

# **Spiritual Warfare**

*Lessons From the Book of Judges*

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## Introduction

It is a very great pleasure to be with you here again, and thank you very much for turning out on this grievously cold evening. On these four occasions that we will be together I hope to be talking with you about certain matters in the book of Judges in the Old Testament. Obviously we shall not be able to cover the whole of the book, nor anything like it.

What I hope to do, therefore, is to take the stories of four of the captivities and four of the deliverances, and to see some of the basic principles of spiritual warfare with which the book of Judges deals. I think it is most unlikely, but if you have not studied Judges in any detail before, I trust that God will open a window on this part of his word.

Let us begin our study by reading first of all from the New Testament, in the epistle by Paul to the Ephesians.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel. (6:10–19)

I have read this passage because, as I said, I want to use the book of Judges to learn certain principles of spiritual warfare. Right from the very beginning, I want to make the point that there is a tremendous contrast between the warfare to which God called the ancient Israelites and the warfare to which he has called us in this present day.

### **The same spiritual powers but different weapons**

The Israelite of old was required to use carnal weapons: literal swords and very sharp spears, not to talk about battering rams and other instruments of cruelty. Their warfare was very much against flesh and blood, for it was not yet ready for them in those days to distinguish between evil principles and the people who embodied them.

We are called to a much higher field, but there have been periods in Christendom when the church seems to have forgotten the words of the Lord Jesus to Peter, when he told him not to try and defend Christ with literal weapons: 'Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (Matt 26:52). And so, in some centuries the church collected her armies and went and slaughtered the flesh and blood of Turks. In other centuries, during the infamous *Inquisition* in Spain, they routed out Jews who didn't convert to Christianity and put them to death with the sword.

In ancient times, Israel was a theocracy governed directly by God under the covenant that God had made with his people. If the authorities heard that anyone had given way to idolatry and worshipped other gods, and after due warning they did not repent, the religious leaders would call upon the civil powers to take up their arms and physically destroy those heretics.

Alas, there have been centuries when the Christian church has imagined it was meant to be doing exactly the same, and forgot how different the church is from Israel. Christians joined up the church with the state and had a look around from time to time to see whether there were any heretics lurking. If they suspected anyone, the church called upon the civil authorities to use their armies and the carnal weapons of the day to physically destroy them. Rivers of tears and oceans of blood and dark infamy on the name of Christ were perpetrated through failure to make this basic distinction.

I trust that nothing I shall say in these studies shall encourage us to think that, in the last analysis, Christians in this day would be right to defend the faith by taking to the sword. We follow one whose command is clear, 'If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world' (John 18:36). Just let me remind you from the passage we have read that the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh—they are not physical weapons, but spiritual; 'Nonetheless, they are mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds and fortresses' (see 2 Cor 10:4).

So, as we read the ancient book of Judges and learn its basic principles, we shall find that in our day we are very often fighting against the same evil spiritual powers. But when it comes to fighting those battles our weapons are different.

## **Why is the book of Judges so full of stories of battles and warfare?**

### **The people had to claim their inheritance**

God had brought his people out of their bondage in Egypt, across the wilderness, and now at length into their inheritance in the promised land. When they first arrived, the armies were collected under Joshua their captain and they made a united assault on the various enemies throughout that country, seeking by their swift, lightning raids to break the backbone of the opposition. When that was done they gathered each in their tribes, or sometimes two or three tribes together, to go to the areas they had been given and take possession of their inheritance. As they did so, God warned them that they were not to compromise in any way with the pagan Canaanites that they found. They were to drive them all out, so that they might enjoy their inheritance.

That reminds us of our own position. We too have been redeemed, though with the blood of an infinitely more precious Lamb. We too have an inheritance, which is kept in heaven for us (see 1 Pet 1:4). When the Lord comes we shall enter that great inheritance. And yet, from another point of view, even while we live here on this earth we may enter spiritually into our inheritance. That surely is the force of Paul's remarks in the letter to the Ephesians. As believers in the Lord Jesus, we are seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, already in our great spiritual inheritance.

### **They had to drive out enemies who were already there**

When we look at things from that point of view, we shall find another similarity between the Israelites and us. When they entered into Palestine they had a land that God had given to them, backed up by his promise that every bit of ground their feet should tread upon would be theirs. At the same time, they soon found enemies galore encamped upon that inheritance, determined to fight to the very last to stop the Israelites coming in and enjoying the promised land.

So it is with us today. We are redeemed, and in one sense seated with Christ in the heavenlies. Our inheritance is open to us to begin to explore all its wealth, and yet at almost every corner hoary old enemies, ugly with beard and spear and armoured mail, are trying to stop us entering into the joy and gathering the 'grapes and figs' of our great inheritance. We need to be prepared to fight for it, as the Israelites were prepared to fight for theirs. Some of them did it very well and cleared out the enemies who held their particular part of the country; others not so well. It says of some that they *did not* cast out the enemy; others tried to, but they *couldn't*.

I suspect we recognize ourselves in those remarks. At some periods of life and with some enemies, maybe we've not tried all that hard to get rid of them? We enjoy being a little sarcastic at times; it's rather clever, we think, and we've not tried too hard to get rid of it.

You say, 'But that's not true of me. I have my weaknesses too that spoil my enjoyment of spiritual things. God knows I've tried to drive out the enemy — many times I've tried, and I can't.

### **They compromised with the enemies and became their slaves**

So God tells us that both those things happened with Israel, and then he tells us what happened next. Because they couldn't drive them out, they then began to compromise with them and to worship their gods. In the end, they fell into bondage to these enemies.

That too has its analogy with us, doesn't it? We remember what Paul says in Romans 6. He's telling us the wonderful provision God has made to deliver us from the power of sin, and he comes down to his tremendous climax when he says, 'For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace' (v. 14). Because Christ has paid all the expense of our transgressions and all the cost of our failures, when as believers we fall and we fail, that's not the end. Sin has not got the final mastery because we are not under law but under grace, and in Christ we may get up and go again. We may confess our sin, know ourselves forgiven and start again, for we are not under law, but under grace.

### **What difference does it make if I fall into sin?**

Says somebody, 'Well, if we're not under law but under grace, does it really matter if I sin?'

I don't suppose you've ever been tempted to think like that. Of course not; but one of these days you might conceivably meet somebody who has.

'The preachers have told me that there is no condemnation for them that are in Christ Jesus, and I'm in Christ Jesus, so there's no condemnation.' (See Rom 8:1.)

How blessedly true that is: through Christ every believer shall be saved from the wrath of God. That's magnificent.

And they say, 'That's what I thought. So, what difference does it make if I fall into sin? You've just agreed that there's no condemnation and I shall never be lost. What does it matter, and what difference does it make?'

'I shouldn't sin if I were you,' says Paul.

'Why not? There's no condemnation,' they say.

'Of course there's not. But don't you realize that to whoever you present yourselves as obedient slaves, you become their slaves?' (see 6:16).

As a believer, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, assured that I shall never come into judgment and I shall be saved from the wrath of God, if nevertheless I yield my members to bad habits and to sin, Paul warns me that, while there is no penalty, there will be consequence. The consequence is that I too shall find myself bound by habit, and the more the practice is indulged in the stronger the bondage will be.

So we learn our lessons too from this ancient book. We have enemies that stop us enjoying our great inheritance; we are to fight and not compromise with them. We shall get victory over some of them very soon, and some of them will prove to be very persistent and difficult. We must not give up, for if we present ourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, we shall become their slaves.

## **God raised up deliverers**

When Israel fell into such bondage, in their misery they cried to the Lord and he raised up deliverers for them. That's the happy side of the stories we shall read—the delightful provision that God made for his erring and wayward people. When they came to their senses and sought his forgiveness, in his kindness he had a saviour waiting to deliver his people.

### **The Saviour of sinners and the Saviour of saints**

What a lovely God he is. Shining out of this remote part of the Old Testament are half a dozen stories that more than point us to the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour and deliverer. It is a tremendous privilege to be able to preach about him to men and women who as yet are unregenerate, but let us not forget that we have a Saviour who saves his people as well.

I cannot read your heart. I don't know from the look on your face whether you are enjoying peace, like the Israelites did for forty years at one stage (Judg 3:11); whether you're marching on your mountaintops of victory, or in your innermost heart you feel defeated and life has become so complicated you can't seem to undo the muddle. My brother, my sister, God has a

Saviour for you as well. Yes, he's the Saviour of sinners, but the Saviour of saints into the bargain.

It is those deliverers that we are to think of in these studies. We shall be taking just four stories and considering the bondage from which they delivered the people of God: Othniel; Ehud; Deborah, Barak and Jael; Samson.

On each occasion we shall be looking for four things:

### **1. The cause of the trouble**

Does the word of God give us any hint as to the cause of the trouble? Was there any particular issue beside the general one of compromise with the enemy?

### **2. The nature of the enemy**

You will observe that the enemy was different on each occasion.

In the first bondage, the enemy was Mesopotamia (3:8). They came from Syria of the Two Rivers. The deliverer was Othniel.

In the second bondage, the enemy was Moab in particular, though they got helpers from Ammon and Amalek (3:12–13). The deliverer was Ehud.

Then, in the third of our stories, Deborah, Barak and Jael fought the Canaanites, and particularly those Canaanites in the north of the country (4:2).

Finally, in our fourth story, Samson fought the Philistines (13:1).

In other stories, Gideon was called upon to lead the armies of the Lord against the Midianites (ch. 6). Abimelech really got things topsy-turvy; he was meant to be fighting the enemy, but in the end he turned round and fought the Israelites (ch. 9). Alas, what things can happen if you're not careful; Jephthah had to face the Ammonites as the main enemy (ch. 11).

A right old bunch of enemies, if ever there was one. Not all enemies are the same. You'll find different ones at different times in life, you know. You'll not be bored by them; Satan has a tremendous variety to come at our heels. So we shall be asking each time, *what is the nature of the enemy*: what did each enemy represent?

The ancient nations were somewhat like the modern ones. If I said to you that someone was 'a typical American', would you know what I meant? Perhaps you'd object, 'There isn't such a thing; every single American is different.'

In a sense you're right, and yet I think some people would know what I meant if I said, 'So and so is a typical American—aren't they charming?'

And if I said that someone was 'a typical Englishman', your face would say, 'Yes, that's right.' But we needn't go further, I shan't be enquiring what you imagine a typical Englishman to be!

Would you happen to know what a typical Moabite was like, if you saw one? Or a typical Mesopotamian? It is these people that we're going to meet, and I shall be suggesting that they differ because of their historical circumstances, their national characteristics, their history, and so forth and so on. They are different.

### 3. The deliverers God raised up

We shall have to do a lot of reconnoitring of the enemy, and when we've done that we shall turn to consider the deliverers that God raised up, and ask first of all what their qualifications were.

Why, for instance, was Othniel raised up to fight the Mesopotamians and not the Moabites? Was there anything special in Othniel that fitted him for that occasion?

We have a vested interest in these stories, haven't we? We want to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ, as Paul encouraged Timothy to be (2 Tim 2:3). We should be able to reconnoitre the enemy and say, 'If my eyes don't deceive me, that's an old *Ammonite* there.' We must prepare ourselves so that we may be ready when God calls us to deliver his people.

### 4. The tactics they employed

And finally, we shall have to look at the tactics that they employed for dealing with the enemy. They are rather colourful, and if you haven't strong nerves perhaps you oughtn't to come for the next few weeks!

You're all right tonight, for Othniel just went in for straightforward warfare. Ehud fought as well, but he had a particular technique. He came into the king, saying, 'I have a message from God for you', and when the king stood up Ehud drew a dagger from his right thigh and pushed it through the belly of the fat king of Moab and killed him. It was quite effective, of course. Whereas Sisera, commander of the great Canaanite armies, was killed, not by a sword through his belly, but by a tent peg through his skull.

I have a notion that God goes for the strong place each time. It is true of some that 'their God is their belly', as Paul says (Phil 3:19), and with others the God they worship is their intellect. Be that as it may, all sorts of different tactics are employed. We shall be asking ourselves how the tactics fit the particular situation, so that we might instruct ourselves on being good soldiers and know what tactics to use.

## Othniel

On the occasion of their first bondage we are told, 'the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years' (Judg 3:8).

### **1. The cause of the trouble**

#### **On this occasion they went wrong in their hearts**

God the Holy Spirit has been pleased to tell us explicitly. 'And their daughters [that is, the daughters of the Canaanites] they [the Israelites] took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods' (v. 6).

They left their first love to God and lost their hearts to the girls of the Canaanites, married them and went after their gods, just like God had told them not to. Said he, 'Don't marry those girls of the Canaanites, for if you do they will be a snare to you and sooner or later you will be worshipping their gods.' It happened, and it was their hearts that went wrong.

#### *Who and what we love*

If I had the wisdom of my elder brothers in this church, I would stop here and preach you a sermon—not to all of you, but to my younger and yet unmarried brothers and sisters. This ancient ploy is still used by our enemy. We are told not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14). My dear young fellow Christians, marry the right girl and she'll make you spiritually; the right husband will be the secret of your success, a tower of strength to you. But if you marry an unbeliever, it will spell disaster.

Why is that? Can't you imagine a young Israelite coming home, and saying, like Samson did, 'I've just seen a smashing girl down the road, Mum. Can I invite her round to tea? Can I bring her home, Dad?'

And they say, 'Is she a good Israelite?'

'Well, no. She's Mesopotamian.'

'No, you can't do that,' they say.

'What's wrong?'

'Moses said . . .'

'Oh, Moses, with his long old beard and his strict kind of ways: that's how you used to think in your days, but the world has changed since then. She's a very nice girl; she likes all the good literature that I like. What's wrong? If I married her, she might even get converted.'

Or she might not. What's wrong with it? She serves other gods. If she's not a believer her fundamental interests are different. That young man that you're sweet on, if he's not a believer, his interests are an eternity different from yours. The danger is that, when a believer marries an unbeliever, in the end the believer gives in and adopts the same standards of life and the same goals as the unbeliever. In other words, they worship the unbeliever's god.

But I'm not as old as my good elders, and nowhere nearly so experienced nor qualified to talk of these things. Let me talk of other matters and I shall feel more relieved. For not only do I hear the New Testament warning believers against marrying unconverted partners, but I hear Scripture telling us to watch our love and affection. 'Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him' (1 John 2:15). James is even more stern, 'Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God' (4:4).

