

Arthur Howe
Book of Judges
1 – Introduction

If I use the word 'judge' then immediately you will think of a courtroom and the passing of a sentence or the pronouncing of an acquittal. In the Bible the judges of Israel in far off times were more than that, though they did pass judgement in law cases.

The book of Judges in the Old Testament of the Bible gets its name from outstanding characters raised up by God to bring deliverance to His people Israel, and to deal out righteous judgement from God on their enemies. It is interesting to note that the work of the judges as judicial figures is rarely mentioned.

This book of Judges that we are going to study contains many warnings against turning away from God and following the ways of the people around them.. Time and again in the book we see the Jewish nation severely punished for its idolatry and treachery. Are we to imagine that such warnings are not needed among God's people today? Is there no idolatry and spiritual treachery to be found among those professing to be Christians? Is there no love of money and material things? Is there no worship of men in positions of prominence that dishonours God? Is there no going after the life-styles and the morality of the world? Look around you and see that the answers are plain.

There is idolatry in the form of covetousness, the worship of possessions and money. For some people and some churches it would be better for them spiritually if they were less well off. They could learn some valuable lessons from Christians in the developing world who are faithful and thankful without having many of this world's goods.

There can be spiritual treachery among those who profess to be Christians when they do not believe fully what the Bible says; when they have their own conception of God: what He is like, what He expects, what He knows and what He can do. They have made a god in their own image as it were, a being who is like themselves and who does not demand any more of them than they would of themselves.

There is treachery or disloyalty when people fail to acknowledge God as the true Creator. Instead they try to make God's Word fit in with the latest theories of science so-called and are bewitched by evolutionary theories.

There is spiritual treachery, too, when people imagine that they can save themselves from the righteous judgement of God for their sins by their own efforts or their own merit. Yet the Scriptures are clear that we are saved only by the power and mercy of God based on the redeeming death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. It is by God's grace that we are saved, through faith in Christ, and not by our good works, so that no-one can boast..

So, let us now take a look at that period of Bible history which is covered by the book of Judges. The story runs from the death of Joshua almost to the time of Israel's first king, Saul. That would put it covering the period from approximately 1200 to 1050 BC.

These judges of whom we read do not appear to have followed one another in close succession. Some may have ruled at the same time as each other in different parts of the land. At times there may have been gaps between the time of one judge and another, such as in the years when no enemies oppressed Israel because God restrained them.

As you read through Judges you can see that the whole period covered by the book was one of disorganisation, tribal discord and defeat. Thankfully, in the midst of that grim period were some merciful deliverances by God when He raised up outstanding leaders. He did this in response to the repentance and heartfelt cries of His people.

How we need to re-learn that lesson in our own day. The trouble is that often we don't have enough sense of our own need. How well attended are the prayer meetings in the churches you know? How much earnest crying to God is heard in them? How much longing to be freed from deadness and spiritual enemies is there found in our praying? How often do we really lay hold on God and plead for his mercy and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit on our lives and witness? Where are the heartfelt cries and pleading such as we discover in the Book of Judges?

So now let us look at these judges who were raised up by God for the help of His people. What were they like? Were they all the same as each other? What kind of work did they do for God? The first thing to make clear is that they all experienced something in common. Every one of them was empowered by God for the task he or she was given. Yes, there was one woman among them, called Deborah. Hers is a most interesting story, but more of that later.

Now, among the Jewish people there might well have been others who hoped or wished to act nobly in bringing deliverance to their people. Yet only each particular judge was marked out by God to do something special. This spiritual authority is what gave them that qualification for leadership that was recognised by those around them.

Remember, their office did not depend on popular choice by a vote, nor by family succession like a tribal chief. In a lesser sense even today in a church fellowship you can look at someone busy in the Lord's work and you can see that is just the right person for that responsibility. That person is marked out for it and is blessed in the work he or she does.

The next thing to observe about the biblical judges is that there were features of their work and service that were almost identical in each case. The first is that they were all avengers of God's enemies. That is to say they dealt out judgement on them, acting as the divinely appointed instrument of punishment.

The second feature is that they were often military campaigners, or heroes who could command allegiance from others. The third feature is that to one degree or another they were judges in the accepted sense, that is they all had a judicial function as civil governors, overseeing domestic arbitration among the tribes of Israel.

