when we do certain things, and we can't undo the past, and there are ramifications as we've seen in Samson's life. He wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for his sin. Yet in the end, Lord, You allowed him to go out with a measure of dignity, with the time that was left, redeeming it to the glory of God. Lord, hear us, grant us Spirit-wrought repentance, fellowship, dependence and action as we all seek to do something more for the Master. Help us to be men and women for the hour. Amen.
Appendix A
"Micah And His Mercenary Minister"

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Now let's turn together to Judges, Judges chapter 17 first of all. Judges chapter 17 - and I did say to you that we've finished our studies of 'Men for The Hour' in the character nature, of those who were called the Judges within this book - there aren't any more. Now we're going to look at a couple of chapters at the end of the book of Judges that are a kind of appendix to this book. They're not chronological in a narrative sense, meaning that what you're reading in chapter 17, 18 and following does not come after, in a time order, the life of Samson or the Judges that we have considered. It's more of a glimpse, a cameo of the general conditions that prevailed over the whole of this time period that we would call the period of the Judges. As we will see, there's an uncanny similarity in this time period and the time period in which we live.

Now the title of my message this morning is 'Micah And His Mercenary Minister' - and our study will comprise of chapters 17 and 18. Now you know what 'mercenary' means, it means to have priority of interest in money and in reward. I have to say - I don't know whether it was providential or not - I don't know what the young people were doing last night, but there's a whole wad of money that was lying on my desk! It must have been a quiz. I was taken aback for a moment or two - hopefully not with covetousness at the beginning! - and then I noticed that each of them were £200 notes, '£200 of the Bank of Iron'! And you can see whose photograph is on the front - it's mine! So I have to be very careful in what I say this morning regarding this issue of money and possessions and so on, but we're looking at 'Micah and His Mercenary Minister'.

We begin to read at verse 1 of chapter 17: "And there was a man of mount Ephraim, whose name was Micah. And he said unto his mother, The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from thee, about which thou cursedst, and spakest of also in mine ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it. And his mother said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my son. And when he had restored the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, his mother said, I had wholly dedicated the silver unto the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a graven image and a molten image: now therefore I will restore it unto thee. Yet he restored the money unto his mother; and his mother took two hundred shekels of silver, and gave them to the founder, who made thereof a graven image and a molten image: and they were in the house of Micah. And the man Micah had an house of gods, and made an ephod, and teraphim", which are personal gods, "and consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest. In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes. And there was a young man out of Bethlehemjudah of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there. And the man departed out of the city from Bethlehemjudah to sojourn where he could find a place: and he came to mount Ephraim to the house of Micah, as he journeyed. And Micah said unto him, Whence comest thou? And he said unto him, I am a Levite of Bethlehemjudah, and I go to sojourn where I may find a place. And Micah said unto him, 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. So the Levite went in. And the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man was unto him as one of his sons. And Micah consecrated the Levite; and the young man became his priest, and was in
the house of Micah. Then said Micah, Now know I that the LORD will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest”.

Then verses 1 to 6 of chapter 18: "In those days there was no king in Israel: and in those days the tribe of the Danites sought them an inheritance to dwell in; for unto that day all their inheritance had not fallen unto them among the tribes of Israel. And the children of Dan sent of their family five men from their coasts, men of valor, from Zorah, and from Eshtaol, to spy out the land, and to search it; and they said unto them, Go, search the land: who when they came to mount Ephraim, to the house of Micah, they lodged there. When they were by the house of Micah, they knew the voice of the young man the Levite: and they turned in thither, and said unto him, Who brought thee hither? and what makest thou in this place? and what hast thou here? And he said unto them, Thus and thus dealeth Micah with me, and hath hired me, and I am his priest. 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. And the priest said unto them, Go in peace: before the LORD is your way wherein ye go”.

Then verse 27 at the end of the chapter: "And they took the things which Micah had made, and the priest which he had, and came unto Laish, unto a people that were at quiet and secure: and they smote them with the edge of the sword, and burnt the city with fire. And there was no deliverer, because it was far from Zidon, and they had no business with any man; and it was in the valley that lieth by Bethrehob. And they built a city, and dwelt therein. And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born unto Israel: howbeit the name of the city was Laish at the first. And the children of Dan set up the graven image: and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land. And they set them up Micah's graven image, which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh".

The closing chapters of the book of Judges tell us of a time when there was no king in Israel and every man did that which was right in his own eyes. A time of moral, religious and political decay. The writer illustrates this to us by giving us two examples of decay, first of all in a religious sense, the decay of idolatry in chapters 17 and 18 that we'll consider this morning; and then the decay in morality in chapter 19, God willing, that we'll look at next Lord's day. You see, we need to understand that God, when He created the world, established three institutions in society. The first was the home, the second was human government, and the third was the worshipping community - whether it was Israel in the Old Testament, or the church in the New.

Since that inception at creation of those three institutions, Satan has desired to undermine all three. He does it by beginning with the first, in the home, for the home has always been the basis for the rest of society. Ever since, as we read in the record of the first couple of chapters of Genesis, God created the first family in Adam and Eve, it has been the foundation of the institutions that society would build and humanity would evolve. But when Satan attacks the family, we find that the very foundations of human government, and even of the community of worship are undermined. The foundation is attacked and begins to crumble, and it's not very long until all parts in society and all institutions follow suit.

Whenever I marry a couple, the fourth clause in the marriage vows for which marriage was ordained is, I quote: 'For the welfare of human society, which can be strong and happy only where the marriage bond is held in honour'. This is why we believe the family is important, it is the foundation of all God's institutions, and indeed the foundation of society. As the Psalmist says, 'If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?'. Around us Satan
is trying to break up homes, he is corrupting government, he is apostatising the church, he is making individual Christian's lives and Christendom at large idolatrous, as he seeks to get us to put other things before the Lord in our personal lives and in the church.

But the ultimate reason for this decay in the home, in government and in the worshipping community was that the lordship of Jehovah - and in our respect, Christ - had been usurped by the will of man. We've concentrated on verse 6 of chapter 17 already in this study, and it's found again in chapter 21 verse 25: 'Every man did that which was right in his own eyes, because there was no king in Israel'. The King represented the rule of the Lord, lordship was usurped, self-will was put in its place. You have to understand that when it says 'Every man did that which was right in his own eyes', that the men and women were not doing things that they deemed to be wrong, rather things that they thought were right. They didn't think they were doing that which was against God. This is what relativism is. It was in the Judges' society, and it's in ours - people actually think that their idolatry and their immorality is right! They reason and compare with light, they feel, in our world and other religious systems, and they come up with this conclusion that what they are committing is right - even though God's word says it is wrong.

Now this applies - what we're going to study this morning - very very dramatically to the church, and indeed to us as individual Christians. Because when you go to the end of the Bible, to Revelation chapter 2 and chapter 3, we find Jesus Christ, the Lord of the churches, walking in the midst of the candlesticks - the Lord of the Christian and the Lord of the church. Again, what is at stake is the lordship of Christ in the life of the individual believer, and the life of His worshipping community. Christ, particularly in the Laodicean period, is shut outside the door - they're still Christians, they're taking His name, they're supposedly following Him, but the presence and the guidance and power of Christ has been shut out. You see, there'll always be breakdown when Christ is not permitted to rule. Whether it's in the Judges, and every man does that which is right in his own eyes because there's no king representing divine authority; or whether it's in the church and Christ is not given His place, people start doing what is right in their own eyes.

Now let's look at this idolatrous situation and see some of the pointers that minister to us and instruct us even in our own society today, and ask ourselves: how far are we from this situation? The first point I want you to notice is that there was domestic spiritual decline - looking first of all at the home. In verses 1 to 4 of chapter 17, we meet this man Micah the Ephraimite. Micah is a great name, do you know what it means? 'Who is like Jehovah?' - what a name! Yet Micah of Ephraim did not live up to the name, his character did not correspond to his claim. We can see that in his immorality and in his spiritual idolatry. He was setting up idols in his home, making other idols, and so there were others in his eyes who were like unto the Lord.

In verse 2 we're given a glimpse to his moral standing, when we see that he stole 1100 shekels of silver from his mother. One day he must have heard her cursing the man that stole them, and for fear of the curse he confessed to her: 'Look, Mum, it was me!' - and he returned the silver. We see the moral breakdown in this home when the mother, in turn, blesses him for returning the silver - in verse 4 we read that. Then she says: 'I was going to give you this money anyway, son, to go away and make some idols so that we could worship the Lord Jehovah'. So she gives him 200 shekels out of the 1100, seeming to be dishonest herself and not giving the whole lot that she seemed to have set aside for this purpose. She orders that two idols be formed from that 200 shekels of silver.
Now if ever there was a dysfunctional family, it's this one. First of all, notice there is deceit and theft in the home on the part of the son. Obviously he had no respect for his mother, stealing 1100 silver shekels. He is deceiving her as well as thieving from her. Now we read in the holy Scriptures, in the New Testament, that: 'in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves', self-love, self-willed, 'covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, and unholy'. Are we not living in days like that today? Vance Havner, many years ago, said: 'We shouldn't worry that the government won't allow children to have Bibles in schools, because they'll get free Bibles when they go to prison'! That reflects the situation in our society today, doesn't it?

Then secondly we see in this dysfunctional family that there was no parental correction. This son owns up to stealing the 1100 shekels, and she blesses him! After cursing the one, who was anonymous to her at that point, who had stolen it; when she finds out it's her own son, she blesses him, she indulges his sin and shortcoming. It also evidences that she was double-tongued. How often we find that in the home! James talks about: 'Out of the same mouth proceeds blessing and cursing; my brethren, these things ought not to be so'. What does your conversation as a parent in the home say about you? And what effect is it having on your children?

But notice, she didn't check her son's waywardness, she encouraged his sin and she gave him 200 shekels to go and to make these idols. Not only was there no parental correction, there was no parental example - encouraging him in idolatry and so on. This is a phenomenon of our time: parents who have no true values to communicate to their children. What values are communicated in the home? Scholars believe that this was a wealthy home - how do we know? Well 1100 silver shekels, compared with the 10 shekels and a shirt that the Levite was given in this passage for a year's service as the family priest seems to show that 1100 must have been an awful lot - certainly a great deal more than that man's yearly wages.

They have got their values all wrong, valuing material things - but more than that: if you look very deeply in this passage, you see that this family managed to break seven of the ten commandments without going out the front door! The fifth commandment transgressed, 'Honour thy father and thy mother'; the eighth, 'Thou shalt not steal'. Now according to Proverbs 30 and verse 9, stealing is a breaking of the third commandment, taking the name of the Lord God in vain - so that's the third broken. Then there's the ninth, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness', lying; and the tenth, 'Thou shalt not covet'. Colossians 3 verse 5 tells us that covetousness is also the sin of idolatry, so that's the first and the second - not worshipping any other gods before Jehovah, and not making idols - and of course they literally did that in their shrine in the home. Seven commandments broken, and what is incredible is that they don't feel a bit guilty about it! In fact, they invoke the blessing of God upon them in verse 2: 'Blessed be thou of the LORD, my son'.

Now when we contrast this Danite mother with another in the book of Judges, we see a great difference - who was that? Samson's mother, who prayed, who sought God's guidance for her son - and whilst he was a wayward man in himself, he had a prestigious upbringing from godly parents. You might say: 'How on earth did these people believe they were serving the Lord through this idolatry?'. Listen to what I'm saying this morning: Micah and this priest, and his mother and the family, they didn't worship Baal! They weren't worshipping the false gods of the Canaanites, they were worshipping Jehovah the LORD! Verse 3 mentions the LORD, verse 13, it is the LORD that they are dedicating these idols to!

Isn't this frightening? You can take the name 'Micah', 'There is none like the LORD'; like the
name 'Christian', 'I am a follower of Christ' - and you could verbally and externally seem to be worshipping the Lord and following Jesus, yet with it all there's an idol on your heart. That's why we sing: 'The greatest idol I have known, whatever that idol be, help me to tear it from Thy throne and worship only Thee'. Now this becomes clearer when we see that not only was there domestic spiritual decline, but there was a DIY man-made religion - and that brings us from the home, God's first institution, to this next one in the story, which is the worshipping community: how self in the home affects faith.

Don't ever think that what you do when you go home on a Sunday and the rest of the week doesn't affect the community here, it does. In verses 5 and 6 we see that Micah put these idols in a shrine in his household with other household gods that he obviously had already, and then he also decided to institute a priesthood for his family. So he made an ephod, which is a priestly garment, and he consecrated his own son to be a priest. Now listen: right away he's transgressing the law. The law of Moses forbade that an Ephraimite should be a priest, the law of Moses said that worship should only take place in the Tabernacle. So what this was was home-made worship and a man-made god - it was DIY religion!