So we are to watch our love. Did you notice the prohibition? Let me quote it again: 'Do not love the world or the things in the world.' What is it we're told to do with the world, and not to do? We are not to *love* it. It's a matter of our hearts, our affections.

You say, 'It's a very funny thing, you know. That word *world* in the Bible starts off as very nice—God made the world and everything in it, and he said it was very good. How is it that this lovely, good world that God made comes to be something bad that I'm not to love?'

## 2. The nature of the enemy

At this point, let me just introduce to you the geography of the matter and we shall perhaps find that it helps. When these people lost their hearts to the Canaanites and married them, then the Lord sold them into the hand of the king of Mesopotamia. Look at where that country is, or was. Mesopotamia is the name given to the land between the River Tigris and the River Euphrates, meaning 'the land between the rivers'.

In the times of the book of Judges this upper part was called 'Syria of the Two Rivers', Aram-Naharaim. In later Hellenistic times it was extended to cover the southern part between the two rivers, so that is why Stephen says, 'The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia . . . and said to him, "Go out from your land . . . into the land that I will show you"' (Acts 7:2-3).

### Mesopotamia was the original homeland of Abraham

Stage by stage, Abraham responded to that call. He left Ur down in the south and came and lived in Haran. After some years he came to his final decision; he moved on from Haran, across the river, and came down through Syria into Palestine, to the land of his inheritance.

The nation of Israel had its beginning in Abraham's experience of conversion, when the God of glory appeared to him. In the light of the surpassing glory of God, and the reality of God, he left his homeland and its idolatry, and came at last into the glorious inheritance that God gave him. But what happened? The Israelites were in the land of their inheritance, but, if you please, the old enemy had come creeping up behind them and they might as well have been back in Mesopotamia.

It could happen, couldn't it? Conversion can be expressed like this. Says Paul, 'But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which *the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*' (Gal 6:14). Conversion is leaving the world's side and coming over to the side of Christ. But it's possible to stand on the side of Christ, to look back and let the world recapture our hearts once more.

*What's wrong with the world?*

1. *The world, even at its best, is only temporary*

When Abraham came out of that land and arrived at last in Canaan, he could have gone back if he'd pleased (Heb 11:15). But he refused to go back, and so did the other patriarchs, 'For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland' (v. 14). '[They are] looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God' (v. 10).

'Do not love the world,' says John.

Why shouldn't I love the world, John?

'The world is passing away along with its desires' (1 John 2:17).

'Use the world, though don't abuse it,' says Paul (see 1 Cor 7:31).

Enjoy all the gifts that God gives us but, my dear brother and sister, 'don't love the world,' says John to each one of us. The world is transient, and in the end you'll lose every drop of love and affection you've put into it. How sad it would be, if we didn't know the God of glory who appeared to Abraham. But he has appeared to us, surely, and opened our eyes to that great eternal world and 'the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.' Like Abraham, we have begun our pilgrimage to that glorious eternal city.

To refer to our previous topic, then, how important it is that both husband and wife have the same objective, and one isn't living for the world here and now, and the other living for eternity.

2. *The world is evil*

It's not only temporary; there's something worse wrong with the world than that. To cut the long story as short as I can, the world is now evil. When God brought up the Mesopotamians, and the Israelites were in bondage to them, they had a king by the name of Cushan-rishathaim. It is such an odd name that we can't tell what Aramaic word it really represents. It looks as if the Hebrew scribes took whatever the word was beforehand and supplied it with vowels to make 'Rishathaim', meaning in Hebrew 'of double wickedness', which wasn't very complimentary. Cushan-rishathaim—King Cushan of double wickedness. I don't suppose he felt flattered, if he heard what the Hebrews called him, and it may serve to remind us that there's a sinister thing about this world. The New Testament tells us not merely that it's temporary; it also says that there is a ruler over this world, the devil himself (John 14:30).

*How has the world got a bad name?*

Well I'll tell you. Right from the very start, when Satan came to the garden of Eden, he took the world that God had made—the lovely world with its beautiful trees and its flowers and its fruits—and he did a very dastardly thing with it. He used it to draw Eve's heart away from God.

John reminds us that it's a question of the Father's love for us and our love for the Father. To show us his love and mercy, he gave us practical gifts—the world, if you like, and all the lovely things that are in it. They come from him down to us, and are meant to go back to him in gratitude and service and sacrifice. All the while these temporary gifts strengthen this love between us and the Father, and that's delightful. In that sense, God has given us all things richly to enjoy, so that they might express his love towards us and bring our gratitude back to God. The greatest of all gifts, of course, is Jesus Christ, God's Son.

But Satan sowed into Eve's mind the idea that, in order to enjoy that world, you had to abandon God; you had to defy his word and take no notice of what his word said. He spread in her mind the idea that to enjoy this lovely world that God in fact had created, she must neglect God and his word. In disobeying God, she put a vast gap between her and the Father, and turned her back on the Father.

The world is now controlled by the ruler of this world, who uses 'the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions' (1 John 2:16) to keep us from the Father. That's why the world is sinister. It's not that things in themselves are necessarily wrong, but when Satan takes them and holds them up as the goal to live for and it takes us from the Father, then that is the worst tragedy that can possibly befall us. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you, and now it becomes a choice between the Father and the world.

### **3. The deliverer God raised up**

On this first occasion it was Othniel, who would deliver them from the king of Mesopotamia.

You say, 'What were his qualifications?'

They are told in Judges 1:11–15, which you may care to read sometime (also Josh 15:13–19). We're told the delightful story how that, when Caleb and company were trying to possess their inheritance, Caleb said, 'Whoever strikes Kiriath-sepher and captures it, to him will I give Achsah my daughter as wife' (v. 16).

Othniel was thinking that it was about time he got married and he'd been scratching his head to know who, when he heard this story. He had a look at Caleb, who was eighty-plus years old and still chasing giants off his inheritance, and he said, 'when I'm eighty, I should want to be like Caleb, always pioneering, always getting hold of new territory and new things to enjoy. What a tremendous chap Caleb is. I wonder if his daughter is anything like him!' He had a look at the giants and his legs began to wobble a bit, until he turned round and had another look at Achsah. 'That settles it,' he says. He had lost his heart to the girl. Up he went to Kiriath-sepher, and the old giants didn't stand a chance because Othniel was fired by the love of Achsah.

### **4. The tactics he employed**

Love was his motivation. You see, if they went wrong because they loved the wrong girls, then God would raise up a deliverer whose heart is all warm and living and vibrant, and he loves the right kind of girl. What a girl she was. She not only fired him to go and take that city of the giants, but when they got it she had a look round, and you know how delightfully they do these things.

'I've been thinking,' she said. 'I'm not grumbling, but this bit of inheritance we've got here is rather dry, isn't it? You could ask Dad—it would be better coming from you—if he'd give us the upper and lower springs as well.'

She didn't want much, did she? When they saw Caleb, Achsah couldn't wait. Before Othniel plucked up the courage to ask Caleb, she had asked him, and what could he say to her? She got what she wanted, the upper and lower springs as well. What things Othniel got when he loved Achsah (see vv. 14–15).

I hope you've got a wife like that, but what I'm getting at is the state of our hearts. What are you in love with? Young people, have you got any senior folks that you look at, and say, 'I would love to be like that godly woman. She knows the Lord; look what she's done for him and how she came through that difficulty she faced.' Do you have any heroes, gentlemen? Have you got a Caleb? Do you say, 'I should like to be like that missionary, that man of God.' Beyond all of them, aren't you in love with the Lord Jesus? You love him and you love the Father; you're not going in for the world because the love of Christ is more real. He has won your heart, and your desire is to know 'the upper and the lower springs'—to know what it is to be seated with Christ in heavenly places, and what it is to have the Christ dwelling in your heart by faith (see Eph 2:6; 3:17).

If ever we're going to help the Lord's people overcome the world, we will not do it by issuing negative prohibitions: 'Don't go here, don't go there. Don't do that; do this, do the other.' The commandments and prohibitions are necessary, but where shall we be unless our hearts are inflamed with the love of Christ, with the love of his word, and the love of the Father and the Holy Spirit? Oh, may God make it real. It's all too possible to sing on Sunday, 'Now none but Christ can satisfy'<sup>1</sup>, and on Monday, when we're challenged to go into our inheritance in this book, to say, 'but it's so dry.' God give us his Holy Spirit to make that great inheritance he's given us fertile.

Fired by love for that girl and for the inheritance, Othniel was now qualified to go and deliver the Israelites, to judge them, and show them what poor choices they'd made when they chose to marry the Canaanites and follow their gods. He went out to war and fought, and his hand was strengthened against the king of Moab. The way to deal with the world remains precisely that.

Satan, the ruler of this world, offered the Lord Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, if he would fall down and worship him. 'No,' said Christ (see Matt 4:8–10). 'The ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me' (John 14:30). Subsequently to his disciples, he added, 'In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world' (16:33). What our Lord did, we are called upon to do. 'I write to you, young men, because you are strong,' says John, 'and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. Do not love the world' (1 John 2:14–15).

So may this ancient part of God's word speak to us in a practical fashion and confirm the direction of our hearts towards Christ, and by loving him may we be a help to those whom the world may have temporarily entangled.

<sup>1</sup> Author unknown, 'O Christ, in thee my soul has found.'

Shall we pray.

Lord, we thank thee now, if, as to Abraham of old, thou hast revealed thyself in all thy glory and brought us out to follow the Lord Jesus into our great spiritual inheritance. Only guard our hearts, we beseech thee, lest in a careless moment the dark prince of this world should beguile and entice us, and enslave us again in love of the world. Save us from being like Demas who forsook Paul, having loved this present world. Fill our eyes and hearts with the glories of the great salvation that we have in the Saviour, so that we may follow him with undivided hearts and be used of thee in our day and generation for the liberation and salvation of others. We ask it through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Ehud

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms. And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab for eighteen years. Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man. The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab. And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his clothes. And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who carried the tribute. But he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal and said, 'I have a secret message for you, O king.' And he commanded, 'Silence.' And all his attendants went out from his presence. And Ehud came to him as he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, 'I have a message from God for you.' And he arose from his seat. And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly. And the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not pull the sword out of his belly; and the excrement came out. Then Ehud went out into the porch and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him and locked them. When he had gone, the servants came, and when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, 'Surely he is relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber.' And they waited till they were embarrassed. But when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them, and there lay their lord dead on the floor. Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the idols and escaped to Seirah. When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. Then the people of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was their leader. And he said to them, 'Follow after me, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.' So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites and did not allow anyone to pass over. And they killed at that time about 10,000 of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; not a man escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years. (Judg 3:12-30)

May God give us grace and perception to understand and apply the lessons which he meant to convey by inspiring the historian to record this story.

On these four Sunday evenings, we are studying the book of Judges. Not the whole book but certain parts, with the idea that in these four brief sessions we might perhaps come to see what the main lessons are, and what practical relevance they would have for us in our modern day.

Last week, as we introduced ourselves to the topic, we found that Judges is full of the idea of God's salvation. What a Saviour God is, isn't he? In all of his inspired word he can scarcely write a book, but somewhere or other in it he is keen to illustrate the glory and the wealth of his salvation. And so it is in this ancient book of Judges, which is mainly the story of how God from time to time raised up saviours and deliverers for his people, Israel.

That simple observation will help us at once to see where this has practical relevance for us. These stories of God's salvation in the past will help us to see the wealth of his salvation for us in the present. Not merely will they point us to our Lord Jesus and that initial work of salvation that he does for us when first we come to him and he saves us, in the sense of forgiving our sins, and giving us eternal life, and putting his Holy Spirit within us; but they shall tell us of that ongoing salvation. Judges records how that, from time to time, God's people—through their weakness, their folly, their failure to keep God's word, and sometimes through their positive and deliberate disobedience—got themselves in all sorts of muddles and pickles, and came unto captivity and bondage to this enemy and that enemy. When they saw what lengths their sins had brought them to and they cried to the Lord, God in his mercy raised up saviours for them. What a word of encouragement that is for us still.

I don't know about you, but I know my own experience well enough to know that, even though I have forgiveness of sins and eternal life through the saving work of Christ—and I've been a Christian now for about fifty years and more—I still get myself into muddles and difficulties and bondages of one kind and another because of my weakness and folly and ignorance of God's word. Sometimes, it's disobedience to God's word; sometimes, even when I would keep it, I find I have an enemy within and it does the very opposite. What a lovely thing it is to know that he who saved us at the beginning is a Saviour all the way along the road. I don't care, my brother, my sister, what kind of a hole you've got yourself into, or if you have somehow got yourself in a muddle as well; you have a Saviour who can bring you back into happy fellowship with God and into victorious Christian living.

Last week we found that these saviours of Israel in the days of Judges operated in two special ways.

### **1. They got Israel to judge themselves**

When Israel got themselves into bondage to some heathen king, why had they done it? That was the point.

The people said, 'Times have changed; we're not living in Moses' day. What does it matter? Everybody does this, why shouldn't we?'

It seemed to make sense at the start, but then they found it led to bondage. They were saved from it as God raised up deliverers who judged them, who took God's holy word and said, 'Now let's judge ourselves in the presence of God, according to God's holy book, and repent where we have disobeyed it, and agree with God that what he says is wrong and evil, *is* wrong and evil.' They judged themselves.

According to 1 Corinthians 11, our blessed Lord still invites us to do the same. On that most sacred of all occasions, when as believers we gather to remember our Lord in the breaking of bread and in the drinking of the cup, he calls upon us to judge ourselves. If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged by the Lord (see vv. 31–32). We might avoid many a sorry experience if we would take God’s word seriously and judge ourselves in the light of it. If we will not judge ourselves, then God has to allow us to find out that sin is sin and evil is evil, by experiencing the bondages that come as a result of our disobedience.

## **2. They led them to victory**

When these saviours had got Israel to judge themselves in the light of God’s word, then God in his mercy led them to victory over their enemies and to recovery out of their bondages.

And therefore this book of Judges has exceedingly practical relevance to our lives as believers. Of course, we no longer fight the battles of the Lord with carnal weapons. The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh; not literal guns, bombs, grenades, machine guns, and so forth. The weapons of our warfare these days are spiritual, but, though we fight on a higher plane and with spiritual weapons, we fight the same evil principles of sin as they did in those ancient days.