We must remember that the book of Judges is more than a simple recounting of events in the life of Israel's people. It is not just an account of part of their long history. Get beneath the surface and you will see one great lesson coming through over and over again. It is just this - cause and effect belong together in the movement of world events.

You see, the book of Judges is the story of God's dealings with His people and the surrounding nations. That unfolding of events is there to illustrate and reveal the character of the Lord God, Sovereign of the universe. It shows that He is righteous and holy, punishing sin even among his own people. But it also shows his great pity when they repented of their wrongdoing and cried to Him for help.

In the book of Judges we are going to see how such lessons need to be learned by us in our day. If we walk humbly with God, He will bless us and make us strong in the face of our enemies. But if we disobey and flirt with the world or turn aside to other gods or other religions, then we shall know sorrow and defeat.

It is not an easy pathway, but remember that earlier God had encouraged his servant Joshua with this promise concerning obedience to his law: "Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous....for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." The path of obedience is the way to victory and peace. Will you not walk in it?

Arthur Howe
Book of Judges
2 – Total Warfare (1:1-36)

Before we examine in closer detail the individual judges and the work they did, we are going to take a look at the opening section of chapter one of the book. In this first chapter we learn of the partial conquest of Canaan by Israel. I say partial for this reason: In the book of Joshua the Israelite tribes broke into Canaan to take possession of the land promised to them by God. Joshua assigned each tribe their own special area to possess. However, they did not possess the land all at once. Substantial pockets of Canaanite resistance remained, and so the occupation was gradual. In those areas where it was incomplete there were problems later on.

There is a vital lesson in all of this for us. Warfare against the enemies of our soul is to be total and unremitting. It has to be waged constantly. We are to fight increasingly against the evil that tempts us on all sides and the corruption that is in us. No peace is allowed where sin is concerned, otherwise it takes root in our personal life or in our churches. When it does it starts to weaken us and drag us down. As Paul writes in First Timothy chapter six and verse twelve, we are to “fight the good fight of faith.” Also, in Second Timothy chapter two and verse three he reminds us that the Christian is to be “a good soldier of Jesus Christ.”

The enemies that surround us come in different forms. It may be friends or even members of our family who try to persuade us to do things or go to places that will take our hearts away from the Lord. It could be people at our workplace who want us to operate in questionable ways so as to make quick money for the business, even if that means harm to the customer. Then there are the more blatant temptations to get involved, like those around us, in immoral behaviour and the misuse of drugs and alcohol. There are the subtle messages peddled by television and the media generally encouraging us to live for today and the things of the world; messages that ignore God and his laws for our conduct. However the enemy comes, there is a fight to be fought and it is ongoing for the Christian believer.

This opening section of Judges is important as it gives us the political background to the period of the judges themselves. It also gives useful geographical information, linking the various tribes with the cities that they conquered. For instance, chapter one verses one to twenty-one concentrate on the conquest of southern Canaan by the tribes of Judah and Simeon. Their exploits are a clear example of how God blesses action that is decisive and aimed at eradicating evil. In verses four to eight we read that the tribe of Judah fought against the Canaanites and the Perizzites with determination. They pressed on and caught up with the evil ruler of the Perizzites, called Adoni-Bezek. He was a butcher of a man, who mutilated seventy kings and had them scrambling for food under his table. He was put to death in Jerusalem. We then go on to read of further successes by Judah against other cities. Verses twenty-two to twenty-six outline the conquest of Bethel in central Canaan by the tribe of Joseph. In each case it states that the Lord was with them, making clear just why they had success in their warfare.

This matter of having the Lord with us is all important in the total warfare in which we engage. We cannot hope for success without Him. In Acts chapter eleven verse twenty-one we see that the hand of the Lord was with the early Christians as they were scattered across the Roman Empire preaching the Gospel. Because of this a great number of people believed and turned in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. What success could they have hoped for if the Lord had not been with them? None at all! We read in Psalm one hundred and twenty-seven verse one: “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.” True victory in the conflict with evil needs the power of God's Holy Spirit to cast down the strongholds of Satan.