If you look at chapter 18 and verse 24, we see the ridiculous nature of a man-made God, for when his gods later are stolen by the Danites, he says: 'Ye have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest'. Imagine fighting for a god that you have made, and a god that can be stolen! It's ridiculous, isn't it? But that's the ridiculous nature of idolatry - that's why God condemns idolatry. But do you know what idolatry is? Idolatry is not the forbidding of worshipping other gods, false gods, but idolatry is also the sin of worshipping the true and the living God by images to represent Him. I think that's a point we often miss, because if we worship the true and the living God by an image, we rob God of His glory.

Now I know that there are some old photographs of you that you wouldn't like to get into public. It's a terrible thing to have a photograph circulated when it really doesn't do you any justice at all. That's really what idolatry is in a sense, but it's far far worse than that - because imagine your name being put on a picture of someone that is clearly not you. That is forgery, and that is what idolatry is in God's eyes - to put His name to a picture that is not Him, it cannot come near His glory! There is much in Christianity today that is done in the name of Christ, and it is idolatry. Often it involves a false priesthood - you see it in Rome. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent stated: 'The images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints are to be had and to be kept especially in churches, and due honour and veneration are to be given them'. That is idolatry - but it's easy to condemn that type of idolatry in Rome, when we can have equal idolatry. We can present a Christ in evangelicalism that is not the Christ of the Bible.

This idea of priesthood often comes with idolatry. You see, there was only one priesthood in Micah's day, and it was among the family of Aaron - and another Levite couldn't do it, or anyone else in the whole of the tribes of Israel. It's the same today, there is only one Great High Priest that we have, and God has set aside all other priests for the Priesthood of His Son, and he has made us all kings and priests to come unto our God through the Lord Jesus. So any clerical priesthood is idolatry, it takes the place of Christ, it is antichrist - it is DIY, man-made religion.

So there's domestic spiritual decline, DIY man-made religion. Then thirdly we find that there was a disregard for the precepts and principles of God's Word. If there was one word that sums up the whole of this awful situation in the land at this time, it's the word 'confusion'. Confusion in the home, confusion in the nation, confusion in the worshipping community - and
where does confusion stem from? Verse 6, man's heart - every man does that which is right in his own eyes. You see, the law of God was ignored. Now if the law of God had been observed, none of these things would have happened.

What I want you to note here is - I said that the people were to worship in the Tabernacle - do you know where the Tabernacle was? The last verse of chapter 18 told us that it was at Shiloh. Now a map reveals that Shiloh is in the hill country of Ephraim, Shiloh is only a short journey from Micah's own house. Don't think for one moment that Micah's idolatry was to do with the unavailability of God's house or God's way of worship! It was nothing to do with that, but everything to do with his refusal to follow God's word because he was doing what was right in his own eyes. He wanted a little Israel in his own house for himself.

What does that teach us? Well, it teaches us a great deal concerning some of the tensions that we see today in evangelicalism between the wisdom of men and the word of God. We are to be guided by God's word and the Spirit of God, and not what is right in men's eyes - because that leads to dubious motivations and decisions.

The fourth thing I want you to notice was that during this period of time decisions were clearly motivated by mammon, decisions were motivated by mammon. Now 'mammon' is a word that the Lord Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount, and it's a personification of the idea of materialism and wealth. Some believe it was the name of a Syrian god that He borrowed. I have used in my title the word 'mercenary', and it's the same idea: you have a primary concern for money and other rewards that maybe aren't financial. Here we see this coming in in the person of this Levite in verses 7 to 13 of chapter 17.

He lived in Bethlehem among the people of Judah, but he is now found in the hill country of Ephraim looking for a place, a place to stay to better himself. Now listen to me: he shouldn't have been in Ephraim, but he shouldn't have been in Bethlehem. He was employed in the service of the Lord as a Levite, he had a city of calling. God's call was on the Levite's life, he was not meant to be an opportunist moving from place to place looking for a better job! What this also infers is that because of the spiritual decline in the nation, people weren't tithing into the temple for the ministry of the Levites - that's what they lived off, and so he was forced in a sense to go out and support his own ministry because the tithes of God's people weren't coming in.

So he reaches Ephraim and he finds Micah, and Micah says to him: 'I have a need, I need a priest. You have a need, you need a job - be my priest!'. Now this young man was a Levite but he was not of Aaron, therefore he was not eligible to serve as a priest. So what made him do it? Well, Micah offered him a salary - 10 shekels. He offered him clothing - a shirt; and he offered him food. Right away the deal was done. Now the Levite clearly knew, and should have confronted Micah with God's law and said: 'No, this is not right, the precepts and principles of God's word would be transgressed' - but what happened? Economic expediency dictated his policy. He had a need for a priest, the Levite had a need for a job, and these two unprincipled men met.

Let me say that money is not unimportant, far from it - as the saying goes: 'Money makes the world go round', and it certainly makes the Gospel go round. You need money to print tracts and Bibles, and to send them to the four corners of the world. But we must be very careful: whilst money is not unimportant, it is not all-important. What the lesson God's Spirit is giving us here is, is that money must never be the sole determining factor of God's people or an individual Christian. Money must never be the motivation in decisions of churches, the sole
motivation for the servants of God. This is twofold: if the children of Israel had been giving their tithes into the Tabernacle, the Levite would have been supplied for and the likelihood is that he wouldn't have wondered. That's what Paul said to Timothy: 'The scripture saith, thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward'.

You can add to a materialistic spirit by not supporting the servants of God. But on the other side of the coin, concerning the Levite, if he had been content with God's call on his life where God had put him, he wouldn't have wandered in selfish ambition, he wouldn't have sought great things for himself. We often joke about preachers moving churches. You may have heard the story of the preacher being called to a larger church - was that God's will? Somebody from the small church that he was at called round one day to talk about it with the pastor, and he was met at the door by the wee girl: 'Where's your Mum and Dad dear?', he said. 'Oh, Dad's upstairs praying about the move, and Mum is downstairs packing'. The opposite can often be the way it is - that's the way it was with this Levite. He was seeking a place, a better opportunity; whereas God's word says: 'Godliness with contentment is great gain'. Now the opposite of that is true: discontent breeds ungodliness, and leads to great spiritual loss, whilst it may bring financial or monetary or even prestigious gain. That is why the Lord Jesus said, now we must hear this: 'You cannot serve two masters, for either you will love the one and hate the other: you cannot serve God and mammon' - Christians, churches!

It wasn't just love for pounds that warped his service, but love for prestige. You see, the Levite refused to be satisfied with God arrangements for his life. He was committed to self-promotion, to personal betterment. Micah wanted a proper Levite as a priest, the Levite wanted the job - maybe he aspired to being one of these Aaronic priests, but couldn't be because of his birth, so suddenly the Levite became an ordained member of the clergy. Isn't it often in church life that expediency ordains by men what God has prohibited. It's expedient, it makes sense, it's right in our eyes.

Now let's see where this leads. In chapter 18 verses 1 to 6, the Danites decide to look for additional territory. 'Why was that?', you say. Well, they had failed to possess the land that was promised to them. They were meant to fight for it, we see in chapter 1 of Judges and verse 34 that they didn't fight for it and they lost it. When some of their spies came to the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim, they recognised the voice of this young Levite as being from the south, and asked him for assurance of divine blessing on their plans. They were wanting to be blessed when they were out of God's will, going into another's land that they had not inherited and God had not promised.

Now in verses 7 to 13 of chapter 18, five men of Dan spied out this northern town of Laish. It says that they found it quiet and secure. Now there's a lesson if ever there was one: they wouldn't fight for what God had given them, but all of a sudden when they find a piece of land that's quiet and secure and could be gotten easily, hasn't any other ties with any nations or tribes, they want it - ease, love of ease and materialistic sloth. Now friends, in verses 14 to 26, these five Danites are seen again, and they're marching to capture this town of Laish - but before it they enter the house of Micah, and they confront the Levite. They say: 'We're going to take all the idols', and the Levite says 'No, you shouldn't really do that' - then after his mild protest he obeys their request.

What was it in verse 19? Look at it, they said: 'Hold your peace', be quiet a minute, 'lay your hand upon your mouth, and go with us, and be to us a father and a priest: 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
the whole of Israel?'. Why be a priest of one family, when you can be the priest of a whole tribe? Why be a clergyman if you can be a bishop? God didn't come into any of this, yet it seemed right - and more than that, it was all done in His name! They were blessing it with their prayers!

Can I ask what our attitude is to the service of Jesus Christ? Are you looking for a place, a place where you can assert yourself? Prestige? A place of privilege? Do you know something? It's intriguing who this Levite is, isn't it? Have you ever wondered? You've probably never even read this passage of Scripture, or at least worked out what it's all about - it's not commonly preached on. Who was this idolatrous self-promoting false priest with a money lust? Look at verses 27 to 31, we read that the Danites struck this peaceful town of Laish, and they changed its name to Dan. We read that they set up this carved image, they wanted a man-made god who would fit their lifestyle without making any demands upon their materialism - and so they appointed, in verse 30 it says, 'Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh' to be their priest. Now that, we believe, is the same Levite that they had stolen from Micah's house.

Now if you have a Revised Version or a New King James Version, you will know that that word 'Manasseh' is a scribal name for Moses. It has been disguised by copyists to prevent disgrace upon the great father of the law, the patriarch. Now what does this mean? This young Levite Jonathan was Moses' grandson - this is the one who brought this idolatry into the nation! What a lesson! It's no good having godly ancestors or forefathers, or denominational founders if you're not a man or woman of God yourself. It also shows the danger of putting people in leadership positions because they're well connected. This was Moses' grandson, and this domestic spiritual decline, this DIY man-made religion, the disregard for the precepts and principles of God's word, decisions motivated purely by mammon, lead to disastrous and far reaching consequences.

Let me take time to show you it: the city of Dan became and remained an idolatrous city. They set up this idol, they set up their priest, we read later on that there Jeroboam later set up one of his two golden calves in the city of Dan for worship. Now what is this telling us? Now listen to this lesson, elders, and deacons, and members, whatever church you go to: Proverbs 14 verse 12, 'There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death'. Never underestimate the consequences of taking Christ off His seat of lordship in your life, off His seat of headship in the church, in placing your own self-will and your own human wise decisions in His place. Because if you go to 1 Chronicles you will find that when the tribes of Israel are listed there and the families of Israel given, Dan is the only tribe that is totally ignored - why? Because Dan would not take what God had given to them, they took a land that God had not given to them, and in the process they lost all that they had, and potentially all that God would have given them!

How do I know that? Well, God gives us a glimpse into the future to Revelation chapter 7, where there are 144,000 Hebrew believers who carry the special ministry of that Gospel for God around the world during the tribulation period. When the tribes are listed within that 144,000, it is observed that Dan is not mentioned - he is completely ignored, because he refused to follow God's mission in the land! He chose the easy way in the land, therefore God refused to give him the special ministry of blessing in the future out of the land.

There's a lesson for every child of God here this morning - 2 Timothy chapter 2 and verse 12: 'If we suffer with him, we shall also reign with him: but if we deny him, he will deny us'. Listen: if all you're living for is your materials, you're going to lose out one day. I'm not
saying you'll not get to heaven, but I am saying this: you'll go to heaven a pauper. George Truett was the long-time pastor of First Baptist in Dallas, Texas. He was invited to dinner at the home of a wealthy oil tycoon. After the meal the host led him to a place where they could get a good view of the surrounding area. He pointed to oil wells that were punctuated, a host of them across the landscape. He boasted to him, he said: 'Twenty five years ago I had absolutely nothing. Now as far as your eye can see, that is all mine!'. Then looking in the opposite direction, there was a sprawling field of grain, and he said: 'That's all mine'. Then turning eastward towards huge herds of cattle, he bragged: 'They're all mine!'. Then pointing to the west there was a beautiful forest, and he exclaimed: 'That too is mine!'. He paused expecting Truett to compliment him, and Truett, placing his hand on his shoulder, pointed to heaven and said: 'How much do you have in that direction?'.

How much do you have in that direction? How much treasure do you have in heaven, not on earth? Wasn't it Pope Innocent IV who asserted to Aquinas that the time is gone when the church was saying: 'Silver and gold have I none', the reply came from the Doctor, 'So also has the time gone when the church can say to the lame at the Temple Gate, 'Arise and walk''.

'There is sin in the camp,
There is treason today,
Is it in me? Is it in me?
There is cause in our angst
For defeat and delay,
Is it, O Lord, in me?

Something of selfishness,
Garments of gold.
Something of hindrance
In young or in old.
Something why God doth
His blessing withhold.
Is it, O Lord, in me?

Is it in me? Is it in me?
Is it, O Lord, in me?'