So, we looked at the list of the major deliverers that we find in the book of Judges, and we noticed that the enemy was different on each occasion. Othniel fought against the Mesopotamians; Ehud, the Moabites; Deborah, Barak and Jael, the Canaanites. Gideon fought the Midianites, Jephthah fought the Ammonites, and Samson the Philistines.

Their tactics were different too. Othniel just went in for straightforward warfare. Ehud fought as well, but he had a particular technique. He came into the king, saying, ‘I have a message from God for you’, and when the king stood up Ehud drew a dagger from his right thigh and pushed it through the belly of the fat old king of Moab and killed him. It was quite effective, of course. Whereas Sisera, commander of the great Canaanite armies, was killed, not by a sword through his belly but by a tent peg through his brain, and the second woman took a millstone, heaved it over the wall, and it landed on top of Abimelech’s skull.

That led us to say to ourselves that we will look for four major things:

1. The cause of the trouble;
2. The nature of the enemy;
3. The deliverers God raised up;
4. The tactics they employed.

## **1. The cause of the trouble**

So we come to the first question: where did Israel go wrong—what was the cause of the trouble? All we are told on this occasion is, ‘Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD’ (3:12), and no more is said. Last week it was a specific charge. They disobeyed God’s word and gave their daughters to the heathen in marriage, married the women from the nations around, and they stole their hearts away from the Lord (v. 6). But this week we find simply the bald statement, ‘they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord’—no further, except

that it was wrong. But perhaps we can find out a great deal, if we now turn to our second quest and consider the characteristics of Moab, described by the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and the New.

## 2. The nature of the enemy

I'm going to run briefly through these passages: they are crucial in the history of God's people. As I do so, can you see some common theme in the character testimonial that the Holy Spirit writes for Moab?

### Moab

1. Where did Moab begin? That's a sorry story, and one would wish not to have to tell it in any detail. Moab began his life as the son of Lot, produced by Lot's incestuous relationship with his own daughter (Gen 19:30–38). What a sorry thing that was; fit to break a believer's heart.

We remember where Lot started (Gen 11:31; 12:4). He started out with Abraham living in Ur of Chaldees, that bright and wonderful civilization. Along with Abraham, he caught sight of the vision of the glory of God and set out from Ur and from Haran to come into the promised land, for they looked for 'the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God' (Heb 11:10). The New Testament tells us that Lot was a righteous man (2 Pet 2:7); justified by faith, even as Abraham was, but a sorry thing happened to that true believer. For the sake of business, he went down near Sodom and Gomorrah, which was a very risky thing to do. He was vexed by the behaviour in Sodom, and in the course of living in Sodom he lost his testimony. They laughed at him. But worse than that, he lost his wife and his sons-in-law. He came out of Sodom 'by the skin of his teeth'. He was saved, 'but only as through fire' (see 1 Cor 3:15). He ended up in a cave outside the city of Zoar. What a sorry story for a man who had started in Ur of Chaldees. That was no cave; Ur was a bright civilization. He was a true believer, but see him now, living in a cave, behaving like a caveman. He was the father of Moab, conceived on a night when he was blind drunk.

It's a solemn thing to think how far a true believer can fall: 'Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall' (1 Cor 10:12). There's no temptation you will ever face that is not common to man, and the Lord provides a way of escape (see v. 13). But we have our part to play — we must take heed lest we fall.

2. Now let's move on in history a little bit to Numbers 23, and this is the story of the terrible thing that Balaam did to the children of Israel. Balaam had been hired by the king of Moab to curse Israel, but he had to give up in despair, saying,

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? . . .

Behold, I received a command to bless:

he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.

He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob,

nor has he seen trouble in Israel. (vv. 8; 20–21)

And then, because he couldn't curse Israel for the king of Moab, 'Balaam. . . taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practise sexual immorality' (Rev 2:14).

That was a dastardly move, wasn't it? Here were these Israelites, foot slogging across the wilderness under a pitiless sun. That's hard enough, but when you've been running out of water and supplies you crave for ease and comfort. When Moab couldn't stop the Israelites by straightforward warfare and opposition, they tried another tack and the girls of Moab came out. To men who were going across the wilderness and rather drab surroundings, the girls did look attractive. They invited the Israelites home, and of course the food was offered in sacrifice to their gods. Then they found what sacrifice to the gods meant, and before they knew where they were they had fallen into sexual immorality.

That sounds lurid to us, perhaps, but our Lord himself had to protest in the New Testament to the church at Pergamum. They were Greeks, and though they were believers, saved and justified by faith, there were some in that church who said that it didn't really matter if you ate food sacrificed to idols, or if you had sex before marriage.

It occurs to me sometimes that these stories mightn't be all that ancient; they might equally describe some parts of our own civilization. Some leaders in the Christian church in modern times have told young Christian people that sex before marriage isn't really wrong, so long as you are truly loving. We'd be wiser to listen to the Lord himself.

3. We come down the centuries to the time of the prophet Jeremiah, and the Holy Spirit gives a long write-up about Moab, from which I select these two things.

Moab has been at ease from his youth  
and has settled on his dregs;  
he has not been emptied from vessel to vessel,  
nor has he gone into exile;  
so his taste remains in him,  
and his scent is not changed. (48:11)

We have heard of the pride of Moab—  
he is very proud—  
of his loftiness, his pride, and his arrogance,  
and the haughtiness of his heart. (v. 29)

It sounds extraordinarily like that terrible list of what Paul calls 'the works of the flesh' (Gal 5:19–21), but I mustn't anticipate.

4. If that has been the origin and character of Moab in the remote past—the way they behaved in the wilderness towards Israel, and the way they were still behaving in the time of the Prophet Jeremiah—let's come to Judges and see about them.

Meet the king of Moab, ladies and gentlemen, as he rises with a little difficulty off his throne. He totters to his feet; he is a very fat man. He's got plenty of flesh, and he's in his summer cooling parlour. I don't blame him, because Jordan is a pretty hot place to be. But if you laze around like that, at your ease too much, you haven't got much of a chance against 'the battle of the bulge' and you're liable to develop rather a lot of flesh. God always goes for

his enemies in their strongest place, and with the precision of a divine warrior he had the man killed through his belly.

God didn't do that with everybody. There was, as perhaps you noticed from our introduction, a certain Sisera, who wasn't a flabby man by any means (ch. 4). He was a military commander in charge of nine hundred chariots produced by the Canaanites in that technological age, a kind of a helicopter by our standards. He was a hard-headed business kind of a fellow, as well as a military commander, but he was an enemy of the people of God. When God killed him, he didn't kill him through his belly; he killed him through his brain. It is a sad thing that our brains can be enemies of God.

The character that the Holy Spirit has painted throughout the Old Testament of Moab makes the matter as clear as can be. Moab is the nation that God has selected to depict that part of ourselves that the Bible calls *the flesh*.

### *Ruth the Moabite*

But after that gruesome catalogue, before I proceed to think from the New Testament about this thing called the flesh, let's just liven ourselves up a bit. Do you know who is the most famous Moabite in all the world? Well I'll tell you. It was Ruth, the Moabite, ancestor of our Lord. What an honour given to a Moabite—a converted Moabite, I hasten to add. What supreme grace of God, to take a woman from a nation like that, convert her and cleanse her, and fit her to be an ancestor of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Oh, the magnificent grace of God: it is with such material that he is building his heaven. Our past hasn't been as spotless as it should have been, and if this ugly catalogue of sins and weaknesses finds us out as well, the New Testament says, 'such were some of you, but you have been cleansed, you have been washed, you have been justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God' (see 1 Cor 6:11).

### **Enemies that returned to attack again**

Before we proceed, just let's notice another little thing to see how serious the matter was. As we study these captivities, we shall find that each captivity denies a first principle of Israel's existence.

Last week we found that the enemy came from *Mesopotamia* and they brought Israel into bondage. We thought what a curious thing that was, for Mesopotamia was the land that Abraham came from at the very beginning. It was the land he was converted from. He left Mesopotamia and Haran and came into the promised land, and here was Israel in the promised land. Another king of Mesopotamia, who'd come in by the back door, had overpowered them once more.

Now this enemy, *Moab*, came and took the city of Jericho.

You say, 'Where does it say that in the Bible?'

Well, perhaps it doesn't in your translation. It says he came and 'took possession of the city of palms' (Judg 3:13). It's the same place, only Moab didn't like to call it 'Jericho' because Jericho had rather unfortunate connotations. It was the city that Israel had had to subdue and destroy in order to enter their inheritance, and when they had destroyed it they cursed it in the name of God, and God forbade that it should ever be rebuilt. It was a city of the curse (see

Josh 6:26). It was the first big victory of Israel when they came into the land, and now in Israel's weakness they have sinned against God and the enemy has come in by the back door and taken again what they thought had been a permanent victory.

It can happen, can't it? To be converted out of the world, to go on well for a time, then through one cause and another the enemy comes in the back door and we fall again into the same bondage that we knew before we were saved.

### **What does the Bible mean by 'the flesh'?**

So now let's turn and think of the theological significance of this thing called 'flesh'. If Eglon reminds us of the flesh, then let us think for a moment of what the New Testament says about it.

You say, 'Surely flesh is a very good thing? It's what we're made of, and we didn't make ourselves. Indeed, now I come to think about it, was it not the glory of our Lord Jesus that, being the eternal Word of God, he became flesh and dwelt among us?' (See John 1:14.)

In and of itself there's nothing bad in flesh; it's part of the human constitution. But, you see, man as originally made was not just flesh. He was flesh and spirit, and his spirit was in fellowship with the Father of spirits. Therefore, his spirit was in control of his flesh and made it a beautiful thing for the expression of human personality and the satisfaction of right and healthy desires. But when man fell, he died spiritually.

Says Paul of us all, 'It is true that before we were converted, we were dead in trespasses and in sins—carnal men and women, not having the spirit' (see Eph 2:1–2). Our fleshly nature rose up and became a rebel, and the apostle points out, 'the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot' (Rom 8:7).

How many of us know the truth of that? We like to think we're kings in our own castles, don't we? Woe betide anybody who bashes in the front door and tries to tell us how to live. We resent it immensely. But do you know that sometimes, in the castle of my own personality, I'm confined to the attic and it's a draughty old place up there. The flesh rises up—wrath and bad temper and envy and jealousy, and who knows what else—and tries to take over. When you try to put it down you find what the Bible says is true: 'The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.' We're not quite kings and queens in our own castles, are we? We have a fallen nature. It affects us not merely in things that are *immoral* in the strict sense of that term, but in a whole ugly brood of things, and not merely in the vices of the world, it can affect us in religious things.

Paul writes to the Colossians, 'Come now, my dear believers, you're a very nice lot, but all this business of angel worship and visions and seeing angels and getting puffed up, that's not true spirituality at all. It may sound good and marvellous and super-duper spirituality, but it isn't. It's but an exhibition of the flesh, vainly puffed up by our fleshly minds' (see 2:18).

Do you know that flesh can masquerade as spirit? Some forms of religion are merely catering to the flesh. That is notably so about salvation. We have to be taught not to put confidence in our own human effort—that is, in our unregenerate flesh—and think that is how we shall find justification and acceptance with God. We have to learn to remove our confidence completely from the flesh, and put it solely in the Lord.

The flesh can assail us in the work of the Lord. The church at Corinth didn't like Paul the apostle very much, because he wasn't a very good orator (see 2 Cor 10:10). Some of the Greek orators were brilliant in those days. They studied oratory in the universities, and you weren't a speaker at all unless you could bamboozle the audience and get them absolutely entranced and nearly off their seats with the brilliance of your oratory. Paul didn't do that. In speech he was contemptible, and he had to rebuke his Corinthian friends: 'You're putting your faith in fleshly weapons,' he said. 'The only things that God will use to convert people are spiritual weapons' (see 10:3-4). Let's all speak as best we can, but let us make sure we do not put our faith in the power of the flesh, even when doing the work of the Lord.

### 3. The deliverer God raised up

Let's come to the victory. How did it happen? We are told first of all of Ehud's preparation. Apparently he had been chosen as the leader of the little group of people who took a *present* to the king of Moab from time to time. Well, that's what some people called it. It sounded better that way; it was actually a *tribute*. Give the king a nice little present, and then he'll leave you alone for the rest of the year. But he kept demanding it and would never be satisfied. Ehud had had enough of that.

He said, 'I'm going to face him. We shall never get rid of this enemy just by giving him little presents.' So he made himself a sword—I like that bit, because it shows his intention. There was going to be a war against the flesh, and obviously not just a little 'putting to death', if you start making a sword. It had double-edges on it, and the very adjective carries with it all sorts of connotations. When he came into the king's presence, he said, 'Your Majesty, I have a message from the Lord for you,' and out came the sword and into the man's belly. So the message turned out to be a sword, and the sword turned out to be a message.

Have you got a sword like that? Of course you have. Hebrews 4 tells us that 'the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (v. 12). It can penetrate into those deep wells of our motivation and our actions.

My brother, my sister, we need to use it. Watch our blessed Lord Jesus in the desert, fighting against the devil. When the devil came to him, first of all at the level of his physical appetite, and said, 'Make these stones bread,' how did our Lord defend himself against the temptation? He got out his sword, and said, 'It is written . . .' (see Matt 4:3f).

When at last they came to take him in Gethsemane's garden, and Peter drew his physical sword and would have cut off a man's ear to prevent the arrest, our blessed Lord told him to put the sword into its sheath. Said he to Peter, 'Do you think I couldn't call to my Father and, if I wanted to avoid arrest, he would give me twelve legions of angels?' Standing in the garden, he said to Peter, 'If I don't go through with this, how then shall the Scripture be fulfilled?' (see Matt 26:47-54).

What a marvellous Saviour we have; he doesn't ask us to do what he didn't do himself. He had his own sword for use when the great emergencies and temptations came upon him. The Bible is our sword, of course.

Ehud made himself a dagger, which is a smaller version of a big sword. It's got two edges, the steel is just as good, and it's a bit handier to use. It was no good going into Moab with a mighty great thing, for Eglon would have seen it and it would have been a bit difficult to wield. He made himself a dagger. I daresay he practised with it now and again to see how quickly he could draw it.

If you won't mind my saying, you'd be advised to make yourself a sword too. Sometimes do you find it difficult when you're talking to an unconverted person about the Lord? You believe in the Bible; the Bible is the word of God, and it's a jolly good sword.