At the end of chapter one, in verses twenty-seven to thirty-six, there is a list of various cities that Israel failed to take in the remaining parts of the land. There was an incomplete

occupation on the part of the tribes of Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephraim., Zebulun, Naphtali and Dan. In each case it is recorded that they did not drive out the evil Canaanites but allowed them to live alongside them or entered into some kind of compromising pact with them. Such toleration of their enemies would eventually lead to God's people falling away into Canaanite worship and immorality.

What was different with these other tribes? There is no mention of the Lord being with them and blessing them, only that they failed to drive out the enemy. Were they half-hearted and unbelieving in their efforts and so failed to have God's blessing and success? That certainly seems to be the case as we shall see when we come to look at the opening verses of chapter two of Judges in our next study.

Can you see how all of this speaks to us today? Where you have individuals and churches without clear biblical standards of belief and behaviour, who are not fully committed to the Lord, not avoiding compromise with sin and worldliness, that is where you will not find God's blessing and spiritual victories. The opposite is also true.

You can see then how we need to be like the tribes of Judah and Joseph in our spiritual warfare: determined, decisive, intent on victory with the help of God. If we fight on in this way then we may be sure that as the Lord was with them so He will be with us, His faithful warriors today. May the Lord bless and strengthen you in this for it is not an easy battle we are in.

One of the first things to do is to recognise who the enemy really is. The Israelites could easily pick out Canaanites by the way they lived, their style of dress or their speech. Yet often Christians today are easily deceived by modern day Canaanites, or are too willing to compromise with them. It is vital to be on our guard in case we are influenced in the wrong way. Let me explain what I mean by watching out for the Canaanites of our day. If someone speaks in an evil, filthy way, or is dishonest, or leads an immoral, corrupt life, then clearly such a person has no place in the Christian church as a member as long as they continue to behave like that. That is straightforward, an assessment that can easily be made.

But what of those people who worm their way into a church fellowship, who seem genuine, pleasant and acceptable and make all the right sounds? They appear to be true and yet in time they start to suggest all manner of things that undermine belief and sound biblical practice. Christian believers, listening to them, begin to wonder if they have been going wrong before these new ideas came along. Yet they need not be unsettled. They must be unwavering, and they must hold on to their biblical principles.

Where do you usually find a sense of God and Christians advancing in their faith? It is in those situations where there is a love for the Lord Himself, a delight in His Word, a concern for prayer and faithful witnessing. That is where you will find blessing and advance against spiritual forces of evil. That is usually where you will see true and lasting conversions and a fellowship based on love for the Saviour and each other.

Isn't that what you long to have for yourself and your own group of Christian believers? Yet isn't it also true that too many Christians and church groups are so often like those Israelite tribes which waged a half-hearted battle and did not see glorious conquests? We can so easily drift into compromise with unbelievers, the Canaanites of our day. Many of them are outside the church, but sadly some are inside, bringing their standards and their lifestyles with them.

This is the time for resolve and determination. There can be no living alongside the "Canaanites". A distinction has to be made between what God has said in His Word and what men dream up for themselves. Everything false must be rejected. A true repentance and genuine faith in the Lord Jesus must be required of all who wish to join with us and become members of Christ's church.

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3 – Apostasy (2:1-23)

The word 'apostasy' is not one that you come across very often. It was used more frequently by Christian writers in past centuries. The word originally meant "standing apart from", but eventually it came to mean "falling away from." I think you can see the application when we consider matters of faith and Christian belief.

Where you have an individual or group of people that moves away from the truth and falls away into error or sin, there you have apostasy. In Judges chapter two we are going to see a clear example of this and some important teaching concerning it.

The first thing we see in chapter two verses one to five is "The Prelude to Apostasy". The opening verses of the chapter detail the warning given to the Israelites at a national gathering called by the angel of the Lord. From other references to Him in the Old Testament Scriptures we can see that this refers to the second person of the Trinity, in other words the eternal Son of God. I say that because in these references He is not referred to simply as "an angel" but "the angel of the Lord." Also He is called "The Lord" in a number of those references and accepts worship from those with whom He is dealing. These instances in the Old Testament are called pre-incarnate appearances of the Son of God, that is appearances before He came to earth in human form as the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here, in the opening of Judges chapter two, we have the angel of the Lord reminding the Israelites of their deliverance from Egypt. He reminded them of their duty to rid the land of the corrupting presence of the Canaanites and that they must not make agreements with them. God had not broken his covenant with them, but, sadly, they had failed in their part. God had kept His solemn, binding agreement to be their God and take them as His people; yet they had disobeyed Him.