This is why John said, as we'll see tomorrow night: 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols'

Father, help us all to see the Lord's injunction to us to seek first the kingdom of God. Lord, all of us seek the kingdom of God, but few of us are seeking it first. It's somewhere down the pecking order after other things. Lord, help us to see in the light of Your word today, that that is as blatant idolatry as the heathen bowing to the wood. Help us to repent, and to seek again our first love, that He may be Lord of our life, Lord of our church - and we'd love to see many in our land would find him Lord as well. For His sake we pray, Amen.
Now let's turn together to the book of Judges once more. We had been spending several weeks looking at individual characters of the Judges, and just in these last two weeks we've stopped that character study series to look at two cameos at the end of this book which are not chronological in the order in which we find them at the end of the book, but are little glimpses into the moral and spiritual state of the nation at this particular time period in Israel's history. They're very graphic, as we saw last Sunday morning, looking at the religious apostasy that there was in the land. This morning we're looking at chapter 19, and the title I've taken for this morning's message is 'God's People in the Gutter'.

Judges chapter 19: "And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite sojourning on the side of mount Ephraim, who took to him a concubine out of Bethlehemjudah. And his concubine played the whore against him, and went away from him unto her father's house to Bethlehemjudah, and was there four whole months. And her husband arose, and went after her, to speak friendly unto her, and to bring her again, having his servant with him, and a couple of asses: and she brought him into her father's house: and when the father of the damsel saw him, he rejoiced to meet him. And his father in law, the damsel's father, retained him; and he abode with him three days: so they did eat and drink, and lodged there. And it came to pass on the fourth day, when they arose early in the morning, that he rose up to depart: and the damsel's father said unto his son in law, Comfort thine heart with a morsel of bread, and afterward go your way. And they sat down, and did eat and drink both of them together: for the damsel's father had said unto the man, Be content, I pray thee, and tarry all night, and let thine heart be merry. And when the man rose up to depart, his father in law urged him: therefore he lodged there again. And he arose early in the morning on the fifth day to depart; and the damsel's father said, Comfort thine heart, I pray thee. And they tarried until afternoon, and they did eat both of them. And when the man rose up to depart, he, and his concubine, and his servant, his father in law, the damsel's father, said unto him, Behold, now the day draweth toward evening, I pray you tarry all night: behold, the day groweth to an end, lodge here, that thine heart may be merry; and to morrow get you early on your way, that thou mayest go home. But the man would not tarry that night, but he rose up and departed, and came over against Jebus, which is Jerusalem; and there were with him two asses saddled, his concubine also was with him. And when they were by Jebus, the day was far spent; and the servant said unto his master, Come, I pray thee, and let us turn in into this city of the Jebusites, and lodge in it. And his master said unto him, We will not turn aside hither into the city of a stranger, that is not of the children of Israel; we will pass over to Gibeah. And he said unto his servant, Come, and let us draw near to one of these places to lodge all night, in Gibeah, or in Ramah. And they passed on and went their way; and the sun went down upon them when they were by Gibeah, which belongeth to Benjamin. And they turned aside thither, to go in and to lodge in Gibeah: and when he went in, he sat him down in a street of the city: for there was no man that took them into his house to lodging".

"And, behold, there came an old man from his work out of the field at even, which was also of mount Ephraim; and he sojourned in Gibeah: but the men of the place were Benjamites. And
when he had lifted up his eyes, he saw a wayfaring man in the street of the city: and the old man said, Whither goest thou? and whence comest thou? And he said unto him, We are passing from Bethlehemjudah toward the side of mount Ephraim; from thence am I: and I went to Bethlehemjudah, but I am now going to the house of the LORD; and there is no man that receiveth me to house. Yet there is both straw and provender for our asses; and there is bread and wine also for me, and for thy handmaid, and for the young man which is with thy servants: there is no want of any thing. And the old man said, Peace be with thee; howsoever let all thy wants lie upon me; only lodge not in the street. So he brought him into his house, and gave provender unto the asses: and they washed their feet, and did eat and drink. Now as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him. And the man, the master of the house, went out unto them, and said unto them, Nay, my brethren, nay, I pray you, do not this folly. Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man do not so vile a thing. But the men would not hearken to him: so the man, that is the Levite, "took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go. Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man's house where her lord was, till it was light. And her lord rose up in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and went out to go his way: and, behold, the woman his concubine was fallen down at the door of the house, and her hands were upon the threshold. And he said unto her, Up, and let us be going. But none answered. Then the man took her up upon an ass, and the man rose up, and gat him unto his place. And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, together with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel. And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds".

'Church cleric in gay gang rape and murder scandal' - you can just imagine the little newsboy at the corner shouting, 'Read all about it! Read all about it!'. It's like one of those headlines from the daily red-top tabloid newspapers, or one of the sensational centrefold stories in some of these women's magazines that you see lying on coffee tables or in medical waiting rooms. But believe it or not, it's the theme of chapter 19 of the book of Judges in the Bible. Perhaps you didn't even realise, as some of you last week were sharing with me, that such stories are in the word of God - but they are.

We find within this chapter alone: wife abuse, blatant flagrant homosexuality, gang rape that leads eventually to murder. We find injustice, brother killing brother in chapters 20 and 21, and even kidnapping. Then we find the awful dismemberment by the Levite of his concubine, sending her by twelve pieces right throughout all the twelve tribes of Israel. Truly God's people are in the gutter. It was Samuel Johnson, the essayist, in 1783 who said these words: 'I lived to see things all as bad as they can be'. That could be said, and indeed I think that's what's being said by the writer in the book of Judges: he had lived to see things all as bad as they can be. Samuel Johnson said that in 1783, what would he say about today?

Now Micah, the man who hired his own priest, and really founded his own manmade religion in the previous chapters we were looking at last week, in chapter 17 and 18 - we saw in his story a family who did not give the Lord His place in their lives. Because of that, idolatry had entered their home and various other sins that were a fallout of that. Now these chapters that
we're looking at, specifically chapter 19 but also chapters 20 and 21 - read them when you get home - speak of a whole nation that has now collectively experienced a moral collapse that has also followed the rejection of Jehovah as their Lord and God. Please note that it's not like other accounts in Israelite history where they've followed a foreign god like Baal or Asherah - there's no mention of any other god here, it's just apathetic disregard for the God that they had, it is flagrant rebellion against His laws that He had given to them. So they weren't wandering after other gods, they just didn't want their own God!

In fact, you could go as far as to say they wanted to be their own gods, they wanted to rule their own lives, they didn't want to be subject to any transcendent deity. That's why we read the catchphrase, which is the key to this whole book, in chapter 19 and the very first verse - every man did that which was right in their own eyes, because there was no king in Israel. At the end of the book, chapter 21 and verse 25, the author repeats it again: because there was no King, who was the physical representation, if you like, of God's lordship of the nation, people just did what was right in their own eyes. Because of that, these last couple of chapters in Judges have been described as the sewer of Scripture. Someone has said it holds the dubious distinction of being the most disgusting and degrading story in the Bible. God's people are in the gutter.

Now here's a lesson, please, and I don't want you to miss it as we go into the various intricate details of the story: the whole point is that when people, even God's people, reject the absolutes of God's word; and when they begin in a relativistic way to do what they feel is good in their own eyes, what they conclude to be right, the end result inevitably is moral anarchy, societal collapse. People eventually, even among the worshipping community in Israel in the Judges' day, and the church in our day, people eventually are unable to discern between what is basic right and wrong. Reject God's moral absolutes, reject God's sovereignty and lordship of life, and moral collapse won't be far away.

Of course we saw last week that one word could sum up the whole of the period of the Judges, and that is the word 'confusion'. Last week we looked in chapter 17 and 18 at religious and spiritual confusion, and that led to spiritual anarchy - everybody did what was OK in their own eyes. Micah decided: 'I'll just make my own wee religion in my house', even though he was only a stone's throw away from God's Tabernacle in Shiloh. He wanted his own little gods and his own priest.

Now we see that there is moral confusion, and that leads to moral anarchy - chapter 19 and following. But we read, and I'm sure the hairs have stood on the back of your neck, of this evil, gross evil that was recurrent in Israel in this day. But ask yourself: why did it come to fruition? The answer is simple: they were doing what was right in their own eyes. They had rejected what God said was right, and chosen what they viewed was right. They thought they were doing right, they didn't conclude that they were doing wrong at all. They had made, as far as they were concerned, reasonable, rational evaluations of moral dilemmas - and they had come to what they thought were right conclusions. But the fact of the matter is: they had rejected God's absolute truth, they had followed their own will, and the nation is now in moral collapse.

Our society is filled with abhorrent immorality, and yet people feel quite free in defending it. Some of them are very suave and articulate, even charismatic spokespersons of various lifestyles and practices. The fact of the matter is, there can scarcely be found a perversion that someone is not willing to stand up and defend as an essential to human freedom. Believe it or not, there are even those in our society who try to stand up and defend child abuse. Do
you know this? They believe that abusers are just expressing themselves, and this is just their orientation - and we have to do something about it, perhaps, to protect the children; but there are actually those who believe that we cannot condemn these people for what they are. Indeed, to a certain extent, that we have to protect their human freedom and not treat them as criminals or subnormal. I know that there are big questions in all of those statements that I have just made, but the sad fact of the matter is: even God's people now, the church, are coming to the defence of all sorts of practices that God has declared in His word are sin.

It reminds me of a man on one occasion who summarised his life in his own eyes, this is what he said: 'I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, and all I get is abuse and the existence of a hunted man'. Who was the poor, persecuted, misunderstood humanitarian who spoke such words? Al Capone, the gangster! That's the way he felt! He was misunderstood, he was just giving people the lighter pleasures in life, and he was abused and persecuted - he had the existence of a hunted man. Now you might say: 'That's ridiculous!', and it is - but that's how he saw it in his own eyes.

You see, when you reject God's absolute standards of truth which are found in His word, everybody expresses morals according to their own relative opinion. Their viewpoint, whether you like it or not, is as legitimate as yours. The result is a total moral disorientation, where children and young people are growing up not knowing what is right and what is wrong.

Now this is seen in two ways in this portion of Scripture. The first way this moral confusion is evidenced is socially, and the second is sexually. Let's look at the first: socially. Now if you thought last week - and forgive me if you weren't here - that Jonathan the Levite was a bad one, this guy surely is equal to him if not worse. This man was a Levite as well, and if Jonathan the Levite last week was materialistic, good living for a living; this Levite was hedonistic. If you don't know what that is, it's simply a lover or a worshipper of pleasure. He lived for what he could get out of life, whatever that was.

The story goes that his wife was unfaithful to him, the Bible says she practised prostitution - and so she ran away, and ran to her father. Now she was his concubine - if you don't know what that is, read the Old Testament - but it's really a second-class wife. She was provided for in law, the law of Moses regulated for a concubine although it did not approve concubines or encourage them - but they were there, they were a fact in society. She fled to her father in Bethlehemjudah. After four months - I'm not giving you that as a literal time period, men! - but after four months, he began to miss her. That's a long time, isn't it? Obviously that would tell you that he had taken her for granted for longer than four months, but he decided: 'I think she's worth going after', so he travelled to Bethlehemjudah.

Eventually he meets up with her, with his father-in-law, and he forgives his concubine. There's a reconciliation, but he finds that he gets on with his father-in-law perhaps better than he got on with his wife. The account goes that for five days they spend the whole time celebrating the reconciliation - five days eating, drinking and making merry. You can see it in verses 4 and 6, and 8 and 22. This man really enjoyed himself, he lived for pleasure.

Now let me note two things for you before we go on any further, and this is so important - the first we will go into in a little more detail in a few moments, and that is how he treated his wife in such a shocking manner. It ought to take our breath away that not only through this story, when his wife was alive, did he treat her with a lack of respect and disdain, but even when she was dead he treated her in a horrendous manner.
Then secondly, and just now I want to labour on this point: this Levite - and remember a Levite was a minister of God - he was careful to enjoy life, but he was careless about what really mattered in life. Now if that isn't characteristic of our age, I do not know what is. Because in our age we have husbands and wives who don't know how to relate and interact properly with one another, but everybody seems to know how to go out and have a good time. Maybe that's because we can forget about the troubles. It's right across the whole of society, and even among God's people.

Paul, in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, said: 'Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation'. We are not to be taken in as Christians with the pleasure-crazed society that is amusing itself to death, literally.

Now let me say before I go on any further that there's nothing wrong with having a good time, and sometimes Christians can be misunderstood as being party-poopers, and folk that don't know how to smile, or don't know how to laugh - I don't know how they could get that impression of us! But nevertheless - maybe they should stand up here from time to time and look down! There's nothing wrong with enjoying ourselves. The Bible does say there's a time to laugh, there's a time to rejoice - but there's something wrong with a society, and with a group of Christians, who do nothing but enjoy themselves and seek nothing but feathering their own nest of affluence and luxury. The Bible says if we live for the material things in life alone as our god, that will bring spiritual death.