You say to your friend, 'The Bible says, "prepare to meet your God." I can show it to you. Now where is it? Corinthians? No, it's not Corinthians, it's Romans. Oh well, here's another one, "The wages of sin is death." Now, wait a minute, I knew where it was yesterday.'

What use is that? We need to make ourselves swords, don't we my brothers and sisters? They're crucial things to have at your fingertips, ready for use on the appropriate occasion.

#### **4. The tactics he employed**

So Ehud made himself a dagger. Then came the turning point in the campaign: what I'd call the right and the wrong use of the knife. That sounds a very odd phrase, but I'm referring to the fact that, when he had taken the tribute for the last time, holy Scripture says 'he sent away the people who carried the tribute. But he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal' (Judg 3:18–19).

It may well have been a boundary stone of Moab or an idol of some kind, all carved out with beautiful ancient art. If you like that style of art, they could make the images look nice. I have to confess I don't altogether understand it—they would be calculated to give me a nightmare. The quite brilliant and perceptive artists did their best to represent the various forces of nature, to which they then bowed down in their religion, worshipping those forces and the animals as gods, and in the end they came to live like animals.

How full of significance those two things were. On the one hand, the use of the knife to carve the image and make religion attractive to the flesh; and on the other hand, Gilgal with its holy but stern memories. When Israel came to Gilgal, Joshua commanded that they were to make themselves sharp knives, circumcise themselves, and cut away the flesh.

We have to make that decision, don't we? Our blessed Lord is exceedingly beautiful and attractive. That I am not denying. And God is indescribably holy, and holiness is a thing of beauty. But we must not be trapped into the false notion of beauty, trying to make religion attractive to the unregenerate mind by indulging their desires, ideas and propensities.

Says Paul, in a heavy indictment of certain people who preached that salvation was achieved by a ritual performed upon a baby at eight days old, 'They who demand you to be circumcised, why do they do it? They don't keep the law of God themselves, then why do they insist on your being circumcised? They do it,' he says, 'that they may make a fair show in the flesh' (see Phil 3:2–3).

If you tell people that they can do something to earn God's salvation, they'll feel very flattered; but it won't do. In that sense, the gospel is stern and severe. It bids us get out the

knife and cut off the flesh. True circumcision is that attitude that has no confidence in the flesh, but only in the Holy Spirit of God.

## **Gilgal**

As Ehud turned by the carved images that were by Gilgal he came to the turning point in the campaign and in his life. The images represented the wrong use of the knife to make religion attractive to the unregenerate mind; Gilgal represented the true use of the knife to have no confidence in the flesh, but to put faith in the living God and in God's Holy Spirit. With that, he came into his majesty's presence.

I like the directness of his tactics, I must say. He didn't say, 'Your Majesty, I don't like you', because Eglon might have said, 'And who are you?'

He said, 'Your Majesty, I have a message from the Lord for you.'

'Oh, have you?' said Eglon, and with some difficulty he struggled out of his seat and stood there.

'I've a message from the Lord for you,' said he—'whoomph' in it went. It really went in, because the handle went in as well, and came out behind. He didn't say, 'Sorry, I've got to hurt you a little bit.' No, of course not. That is not the way to deal with the flesh. Listen to Paul, 'For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live' (Rom 8:13). It will mean decided, decisive action, and the deliberate use of God's word and the power of his Spirit.

## **Jordan**

Ehud left that mountain of flesh on the floor, went out, locked the doors, and eventually came to the River Jordan. What memories Jordan had for them, and I hope for you as well. That was how Israel came into the promised land, and what a story it was. When they came the river was in flood, and the question was, how would they get into their inheritance? God asked them to believe that he would do a miracle. They had to walk until their feet were right in the water, as though they were going into a watery grave, and then God parted the water and they went down into the very bed of the river and came up the other side. God told them to take stones and put some on the bed of the river and some on the bank, so that when the waters came back they could stand by those stones and say, 'What do I believe? I was right down there on the bottom, below all that water, and God brought me up.'

Does that sound like a parable to you? If it doesn't, just go to sleep for two seconds while I talk to the others! The way into our great inheritance is for us to be conformed to the death of God's Son (see Phil 3:10). Not just for the bad bit, but for the whole of me to go down. That's God's verdict on my flesh. The whole of me dying with Christ, buried with Christ, so that I might rise on the other side to walk in newness of life and be conformed to his resurrection from the dead.

I'm going to let you go home and my elders will congratulate me for having improved this week, but just before you go let me suggest how you might perhaps check a little bit to see whether I have in fact got the explanation of these things correct.

## Confidence in the flesh

I'm going to leave Judges 3 and recite in your ears the main details of Philippians 3 from the New Testament. It won't be altogether my fault if you should see certain similarities between the two chapters.

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (vv. 1–11)

In Philippians 3 we meet another Benjamite. Ehud was a Benjamite, and so was the Apostle Paul. If ever a man could have got to heaven by putting his confidence in the flesh and attempting to keep the law of God, that was Saul of Tarsus. Now Paul the apostle, he reminds his fellow believers that there is a right and a wrong use of the knife: 'Beware,' he says, 'of the concision. For we are the circumcision' (vv. 2–3 KJV).

What is *concision*? Well, he's actually referring to the rite of *circumcision*, in which they got a knife to cut off the flesh. But now he uses a term almost of abuse: 'It's a *mutilation*,' he says. Here were people, taking that Old Testament rite of circumcision and, instead of using it as it should be used, they were preaching that you were contributing to your salvation by keeping that external rite. They were putting their 'confidence in the flesh' for salvation, and we need to be warned against that wrong use of the knife. Salvation does not come by any ritual.

Not the labour of my hands  
can fulfil thy law's demands;  
could my zeal no respite know,  
could my tears forever flow . . .<sup>2</sup>

No ritual could ever atone for sin. I must learn to use the knife rightly. Not concision, but circumcision. 'We are the circumcision,' says Paul, 'who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh' (v. 3).

<sup>2</sup> Augustus M. Toplady (1740-1778), 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me' (1776).

I talked about Jordan a moment ago. Well, let me talk about something else from the New Testament.

'If you need the way of salvation,' says Paul, 'it is first to be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith' (see v. 9). And then to pursue the path of ongoing holiness: 'that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead' (vv. 10–11). So, let us not set our minds on earthly things, as others do; our citizenship is in heaven, not in some cursed place on earth, like Jericho was (see vv. 19–20).

But, look out! When Ehud said, 'I've a message from the Lord for you,' there came a dagger all of a sudden and went right through the man's belly. Now listen to this other Benjamite: 'if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you . . . For many, of whom I have often told you . . . their god is their belly' (vv. 15, 18–19). That's straight talking, and Moab was subdued by that kind of tactic.

We look for a better and a more glorious victory. 'Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour' (v. 20). Ehud was a saviour in his day. Thank God for this supreme Saviour, even Jesus Christ our Lord. He's coming again, my brothers and sisters. Moab was subdued in that ancient time, and when the Lord Jesus comes he shall 'subject all things to himself' (v. 21). Oh, the glory of it. When our salvation is at last complete, he shall take even 'this body of our humiliation' (RV)—our lowly bodies, the scene of so many battlefields, some victories and many defeats, and transform them to be like his glorious body. Until that day comes, may the Lord encourage and strengthen us to fight a resolute battle against the flesh and all its works.

Shall we pray.

Oh, Lord, we have laboured and stayed long at the study of thy holy word this evening, but in some sense we have been in thy spiritual military academy. We cannot but expect the lessons to be severe and hard. Make us good soldiers of Jesus Christ, we do beseech thee, so that we might fight loyally by the power of thy Holy Spirit, having no confidence in the flesh, but every confidence in the rightness of thy word and in all its commands and prohibitions. We thank thee now for the Saviour and the prospect that one day he will complete our salvation. In the meantime, Lord, help us to treasure thy word and make from it our own personal swords that we might be diligent, faithful and zealous, putting the flesh to death, fighting the battles of the Lord, and, if it please thee by thy grace, being used in our turn as saviours of others. Hear us and dismiss us with thy blessing, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Deborah, Barak & Jael

You will perceive the importance of this third captivity suffered by Israel in the time of Judges from the fact that the Holy Spirit devotes two whole chapters to the description of the matter. I'm going to assume that you have read the prose narrative of the story in chapter 4. Tonight, therefore, I suggest that we read chapter 5, which gives us an inspired comment through Deborah's poetry, enabling us to perceive the inner spiritual significance of this great event and the splendour of the victory that God gave them when he saved them from their oppressors.

The Hebrew of this chapter is in parts obscure, and therefore you will find that Bible translations differ.

Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day: 'That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the LORD! Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the LORD I will sing; I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel. LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. The mountains quaked before the LORD, even Sinai before the LORD, the God of Israel. In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned, and travellers kept to the byways. The villagers ceased in Israel; they ceased to be until I arose; I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel. When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gates. Was shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in Israel? My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the LORD. Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys, you who sit on rich carpets and you who walk by the way. To the sound of musicians at the watering places, there they repeat the righteous triumphs of the LORD, the righteous triumphs of his villagers in Israel. Then down to the gates marched the people of the LORD. Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, break out in a song! Arise, Barak, lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam. Then down marched the remnant of the noble; the people of the LORD marched down for me against the mighty. From Ephraim their root they marched down into the valley, following you, Benjamin, with your kinsmen; from Machir marched down the commanders, and from Zebulun those who bear the lieutenant's staff; the princes of Issachar came with Deborah, and Issachar faithful to Barak; into the valley they rushed at his heels. Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds, to hear the whistling for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he stay with the ships? Asher sat still at the coast of the sea, staying by his landings. Zebulun is a people who risked their lives to the death; Naphtali, too, on the heights of the field. The kings came, they fought;

then fought the kings of Canaan, at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo; they got no spoils of silver. From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera.

The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds. Curse Meroz, says the angel of the LORD, curse its inhabitants thoroughly, because they did not come to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty. Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed.' (vv. 1-24)

Let us break off our reading of the poetry there, but with that phrase from verse 12 in our minds, 'Arise, Barak, lead away your captives', let's just look at the context where similar words occur in the New Testament, and of course they are in Ephesians 4.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.' (In saying, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. (vv. 7-18)

And may God give us good understanding of his holy word.

I am almost tempted to apologize in advance that our study tonight cannot be so simple and straightforward as it was last week, nor so easy to follow. That is partly my fault, but not altogether. We are currently studying the book of Judges so that we might learn from it principles of spiritual warfare. That means, of course, as we read the old battles of literal warfare with carnal weapons, we have to make a lot of changes in our thinking. As Christians, we are told that 'the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh' (2 Cor 10:4). It was a thousand pities and more, when in the early centuries the Christian church came to look upon such Scriptures as the book of Judges as their warrant for trying to defend or promote the Christian faith with the use of literal weapons. The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, and therefore, as we study these ancient battles, we necessarily have to make a number of transpositions.

On the other hand, it is true that sin is monotonously the same in all generations. What the Israelites were fighting in the name of God and at his instructions were some of the ugly

expressions of that universal disease and rebellion against God; that is, sin and transgression. We shall find, therefore, that the enemies they fought are essentially the enemies that we too must fight in our day. More often than not we shall find that the enemies are not external to ourselves, but hiding in our hearts and in our own minds.

Last week we were considering the ancient nation of Moab, so the enemy was easy to reconnoitre. I cannot tell you anything about their modern successes, but in the Old Testament God's characterization of Moab was very clear. From first to last it was a nation tainted with immorality and the indulgence of carnal appetite. So, having read the Prophets, we considered the king in Israel's day against whom Ehud fought, and found him to be a very fat man, loaded down with his flesh, and noticed that God destroyed him by a dagger through his belly. The whole nastiness of it reminded us of those powerful remarks of Paul in the New Testament, where he had to tell his fellow believers to, 'beware of dogs, . . . beware of the concision' (see Phil 3:2 KJV). 'I tell you again, weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ . . . whose god is their belly' (see vv. 18–19). And in went the sword of the word of God to such spiritual abnormality.

## **1. The cause of the trouble**

So last week our lesson was easy to follow. Tonight we shall find it much more complicated, because, when at first we encounter the nation that oppressed Israel and look at their features, we shall not immediately find anything that seems to be bad. Indeed, some of the things that are said about them seem almost commendable. Nevertheless, have patience with me, because, though I would like to tell you that the enemies of the Lord are always simple— the battles of the Lord are always easy, and that it's always child's play to see what is right and what is wrong and where to draw the line—that wouldn't be true. We fight an enemy who is exceedingly sophisticated. So sophisticated that he did not hesitate to approach the incarnate Son of God and put before him temptations that were subtle in the extreme. If some of us had been there instead of the Lord himself, we might have found it very difficult to see what was wrong with the suggestions that Satan was making.

In our spiritual warfare not all things are immediately clear and simple and straightforward. We shall have to look at life with care, for his satanic majesty will set up all sorts of ambushes and situations that look innocent in the extreme to us, but are the very artifices of the enemy, designed to catch us, bring us into bondage, and render us inefficient as the people of God.

### **The Canaanites**

So let us look immediately at the enemy; first of all, in general. For the background we go back in history, as Deborah teaches us in the opening verses of her poem, to that august event when, if the Bible is true, the transcendent Lord came down upon Mount Sinai and met his people, Israel, in the wilderness. What a story it is, challenging our faith to its very foundation—that the eternal God came down and presented himself to the people whom he had redeemed, and proceeded to journey with them and lead their armies into the land of Canaan. According to the Old Testament, God had great purposes indeed for that nation of Israel, and the first objective was that he brought them into the land of Canaan and settled them there as a nation.

One day, it was his good pleasure to bring in through that nation the very Saviour of the world, so dealing here in our planet with that vast rebellion that had broken out in heavenly places. As we think of the story and the initial stages of the campaign, our hearts bow in worship, don't they? We are told in holy writ, in words that condescend to our weak understanding, that the very heavens are not pure in God's sight (Job 15:15); somewhere in those remote ages a rebellion broke out amongst those exalted spirit beings that inhabit the heavens.