As a consequence of all this Israel would not have full success against their enemies and would find them to be a continuing source of conflict and temptation. This caused an outpouring of grief or weeping at the place where they were assembled. They gave it the name "Bochim" which means "the weepers". For a little time after this they did serve God, but their sorrow was neither deep nor enduring. Before long their apostasy would become painfully obvious.

This opening section of Judges chapter two is important as it sets the scene for what follows in the rest of the book. It also warns us today of what will happen if we do not listen to God's warnings not to make agreement with those who are outside of God's kingdom and opposed to it. If we who are Christians do not resist evil influences in our lives or in the Church they will cause us untold grief.

There are many Christians and some churches which have suffered trouble and sorrow because they did not heed such warnings in Scripture. Like the Israelites in Judges chapter two, they have become "weepers", that is to say, they have known bitter sorrow because they have broken their covenant with God. The Israelites tolerated friendship with the unbelieving Canaanites around them. They learned to relax and drink with them. They intermarried with them. They adopted their beliefs while trying to hold on to their own. The consequence of all this was that they gradually lost their hold on God and they became spiritually weak. Eventually the world around trampled them down and despised them for their spiritual powerlessness. Let us be warned by this ever present danger and be fearful of allowing it to happen where we are concerned.

Next, in verses six to nine, we have "Restraint from Apostasy." After the people departed from Bochim they happily went to claim the part of land assigned to them. For a while they served God faithfully while Joshua and the elders who succeeded him were in charge of the nation. Those men had seen the mighty things that God had done in bringing them into

the Promised Land. Their faith in Him was strong and they were leaders worth following. They served to restrain the people from falling away from God. So it is today as Christian leaders who are spiritually strong have a powerful influence on those who look up to them. They are God's instruments for preserving faith and obedience.

There is a fearsome responsibility and they must follow what Paul says in First Timothy chapter four verse sixteen: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." Satan works hard to undermine and discourage faithful teachers and leaders. They are the officers in the Lord's army and with them out of the way the troops are soon scattered. How we should be thankful if God has given us such leaders and how we should pray for them and support them.

There follows in verses ten to thirteen an outline of "The Stages of Apostasy." First of all you have the passing of the faithful leaders, followed by a generation which did not know the Lord in a personal way and had no remembrance of all the wonderful things that God had done in the past. We then read that the people fell into evil ways and began to worship other gods and to finally forsake the Lord God altogether. This apostasy by His people provoked the just anger of the Lord.

In present times, the remembrance of the days of revival and of many people turning to Christ in true repentance and faith, have gradually faded from our memory. People come into the Church who would call themselves Christians but who are in reality strangers to God's saving power and grace.

There are those who are attending Christian churches but they are not truly serving the Lord. They are serving themselves so as to be noticed by others, or they are more interested in money and possessions than spiritual things. Sadly there are some who outside of their church life are involved in dishonesty and even immorality, and practices forbidden by God, such as the occult. These people appear to honour God with their lips, but their hearts are from Him, and they stand under His judgement as did the people of Israel.

We can identify the "Evidences of Apostasy" in verses fourteen to nineteen of Judges chapter two. The first evidence of apostasy amongst God's people is that He became angry with them and withdrew his hand of blessing from them. He handed them over to their enemies and they had no success in their battles. Wherever the Israelites went they experienced failure and defeat. Then when God mercifully gave them good judges to lead them, they would not listen. Instead they stubbornly went back to their old sinful ways. They did not go back to the obedient ways of their forefathers. They failed to learn the lessons being taught them.

So for us today, the Lord sends faithful leaders and preachers to us declaring the truths of God's word and rebuking things that are wrong. We must be careful that we do not dismiss what they are saying and carry on in our own self-pleasing ways. Let us learn the lesson that if we turn away from the Lord we will forfeit his blessing and be judged for our disobedience.

There is, happily, a positive note to be found in this chapter. In verses sixteen and eighteen there are evidences of "Restoration from Apostasy." It was in answer to the heartfelt groaning or pleadings of His people under the oppression of their enemies that God raised up judges to deliver them.