In Matthew 10, the Lord Jesus said in verse 39: 'He that finds his life shall lose it: and he that loses his life shall find it'. What does that mean? If you live to hoard resources and pleasures and sensuality to yourself in this life, you'll lose the next! But if you live for the next life now, and lose all of those things that the whole world seems to hanker after, you will find God's eternal light. We see this in the church, the pleasure-crazed society has filtered in and infected Christian life. Weirsdale, the commentator and Christian writer, says: 'In too many churches the laughter of religious entertainment has replaced the holy hush of worship'. That's profound: the laughter of religious entertainment has replaced the holy hush of worship.

For many Christians, the most important thing when they get together is that they have 'fun'. I want everybody to have fun, of course, but is that the most important thing? Then there's an epilogue of God's word tailed at the end, just to make us all feel OK. My mother and father recently were away in the States, and there were at First Baptist Church Orlando in Florida. They brought back, for my interest, one of the orders of service, advertising various things that were going on in the life of the church. I noted with great intrigue the advert for 'Sunday Evening Comedy Night for all the family'. Guest comedians were coming along. I think - if memory serves me correctly, I couldn't find it - this was a quote: 'Prepare to split your sides'. Yet God's word says: 'Rend your heart', not your sides.

God's word says that we as Christians should be able to discern the spirit of the age, and what is going on not only outside, but inside the church - and it should affect us so that we're not so filled with frivolity that it seems to indicate that we're blind to spiritual reality. I think this is why the church has an identity crisis today: she no longer knows what she exists for - and I'm talking about this church as well. What are we here for? What is the purpose of our existent? I'll let you ponder that one yourself. All I know is that in the Judges' day the nation
was in a terrible state before God, yet here was one of God's Levite ministers, and his own belly was his god.

Yet James says to us: 'Be afflicted, mourn and weep, let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness'. There's nothing wrong with enjoying yourself, but we as Christians are here for a higher purpose. Isn't it ironic that - I think at least - the most pleasure-crazed societies are the most inhospitable. I don't know whether you've travelled too far, but you might find that when you go to some of the Third World countries and places where people don't have as many resources, they're much more friendly, much more family and neighbour orientated. We find that here in chapter 19 and verses 10 to 21, during this time it was dangerous to travel - we found that out from chapter 5 already. It was dangerous to travel in the day as well as the night, and this Levite didn't want to stay in Jerusalem because it was in the hands of the pagan Jebusites at this particular moment. So they pressed on about 4 miles to Gibeah, and that was a town that was inhabited by other Israelites - God's people, Benjaminites.

But when he gets there, what we find in this narrative is that they were as bad, if not worse than the pagans. But before we talk about their immorality, I want you to see the lack of hospitality. Now in the sacred law of God, and indeed Eastern tradition and custom, it was a terrible thing to neglect the stranger in your midst - that has a lot to say, I think, about migrants in our own society. We're meant to welcome people, and the Israelites were to do that - but lo and behold, these strangers wander into Gibeah, and nobody wants to be bothered with them! Someone should have taken them under their wing, but here's the key: because everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes, they ceased to be hospitable one toward the other.

Being hospitable is not just about laying a meal down for someone, it's about being mannerly and courteous, common decency towards one another. Hospitality is a qualification of an elder, it's also the qualification of an elder's wife. Indeed, Paul says: 'A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach'. In Titus 1 verse 8, Paul says: 'But a lover of hospitality', they should be, 'a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate'. It's not just overseers, all Christians - Hebrews 13:2 says, 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares'. Now isn't it interesting that the more affluent and pleasure-centred a society, and even a church, becomes, the more selfish and self-centred it becomes as well. I think as the church has become more middle-class and upper-class, it has less time for looking after other people: widows, orphans, you name them, people in society that need help today.

But all of a sudden an old Ephraimite walks through the town after a day's work in the field, and he takes them in. Now it's at this point that the story turns sordid. We see moral confusion socially. How did we see it? Pleasure-crazed hedonism, living for life now and forgetting about eternity. Then we see also inhospitality, they didn't want to provide for one another they were so self-centred. But now we're seeing moral confusion and collapse sexually - verses 22 to 28. In the midst of their celebration in this old man's house, enjoying themselves again, they hear a pounding on the walls of the house. It's almost like a repeat of what we find in Genesis chapter 19 in Sodom - all over again, the men of the city surrounding this house, they see a new man come into the town and they want to 'know' him, that is Hebrew for 'sexual intercourse'. They want to commit this awful sin.

The old man, rightly so, says: 'Do not commit this vile thing in Israel!'. God's word does say clearly, although it is very unpopular and politically incorrect, God's word declares that
homosexuality is unnatural - Romans chapter 1; it is against the laws of God, Leviticus 18 and 1 Corinthians 6. Like Lot in Sodom, this man was right to be shocked, and he said: 'No, it's wicked, it's godless!' - but notice this: 'Here is my daughter', he says, 'and this Levite's concubine, do whatever is good in your eyes to them!'. Note that: do whatever is good in your eyes to them.

They kept pounding until, with desperate cowardice, that Levite - to save his own skin - pushed his concubine out the door; and the Bible says, tragically, that the evil Benjaminites raped her all night long. The next morning the Levite came out the door, callously said: 'Come on, get up, we've got to get out of here'. She was dead. He picked up the body, threw her over the donkey, carried her home, callously took out a knife and cut her in twelve pieces, and sent the pieces throughout Israel. It's disturbing, isn't it? That's mild to describe it. Do you know what I think is perhaps the most disturbing thing about that story? This Levite, this so-called man of God, was able to go to his bed and put his head on the pillow and sleep like a baby, when he knew his wife was being abused all night through. The Bible says that there will come a day, and I think we're living in it, when people will be without natural affections.

Then the second disturbing thing for me, also, is that because the foundation of Israel's morality had shifted from God's law to their own opinion, they could abhor homosexuality - and we, as Christians, might give them a pat on the back and say: 'Well done' - but they thought nothing wrong of throwing their own wives and concubines to the dogs, and saying: 'Do what's right in your own eyes with her'. Now obviously the people outside the house thought there was nothing wrong with homosexuality, and this is the problem - it's illustrated graphically for us: when we have no standards other than our own, there are no standards! People inside the house didn't like homosexuality, people outside the house, they thought it was quite normal - who's right? Well in a society where there are no absolutes, they're all right! You can't be wrong! Yet Romans 1 tells us that when society shows a widespread acceptance of homosexuality, it is already under the judgment of God, and it is a society that God has given up. Study it yourself.

You might say: 'But surely you can't apply these sexual misdemeanours to the church?'. Can I not? What is our moral purity like? Oh, we can skate round this, and it is very uncomfortable - but the fact of the matter is: statistics, that can't always be trusted, tend to indicate that there is no difference between the problems that professing Christians have to those who are not professing Christians. Now that's not right, but that's the way things are folks. We can sit here in our lovely clothes and in this lovely environment, but the fact of the matter is: you could be struggling with a problem of purity. It might be a sexual problem - you might say: 'No, not me!'. Really? I came across a definition of 'infidelity' recently, do you know what it is? This is profound, and it's revolutionised not only my thoughts but my life: 'It is to be gratified from anyone or anything that is not your husband or wife'. Mental, emotional, physical gratification from anything that is not your husband or wife - that is infidelity.

Now where do you stand? What's our home life like in the family? What do we give to our children? One author that I was reading as I was studying for this message said: 'We would ask the question how a father could offer his own daughter as a sacrifice to the lusts of a mob. It's difficult to understand. Yet many parents today allow their son's and daughter's minds and hearts to be violated by what they see, what they hear in movies, on television, at rock concerts. Chastity of mind and heart is essential for chastity of body'. Some of you might think this is puritanical extreme, but what are our viewing habits like? Someone might be horrified reading such a passage of Scripture out in church - but you know as well as I do that this is the daily bread of people who are viewing TV, some of them 5, 6, 7 hours a day. Some
of you go to the cinema - what do you go to watch? What are you viewing on the screen and DVD, on your video?

There was an Oscar winning film a few years ago that was advertised in the following way: 'Moviegoers: if violence, madness, rape, larceny and bloodshed appeal to you, then see the best'. Millions went and saw it. What do you watch? What do you allow to go on on that screen in your living room, that if it was actually happening you'd be calling the police? What does that say? It says this: that if we get to a position where we are entertained by immorality, titillated by godlessness, even in these peripheral ways through media and so on - if we're not committing them ourselves, but we get a kick out of them, it's a sign that we have chosen and accepted a cheapened view of life, a degraded view of human beings. For new morality and new liberalism is not something profound, it is dehumanising, it is degrading to people made in the image of God.

We see it so graphically in this story - but can I ask you another question: what are our actions regulated by? Do we think things are wrong when society says they're wrong? Or do we think it when it's popular opinion? Or do we think it even when it's Christian popular opinion? Or is all that matters our own personal opinion? Do you see if those are the regulating factors of our values? We're in trouble! The word of God must be the final authority and rule of our faith and life. Even at times when we think we're being awfully godly and moral, we can still be regulated by popular opinion, not God's word.

Let me give you an illustration if you don't understand what I'm saying. This is why why we do something is as important as what we do. Years ago people believed that premarital sexual relations were wrong. The reason they gave was the possibility of having a child out of wedlock, and the disgrace. That was years ago. Two things have changed: birth control and the acceptability of casual relationships. The reason for why people believed it being wrong, a baby out of wedlock, has been removed by technology. What's everybody saying? 'It's alright'. You see, the reasons why we believe things are wrong are as important as why we do not do them. If the only reason for sexual purity is the fear of an unwanted pregnancy, that must mean today sexual immorality is now entirely appropriate. Do you see what we're saying? If your moral behaviour is not grounded on the moral absolutes of God's word, you'll end up doing what is right in your own eyes when the circumstances change. God's word says anything out of marriage, whatever it is, with a woman, with a man, or whatever - it's wrong!

The social and sexual sin in the last chapters of Judges affected the whole nation. I'm saying to you this morning: don't underestimate or social and our sexual indiscretions. If there is sin in the home, in society, it will surely evolve - and then eventually the church will manifest it. If they're not faced in home, society and church, there inevitably will be a moral collapse and a spiritual death within society. There is no such thing as a victimless sin! We don't live to ourselves, and we don't sin to ourselves.

There's a story told about a ship that was travelling across the Mediterranean, and one of the passengers cut a hole through the side of the boat. The sailors all came rushing and demanded of him to know what on earth he was doing. He just replied to them: 'What difference does it make to you? The hole is under my bunk!'. Many Christians, and people in wider society, have been boring holes under their own bunks for years, and they think it's of no consequence - and then we're all left wondering why the boat is sinking.

The children of Israel started off making wonderful promises to God: obedience, faithfulness. Quickly the rot set in, and each succeeding generation did not learn from the previous
mistakes. Now after the book of Judges is the book of Ruth, which we won't study, but it's a book about salvation. It's a love story of redemption and how a man with great wealth, called Boaz, came and purchased his beloved bride to make her his very own. It's a story about harvest, bringing in the sheaves for God. That is the life that the believer is to live, and it was during the same time period as the book of Judges! But here's my question to everyone here, whether you're a Christian or not: which book are you living in? The book of Judges, where every man does that which is right in his own eyes; or the book of Ruth, where you have surrendered to the loving Saviour, relinquished your own right of self and sin in your life, and given everything up in love to Him, and He has filled your life with life that is to the full.

That is the choice: which life are you living? May God bless His word to all our hearts.

Let's all bow our heads. Do you feel the challenge of God's word? Do you? If you don't, there's something wrong, you're self-deceived for every heart here is desperately wicked, and none of us can truly know it. All we can do is give it over to Christ, and allow Him to give us by His Spirit a new heart, a new life, and He can do that - but we must come to Him confessing, repenting, and willing to believe in Him.

Lord, we pray that all of us, those who take the name of Christ and those who have not yet, that we would realise the truth and the import of God’s word: that we cannot reject God's truth, and then think that we can just live according to our own vain morals, for morality is of God. Lord, we pray that people will realise this this morning, that if we don't have God we have nothing. The only way to God is through Christ, the Lord Jesus, Your Son, who came and died for us. Lord, all of us are falling far short in all of these areas - socially and sexually. Lord, we pray that You will forgive us; and, Lord, that the holes that have been bored personally by us in the Gospel ship, that they will begin to be filled by repentance and faith and restitution, that the ship again will sail, and souls will be rescued from the deep. Amen.
Now we're turning in our Bibles for our reading first of all to Judges chapter 6. I'm sure you're saying to yourself: 'He keeps telling us we've finished this book, and he keeps going back to it every week!'. Well, we have finished our character studies, looking at the individual Judges in the book of Judges - but you remember that the last two Sunday mornings I was ministering to you from two little glimpses into the historical situation that there was both spiritually and morally within Israel at this time of the Judges. What I feel led to do for you today is look at another character in the book of Judges, and that is 'The Angel of Jehovah'. We have seen Him already in a number of the little studies that we have done, but we're going to look at Him specifically not only in Judges but right throughout the Old Testament, and I believe it will be to our blessing and instruction.