*God's purposes are constantly thwarted*

Their great leader, the 'anointed guardian cherub' (Ezek 28:14), rose up against God (see Isa 14:13–14). Not only did he fall himself but also vented his spite on our world. As history begins, we watch the beginnings of God's countermeasures. In answer to the rebellion of the heavens, God was pleased to centre the campaign on our little planet earth, and created man in his image. Satan immediately set about thwarting the purposes of God and bringing man over to his rebellious side. In his mercy, far from abandoning his great purposes, God proceeded with them, and here is one of the further stages in his answer to this great satanic rebellion. God himself came down, delivered this poor, small and largely unknown nation out of the hand of the Egyptians, and brought them across the wilderness. He came down on the Mountain of Sinai and led their armies personally into the land of Canaan (Judg 5:5).

*Israel's progress was constantly thwarted*

As they came into that land, there was a king called Jabin—let's call him Jabin I; we read of him in Joshua 11. Jabin gathered together a great confederacy of kings with the sole purpose of thwarting this invasion and stopping Israel becoming the residents of that land. Whether he knew what he was doing or not, he was thwarting the purposes of God in redemption and all that God subsequently intended to do through Israel. Joshua defeated him and Israel entered the land and began to settle. But then, some one hundred years and more later, there arose another Jabin—Jabin II we will call him. He had Sisera for the General of his armies and nine hundred chariots of iron; and then there came a revival of the Canaanite kings and of their civilization. The result was that for forty years they mightily oppressed the people of Israel.

What a sad picture Deborah gives in the opening verses of her poem. There was Israel, in the land all right; but see them now, fragmented, broken, with scarcely any interaction between the tribes. Anybody who dared to travel from one place to the other went skulking down the country lanes, not wanting to be seen openly and publicly. Israel lost her leaders under the Canaanite oppression, the people became unarmed. Says Deborah, 'Was shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in Israel?' (Judg 5:8).

What a sorry sight the people of God's great purpose were. Instead of being one united nation, standing solidly for God, bearing testimony to the purposes of the God of heaven, they're fragmented into tiny little bits. Dan over here has scarcely any contact with Gad over the way, and certainly not with Judah down at the bottom. They were leaderless, without defence against their enemy, without shield and without spear worth talking about to mount any aggressive evangelism. Once more they have denied a first principle in the nation's existence.

As we have studied these stories we have been interested to observe that in each of these captivities a basic principle of the nation's existence is denied. In the first captivity Israel came under the domination of the King of Mesopotamia: ironically enough, for it was out of Mesopotamia that Abraham had been called. What was the use of the holy nation being now in the land of promise, if once more they have come under the domination of the king of Mesopotamia? In the second captivity Moab took the city of Jericho: Jericho, being the first city that Israel had taken when they came over the river Jordan to begin their conquest of the land. It was so sad, as they went on, that the enemy had come in behind and taken Jericho all over again. What's the good of making progress and defeating further enemies, if the enemy is coming behind and re-establishing himself in places we thought we had already conquered?

Now it is said that Jabin, the king of Canaanites, cruelly oppressed Israel (Judg 4:3). That's exactly what Pharaoh did in Egypt, and it was wonderful to be redeemed; but what practical use is it to be in Canaan if the people of God are still going to be oppressed by enemies?

You say, 'However did they get to this sorry state of affairs? It not only denies a basic principle of their existence, it makes a nonsense of the purpose of God for them.'

In God's great eternal purposes Israel were destined to be taken out of the nations and planted in the land, to be the vehicle for the testimony of God among the Gentiles, until all the nations could see the truth that Jehovah is God, in all his glorious uniqueness and the beauty of his holiness—that Jehovah is true, as distinct from all the idolatry of the Gentiles. Now, when Israel should be standing for that truth, they are fragmented. They scarcely dared to open their mouths, they were defenceless and without spear for attack. What's happened to their testimony? The purpose of God, that one day through that nation the Messiah should come, seems to be thwarted. That looks a forlorn hope now. How would you begin to believe it, if you saw those Israelites so fragmented, so weak, so miserably oppressed?

### **The danger of compromise**

You say, 'How did they come to such a grievous situation?'

Deborah's verdict is very succinct, 'They chose new gods' (see 5:8 KJV).

That's how it happened. What a sorry story. Had they grown tired, perhaps, of the real living God? He had redeemed them from his wrath in Egypt and brought them safely through the wilderness. He had deigned to presence himself among them as the God who loved them and loved to be their God. He had invited them to be his people, and in their fickle hearts they compromised the truth of the one true God, the unique Saviour of men. Instead of Israel standing amongst the nations, crying to them, as Isaiah subsequently did, 'Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other' (45:22), Israel herself compromised the very basic truth of her existence and went after other gods.

'When new gods were chosen,' says Deborah 'then war was in the gates' (5:8).

As we read those far-off stories, we cannot help remembering ourselves. As believers in the Lord Jesus, it is possible for us to do similar things. We too have been redeemed, and God likewise has purposes for us that are grand beyond description.

We are meant to stand in this world as the early apostles did, witnessing to the unique glory of Jesus Christ our Lord, 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). Yet it is all too

possible that we get deceived and turn aside. Listen to Paul talking to his fellow believers in Corinth, 'I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (2 Cor 11:3).

It's possible for believers to get caught out—in theological college, perhaps—and to imbibe theories that, if you were to push to their logical conclusion, would call in question the deity and omniscience of Jesus Christ our Lord. For believers in this present day it is possible to be so influenced by the modern spirit of the world that they are inclined to say, 'We mustn't be proud and bigoted. Isn't it time we admitted that Christianity is just one religion among many? It is one way to God, but there are many other ways.' Some people like to think it is Christian charity to talk like that, but it is nothing short of fundamental disloyalty to the blessed person of our Lord.

'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all' (1 Tim 2:5–6). Let no one say this is bigoted, for it is glorious. His sacrifice was so big, you don't need any other; his salvation is so powerful, his person so great, you won't need any other saviour. In the end all other systems of salvation are idolatrous; they depend on human effort and human work. Jesus Christ is Jehovah incarnate and he stands unique among the religions of the world. He offers you a salvation that is free; not by your works nor by your merit. 'Turn to me and be saved,' he says, '. . . For I am God, and there is no other' (Isa 45:22). May God prevent us from compromising this fundamental point of our Christian testimony and grant that it will never be true of us, 'they chose other gods'.

## 2. The nature of the enemy

But let us now come and look at the features of this enemy that so deceived Israel and, in the end, oppressed them.

### King Jabin

First of all, there was their king, whose name was Jabin. Some of the experts tell us that his name possibly means something like 'he perceives', and if that is so it was probably given to him as a kind of an honourable title, like some rulers in Europe in the past centuries were called 'the wise'. It's always good to flatter your king and tell him he's wise, even if he isn't. It could be that the name was quite common, and therefore we attach little importance to it. But, as king of the Canaanites, if he did lay claim to wisdom, he had some justification, for look at the next thing we are told about him, 'he had 900 chariots of iron' (4:3).

Now you smile. What is that compared with your computers, your space probes, your laser beams, Star Wars, and all that kind of thing? You smile at these crude objects from the ancient world, but I'll have you know that they thought they were just as clever as you. They'd got chariots of iron, and that was advanced technology for the people in those times. Israel's heart sank into their boots when they saw them. All they'd got were old-fashioned clubs and one or two spears that they'd knocked out of a bit of a second-hand tin; and here was Jabin with the very latest technology he could possibly get hold of. It had been discovered a long while, but now the Canaanites had got it. They knew how to smelt iron, which was quite something for people in that far-off day; and when they got the iron they knew how to work

it and create chariots. What could you do against an enemy like that, if all you've got is a homemade spear? It's like fighting a Russian tank with your fists.

I hope you're beginning to perceive that these folks weren't like that flabby king of Moab, letting himself grow overweight in his summer chamber, taking life easy. This was what the industrial north of England used to be in days gone by. It was a great centre of metal work, engineering and invention, indicating no ordinary amount of brains.

### **The merchandise of the Canaanites**

And then we're told that Jabin was king of the *Canaanites*. Now the Canaanites have a long history in the ancient world, and at different times they covered less or more territories. But one of the features that marked them was that they were famous as merchants. One part of their descendants became Tyre and Sidon, and from reading the Prophets or history we know what good merchants the people of Tyre and Sidon were. It goes together, doesn't it? They were leading the technology of the day, and they were also merchants. How else would it be? When you had to import horses for your chariots, then you could sell your Mark II chariot that was better than anybody else's chariot, with all the other things you had invented and made.

They became so famous in the ancient world that in subsequent centuries the name Canaanite became a synonym for merchant. Just like some of the Babylonians—the Chaldeans—were so famous as soothsayers that in Latin the word *Chaldeus* means soothsayer.

So, when you read in Zechariah 14:21 of the prophet's vision of the great day when the Lord shall have come and everything shall be restored—'And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day', we don't know how to translate it. 'There shall be no more the *Canaanite* in the house of the LORD of hosts' (KJV); or there shall no longer be a *merchant* in the house of the Lord. Perhaps the latter, for when you read such a promise you can't help thinking about how our Lord found the temple when he was on earth. He came to his Father's house, expecting it to be a house of prayer, and, lo and behold, religion had become infected with the spirit of merchandise, and had been turned into a way of making money. What a sorry feature that has been, and Christendom has not been guiltless. 'There are some,' says Paul, 'who imagine that godliness is a way of making money' (see 1 Tim 6:5). They're in it because they get a vast profit on their literature, their relics, and their religious knick-knacks—*merchants*.

### **Captain Sisera**

And then we notice that Sisera, the captain of the host, was eventually killed through his brain. That might have seemed to us just a little insignificant detail, had we not noticed that the tactics in the book of Judges are very carefully emphasized by the Spirit of God.

Last week we saw how fitting it was and how significant that the enemy was killed through his belly. He was a fat man: he spoke to us of man's flesh and his fleshly nature. This week we are to meet a man who was not killed through his belly, he was killed through his brain. He was commander in chief of the forces, with a tremendous regiment of nine hundred tanks. You don't put a soft, flabby fellow in charge of nine hundred tanks. Being a hard-headed military commander of that leading technological nation, I suspect Sisera was brilliant

in his brain power. God went for his strongest point and had him killed through his brain. Perhaps you'll remember I promised you at the beginning of this lecture that it's going to be a little bit difficult.

'Well,' you say, 'if that's what the Canaanites were, what was wrong with them?'

*What's wrong with technology?*

Nothing, as far as I know. I'm very glad of my car, and I am thankful to God for the modern technology that has provided the medics with X-rays and all sorts of body scanners. I wouldn't prefer to be living in the jungle, nor would I think it more pious to do so. There's nothing wrong with brainpower. God made our brains. Moreover, he calls upon us to love the Lord our God, not only with all our soul, but with all our mind (Matt 22:37). We may not all have equally able minds. We are not all Siseras or Jabins; but what minds we have, God calls upon us to use to the utmost of their ability. We are to think; we're not to be lazy with our intellects. My dear young folk, you are in the youth of life and your brains are the sharpest they'll ever be. Do give your brains to Christ. Learn how to think. It is an absolute slander to say that you can't be a Christian unless you're prepared to put your head in the sand and not think. It's God who asked you to think: to love him with your heart *and all your mind*.

*What's wrong with commerce?*

Nothing, I hope. I enjoy tomatoes from the Canaries, don't you? And sultanas that won't grow in Northern Ireland come in very acceptably. Thank God for commerce. So, what's wrong with it all? I ask you to notice the last significant thing for the moment. We are told that Sisera lived in Harosheth *of the Gentiles* (Judg 4:2 KJV). Nobody's quite sure where Harosheth was, but notice that phrase, 'Harosheth of the Gentiles'. Again, you might at first be inclined to think that it is not very significant.

You say, 'But, other than Israelites, surely everybody was a Gentile? Harosheth was bound to be a Gentile.'

In a way that is true, but then let me briefly call your attention to the ways that the Holy Spirit of God characterizes people and nations in Old Testament times. God will talk, for instance, of the Amalekites. Now all nations were sinners by definition, but when God talks about the Amalekites, he says, '*the sinners, the Amalekites*' (1 Sam 15:18). Or again, he talks about the '*uncircumcised Philistine*' (17:26). Many nations outside Israel were uncircumcised, but when God talks about the Philistine, he frequently calls attention to this specific characteristic, '*the uncircumcised*' Philistine.

So, when God begins to talk about these Canaanites, he observes where they lived. Sisera lived in Harosheth of the Gentiles, up north in the area that subsequently came to be called Galilee, and even in New Testament times it is described as '*Galilee of the Gentiles*' (Matt 4:15). That is where Israel had immediate contact with Gentiles, and with a Gentile way of life. Notice the way the New Testament talks. 'Gentile' in the New Testament is not merely an ethnic description; it carries with it certain moral and spiritual characteristics. So much so that believers are warned about behaving or thinking like Gentiles. In Matthew 6, for instance, our Lord is heard saying, 'And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words' (v. 7). Then at the end of that chapter he warns us about having the same objectives as Gentiles as we go to our daily work,

'For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all' (v. 32). In Ephesians 4 Paul warns, 'Don't please continue in the Gentile mindset, but learn to look at this world and think as truly regenerate people' (see vv. 17–32).

And so it's not the things in themselves that were wrong, the technology and the brains, nor the merchandise. It was using these in a Gentile way that was wrong, and for a moment now I want to concentrate your mind on certain practical exhortations in the New Testament that ask us not to behave like Gentiles.

### **The Gentile attitude to work**

Our Lord begins by saying, 'No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money' (Matt 6:24). In your daily work you will be serving one or the other: God, in whose service there is perfect freedom; or money, if you go to work with the motivation of a Gentile, and you will eventually bring yourself under bondage.

How then should I go to work?

Says our Lord, 'When you go to work, don't seek after food and clothes' (see vv. 31–32).

You say, 'That's impractical. Why else would anybody go to work if it wasn't to seek food and clothes? I mean, that's the whole reason why I go to work. If I didn't have to get food and clothes I wouldn't go to work, I'd retire.'

Oh, fancy that! Hadn't we better think a bit, because our Lord says that's what the Gentiles do? When they go to work their motivation is to get food and clothes.

'Don't be like Gentiles,' says the Lord.

Why then should I go to work?

'But seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you' (v. 33).