It is when the church today has a real sense of its need that it will begin to cry to God for deliverance. At present it is far too comfortable, even at times intoxicated with its own apparent appeal and success. Ask yourself how much groaning or pleading with God is heard when we meet to pray? When we start to see that in our prayer meetings we may hope for God to move powerfully among us.

Finally, in verses twenty to twenty-three we can draw some "Lessons from Apostasy". God judges his people because they transgressed or went against his covenant with them. He made clear that He would not drive out their enemies. Instead He would leave them set against His people so as to prove them and to see if they would keep His ways or not.

Is God proving or testing His people today? I believe He is. When our enemies are allowed to give us a hard time it is to test us, to see if we will be true to God's Word or not. The people of God are being refined or sifted. The genuine, the faithful, the loyal ones are being made to stand out. The shallow and compromised churches will be overcome, but those who endure to the end will be saved. Are you part of the fight against apostasy or part of the apostasy itself?

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4 – The Pattern of Spiritual Progress

Are there steps and stages in falling away from God? Are there danger signals we can pay attention to like a car or train stopping at a red light? What alarm bells should we hear so as to know that we are moving away from the Lord? This third chapter of Judges is helpful in pointing out these things to us.

There is a clear pattern in the events of this chapter which is found again and again throughout the book of Judges. This pattern shows how Israel lost its hold on God then found it again. The sequence of events runs as follows: "Rebellion", "Rejection", "Repentance", "Response" (by God) and "Rest", that is a period of peace and stability.

The opening of Judges chapter three reminds us again that God left the unbelieving nations in place as a chastisement or test for his people. Verse four says, "They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commandments, which He had given their forefathers through Moses." These nations proved or tested Israel through warfare because God's people had known peace and quiet, and had become corrupted in those easy times. God wanted to see if they would give attention to all the commandments that He had given to them as his chosen nation. It was not going to be an easy time. There were battles to be fought.

Do you long for things to be easier? Do you wish you were passing through restful, peaceful times?

How much easier it would be if everyone else in the family was a follower of the Lord Jesus. Working conditions would be pleasanter if everyone else was sympathetic to Christian values. Life would be less stressful if the people around us were not so competitive, argumentative, self-seeking and materialistic. Look again at these verses. Can it be that God is refining and strengthening you through spiritual warfare and opposition, as He was in those times?

First, then, we come to this stage of Rebellion in Israel, which is in verses five to seven. It happened gradually and therein lies the danger. They gradually became more and more involved with the Canaanite tribes and intermarried with them. That led them to adopt their lifestyle and their religion which was corrupt and immoral. At the heart of it was ritual prostitution which was supposed to make their god Baal bring fertility on the earth. The final stage in this rebellion was that Israel forgot the Lord their God.

The danger is the same today. When Christians get gradually involved in the practices and entertainments of the corrupt world all around - our own "Land of Canaan" - then they too can be corrupted and drawn away from the Lord. We are to be a separate people for the Lord, just as Israel should have been. To be associated with the world around and with its evil practices is rebellion against God and will lead ultimately even to the point of forgetting Him.

The next thing to happen was Rejection by God, not in the absolute sense, but for a time. This was so that Israel would learn from its mistake in going astray. In verse eight we learn, sadly, that God's anger was directed to his own people because of their wickedness. He allowed them to fall into the hand of an enemy, a Syrian king from Mesopotamia about five hundred miles to the north east. For eight miserable years the Israelites served this overlord, suffering for their folly.

Sometimes the Lord allows us to suffer under the blows of Satan because of our rebellion. We pay this price for drifting away from the Lord. We experience his rejection. We can't get through to Him in prayer. We can't seem to get close to Him and we experience defeat at the hands of Satan.

Then comes the turning point, that is to say, Repentance. You find this in verse nine of Judges chapter three: "When they cried out to the Lord, He raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel, son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them." Repentance is a complete change of mind or attitude which leads to a change of conduct. The people of Israel were brought to see how wrong was their rebellion and they cried to the Lord for help and deliverance. If you are a Christian who has rebelled against the Lord and fallen into the ways of the world then there is a way back. It is the way of repentance. There needs to be an earnest and sorrowful seeking after God in true humility. You need to put away those things that have come between you and God, once and for all and cry to Him for help.