Judges chapter 6 and verse 12, and this is the story, of course, of Gideon - Judges 6 and verse 12: "And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him, and said unto him, The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valor. And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt? but now the LORD hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites". Verse 21: "Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the LORD departed out of his sight. And when Gideon perceived that he was an angel of the LORD, Gideon said, Alas, O LORD God! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face".

Then chapter 13 of Judges, and this is now the account of Samson the Judge. We'll read the first 23 verses: "And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren, and bare not. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto the woman, and said unto 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, nor eat any unclean thing: 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. Then the woman came and told her husband, saying, 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".

Then if we can go down to verse 13: "And the angel of the LORD said unto Manoah, Of all that I said unto the woman let her beware. She may not eat of any thing that cometh of the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing: all that I commanded her let her observe. And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, I pray thee, let us detain thee, until we shall have made ready a kid for thee. And the angel of the LORD said unto Manoah, Though thou detain me, I will not eat of thy bread: and if thou wilt offer a burnt offering, thou must offer it unto the LORD. For Manoah knew not that he was an angel of the
LORD. And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, What is thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honor? And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret? So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered it upon a rock unto the LORD: and the angel did wonderously; and Manoah and his wife looked on. For it came to pass, when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on it, and fell on their faces to the ground. But the angel of the LORD did no more appear to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was an angel of the LORD. And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God”.

I don't know whether you've noticed, but in general there has been a revived interest in angels. New Age philosophy has been popularised, particularly on daytime television and through other media, and it is based on this idea that all of us as human creatures have guardian angels. The premise is that these angels can guide us, and they are used by the 'Divine' to answer our prayers and to protect us from day-to-day in our business. There are even things called 'angel cards', which are a bit like tarot cards, and these are used to divine through these angels, it is supposed, guidance from God. Indeed, I read of how on one occasion members were invited to a local diet and fitness club at their Christmas party that was held, incidentally, in a church hall. They had opportunity at this Christmas party to receive 'angel readings' at a special rate for Christmas of 5 pounds for 15 minutes. The person offering the readings was said to run, and I'm quoting: 'Monthly workshops to connect people to their angels'.

I know of one individual who received a letter from what was called 'The Angel Life Guild', informing them that you can get to know eleven of your angels from your angel family tree. They, among other things, are said to protect, bring health, riches, and power. All they had to do was send £22.25 pence, and they would find out who these eleven angels were, and they would receive personal messages from the angels! It is said that these angels have been waiting, from your birth, to get to know you. At the moment of destiny, 'when destiny planted your tree in the angel garden', these angels have been just waiting to wait on you from heaven.

This is New Age philosophy, and of course it fails to recognise that the Bible teaches us that there are such things called fallen angels, demonic spirits, and those angels don't always appear to be bad. Indeed, Paul tells us that we're not to marvel, for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light, therefore it's no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as ministers of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their works. Demons can portray themselves in a positive light. This is occult in its purest form. I know of a person who gave a false name and a false birth date to this 'Angel Guild', but still his angel seemed to reveal all the secrets to him - but he said: 'What was interesting is that I only used this name to obtain information on angels, but I have also received to the same name and address a very similar offer, but this time using tarot cards. The price is the same, the offer boils down to the same information of having a successful future - one using angels, the other using tarot cards. Coincidence?', he says, 'I think not!'.

This, of course, is occultic divination. The dynamic behind tarot cards is the same dynamic behind this New Age angel-ology, and that is simply: demonic. Even among Christians today, particularly in charismatic circles, there is a great revived interest in angels. Billy Graham, though he is not charismatic of course, in 1975 published a book called: 'Angels, God's Secret Agents', and it was a runaway best-seller. Among hardcover books during 1975 it sold 810,000 copies by the year's end, despite that it was only published in October. The sales
reached one million in January of the next year and, according to the publisher Doubleday, it is believed to be the first time a best-seller has hit the one million mark within four months. People are so interested in angels, even Christians.

Let me say that there is a great deal of error that is akin to occultism taught in charismatic circles regarding angels. But perhaps the most disturbing thing for me concerning it, whether it's in the secular New Age realm or in Christendom, is that often a misguided focus on angels takes our attention away from the Lord to His servants.

So I want to direct your attention back to the Lord of angels. Let us ask the first question: what is an angel? We must maintain that the Bible teaches that angels exist. The Hebrew word for 'angel' is the word 'malach', and the Greek word is 'angelos', which we derive our English word 'angel' from. It simply means 'a messenger', an angel is a messenger from God.

Now normally we link these messengers to that great heavenly host, that heavenly order of angels. Indeed, in one chapter, Genesis 32:1, we read that 'Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him' - the messengers of God. Yet in verse 3 of the same chapter we read: 'And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the country of Edom'. The word is the same that is used for Jacob's messengers, his emissaries. So it can be used for these angelic beings in the host of heaven, these intelligent beings created by God that are employed as ministers of His providence and protectors of His people, but it also can be used of human beings who go with God's, or even another man's message - operating on behalf of another.

So there are supernatural beings called angels, and God has said to us as His children in Psalm 91 verse 11 that: 'He shall give his angels charge over us to keep us in all his ways'. So everyone does not have a guardian angel, or even guardian angels, but only the saints of God have angels to guard them. We see also that it's not just these supernatural beings, but this messenger can be a human. On the other hand there is an Angel that we read of right throughout the whole of the Scriptures, or better 'The Messenger of Jehovah' He is called, and He appears in the Bible to stand in a class all of His own. Not one of this great heavenly host of myriad upon myriad of angels, or not just simply a human messenger, even though He appears as a man at times, but He seems to be different, unique.

So we need to ask the question, not just what is an angel, but who is this Angel of Jehovah? Well, here's how He appears first of all within the Scriptures: He seems always to take the persona of a divine being. What do I mean? Well, He is not angelic in nature, but He seems to be God - for when He is addressed on occasion, you can see it in the portions that we read this morning, He is often called 'Jehovah', 'I AM', 'Elohim', which is the name of the Creator God. We saw in Judges 6 and verse 13 that: 'Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord'. In verse 18, 'Depart not hence, I pray thee, until I come unto thee, and bring forth my present, and set it before thee. And he said, I will tarry until thou come again', so he brought his offering to Him as if He was the Lord. In verse 21 we read that he gave the offering to the Angel as if He were the Lord, and in verse 22 he realised he had seen the Angel of the Lord face-to-face, and he said: 'Alas, O LORD God!' .

In this particular instance of Gideon giving the offering to God through the Angel, we see that the Angel accepted the offering of worship as the Lord. Now we know that angels are not allowed to do that, they are prohibited. In Revelation 22 we read that John, with an angel, heard the things in the Revelation and saw them and 'fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed him these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am
thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God’. Yet Gideon worships and brings obeisance to this Angel. He is not simply one of the great heavenly host, He is accepting worship. So this Angel is not Gabriel, it is not the Archangel Michael, He is not one of the cherubim or the seraphim, He stands distinct on His own actually as a divine being - He accepts the worship of men.

Then secondly, a little bit to contrast that is the fact that He appears to be distinguished from God on occasions. He is Jehovah, and yet He is acting on behalf of another who is called Jehovah - He is the Messenger of Jehovah. John Walvoord, the former president of the Dallas Theological Seminary, lists four arguments to show that the Angel of Jehovah, the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament Scriptures is always a Christophany; that is a pre-incarnate appearance, visibly, of none other than our Lord Jesus Christ before He came to earth, the Lord Jesus appearing in this particular form.

Here are the four reasons. First of all, the second Person of the Trinity is the visible God of the New Testament. John 1 and verse 1 teaches us that 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. When God came, He came as a man, but it was the Word, the Word of God, His expression of Himself, that was the way He manifested Himself through the second Person. Hebrews 1:3 tells us that that second Person was 'the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, who upheld all things by the word of his power'. So it’s no surprise to us, at least it ought not to be so, that in the Old Testament when God revealed Himself in a visible form through the Angel of Jehovah, we believe it to be the Lord Jesus Himself.

The second reason is that the Angel of Jehovah in the Old Testament no longer appears after the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, after His birth. Now you might say: 'Well, who then is the angel of the Lord in the nativity scene?'. Well, that is Gabriel, the Gospel writers make clear who it is. So after the Lord comes in flesh, the Word takes flesh and dwells among us, the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament capacity is never mentioned again.

Then thirdly, Walvoord says that both the Angel of Jehovah and Christ are sent by the Father. That's what we find in the second Person of the Trinity: the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world, and this Angel is the Messenger of Jehovah come from the Father. Then fourthly he tells us that the Angel of Jehovah could not be either Father or Spirit, for the Bible teaches us that they are invisible to man, but this One has been seen by mankind. This One is, to sum it all up, the Divine Messenger with the divine message, who is divine in Himself, for He is none other than the pre-existent Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul said in Romans 15: 'Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and comfort we have hope'. We were thinking even this morning around the Lord’s Table, Hebrews 13 verse 8 - the Lord Jesus Christ is what? The same yesterday, and today, and forever. Therefore, whatever we learn from the Angel of Jehovah in the Old Testament Scriptures, we can still apply to our Lord Jesus Christ who is with us today by His Spirit. This has been a tremendous encouragement to me, and so I want us to look this morning in the time that remains at what was His ministry, the Angel of Jehovah - and therefore, what is His ministry to us today as the Lord Jesus Christ?

He is bringing messages from God, what are the messages that He brought from God? To whom does He bring them? In what circumstances? How can we apply these things to our lives today? Well, someone has said, in conjecture of course, that they believe that angels move from one end of the earth to the other, a bit like our thoughts move from one thing to
another. You can go from here to New York, if you've been there, in your thoughts in an instant. Well, I don't know whether that's true or not, but I want your thoughts to take flight for a few moments. I want you to come with me and visit the scenes that the Old Testament gives us of this One, the Angel of Jehovah, His message and those to whom He brings it.

Come with me first of all to the barren wilderness, to a fountain by the way of Shur. By that fountain there is an outcast, a woman who is with child. She is on her way from Canaan back home to the land of Egypt, her name is Hagar. We read in Genesis 16:10 that 'the angel of the LORD said unto Hagar, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude'. Now this is a great time of distress in Hagar's life. Abraham's wife had given Hagar, her handmaid, to Abraham to bear a child because she was barren in her own womb. Immediately it was known that she was with child, she became jealous and vindictive, and cast Hagar out of the home. But whilst Hagar is cast off of men and women, even men and women of God, the Angel of Jehovah comes to her in her predicament and promises Hagar to multiply her seeds through Ishmael in his descendants.

Then in verse 13 we read that she acknowledges this angel as 'El-Rohi', that is 'the God who sees'. Now Proverbs chapter 15 verse 3 tells us that 'The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding evil and good'. Only the Lord is omniscient, all-knowing and all-seeing. Now later on in the book of Genesis, chapter 21, we find that the Angel appears a second time to Hagar for she is cast out once again. This is the final time, and she is cast out with her child now born, Ishmael, into the wilderness. She had a little canteen of water and it has now run out, and now the Angel of the Lord comes and speaks, and tells her that the Lord has heard her cry. Incidentally the name 'Ishmael' means 'God hears'. Here is the Angel of the Lord coming to the help of one who is destitute - does He not do the same today?

Philippians tells us He does: 'My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus. Be anxious for nothing; but by all things in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your requests made known to God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus'. Am I speaking to one who is destitute, one who is an outcast? Maybe even an outcast to the people of God - isn't it wonderful that our Lord Jesus Christ still comes to outcasts as He did as the Angel of Jehovah, as He did to the man of Galilee who touched the lepers, and as He is doing in grace to men and women all around us. He is the one whose ministry is to help the outcasts, to help the destitute.

Travel with me again, this time up Mount Moriah. Some believe that this is the place where the temple was built, and subsequently the very place where our Lord Jesus was crucified for our sins. But I want you to see there, Abraham - and in Genesis 22 God told Abraham to take his son, his only son, up that Mount, and to build an altar and to there slay him unto the Lord. Genesis 22 and verse 10: 'And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me'. We read further: 'And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and beheld behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen'.

Now we see clearly that Abraham addressed this Angel as 'the Lord'. In verse 11, verse 14,
verse 15 He is called 'Jehovahjireh', 'The LORD my provider'. Here we see Him providing a substitute for the salvation of Isaac, and praise God the Angel of Jehovah still provides a substitute - He has provided Himself a Lamb - but what is this to us today? It is provision for the desperate. The Angel of Jehovah not only brings help for the destitute, but provision for the desperate. He provided a lamb for Abraham, He provided a Lamb for us in the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Romans 8 tells us that if He has offered up Himself, '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?'. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever - He's still providing for the desperate, isn't that wonderful?