'First', before what? When I was a youth and a little bit more senseless than I am now, I used to think it meant that, before you go to work, you should take the pains to give out a few tracts. Do the Lord's work first; put the Lord's work before your daily work. I suppose that's good advice, but I've come to think that it's not what the Lord means. He means something bigger than that. Not *first* attend to the Lord's interests, and *then* your own interests, but when you go to your daily work let your first motivation be the rule of God in your life and the righteousness which that rule produces. According to our Lord that is what daily work is about; it is a most sacred thing. It doesn't really matter whether you're in merchandise with computers, or you're sweeping the streets and keeping them lovely and clean for us; the real thing is that are you seeking the Lord's rule and the righteousness that comes from it.

You say, 'What do you mean by seeking the Lord's rule?'

Well, very simple and practical things, my dear brothers and sisters. It is God's great purpose to have us in glory, conformed to the image of his Son. He has a vast inheritance for us, 'imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven', and he is in process of wanting to lead us into it (see 1 Pet 1:4).

'How shall he conform me to the image of his Son?'

If we're going to be conformed to the image of his Son, we shall need to be honest and truthful and unselfish and loyal and faithful and responsible. We can see that in the Bible.

'That's marvellous. Now I've learnt the lesson,' you say.

'No,' says God, 'of course you haven't learnt the lesson. That's only the theory! Having learnt the theory, now you've got to put it into practice and actually get training in being honest and faithful and truthful.'

'Where shall I get that experience from?'

In your daily work. You businessmen know what a tough school it is to live in a Gentile world, where businessmen sometimes cut corners and the pressures are immense. What it is to be a factory manager and stand between the bosses and the unions and try your hardest to be fair-minded. Sometimes you wish you could get out of it all, because of the colossal pressures of being in a modern world.

Oh, my brother, let me encourage you if I could. That's why God sends you to work. By the very disciplines of daily work, you are learning to be honest, learning to be faithful to God, learning to be true, learning to be unselfish. That is the point of life. God is preparing you for the great inheritance in glory. Seek first his rule.

You say, 'Yes, but I've got to get my bread and butter.'

Of course you have. 'Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all' (Matt 6:32). Of course he does. It's not wrong to go to work in order to get money to pay the grocery bills. 'If anyone is not willing to work,' says Scripture, 'let him not eat' (2 Thess 3:10). But simply to get clothes and food mustn't be the first motive for going to work. If you do that, you're serving money, and in the end you are in danger of bondage.

Here's a good man, a Christian of sterling character, but he's in a very difficult, complicated business situation, and the only reason really that he's there is to make the money to get food and clothes and keep the children at school. The boss demands that he cooks the books. If he goes along with the crooked method, he'll get the money he needs. If he refuses to be dishonest, he could get the sack.

If he were in work merely for the sake of the food and the clothes, do you see what would happen? He would be tempted to be dishonest, wouldn't he? He'd get the food and the clothes and lose the very reason why God sent him to work. The whole purpose of God in conforming the man to Christ would be hindered, and the testimony of the church in the world and the gospel compromised.

You don't have to cheat in business for it to become an oppressor. Many a budding young academic, because of the pressure of competition, spends nearly twenty-four hours a day at his studies. He has no time for Scripture, little time for prayer, and in the end his spiritual health comes to be at an all-time low. If there is a man who sets himself for business, for clothes, for car, for home, he pays a very big price in the end. His knowledge of God's word, his communion with the Lord, his ability to minister to his fellow believers, go by the board. The *Canaanite* has got him in bondage.

Now here's another fellow. His trouble is that he's got too little work. Am I speaking to somebody here who's tormented by the fact that you're unemployed? It seems to you that the world doesn't want you. Your trouble is not too much work, but too little. My dear friend, if work was everything, you would be in a poor state, wouldn't you?

Let me tell you that the whole point of life is to seek the kingdom of God, his rule and the righteousness it brings. You can seek it in your daily job, and if you haven't got 'a daily job', you can still seek it, can't you? Find something to do that will help to develop in you a

Christian character. That's what life is about. Can you not see that there's a big difference between the Gentile way of looking at things and the Christian way?

It's not only in material things that we shall need not to behave like Gentiles. In the strictly spiritual realm, we shall have to beware of unregenerate wisdom. The purpose of God is this. He sent his Son to deliver us. Now his Son is raised, and in a sense we're raised up with him and seated in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). But in another sense we have not all attained to the unity of the faith, and the great purposes of God in the church await their final fulfilment, and we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (see 4:13–15).

You can scarcely read an epistle in the New Testament, but you'll find God's holy truth assaulted from every possible angle. Galatians will tell how certain false teachers were assailing the doctrine of justification by faith. In Colossians there were others who were assailing the doctrine of the fullness in Christ, telling people they needed philosophy and angel worship and penance, and who knows what else, in order to become more holy. John, the apostle of love, warns us that 'many antichrists have come' (1 John 2:18). And what do they do? They deny the person of the Lord Jesus.

It's common knowledge in the New Testament that Satan, even in those days, was attacking the truth of God from every conceivable angle. We are called upon to fight the battles of the Lord; not merely now to abstain from carnal indulgence, but to stand solidly and loyally for the truth of God's great purposes in history. He sent his Son—the Lord Jesus Christ was indeed of the seed of David; he was born of a virgin; he did die; he rose literally from the dead, and has literally gone back to heaven. But one day he shall come again, and it is the purpose of God to have every believer united with him in glory as the body of which Jesus Christ is the head. That is God's revealed plan and Satan will use every technique he knows to undermine the whole purpose and stop God's people arriving in their heavenly destiny, by casting doubt upon the truth. We're called to fight the battles of the Lord; not just to be good people, but to be spiritual people.

### **3. The deliverers God raised up**

#### **It was a battle in two stages**

##### *Stage 1*

First of all, there was Deborah and Barak, and if you follow the details of her poem you will notice what happened. The battle took place up in the north, and Deborah, led by the Holy Spirit of God, instructed Barak to go up north to Mount Tabor, which was a sizeable mountain in those parts. 'When you get up there, God will draw Sisera and his chariots towards Mount Tabor, to the River Kishon. And what you're to do, Barak, is to come *down* the mountain.'

When he heard that, he must have been horror struck. Come down the mountain? What does Deborah know about fighting? The Canaanites had nine hundred chariots, and of course you use chariots on the plain, so Israel should go *up* the mountain. The chariots can't go up the mountain; Israel would be pretty secure and they could fight a guerrilla warfare, poking their noses round a rock here and out of a cave somewhere else. But to come down the mountain with ten thousand men who scarcely have a spear, and stand on the plain while

nine hundred chariots go charging around you—well, they'd cut you to mincemeat. It sounded utter folly to expose their weakness to the enemy like that.

'And that's precisely what I want you to do,' said God. 'Come down the mountain to where the enemy is and the chariots are, and I shall come in front of you.'

Do you know what happened that turned apparent folly into brilliant tactics? When they got down the mountain, God caused an enormous great cloudburst. There was such torrential rain that it turned that little River Kishon into a mighty raging torrent that swamped the whole plain. Before Sisera knew where he was, the whole thing was a quagmire and his chariots were all bogged down in the mud. He had to get off his chariot and try to run to save his life.

You say, 'There's an advantage, surely, in being in touch with God; to being a prophetess, and knowing God's revealed truth?'

Yes, see the wisdom of God that seemed to be folly, but it was a glorious strategy. I have talked about Barak coming down the mountain and it seemed folly, allow me just to remind you of God's central strategy in the great war of the ages. The blessed Son of God came down, didn't he? Down to our planet, and allowed himself to be nailed on a cross. The weakness of God, and the folly of it—Jesus Christ delivered over into the hands of men. But it was the most superlative wisdom, such as the rulers of this world never knew—for, had they known it, 'they would not have crucified the Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2:8).

What a mistake Satan made. 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor 1:18). When all seemed lost, the message of the cross proved to be God's effective strategy for the salvation of everyone who believes.

### *Stage 2*

I can't help thinking how Sisera's hopes were thwarted. There was his mother, the queen mother, and his wife and all their ladies, looking out of their castle, saying, 'Why is Sisera not coming? We thought he would have been here by this time, having mopped up those little Israelites, and brought back the spoil.' He didn't though, did he? Barak came down the mountain with God in front of them, and he took his captors captive. It was Barak who divided the spoil, and as I think about it my mind turns to bigger things.

### **A bigger battle**

Our blessed Lord not only came down, but the one who came down is the one who's gone up victorious, and has led a host of captives and given gifts to men. What a lovely story it is.

Let me tell you of one of the big captives he took. His very chief enemy was a man called Saul of Tarsus, '[who] was convinced that [he] ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth' (Acts 26:9). He went around assaulting the believers and casting them into prison, but our brilliant Lord Jesus Christ led him captive and gave him to the church so that one day it might be fully complete, achieving the unity of the faith. What a lovely story of triumph it has been all down the ages. Millions of men and women who were once in the power of darkness, captured by the blessed Lord and given to his church as gifts towards the perfecting of his people.

## 4. The tactics they employed

### The victory was in two stages

#### *Stage 1*

First, there was what Deborah and Barak did by coming down the mountain with God leading the way. That was the great initial victory, and we have spent some time on that.

#### *Stage 2*

Then there had to be the second part, which was the mopping up of Sisera the great captain. He got down off his chariot and ran for his life, and eventually came to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. Jael has been much criticized for what she did, and I have the notion that people haven't always understood the situation she found herself in. Here was a fully armed man. One slice of his sword would have ended her life forever. She invited him in — what else could she do? She gave him milk.

He said, 'Stand at the door of your tent, and when anybody comes and says, "Is there a man here?" you say "no".'

Well that was impossible. Barak was coming up the road presently and if he had come to Jael's tent and said, 'Jael, have you got a man inside here?' and Jael had said 'no', that would have been the end of Jael, for Barak would have killed her if he'd found out. She had to make up her mind whose side she was on. Would she be loyal to her recent friends, the Canaanites, or to her long-distant friends where her loyalties really lay, Moses and the Israelites? She decided positively now to take her stand once more with them, reached for a tent peg and hammered it through the man's brains (see Judg 4:15–22).

### A bigger victory

That's what you will have to do. The Lord has won the victory and gone back to heaven. He's placed us as gifts in his church, having rescued us from the enemy and given us to his people. My brothers and sisters, there's some fighting to do. You'll have to face this matter of the Gentile mind — the Gentile attitude to life, the Gentile attitude to God's truth — and you'll have to take your tent peg and take your stand for the blessed Lord and his people.

Paul appealed to the Corinthians, 'Stand fast for the gospel. The only thing that can save you is not men's philosophy but the gospel of the cross' (see 1 Cor 1:18). So we too must take our tent peg and put it through the brain of all mere human imagination setting itself against God's revealed truth. We must take our stand on the message of the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord, and on the way we run our churches. 'If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise' (1 Cor 3:18). We must examine our churches in the light of God's revealed truth and ask ourselves how far we have compromised God's truth. Are we running our churches simply by the dictates of mere human reason? If necessary we must become fools, put our tent peg through human wisdom, and determine to go by God's revealed truth.

As we go to our work tomorrow, that could be difficult; but we must seek God's grace to put our tent peg through the Gentile mindset and go to work not like Gentiles do, merely to

get food and clothes, but to serve the rule of God and his righteousness. There's a battle to be fought and we have a chance to be in it.

*Taking our place in the battle*

Hear then, Deborah's song: 'My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the LORD' (Judg 5:9).

Naphtali and Issachar risked their very lives for the sake of God and the battles of the Lord. Praise the Lord for such marvellous devotion to the Lord and his truth.

Dan wasn't there, was he?

You say, 'What do you mean, he wasn't there?'

When the battle was going on, Dan wasn't there.

'Where was he?'

In the ships, apparently. So was Asher.

'What was he in the ships for?'

I don't know. I suppose that's how he made his money, and when the big battle of the Lord was on he just wasn't there. Oh, my brother, why did Dan stay with the ships?

God grant that in the great battles of life we shall all be there to fight for the Lord, and not immersed so much in other things that we have no time for the deliverance of God's people.

The Lord bless his word and compensate you for your great powers of endurance, sitting on those seats for such a long time on a Sunday night.

And let us pray.

Oh Lord, now we bring thee thy holy word. We confess before thee that studying it can be tough and hard, but we call to mind that we are in a battle, and for the sake of the Lord Jesus we are prepared by thy grace to endure hardness, as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. If the lessons have been a little difficult to follow and to learn tonight, Lord, we ask thy grace and the workings of thy Holy Spirit that we might progressively understand them in the days to come. But the hardest thing, Lord, would not be the learning of the lesson, but the putting of it into practice. Give us thy divine wisdom, we beseech thee, and confidence in thy word and in thy redeeming strategy. Oh God, save us from becoming entangled and in bondage to the affairs of this world, but rather may we so live and work as to honour thee, seek thy rule, develop thy righteousness, and be found efficient and free to join in the great battles of the Lord, so that we might share at last with our Saviour the joy of the final victory. For his name's sake. Amen.

## Samson

Tonight we are to study the life and work of Samson, and therefore we shall read three small background passages.

In Genesis 17 we have the record of the covenant of circumcision that God made with Abraham.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.' Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.' (vv. 1–6)

Jeremiah 9 shows us that even the Old Testament itself was aware of the distinction between the physical and external rite of circumcision and the moral and spiritual truths that it taught by its symbolism.

Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practises steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD. Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh—Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised [meaning literally so], and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart.' (vv. 23–26)

And finally, a comment from the New Testament in Hebrews 11.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. (v. 32)

Of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (vv. 38–40)

God grant us good understanding of his word.

So we come to study briefly the life and work of that great man of faith, Samson. It will set us a very rigorous exercise in humility, in charity, mercy and discernment, and then in the enjoyment of the grace of God. Samson's faults are so evident, and in some sense so unrelievedly disastrous, that it is possible we should overlook our own frailty and forget to be humble. We may subconsciously imagine that we are superior to him and fail to consider seriously the injunction of the inspired apostle, 'let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall' (1 Cor 10:12). As we consider another man's faults we shall need special grace ourselves.

His faults are so clear that, if we are not careful, we could become obsessed with his faults, and therefore come to harsh and censorious judgments over the things that were bad and fail to see the good. We may even misinterpret what was good, because we are so influenced by his obvious faults. Let a good man fail and fall, and we tend to think more of his failure and his fall than we do of his past good achievements. For that we need humility and charity, and Godly discernment.

Samson was a man who experienced the supernatural power of God's Holy Spirit, perhaps more than any other in Old Testament days. His life reads in some parts like a marvellous exhibition of sheer supernatural power of the Spirit of God. We shall need discernment, therefore, to see that it is possible to confuse spirituality and morality. The church in Corinth came behind none in the wealth of spiritual gift that God had given them, but they also came behind very few in their immorality, to which they became ensnared, in spite of—I nearly said, because of—their spiritual gifts.

While we applaud all that was good and achieved by Samson, his disobedience to God's word at last had its inevitable effect. God's patience may be long, but continuance in disobedience leads finally to spiritual disaster. We shall find a potent lesson here for ourselves. The fact that God uses us in spite of our disobedience should teach us to be more humble and loyal and obedient to the Lord and to his word.

It should never lead us to argue, 'I know this isn't perhaps the scriptural thing to do, but God has blessed me, so what does it matter in the end whether I obey holy Scripture or not? The fact that God has blessed me and used me sanctions my disobedience.'

If we thus abuse the grace of God, and take it as permission for substandard behaviour, inevitably we shall pay the penalty. 'For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption' (Gal 6:8). Nonetheless, if we need humility and charity and discernment, what a lovely lesson it will be in the grace of God.

As I read this ancient story of Samson and watch how God used such an imperfect man, I say to myself what a marvel it is that God uses any one of us. Has it not amazed you, my brother, even at the peak of your spirituality, that God would use you, imperfect as you are, falling short of his holy standards? How is it that the great God of heaven has allowed us to do what angels would love to do? Weak and failing as we are, he has put into our hands the indescribable privilege of working for him, used by his Spirit in the battles of the Lord. What grace of God, that he uses us in spite of our infirmity.

Even when Samson lost his sight and his freedom and became a slave in the prison house of Dagon, God was merciful. His hair grew again and God allowed him to reap some kind of victory, even from the very jaws of disaster. Courage, my brother, my sister, if you began well

and then you failed, God is merciful yet. It's possible for our *hair*, so to speak, to grow again. Within the limits that our failures have placed on God himself, he can revive us and grant a victory of sorts, even at the end.

Judges is a lovely book about the salvation of God, and if I fail in these objectives and say wrong things about Samson I am sure he'll hold no grudge against me. We shall love each other in heaven and I think he will be glad to know that he was used to educate and help the likes of us. God gives no licence for careless living, but he can take my very mistakes and use them to preserve some of my brothers and sisters.

To help us arrive at a true and just judgment of Samson's life, let us spend a few moments looking at the context of the whole of this book.

### **The pattern of the history of the book of Judges**

On our first occasion we observed that in chapter 3 God explains the pattern of the history that we shall read in this book. From time to time, Israel sinned against the Lord and he delivered them into the hands of their enemies. When the enemies' oppression had proved rigorous and painful, Israel would be brought to repentance and cry to the Lord. In his mercy, he would raise them up a saviour and a deliverer, who would deliver them and set them free once more.

Then the circle repeated itself. After some years of prosperity, once more they disobeyed the Lord and foolishly did evil in his sight. Again the Lord had to deliver them into the hand of their enemies. Only there is this difference. The cycle is not only repeated, but each time it gets worse. When they were delivered from the first bondage, we read that they did even worse in the sight of the Lord; so it's not just repetition.

The historian arranges the material in his book so as to make this point. I shall attempt to summarize for you the earliest and the latest chapters of the book. Generally, people find the last chapters to be an exceedingly difficult story, but let us see how the writer has helped us to try and understand these things.

### **The all-tribal assembly**

There were times when matters had to be decided that could not be decided by individual tribes working alone, and therefore delegates from all the tribes had to meet and take decisions before the Lord that would affect the whole nation. We call that institution the all-tribal assembly.

*In Judges 1:1–2:5* we read of them meeting before the Lord to determine a very important matter; in one sense, a very happy matter. The first phase of the conquest was over and now Israel were going into the second phase. What could be happier and more delightful now than for each man to secure the inheritance that God had given him, and enjoy the butter and the honey, the milk and the wine and the figs? The question that the all-tribal assembly brought before God was this:

'Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?' The LORD said, 'Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.' (1:1–2)

Then we read how Judah went up and made a magnificent start. The story of the all-tribal assembly waiting upon God to be told the order of the conquest of the land: how to defeat the enemy and so to enter into the inheritance. It is delightful.

*In chapters 20–21, the last stories in the book bring us back to that all-tribal assembly. They're meeting once more before the Lord, asking the same question, 'Who shall go up first for us?' But you will at once perceive that the key and the mood are different. It's no longer a question of going up to defeat the enemy.*

The people of Israel arose and went up to Bethel and enquired of God, 'Who shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin?' And the LORD said, 'Judah shall go up first.'  
(20:18)

It's the armies of Israel going up to discipline a sinful tribe, Benjamin. By their ghastly, immoral behaviour they had brought such a blot on the name of the people of God that they must be disciplined. That's not so happy. Better a meeting of the church elders to discuss the next gospel campaign, or to plan the teaching of holy Scripture for the incoming year. It's a sad necessity that occurs sometimes, when there's a meeting to ponder what steps of discipline must be taken upon an erring brother, but these things happen.

Alas, in trying to discipline the sinful tribe of Benjamin, the all-tribal assembly made a complete disaster of it. Starting with a bad thing, they made it ten times worse and befouled the very sacred things they were meant to preserve—the sanctity of sex, the sanctity of oath, the sanctity of safe travel and hospitality. The historian calls upon us to observe how that one very big institution in Israel failed, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (21:25). Eventually it was necessary for Israel to go over to rule by kings, instead of the theocracy which they had enjoyed.

### **Idolatry: recurrent and endemic**

Look at the other two blocks of material that begin and end the book.

*In 2:6–3:6, we have the melancholy story of Israel's recurrent idolatry. When they were prosperous they forgot the Lord, went after the gods of the heathen nations around them, and fell into idolatry. Then they repented and God restored them by raising up a saviour. Mercifully in the early days it was a thing that happened only from time to time, and from which they recovered.*

*In 17:1–18:31, when you come towards the end of the book you read some very sorry stories indeed. Now the idolatry is not recurrent, it's built into the very fabric of the nation; taken up and institutionalized by no less a person than a Levite, who was Moses' own grandson (18:30). Just imagine, Moses' grandson now takes up office as the priest of the tribe of Dan, a worship centred round a silly little old silver image, open idolatry and institutionalized.*

We're told how Dan went north to conquer some of these Canaanites and came across a city called Laish. It was in the name of God, I suppose, that they went and conquered those heathen Canaanites, took the town, dwelt there and established idolatry. Things have come

to a sorry state when the very Israel that was sent into the land to destroy idolatry is now destroying the Canaanites and putting in their own idolatry.

Sometimes I find myself wishing that the only missionaries who had ever gone to the heathen were those who took the pure gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord, and not some form of idolatry with them and implanted it there. The point I really want to make is that, between the beginning and the end of the book, things have seriously deteriorated.

### **A summary so far**

Now I call your attention once more to that list of major judges that I put before you on the first occasion. Othniel, Ehud, Deborah with Barak and Jael, Gideon, Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson.

After Gideon, notice how things deteriorated. I suppose, in some part, the rot set in with Gideon, because in his story we are told how he first stood against idolatry, cast down the idolatrous image, fought the enemy, and all seemed well. But, having fought the enemy, he fell out with his brethren, the Israelites, and started fighting them, and ended up by lapsing into idolatry.

Under Deborah, Barak and Jael, a woman killed the enemy commander through his skull, and that was a notable victory. In the story of Abimelech, another woman kills the commander through his skull. She puts a millstone right on top of his cranium and smashes it in. That put a merciful end to all his nonsense. But the sorry thing, over which you should nearly weep, is that the enemy wasn't a Canaanite. The enemy was one of the princes of Israel, who had made such a nuisance of himself among the people of God and brought them into bondage, that this woman couldn't stick it any more. It was a victory, but a sorry one, when the people of God had to be delivered from one of their own deliverers.

Ehud fought against the Moabites, Ammon, and Amalek. He is marked by his so-called diplomacy, when he brought a message to the enemy. After he had assassinated the king he went down to the fords of Jordan. As the enemy came there to make their escape, Ehud and his warriors despatched them and Moab was subdued.

Later in the book we read of a certain Jephthah. He was a man of faith, says the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:32-33). He likewise fought the Ammonites, and was also marked by diplomacy. He sent several messengers to the enemy, but when he had defeated them he too fell out with his brethren. He took the fords of Jordan, and when his national brethren came to the fords he set them a test. They were of a slightly different tribe. Said he, 'Say Shibboleth,' and the poor men couldn't quite phrase it. They wanted to say it, and they meant the same thing, but their lips wouldn't form the correct pronunciation. Instead of saying 'Shibboleth', they said 'Sibboleth' (see Judg 12:5-6). The fact that they meant the same thing, and they were brothers in the same nation, counted nothing with Jephthah. If they couldn't say things exactly his way, he slit their throats. It's a sorry business, isn't it? It was a good thing when the people of God gained victory at the fords of Jordan over their enemies. It's a sorry thing when the people of God fall out, though they mean the same thing, cut each other to pieces, and then count it a victory.

In the second part of Judges, the historian has deliberately arranged his material to show that, even in the middle of its apparent revivals and victories, the nation of Israel is going downhill. If you can see that, then you will perceive more easily the point that the Holy Spirit of God is making when he contrasts Samson, the last deliverer, with Othniel, the first deliverer.

The secret of Othniel's success was his wife. He did battle for the Lord and delivered the people of God. The reason they had come into difficulty at that time was because they had taken wives from the nations that were around them (3:6). Disobeying God's holy word, they had intermarried with the heathen, the unconverted, reaping the inevitable consequence when believers marry unbelievers. God raised up Othniel to deliver his people from the bondage caused by this serious fault.

## 1. The cause of the trouble

With that we come to Samson, a great man of God and the Bible calls him a man of faith (see Heb 11:32–33). Let me say nothing else. He was stirred by the Spirit of God (Judg 13:25), and certainly won many spectacular battles for the Lord, but his whole career was damaged from the start because he insisted on marrying heathen women. Now the very judge himself is guilty of the sins the people had to be judged for in earlier days. He insists on doing it and won't agree that there's anything wrong. God blesses him in spite of it, but the final result is inevitable.

Othniel's wife urged him to ask for additional inheritance from Caleb, her father, and this was the secret of Othniel's success. What Samson's wives' urged him to do was the secret of his downfall, and therefore we shall have to try to come to some balanced assessment of Samson. He was a great deliverer, a man of faith, and God used him. Let us credit him with everything good we possibly can, but the inspired historian tells us that, in spite of all that, he was disobedient right from the very start and inevitably came to disaster. When he was born, the Philistines ruled over Israel. God raised him up as a deliverer and he won many victories. But when he died, the Philistines still ruled over Israel, and his own life ended in a Philistine prison.

## 2. The nature of the enemy

### The Philistines

First of all, we should consider the enemy and what they stood for. We have been looking at the different enemies in the book and finding that, like modern nations, they had certain national characteristics. That gave us a clue as to what they stood for, and therefore helped us to see certain principles that were hostile to the people of God.

Last week we noticed that the Philistines are called the *uncircumcised* Philistines, and remarked that that is a little surprising. Many nations outside Israel were uncircumcised, yet when God's Spirit talks about Philistines he constantly uses the adjective, 'the *uncircumcised* Philistines'. All men are sinners, but when God talks about the Amalekites he will say, 'the *sinners*, the Amalekites'.

## They were uncircumcised

It is a very interesting thing about the Philistines, that they are part of the old sea peoples who came across and colonized the coastlands of the land of Canaan. In fact, they so made their mark on Canaan that they gave their name to the land: Palestine means 'the land of the Philistines'. As far as many Gentile nations knew, Palestine was inhabited by Philistines — they were the kind of people who lived there. They may have given their name to the land, and yet what a difference there was between them and Israel. The first characteristic was that they were uncircumcised.

### *God's covenants*

We read in Genesis 17 of the institution in Israel of the covenant of circumcision. It stood for the fact that Israel were in a special relationship with God, starting with Abraham, the great father of the faithful. Abraham knew what it was to be justified by faith and living in covenant relationship with God. In our modern terminology, it stands for those who are *regenerate*.

We too have a covenant. Not the old covenant of the law, nor the old covenant of circumcision. Our blessed Lord has made a new covenant with his people of this age. We celebrate it as we meet together to take the bread and drink the cup of the new covenant, and once again declare and show forth the death of Jesus Christ our Lord. As we take the cup of the covenant we proclaim that all our hope of salvation is in Jesus Christ, who gave his body and his blood, and brought us into a relationship with God. As regenerate men and women, the Spirit of God has begun to write the laws of God on our minds and hearts (see Heb 10:16).

Abraham stood in covenant relationship with God under the terms of the old covenant. The Philistines were in the land they'd given their name to, but they were not members of the covenant. The historians tell us that they didn't proceed by open battles, but using their superior might and civilization little by little they came to dominate the people of God.

When we think of such things, we remember our own sorry history as *Christendom*. We should have a Christendom in which every man and woman is a member of the covenant; every person has been born again, knows the power of the regenerating Holy Spirit, and what the cleansing power of the blood of Christ is. But how soon it was in the years of Christendom that unregenerate people were intermingling with the people of God, and now, with all charity of heart, you have to wonder why they call themselves *Christian*. Are they born again? Are they regenerate? Do they personally know the terms and reality of the new covenant?

God protests through Jeremiah:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh . . . for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart. (Jer 9:25–26)

Israel were circumcised physically, but uncircumcised in heart. It affected their whole attitude to God.

### **They boasted in their physical strength**

So the Philistines were uncircumcised. They didn't know the true God, but what else marks them? In subsequent history it was the Philistines that produced Goliath of Gath. Watch him striding on to the stage of history. He's the biggest man that Philistia could produce, and that's how the battle is going to be settled. What a colossal brain. What size of helmet will it take to accommodate his vast skull? What a specimen of *manhood*. Just look at his arms; his spear would reach from here to the door. His shield is a colossal affair; you wouldn't get anywhere near him. He comes striding on to the field of battle, defying the living God, confident in himself as man, the biggest man in all the Old Testament. 'I defy the ranks of Israel this day,' he says (1 Sam 17:10).

Let's read Jeremiah 9 again.

Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practises steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.' (vv. 23–24)

'What is *man* that you are mindful of him . . .?' asked the Psalmist (8:4). And here comes this little peashooter, David, with five stones in his sling. When Goliath sees him, he is mightily upset; he feels it's an insult. 'Fancy bringing a little youth like that to fight with me!' It's like putting your preacher tonight in the ring with Muhammad Ali when he was at his height!

'Give me a man,' Goliath said, 'I want a big man.'

David replies, 'I come to you without any sword in my hand. It's not going to be about who has the best weapons. I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied' (see 1 Sam 17:41–47).

It's a question of God versus man, man versus God; and in the Philistine you see a man who's got too big for his shoes. Man grown big. No faith whatsoever in almighty God.<sup>3</sup>

### **They did not believe in the supernatural power of God**

In 1 Samuel 5 we read the story of the Philistines capturing the ark of God. They brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod and put it in the house of Dagon, their god. When they came the next morning, however, Dagon had fallen down off his pedestal. Being wise Philistines, they pondered the situation. 'One's god oughtn't to do that kind of thing. What shall we do about it?' Putting their brains and muscles together, they heaved him back up on his pedestal, and then got down and worshipped him. Can you imagine it?

When they came back the next day, it was worse. He'd fallen over, and his head and hands were off (see v. 4). What's the good of a god who loses his head and his hands, I wonder. Brains and brawn, both of them gone. They contemplated it even more severely and came to the decision that they must use their hands and their brains, so they put the god's hands and head back on, set him back on his perch and fell down and worshipped him.

<sup>3</sup> There is a break in the recording here.

I don't know whether we ought to grin at that. What a fool man is, when he grows so big that he knows nothing of the living God and of the supernatural power of God. He might even have a religion, but what it amounts to is the worship of his own brain and his own brawn. Man putting his confidence in man.

What does true circumcision mean? 'Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me"' (Jer 9:23–24).

### 3. The deliverer God raised up

Samson's preparation for dealing with the Philistines was done mostly through his parents. It's a lovely story, and we should not forget his mother in particular. She was a brilliant woman of faith with a tremendous experience of the reality of God. Behind many a public figure there's a mother and father, unseen in public maybe, whose prayers and experience of God were the real preparation for the ministry of their son or daughter. Many of us sometimes forget the secret of our strength and imagine our gifts depend simply upon us, when we owe more than we think to the preparation of our forebears and elders.

The story is told then of the experience of Samson's parents, and of his mother in particular. There came a man to Manoah's wife. She was barren and had no children, but the man communicated to her that God, by his supernatural power, was going to give her a child—as he had done to Sarah, Abraham's wife, and was yet to do to Hannah, wife of Elkanah.

Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. (13:3–5)

She went and told her husband, and eventually the man came again and both husband and wife began to talk to the man. 'Now when your words come true, what is to be the child's manner of life, and what is his mission?' Manoah asked (v. 12).

And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, 'Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful. She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. All that I commanded her let her observe.' (vv. 13–14)

'Tell me,' said Manoah—fascinated by this man and not knowing who he was—'What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honour you?' (v. 17).

'Why do you ask my name?' said the man, for he was in fact no ordinary man. This was *the angel of the Lord*—a preincarnate appearance of the Son of God. 'Why will you ask my name,' said he to Manoah, 'seeing it is wonderful—incomprehensible?'

Then, to demonstrate what he meant, he allowed them to bring their sacrifice and offer it to the Lord. When the flame went up towards heaven from the altar, this incomprehensible

man did incomprehensibly, for he went up in the flame of the sacrifice. Manoah and his wife fell to the ground, startled. 'We shall surely die, for we have seen God,' said Manoah. But his wife, with more sense and faith, saw that it meant acceptance with God (see vv. 18–23).

What will overcome this false thing, that man is big and independent of God, but a sight of the reality of God himself? A sight of that supreme and incomprehensible man, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Son of God. Let me encourage you just for a while now to sit back and think of him. Have you not seen him? Oh, the wonder of being allowed to come to know that incomprehensible person.

The Lord Jesus asked his disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?'

Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven' (Matt 16:15–17).

Another time Jesus declared, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children' (Matt 11:25).

Have you seen him, my brothers and sisters? His name is wonderful. Thank God, it surpasses human understanding. How shall we tell the story of God, the transcendent Lord, the eternal Word become flesh? You've not merely read about it in the pages of holy Scripture but you have seen him; not as some vision but with that eye of faith illumined by God's Holy Spirit to see and understand.

Oh, the great mystery of it: God was manifested in the flesh (see 1 Tim 3:16). When the whole world was lost in sin he offered himself on that altar. For your sake he died and ascended, and God has accepted him. You now know what he meant when he said to Philip, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). But you're not going to die because you have seen him, you shall live eternally. 'For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life' (John 6:40). And you sit here, in humble Apsley Street—so-called Gospel Hall, and your spirit is in touch with the living God. You have seen him, you know yourself accepted in the beloved, and in touch with the risen Son of God.

#### **4. The tactics he used**

What a marvellous preparation for young Samson, to come of such a family and with a tradition like that behind him. As his infant mind was able to bear it, do you not think that his mother would tell him about it? She would not have said, 'Samson, you're going to be the biggest man around here for miles, the preacher of the century'; rather, 'Samson, God has shown himself to us. Let me tell you about that marvellous man who came from heaven and went back again.'

What was the child's manner of life to be, and where was the secret of his power? He was required to live the life of a Nazirite, which in short was absolute and complete dedication to God. Among the requirements of the Nazirites was that they should have their hair long. In more recent years it's become a style in some parts of the world and gentlemen are not necessarily ashamed of it; in those ancient days it must have looked a little incongruous. But

that was the secret of his power. As far as we can judge, he had no great physical strength, no massive head like Goliath of Gath. He was just an ordinary fellow wearing long hair like a woman, signifying his dependence on God and utter devotion to him.

That was how it began. Wiser brains than mine would be needed to make sense of what he did. Three or four times in the opening chapters we are told that the Spirit of God came upon him, so let me say nothing to his discredit. They were actions empowered by the Spirit of God. He went to seek a Philistine wife. 'You shouldn't do that,' said his father and mother, but they didn't know that it was from the Lord, says 14:4.

'There you are,' someone says, 'those old regulations by Moses don't count for anything. That was a past generation.'

Don't be so sure. Yes, it was of the Lord when Samson went and sought the Philistine wife. God used it in his great sovereignty to cause an occasion against the Philistines and slaughter some of them, but we can see where that kind of pathway ended. One girl betrayed his riddle, and another his secret, and between them they brought him to disaster. The riddle was about the work he had done in slaughtering the lion; the secret was about the source of his strength. Both were betrayed.

### **The lion and the riddle**

Let's be as sympathetic as we can. He was going out after this woman and out came a lion. I think if I'd been Samson, I'd have said, 'That's as far as I'll go here. There are lions around here; I don't think I'm on the right track.' With a roaring lion running around, seeking whom he may devour, I should have thought, 'That's a warning sent by the Lord. I'm in enemy territory and I'd better go back.' Not Samson. He was so confident in his spiritual power, and the Spirit of God came on him, so he was a better man than I. He got hold of the lion and he 'tore it in pieces' (see 14:6). What a marvellous victory over the lion. And then he gets full marks, ten out of ten in my book, as he didn't tell anybody. Being a young man, I don't know how he resisted the temptation.

Coming back the next day, he found some honey in the carcass and ate it. I'm not so sure that he ought to have done that, for he was meant to be a Nazirite. Nazirites weren't supposed to touch dead bodies, but the scholars say that means dead human bodies; touching dead animal bodies was all right. You'd need to be an expert to make that kind of distinction, but let's give him the benefit of the doubt. He took the honey and enjoyed it. It's always very tasty when you get a victory over the 'roaring lion', his satanic majesty. 'I write to you, young men, because you are strong . . . and you have overcome the evil one' (1 John 2:14). How sweet the victory is.

He went down for the wedding ceremony and the kind of prolonged honeymoon people had in those days. I cannot make sense of what happened next. I know in those ancient times a riddle was a kind of game—Solomon delighted in showing his superior wisdom and set riddles for his dinner party guests. Sometimes there was a forfeit and if you couldn't solve the riddle, you had to pay the forfeit. So Samson set them a riddle. 'Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet' (14:14). The Philistines couldn't work that one out. How should they know? Would you have known it? How would they

know anything about the lion, or what it meant, or how he'd done it? Why didn't he make it clear and plain, like John 3:16?

You say, 'It wasn't written then.'

Then why didn't he talk to them in plain Philistine or Canaanite, and tell them about the reality of God, instead of setting them riddles that they couldn't possibly understand? What was he trying to do? I hope he wasn't trying to show how clever he was; how superior his wisdom was to theirs. That's the temptation, isn't it, for those who have spiritual gifts? Instead of giving the glory to God, we start talking about our victories. Little by little the pendulum has gone to the other side, and it's a glorification of me. 'Look what I know and how wise I am.'

He loved the Philistine girl, but in her heart she wasn't in sympathy with him, nor with the Spirit of God. In her heart she was in sympathy with the Philistines. She said, 'You don't love me, Samson.' She cried every day, I don't know how she managed it. Every day of the honeymoon, she said, 'Do you not really love me?' And so he told her the answer to the riddle, and she told the Philistines. They could see nothing in it.

As I read it, the words that come to my mind are the words of the Lord Jesus, 'Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you' (Matt 7:6). Don't expect unregenerate people to see anything in the accomplishments of the Spirit of God; the Philistines decided there was nothing in it. The Holy Spirit of God was obliged to come on Samson and he got his revenge on them, and demonstrated that there was some reality in the supernatural power of God's Holy Spirit.

Samson was so disgusted that he went off and left his wife. He came back again some months later only to find that she was refused to him. In high indignation he sought revenge (Judg 15). Who for? I fear it was for himself. What would you have done if you were God at that point?

You say, 'The poor man's motives are all mixed up.'

Yet God in his mercy still uses him to demonstrate to the Philistines that there is a reality; the Spirit of God is real.

He collected a lot of jackals or foxes and tied their tails together. Then he put smoking firebrands between the tails and let them loose in the corn. You should have seen the fireworks. I think a lot of people must have stood in wonder, open-mouthed, but what did it effect in the end? There were some Philistines slain, but when all the fireworks were over what had it done?

You say, 'It showed that there was a difference between the Philistine's confidence in man and his unregenerate religion, and the reality of the covenant of God and the Holy Spirit of God.'

Yes, it showed that. Alas, when Samson stood for that, his own brethren from Judah came up. They said, 'Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us? . . . We have come down to bind you, that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines' (15:11-12).

Now where have they got to? Israel themselves are pleading to stop all manifestations of the Spirit of God, submit to Philistine rule, and accept a religion that has the appearance of godliness, but denies its power. In effect they were saying that they no longer believed in the

supernatural and in the exploits of God's Holy Spirit, and the reality of a relationship with the man in glory. So they bound him and handed him over, and of course the Spirit of God came upon him. He broke the bonds, and once more God demonstrated through Samson, feeble servant though he was, the reality of a supernatural God.

He did something useful, but it would seem that his very success betrayed him. In spite of going after that woman in Timnah, God had used him and turned even his mistake to the glory of God in some sense. He continued to judge Israel for twenty years (v. 20).

### **Using gift without the Spirit**

But now look what happened. You'll not read of the Spirit of God any more now. He goes after two other women (16:1, 4). He went to the harlot of Gaza. He was in a trap and he used his great strength to get out of it once more, and carried the very gates of the city up to the top of the mountain.

You say, 'Was it an exhibition of the Spirit of God.'

It wasn't. The Bible doesn't mention the Spirit of God.

The New Testament would have us make a distinction between a spiritual gift that God has given to us, which we still possess; and actually being used by the Holy Spirit of God. I may have a gift as a teacher, and on occasions God Almighty has used even his humble servant. But there have been other times when, in my folly, I have used my gift and it wasn't the Holy Spirit behind it.

'If I speak in a tongue' says Scripture, 'does that always mean that the Holy Spirit is using me at that moment?' It certainly doesn't. We must learn to distinguish between the irrevocable gifts that God has given us, and what it means for God to use those gifts.

### **His final tactic**

Samson used his mighty strength to get out of Gaza. The Bible does not say it was the Holy Spirit that got him out. Encouraged by that, he repeated his mistake, and this time the trap closed on him. Delilah found out not merely the secret of what he had done for the Lord, she found out the secret of his power. It lay in his hair, in his Naziriteship, in his devotion to God, and she robbed him of it and he deliberately disobeyed the Lord.

It was a disaster. They put him in prison and put his eyes out. What a sad thing it had come to. His godly parents had had the eyes of their hearts enlightened; they had seen God. Here is Samson, his eyes out, blind and imprisoned, and the unregenerate Philistines said, 'There you are, we've proved it. There's nothing in this supernatural religion whatsoever. Our god, Dagon, has won' (see 16:23).

As I think of these things I say to myself, 'do not pray for gift; pray rather "that you may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being"' (see Eph 3:16), and that:

the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe. (Eph 1:17-19)

May God save us from spectacular gift that loses sight of the blessed Son of God. Pray, my brothers and sisters, that God would enlighten our hearts to see the Lord and remain in obedience to him.

In God's mercy, Samson's hair grew again and he achieved his final victory. Scripture comments that he killed more in his death than he did in his life (16:30). He had allowed himself to be betrayed into using his spectacular powers for his own glorification, and had become careless in his obedience. Perhaps at last he had learnt the secret that the only safe way of using spiritual power is to let all the praise and glory go to God; in humble obedience upon God, to die to self and live for the Saviour. Let us learn the lesson too, and the victory shall be ours.

Shall we pray.

Now Lord, we ask thy grace. We have tried together to understand this complicated personality, thine ancient servant, Samson. Forgive us for any wrong judgment we have come to, any hard words we have said about him. We thank thee for him and for the record of his faith, and we thank thee for thy mercy to his parents and the lessons thou taught them, and we thank thee for the way thou wast able to use Samson, for it encourages us ourselves. Let us learn wisely the lessons thou would teach us.

Reveal to us the Lord Jesus the more, we beseech thee. Put into our hearts increasing lack of trust in our own abilities, and make us more dedicated to and dependent on the risen Saviour. Help us to do all that we do by thy Spirit, and for the glory of the Lord Jesus. Make us true witnesses for our risen Lord amidst a world in which there is so much dead, unregenerate religion. Hear us then, and dismiss us now with thine evening blessing, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** (1925-2019) was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.