Now come with me again, this time to Egypt, and hear the cry of the Israelites under the lash of their Egyptian oppressors. Then move from Egypt, and come with me to the backside of the Midianite desert, and see there Moses - out of the palace now for many years - shepherding his father-in-law's flock. He reaches the Mount of God, the Bible says, Horeb; and there he spies a strange phenomenon, so much so that he stops to look at it. In Exodus 3 we read these words: 'The angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. Moreover he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God'.

The Angel of the Lord appeared unto Moses, why? For the purpose of delivering the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Hallelujah, the Angel of the Lord in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ still is delivering people from bondage! Those that are without Christ, without hope, and those still who are in Christ but have become bound with some sin, some temptation. Praise God, He is the same today as He ever has been! As He said in John 8:36: 'If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed'.

Come with me again to the wilderness, this time to see the children of Israel wandering they know not where. This time a little girl, if you can imagine this, looks out the front door of her tent and says: 'Mummy, Daddy, there it is, the pillar of fire', she says at night, 'the pillar of cloud', she says by day. Do you ever wonder what that pillar of cloud and fire was? Exodus 13:21 tells us: 'The LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night'. 'The LORD', it says, 'went before them', yet in Exodus 14:19 it says, 'The angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them'. This was the Angel of Jehovah, and what's He doing? He's giving direction to the disorientated. They don't know where they're going, they're wandering in sin.

Paul gives us the clue to this, he says in 1 Corinthians 10: 'And they all drank the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ'. Are you looking for direction this morning? I don't know where you're going in life or in the Christian pilgrimage - do you know what you need to do? What Hebrews tells us: 'Seeing we are compassed with such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith'. That's all the Israelites did, they looked unto Jesus - that's where we get guidance! O pilgrim bound for the heavenly land,
never lose sight of Jesus!

Help for the destitute, provision for the desperate, deliverance from bondage, direction for the disorientated. Now come with me to an oak in Ophrah, under which sits this Angel. This is the Angel who will go to speak to Gideon, and call him a mighty man of valour as he threshes wheat behind the winepress, hiding from the Midianites. In Judges 6 He comes to him as Jehovah-Shalom, the Angel comes to Gideon as Jehovah-Shalom and pronounces a blessing upon him. What's He doing? He's bringing peace to the disturbed! Just like the Lord Jesus did, where it's recorded in Matthew 11, when He said: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'. Isn't He wonderful? He's still giving peace to the disturbed. What are you disturbed about today? You need the Lord Jesus, the One who was the Angel of Jehovah, the One who is Jesus of Nazareth, and the One who is now the Lord of Glory, exalted and given a high place above every other place.

Come with me once again to Babylon, it's the famed city of the hundred brass gates. Its walls are as broad at the top as the streets are wide round about it, and there are three young men that are cast into a fiery furnace because they refuse to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's image. We read in Daniel chapter 3: 'Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God'. Then Daniel 3 and verse 25 says: 'He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God'. God has sent His Angel, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God!

That was preservation from danger. What danger are you in today? Health, loss of wealth? My friend, go to the palace again and see the gate open, and Darius the King run under the cover of night, making his way to the den of execution. Watch as he stands and quietly shouts down: 'O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions? Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live for ever. My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt'. Praise God, the Lord Jesus is still shutting the mouths of lions, preserving His people from danger.

Follow with me again as we chase the bedraggled prophet of God and after a day's journey in the desert he falls under a juniper tree, he curses his life, and then he falls asleep through exhaustion brought on by his depression. Then this Angel appears, and we read in 1 Kings 19: 'as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again. And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee'. Has the journey become too great for you? You know what I'm talking about. Well, here's the One who lifts the depressed. I love Psalm 3 verse 3: 'Thou, O LORD, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of my head'. 'Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved'.

Come with me again to the prophet standing, in his own mind, before the Angel, this Angel. There is Joshua the High Priest in filthy garments, and Satan is at his right hand - Zechariah chapter 3 - and he is accusing Joshua of sin and iniquity and failure. We read in Zechariah 3 verse 1 that the prophet saw: 'Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan
standing at his right hand to resist him', and in verse 4, 'And he answered and spake unto those that stood before him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment'. This Angel was able to give cleansing for depravity. Isn't it wonderful? Because this Angel is the One who said: 'Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God'. This is the One who had not the nature of angels, but as a Messenger of God above the angels, Hebrews said, ' Took not on him the nature of angels, but took upon him the seed of Abraham'. Who is this One? Hebrews 2:9: 'We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man'. That's why He can cleanse us from depravity, because this blessed Messenger of the covenant took flesh and blood and died on the cross to purge away all our sins. Have you known that?

Then, if I could leave with you two facts. He's the help for the destitute, provision for the desperate, deliverance from bondage, direction for the disorientated. He is peace to the disturbed, preservation from danger. He lifts up the depressed, He cleansed the depraved - but He's also the defence for the threatened. Psalm 34 verse 7 tells us: 'The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them'. Listen: if you've got the Angel of the Lord, the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour, He encamps round about you. In fact, on one occasion He slew 185,000 Assyrians in defence of His own people in one night! He surrounds them, 'He pitches His tent' it literally means, He encamps about them, He forms a circle on all sides! This is the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ - a defence for the threatened.

What are you threatened by? I can't even start, it could be one of 100 million things, but praise God: there is One who can protect you. Spurgeon in his 'Faith's Cheque-book', the daily readings, says: 'We cannot see the angels, but it is enough that they can see us. There is one great Angel of the Covenant, whom not having seen we love, and His eye is always upon us both day and night. He has a host of holy ones under Him, and He causes these to be watchers over His saints and to guard them from all ill. If devils do us mischief, shining ones do us service. Note that the LORD of angels does not come and go and pay us transient visits, but He and His armies encamp around us. The headquarters of the army of salvation is where those live whose trust is in the living God. This camp surrounds the faithful so that they cannot be attacked from any quarter unless the adversary can break through the entrenchments of the LORD of angels. We have a fixed protection, a permanent watch. Sentineled by the messengers of God, we shall not be surprised by sudden assaults nor swallowed up by overwhelming forces. Deliverance is promised in this verse - deliverance by the great Captain of our salvation, and that deliverance we shall obtain again and again until our warfare is accomplished and we exchange the field of conflict for the home of rest'. 'He encampeth' around those that fear Him!

Not only does he bring defence for the threatened, but sympathy for the distressed. This is a lovely verse, Isaiah 63:9: 'In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them' - the Angel of His presence being the Angel of the LORD, touched with the feelings of their infirmity. How tender are these words: He loved them, He redeemed them, He pitied them, and He carried them - and He actually entered into the suffering of His own people.

Isn't it wonderful that the Lord Jesus has not changed? He still helps the destitute, He still provides for the desperate, He still delivers those in bondage, He still directs those who are disorientated, He still brings peace to the disturbed, He still preserves us from danger, He still
lifts up the depressed, cleanses the depraved, defends the threatened, and sympathises with the distressed. 'For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need'.

What is your need? What is your need? The Angel of Jehovah who met their need is the Lord Jesus Christ who meets our need - the same yesterday, today, and forever.

'Oh, glorious face of beauty,  
Oh gentle touch of care;  
If here it is so blessed,   
What will it be up there?'.

O Father, we pray that we would see His face, that we would hear His voice, that we would feel His touch - that One who was Your Messenger, the Angel of Jehovah, the One who is Your Son, the Word of God who came in human flesh, the One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, the One who said to Manoah: 'Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is wonderful?'. Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace - may we know Your touch, whatever our need. Amen.
Appendix D
"Effective Prayer"
by C.H. Spurgeon

"Oh that I knew where I might find Him! that I might come even to His seat! I would order my cause before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments." - Job 23:3,4

In Job's uttermost extremity he cried after the Lord. The longing desire of an afflicted child of God is once more to see his Father's face. His first prayer is not, "Oh that I might be healed of the disease which now festers in every part of my body!" nor even, "Oh that I might see my children restored from the jaws of the grave, and my property once more brought from the hand of the spoiler!" but the first and uttermost cry is "Oh that I knew where I might find Him -- who is my God! that I might come even to His seat!"

God's children run home when the storm comes on. It is the heaven-born instinct of a gracious soul to seek shelter from all ills beneath the wings of Jehovah. "He that hath made his refuge God," might serve as the title of a true believer. A hypocrite, when he feels that he has been afflicted by God, resents the infliction, and, like a slave, would run from the master who has scourged him; but not so the true heir of heaven, he kisses the hand which smote him, and seeks shelter from the rod in the bosom of that very God who frowned upon him.

You will observe that the desire to commune with God is intensified by the failure of all other sources of consolation. When Job first saw his friends at a distance, he may have entertained a hope that their kindly counsel and compassionate tenderness would blunt the edge of his grief; but they had not long spoken before he cried out in bitterness, "Miserable comforters are ye all." They put salt into his wounds, they heaped fuel upon the flame of his sorrow, they added the gall of their upbraidings to the wormwood of his griefs. In the sunshine of his smile they once had longed to sun themselves, and now they dare to cast shadows upon his reputation, most ungenerous and undeserved. So the patriarch turned away from his sorry friends and looked up to the celestial throne, just as a traveller turns from his empty skin bottle and betakes himself with all speed to the well. He bids farewell to earthborn hopes, and cries, "Oh that I knew where I might find my God!" Nothing teaches us so much that preciousness of the Creator as when we learn the emptiness of all besides. When you have been pierced through and through with the sentence, "Cursed is he that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm," then will you suck unutterable sweetness from the divine assurance, "Blessed is he that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is." Turning away with bitter scorn from earth's hives, where you found no honey, but many sharp stings, you will rejoice in Him Whose faithful word is sweeter than honey or the honeycomb.

It is further observable that though a good man hastens to God in his trouble, and runs with all the more speed because of the unkindness of his fellow men, yet sometimes the gracious soul is left without the comfortable presence of God. This is the worst of all griefs; the text is one of Job's deep groans, far deeper than any which came from him on account of the loss of his children and his property: "Oh that I knew where I might find Him!" The worst of all losses is to lose the smile of my God. He now had a foretaste of the bitterness of his Redeemer's cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" God's presence is always with His people in one sense, so far as secretly sustaining them is concerned, but His manifest presence they do not always enjoy. Like the spouse in the song, they seek their beloved by night upon their
bed, they seek him but they find him not; and though they wake and roam through the city they may not discover him and the question may be sadly asked again and again, "Saw ye Him whom my soul loveth?" You may be beloved of God, and yet have no consciousness of that love in your soul. You may be as dear to His heart as Jesus Christ Himself, and yet for a small moment He may forsake you, and in a little wrath He may hide Himself from you.

But at such times the desire of the believing soul gathers yet greater intensity from the fact of God’s light being withheld. Instead of saying with proud lip, "Well, if He leaves me I must do without Him; if I cannot have His comfortable presence I must fight on as best may be," the soul says, "No, it is my very life; I must have my God. I perish, I sink in deep mire where there is no standing, and nothing but the arm of God can deliver me." The gracious soul addresses itself with a double zeal to find out God, and sends up its groans, its entreaties, its sobs and sighs to heaven more frequently and fervently. "Oh that I knew where I might find Him!" Distance or labour are as nothing; if the soul only knew where to go she would soon overleap the distance. She makes no stipulation about mountains or rivers, but vows that if she knew where, she would come even to His seat. My soul in her hunger would break through stone walls, or scale the battlements of heaven to reach her God, and though there were seven hells between me and Him, yet would I face the flame if I might reach Him, nothing daunted if I had but the prospect of at last standing in His presence and feeling the delight of His love. That seems to me to be the state of mind in which Job pronounced the words before us.

But we cannot stop at this point. It appears that Job's end, in desiring the presence of God, was that he might pray to Him. He had prayed, but he wanted to pray as in God's presence. He desired to plead as before One whom he knew would hear and help him. He longed to state his own case before the seat of the impartial Judge, before the very face of the all-wise God; he would appeal from the lower courts, where his friends judged unrighteous judgment, to the Court of King's Bench—the High Court of heaven-there, says he, "I would order my cause before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments."

In this latter verse Job teaches us how he meant to plead and intercede with God. He does, as it were, reveal the secrets of his closet, and unveils the art of prayer. We are here admitted into the guild of suppliants; we are shown the art and mystery of pleading; we have here taught to us the blessed handicraft and science of prayer, and if we can be bound apprentice to Job and can have a lesson from Job's master, we may acquire no little skill in interceding with God.

I. ORDERING OUR CAUSE BEFORE GOD

There is a popular notion that prayer is a very easy thing, a kind of common business that may be done anyhow, without care or effort. Some think that you have only to reach a book down and get through a certain number of very excellent words, and you have prayed and may put the book up again. Others suppose that to use a book is superstitious and that you ought rather to repeat extemporaneous sentences, sentences which come to your mind with a rush, like a herd of swine or a pack of hounds, and that when you have uttered them with some little attention to what you have said, you have prayed.

Now neither of these modes of prayer were adopted by ancient saints. They appear to have thought a great deal more seriously of prayer than many do nowadays. It seems to have been a mighty business with them, a long-practised exercise, in which some of them attained great
eminence, and were thereby singularly blest. They reaped great harvests in the field of
prayer, and found the mercy seat to be a mine of untold treasures.

The ancient saints were given, with Job, to ordering their cause before God. As a petitioner
coming into court does not come there without thought to state his case on the spur of the
moment, but enters into the audience chamber with his suit well prepared, having also
learned how he ought to behave himself in the presence of the great one to whom he is
appealing; so it is well to approach the seat of the King of kings as much as possible with
premeditation and preparation, knowing what we are about, where we are standing, and what
it is which we desire to obtain. In times of peril and distress we may fly to God just as we are,
as the dove enters the cleft of the rock, even though her plumes are ruffled; but in ordinary
times we should not come with an unprepared spirit, even as a child does not come to his
father in the morning till he has washed his face.

See the priest over there; he has a sacrifice to offer, but he does not rush into the court of
the priests and hack at the bullock with the first pole-axe upon which he can lay his hand, but
when he rises he washes his feet at the brazen laver, he puts on his garments, and adorns
himself with his priestly vestments. Then he comes to the altar with his victim properly
divided according to the law, and is careful to do according to the command, even to such a
simple matter as the placing of the fat, and the liver, and the kidneys. He takes the blood in a
bowl and pours it in an appropriate place at the foot of the altar, not throwing it just as it may
occur to him, and he kindles the fire not with common flame, but with the sacred fire off the
altar. Now this ritual is all superseded, but the truth which it taught remains the same; our
spiritual sacrifices should be offered with holy carefulness. God forbid that our prayer should
be a mere leaping out of bed and kneeling down, and saying anything that comes first to
hand. On the contrary, may we wait upon the Lord with holy fear and sacred awe.

See how David prayed when God had blessed him-he went in before the Lord. Understand
that; he did not stand outside at a distance, but he went in before the Lord and he sat down-
for sitting is not a bad posture for prayer, let who will speak against it-and sitting down
quietly and calmly before the Lord he then began to pray, but not until first he had thought
over the divine goodness, and so attained to the spirit of prayer. Then by the assistance of
the Holy Ghost did he open his mouth. Oh that we oftener sought the Lord in this manner!

David puts it, "In the morning will I direct my prayer unto Thee, and will look up" [Psalm
5:3]; which I have frequently explained to you to mean that he marshalled his thoughts like
men of war, or that he aimed his prayers like arrows. He did not take the arrow and put it on
the bowstring and shoot, and shoot, and shoot anywhere; but after he had taken out the
chosen shaft, and fitted it to the string, he took deliberate aim. He looked-looked well-at the
white of the target; kept his eye fixed on it, directing his prayer, and then drew his bow with
all his strength and let the arrow fly; and then, when the shaft had left his hand, what does
he say? "I will look up." He looked up to see where the arrow went, to see what effect it had;
for he expected an answer to his prayers, and was not as many who scarcely think of their
prayers after they have uttered them. David knew that he had an engagement before him
which required all his mental powers; He marshalled up his faculties and went about the work
in a workmanlike manner, as one who believed in it and meant to succeed. We should plough
carefully and pray carefully. The better the work the more attention it deserves. To be anxious
in the shop and thoughtless in the closet is little less than blasphemy, for it is an insinuation
that anything will do for God, but the world must have our best.
If any ask what order should be observed in prayer, I am not about to give you a scheme such as many have drawn out, in which adoration, confession, petition, intercession, and ascription are arranged in succession. I am not persuaded that any such order is of divine authority. It is to no mere mechanical order I have been referring, for our prayers will be equally acceptable, and possibly equally proper, in any form; for there are specimens of prayers, in all shapes, in the Old and New Testaments.

The true spiritual order of prayer seems to me to consist in something more than mere arrangement. It is most fitting for us to feel that we are now doing something that is real; that we are about to address ourselves to God, Whom we cannot see, but Who is really present; Whom we can neither touch nor hear, nor by our senses can apprehend, but Who, nevertheless, is as truly with us as though we were speaking to a friend of flesh and blood like ourselves. Feeling the reality of God's presence, our mind will be led by divine grace into a humble state; we shall feel like Abraham, when he said, "I have taken upon myself to speak unto God, I that am but dust and ashes." [Genesis 18:27] Consequently we shall not deliver ourselves of our prayer as boys repeating their lessons, as a mere matter of routine, much less shall we speak as if we were rabbis instructing our pupils, or as I have heard some do, with the coarseness of a highwayman stopping a person on the road and demanding his purse of him; but we shall be humble yet bold petitioners, humbly importuning mercy through the Saviour's blood. We shall not have the reserve of a slave but the loving reverence of a child, yet not an impudent, impertinent child, but a teachable obedient child, honouring his Father, and therefore asking earnestly, but with deferential submission to his Father's will. When I feel that I am in the presence of God, and take my rightful position in that presence, the next thing I shall want to recognise will be that I have no right to what I am seeking, and cannot expect to obtain it except as a gift of grace, and I must recollect that God limits the channel through which He will give me mercy—He will give it to me through His dear Son. Let me put myself then under the patronage of the great Redeemer. Let me feel that now it is no longer I that speak but Christ that speaketh with me, and that while I plead, I plead His wounds, His life, His death, His blood, Himself. This is truly getting into order.

What am I to ask for? It is most proper in prayer, to aim at great distinctness of supplication. There is much reason to complain of some public prayers, that those who offer them do not really ask God for anything. I must acknowledge I fear to having so prayed myself, and certainly to having heard many prayers of the kind, in which I did not feel that anything was sought for from God—a great deal of very excellent doctrinal and experimental matter uttered, but little real petitioning, and that little in a nebulous kind of state, chaotic and unformed. But it seems to me that prayer should be distinct, the asking for something definitely and distinctly because the mind has realised its distinct need of such a thing, and therefore must plead for it. It is well not to beat round the bush in prayer, but to come directly to the point. I like that prayer of Abraham's, "Oh that Ishmael might live before thee!" [Genesis 17:18] There is the name and the person prayed for, and the blessing desired, all put in a few words,—"Ishmael might live before thee." Many persons would have used a roundabout expression of this kind, "Oh that our beloved offspring might be regarded with the favour which Thou bearest to those who," etc. Say "Ishmael," if you mean "Ishmael"; put it in plain words before the Lord. Some people cannot even pray for the minister without using such circular descriptives that you might think it were the parish beadle, or somebody whom it did not do to mention too particularly.

Why not be distinct, and say what we mean as well as mean what we say? Ordering our cause would bring us to greater distinctness of mind. It is not necessary in the closet to ask for every supposable good thing; it is not necessary to rehearse the catalogue of every want that
you may have, have had, can have, or shall have. Ask for what you now need, and, as a rule, keep to present need; ask for your daily bread—what you want now—ask for that. Ask for it plainly, as before God, who does not regard our fine expressions, and to whom your eloquence and oratory will be less than nothing and vanity. You are before the Lord; let your words be few, but let your heart be fervent.

You have not quite completed the ordering when you have asked for what you want through Jesus Christ. There should be a looking round the blessing which you desire, to see whether it is assuredly a fitting thing to ask; for some prayers would never be offered if men did but think. A little reflection would show to us that some things which we desire were better left alone. We may, moreover, have a motive at the bottom of our desire which is not Christ-like, a selfish motive, which forgets God’s glory and caters only for our own ease and comfort. Now although we may ask for things which are for our profit, yet still we must never let our profit interfere in any way with the glory of God. There must be mingled with acceptable prayer the holy salt of submission to the divine will. I like Luther's saying, "Lord, I will have my will of Thee at this time." "What!” say you, "Like such an expression as that?” I do, because of the next clause, which was, "I will have my will, for I know that my will is Thy will." That is well spoken, Luther; but without the last words it would have been wicked presumption. When we are sure that what we ask for is for God's glory, then, if we have power in prayer, we may say, "I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me" [Genesis 32:26]: we may come to close dealings with God, and like Jacob with the angel we may even wrestle and seek to give the angel the fall sooner than be sent away without the benediction. But we must be quite clear, before we come to such terms as those, that what we are seeking is really for the Master's honour.

Put these three things together, the deep spirituality which recognises prayer as being real conversation with the invisible God—much distinctness which is the reality of prayer, asking for what we know we want—and much fervency, believing the thing to be necessary, and therefore resolving to obtain it if it can be had by prayer, and above all these, complete submission, leaving it still with the Master's will;—commingle all these, and you have a clear idea of what it is to order your cause before the Lord.

Still prayer itself is an art which only the Holy Ghost can teach us. He is the giver of all prayer. Pray for prayer—pray till you can pray; pray to be helped to pray, and give not up praying because you cannot pray, for it is when you think you cannot pray that you are most praying. Sometimes when you have no sort of comfort in your supplications, it is then that your heart all broken and cast down is really wrestling and truly prevailing with the Most High.

**II. FILLING OUR MOUTH WITH ARGUMENTS**

Not filling the mouth with words nor good phrases, nor pretty expressions, but filling the mouth with arguments, as the ancient saints were wont to argue in prayer. When we come to the gate of mercy forcible arguments are the knocks of the rapper by which the gate is opened.

Why are arguments to be used at all? The reply is, certainly not because God is slow to give, not because God needs to be informed of any circumstance with regard to ourselves or of anything in connection with the mercy asked. The arguments to be used are for our own benefit not for His. He requires us to plead with Him, and to bring forth our strong reasons, as Isaiah says [Isaiah 41:21], because this will show that we feel the value of the mercy. When
a man searches for arguments for a thing it is because he attaches importance to that which he is seeking.

Again, our use of arguments teaches us the ground upon which we obtain the blessing. If a man should come with the argument of his own merit, he would never succeed; the successful argument is always founded upon grace, and hence the soul so pleading is made to understand intensely that it is by grace and by grace alone that a sinner obtains anything of the Lord. Besides, the use of arguments is intended to stir up our fervency. The man who uses one argument with God will get more force in using the next, and will use the next with still greater power, and the next with more force still. The best prayers I have ever heard in our prayer meetings have been those which have been fullest of argument. Sometimes my soul has been fairly melted down when I have listened to brethren who have come before God feeling the mercy to be really needed, and that they must have it, for they first pleaded with God to give it for this reason, and then for a second, and then for a third, and then for a fourth and a fifth, until they have awakened the fervency of the entire assembly.

There is no need for prayer at all as far as God is concerned, but what a need there is for it on our own account! If we were not constrained to pray, I question whether we could even live as Christians. If God's mercies came to us unasked, they would not be half so useful as they now are, when they have to be sought for; for now we get a double blessing, a blessing in the obtaining, and a blessing in the seeking. The very act of prayer is a blessing. To pray is as it were to bathe oneself in a cool stream, and so to escape from the heats of earth's summer sun. To pray is to mount on eagle's wings above the clouds and get into the clear heaven where God dwells. To pray is to enter the treasure-house of God and to enrich oneself out of an inexhaustible storehouse. To pray is to grasp heaven in one's arms, to embrace the Deity within one's soul, and to feel one's body made a temple of the Holy Ghost. Apart from the answer, prayer is in itself a benediction. To pray is to cast off your burdens, it is to tear away your rags, it is to shake off your diseases, it is to be filled with spiritual vigour, it is to reach the highest point of Christian health. God give us to be much in the holy art of arguing with God in prayer.

The most interesting part of our subject remains; it is a very rapid summary and catalogue of a few of the arguments which have been used with great success with God. I cannot give you a full list; that would require a treatise such as John Owen might produce.

1. God's attributes
Abraham pleaded this when he laid hold upon God's justice. Sodom was to be prayed for, and Abraham begins, "Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from Thee. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" [Genesis 18:24-25] Here the wrestling begins. It was a powerful argument by which the patriarch grasped the Lord's left hand, and arrested it just when the thunderbolt was about to fall. But there came a reply to it. It was intimated to him that this would not spare the city, and you notice how the good man, when sorely pressed, retreated by inches; and at last, when he could no longer lay hold upon justice, grasped God's right hand of mercy, and that gave him a wondrous hold when he asked that if there were but ten righteous there the city might be spared. So you and I may take hold at any time upon the justice, the mercy, the faithfulness, the wisdom, the long-suffering, the tenderness of God, and we shall find every attribute of the Most High to be, as it were, a great battering-ram, with which we may open the gates of heaven.
2. God’s promise
When Jacob was on the other side of the brook Jabbok, and his brother Esau was coming with armed men, he pleaded with God not to allow Esau to destroy the mother and the children, and as a master reason he pleaded, "And Thou saidst, Surely I will do thee good." [Genesis 32:12] Oh the force of that plea! He was holding God to His word: "Thou saidst." The attribute is a splendid horn of the altar to lay hold upon; but the promise, which has in it the attribute and something more, is a yet mightier holdfast, "Thou saidst." Remember how David put it. After Nathan had spoken the promise, David said at the close of his prayer, "Do as Thou hast said." [2 Samuel 7:25] That is a legitimate argument with every honest man, and has He said, and shall He not do it? "Let God be true, and every man a liar." [Romans 3:4] Shall not He be true? Shall He not keep His word? Shall not every word that comes out of His lips stand fast and be fulfilled?

Solomon, at the opening of the temple, used the same mighty plea. He pleads with God to remember the word which He had spoken to his father David, and to bless that place. When a man gives a promissory note his honour is engaged. He signs his hand, and he must discharge it when the due time comes, or else he loses credit. It shall never be said that God dishonours His bills. The credit of the Most High never was impeached, and never shall be. He is punctual to the moment; He never is before His time, but He never is behind it. You shall search His Book through, and you shall compare it with the experience of God's people, and the two tally from the first to the last; and many a hoary patriarch has said with Joshua in his old age, "Not one good thing has failed of all that the Lord God has promised: all has come to pass." If you have a divine promise, you need not plead that with an "if" in it; you may plead with a certainty. If for the mercy which you are now asking, you have God's solemnly pledged word, there will scarce be any room for the caution about submission to His will. You know His will. That will is in the promise; plead it. Do not give Him rest until He fulfil it. He meant to fulfil it, or else He would not have given it. God does not give His words merely to quiet our noise, and to keep us hopeful for a while, with the intention of putting us off at last; but when He speaks, He speaks because He means to act.

3. The great name of God
How mightily did Moses argue with God on one occasion upon this ground! "What wilt Thou do for Thy great name? The Egyptians will say, Because the Lord could not bring them into the land, therefore He slew them in the wilderness." [Numbers 14:15-16] There are some occasions when the name of God is very closely tied up with the history of His people. Sometimes in reliance upon a divine promise, a believer will be led to take a certain course of action. Now, if the Lord should not be as good as His promise, not only is the believer deceived, but the wicked world looking on would say, Aha! aha! Where is your God? Take the case of our respected brother, Mr. Muller, of Bristol. For many years he declared that God hears prayer, and firm in that conviction, he went on to build house after house for the maintenance of orphans. Now, I can very well conceive that, if he had been driven to a point of want of means for the maintenance of those thousand or two thousand children, he might very well have used the plea, "What wilt Thou do for Thy great name?" And you, in some severe trouble, when you have fairly received the promise, may say, "Lord, Thou hast said, 'In six troubles I will be with thee, and in seven I will not forsake thee.' I have told my friends and neighbours that I put my trust in thee, and if Thou do not deliver me now, where is Thy name? Arise, O God, and do this thing, lest Thy honour be cast into the dust."

Coupled with this, we may employ the further arguments of the hard things said by the revilers. It was well done of Hezekiah when he took Rabshakeh's letter and spread it before
the Lord. Will that help him? It is full of blasphemy, will that help him? "Where are the gods of Arphad and Sepharvaim? Where are the gods of the cities which I have overthrown? Let not Hezekiah deceive you, saying that Jehovah will deliver you." [2 Kings 19; Isaiah 37] Does that have any effect? Oh yes! It was a blessed thing that Rabshakeh wrote that letter, for it provoked the Lord to help His people. Sometimes the child of God can rejoice when he sees his enemies get thoroughly out of temper and take to reviling. "Now," he says, "they have reviled the Lord Himself; not me alone have they assailed, but the Most High Himself." Now it is no longer the poor insignificant Hezekiah with his little band of soldiers, but it is Jehovah, the King of angels, who has come to fight against Rabshakeh. Now what will you do, O boastful soldier of proud Sennacherib? Will you not be utterly destroyed, since Jehovah Himself has come into the fray? All the progress that is made by popery, all the wrong things said by speculative atheists and so on, should be by Christians used as an argument with God, why He should help the gospel. Lord; see how they reproach the gospel of Jesus! Pluck Thy right hand out of Thy bosom! O God, they defy Thee! Antichrist thrusts itself into the place where Thy Son once was honoured, and from the very pulpits where the gospel was once preached, popery is now declared. Arise, O God, wake up Thy zeal, let Thy sacred passions burn! Thine ancient foe again prevails. Behold the harlot of Babylon once more upon her scarlet-coloured beast rides forth in triumph! Come Jehovah, come, Jehovah, and once again show what Thy bare arm can do! This is a legitimate mode of pleading with God, for His great name's sake.

4. The sorrows of God's people
This is frequently pleaded in the Bible. Jeremiah is the great master of this art. He says, "Her Nazarites were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk, they were more ruddy in body than rubies, their polishing was of sapphire: their visage is blacker than a coal." [Lamentations 4:7-8] "The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!" [Lamentations 4:2] He talks of all their griefs and straitnesses in the siege. He calls upon the Lord to look upon His suffering Zion; and before long his plaintive cries are heard. Nothing so eloquent with the father as his child's cry; yes, there is one thing more mighty still, and that is a moan-when the child is so sick that it is past crying, and lies moaning with that kind of moan which indicates extreme suffering and intense weakness. Who can resist that moan? And when God's Israel shall be brought very low so that they can scarcely cry but only their moans are heard, then comes the Lord's time of deliverance, and He is sure to show that He loves His people. Whenever you also are brought into the same condition you may plead your moanings, and when you see a church brought very low you may use her griefs as an argument why God should return and save the remnant of His people.

5. The past
Experienced people of God, you know how to plead this. Here is David's specimen of it: "Thou hast been my help. Leave me not, neither forsake me." [Psalm 27:9] He pleads God's mercy to him from his youth up. He speaks of being cast upon his God from his very birth, and then he pleads, "Now also, when I am old and greyheaded, O God, forsake me not." [Psalm 71:18] Moses also, speaking with God, says, "Thou didst bring this people up out of Egypt." [Deuteronomy 9:26] As if he would say, "Do not leave Thy work unfinished; Thou hast begun to build, complete it. Thou hast fought the first battle; Lord, end the campaign! Go on till Thou gettest a complete victory." How often have we cried in our trouble, "Lord, Thou didst deliver me in such and such sharp trial, when it seemed as if no help were near; Thou hast never forsaken me yet. I have set up my Ebenezer in Thy name. If Thou hadst intended to leave me why hast Thou showed me such things? Hast Thou brought Thy servant to this place to put him to shame?" We have to deal with an unchanging God, Who will do in the future
what He has done in the past, because He never turns from His purpose, and cannot be thwarted in His design; the past thus becomes a very mighty means of winning blessings from Him.

We may even use our own unworthiness as an argument with God. "Out of the eater comes forth meat, and out of the strong comes forth sweetness." [Judges 14:14] David in one place pleads thus: "Lord, have mercy upon mine iniquity, for it is great." [Psalm 25:10] That is a very singular mode of reasoning; but being interpreted it means, "Lord, why shouldst thou go about doing little things? Thou art a great God, and here is a great sinner. Here is a fitness in me for the display of Thy grace. The greatness of my sin makes me a platform for the greatness of Thy mercy. Let the greatness of Thy love be seen in me." Moses seems to have the same on his mind when he asks God to show His great power in sparing His sinful people. The power with which God restrains Himself is great indeed. There is such a thing as creeping down at the foot of the throne, crouching low and crying, "O God, break me not-I am a bruised reed. Tread not on my little life, it is now but as the smoking flax. Wilt Thou hunt me? Wilt Thou come out, as David said, 'after a dead dog, after a flea?' Wilt Thou pursue me as a leaf that is blown in the tempest? Wilt Thou watch me, as Job said, as though I were a vast sea, or a great whale? I am so little, and because the greatness of Thy mercy can be shown in one so insignificant and yet so vile, therefore, O God, have mercy upon me."

There was once an occasion when the very Godhead of Jehovah made a triumphant plea for the prophet Elijah. On that august occasion, when he had bidden his adversaries see whether their god could answer them by fire, you can little guess the excitement there must have been in the prophet's mind. With what stern sarcasm did he say, "Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awakened." [1 Kings 18:27] And as they cut themselves with knives, and leaped upon the altar, oh the scorn with which that man of God must have looked down upon their impotent exertions, and their earnest but useless cries! But think of how his heart must have palpitated, if it had not been for the strength of his faith, when he repaired the altar of God that was broken down, and laid the wood in order, and killed the bullock. Hear him cry, "Pour water on it. You shall not suspect me of concealing fire; pour water on the victim." When they had done so, he bids them "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time; and then he says, "Do it a third time." And when it was all covered with water, soaked and saturated through, then he stands up and cries to God, "O God, let it be known that Thou only art God." [1 Kings 18:36] Here everything was put to the test. Jehovah's own existence was now put, as it were, at stake, before the eyes of men by this bold prophet. But how well the prophet was heard! Down came the fire and devoured not only the sacrifice, but even the wood, and the stones, and even the very water that was in the trenches, for Jehovah God had answered His servant's prayer. We sometimes may do the same, and say unto Him, "Oh, by Thy Deity, by Thine existence, if indeed Thou be God, now show Thyself for the help of Thy people!"

6. The sufferings, death, merit, and intercession of Christ Jesus
I am afraid we do not understand what it is that we have at our command when we are allowed to plead with God for Christ's sake. I met with this thought the other day: it was something new to me, but I believe it ought not to have been. When we ask God to hear us, pleading Christ's name, we usually mean, "O Lord, Thy dear Son deserves this of Thee; do this unto me because of what He merits." But if we knew it we might go farther. Supposing you should say to me, you who keep a warehouse in the city, "Sir, call at my office, and use my name, and say that they are to give you such a thing." I should go in and use you name, and I should obtain my request as a matter of right and a matter of necessity. This is virtually what Jesus Christ says to us. "If you need anything of God, all that the Father has belongs to
Me; go and use My name." Suppose you should give a man your chequebook signed with your own name and left blank, to be filled up as he chose; that would be very nearly what Jesus has done in these words, "If ye ask anything in My name I will give it you." [John 14:14] If I had a good name at the bottom of the cheque I should be sure that I should get it cashed when I went to the banker with it; so when you have got Christ's name, to whom the very justice of God has become a debtor, and whose merits have claims with the Most High, when you have Christ's name there is no need to speak with fear and trembling and bated breath. Waver not and let not faith stagger! When you plead the name of Christ you plead that which shakes the gates of hell, and which the hosts of heaven obey, and God Himself feels the sacred power of that divine plea.

You would do better if you sometimes thought more in your prayers of Christ's griefs and groans. Bring before the Lord His wounds, tell the Lord of His cries, make the groans of Jesus cry again from Gethsemane, and His blood speak again from that frozen Calvary. Speak out and tell the Lord that with such griefs, and cries, and groans to plead, you cannot take a denial.

III. PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING

If the Holy Ghost shall teach us how to order our cause, and how to fill our mouth with arguments, the results shall be that we shall have our mouth filled with praises. The man who has his mouth full of arguments in prayer shall soon have his mouth full of benedictions in answer to prayer. You have your mouth full this morning, have you? What of? Full of complaining? Pray the Lord to rinse your mouth out of that black stuff, for it will little avail you, and it will turn bitter within you one of these days. Oh have your mouth full of prayer, full of it, full of arguments so that there is room for nothing else. Then you shall soon go away with whatsoever you have asked of God. "Delight thyself also in the Lord, and He will give thee the desires of thine heart." [Psalm 37:4]

It is said-I know not how truly-that the explanation of the text, "Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it," [Psalm 81:10] may be found in a very singular Oriental custom. It is said that not many years ago-I remember the circumstances being reported-the King of Persia ordered the chief of his nobility, who had done something or other which greatly gratified him, to open his mouth, and when he had done so he began to put into his mouth pearls, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, till he had filled it as full as it could hold, and then he bade him go his way. This is said to have been occasionally done in Oriental Courts towards great favourites. Now certainly whether that be an explanation of the text or not it is an illustration of it. God says, "Open thy mouth with arguments," and then He will fill it with mercies priceless, gems unspeakably valuable. Would not a man open his mouth wide when he had to have it filled in such a manner? Surely the most simple-minded among you would be wise enough for that. Let us then open wide our mouth when we have to plead with God. Our needs are great, let our askings be great, and the supply shall be great too. You are not straitened in Him; you are straitened in yourselves. The Lord give you large-mouthedness in prayer, great potency, not in the use of language, but in employing arguments.

What I have been speaking to the Christian is applicable in great measure to the unconverted man. God give you to see the force of it, and to fly in humble prayer to the Lord Jesus Christ and to find eternal life in Him.
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