If the forces of evil surround you and seem overwhelming at times, is it because you are away from the Lord and need to come back to Him in repentance? This is something that is sadly lacking among many professing Christians today.

Following on from repentance we have a merciful Response from God. Notice again that in verse nine we read of God raising up a deliverer, a judge called Othniel. His uncle was Caleb, one of the few faithful leaders of an earlier generation. The Lord's response to the genuine cry of repentance from his people was to come to their aid and deliver them from the hand of their enemy.

We learn of Othniel that God's Spirit came upon him so that he judged Israel, and he led them out to victory against their oppressor. In other words he was equipped by God for two daunting tasks so that he accomplished them both effectively. The work of leading a company of God's people today is no work for spiritual lightweights. It is not just a matter of getting up at the front and leading the singing. Nor is it impressing people with a good flow of words that captivates the hearers. What is needed is someone who knows God and knows the Scriptures. The battle requires strong, mature Christians who have the blessing of God on their lives and teaching. Without this spiritual endowment a work may appear to be going on, but no great or lasting benefit will flow from it. God equips those He calls to his work, granting them the power of his Holy Spirit. A truly spiritual leader will lead God's people to victory by the faithful application of God's word to his own life and that of his people.

The final feature of this spiritual progress from rebellion and rejection through repentance and God's response is Rest. Verse eleven of Judges chapter three tells us that the land had rest for forty years and then Othniel died. God is merciful and grants us times of rest and peace. In Isaiah chapter thirty verse fifteen we read these words: "This is what the Sovereign Lord, the holy One of Israel, says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength....'" In this fallen, evil world we are never far away from hatred and hostility. Do not be surprised when you meet it, and especially so if it comes because you are a Christian. God may grant you quietness and a placid life, but above all else pray for boldness and steadfastness in the face of opposition. True rest will only come when all our spiritual warfare is at an end.

As we come to verse twelve we read: "Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." Here is the same sad story of rebellion after being blessed by God. This time it was the Moabite king, Eglon, who was raised up to chasten the Israelites for eighteen long years. Once more in mercy God responded to the cry of his people by raising up a left-handed warrior. He was Ehud of the tribe of Benjamin, and the Lord used him to lead the people to victory over their Moabite enemies. After this the land enjoyed peace for eighty years. What a mighty blessing that must have been considering that under Othniel the period was but forty years.

This, then, is the pattern of spiritual progress, moving from rebellion through rejection to repentance, then God's response and finally rest. That pattern is seen later in other parts of the book of Judges. You will be able to trace it quite clearly as you read it through for yourself. If you can, look over chapter three again and try to recognise where you are or

where your church is in this matter of spiritual progress. Are you experiencing victory in your life, or are you under the oppression of the enemy because of disobedience? Seek the Lord for his deliverance from the spiritual enemies who may be oppressing you just now.

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5 – Deborah, Jael and Barak (4:1-5:31)

In this section of Judges we learn of victory for the Israelites by two women with a man tagging along behind in the sharing of honours. This is most strange for those times when it was a male-dominated society. It is something that requires some explanation and we will come to this later.

Sad to say the people of Israel had not learned their lesson and had drifted off into evil yet again after the death of two good judges, Ehud and Shamgar. It says something about the nation's spirituality when it has to be bolstered by strong leaders and then gives way once those heroes are removed from the scene.

Yet are things any different today? We sometimes see Christian fellowships rallying around a dominant personality, only to fade and drift away when that leader is called to a different field of service or called home to heaven. If the people had been totally committed to the Lord and not to the man, they would have continued and pulled together in their adversity or time of loss.

In Judges chapter four verse one we read: "... the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord. So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor." The great city of Hazor was about seven miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Jabin's commanding officer was Sisera who lived in Harosheth, a place thought to be near modern day Haifa in Israel. It is Sisera who features in the events of chapters four and five.

As in former times, when they had fallen away from Him, Israel pleaded in desperation to God. We read in chapter four verse three that, "The children of Israel cried to the Lord for help." And what brought them to that point? It was Sisera's nine hundred iron chariots! It was like ordinary foot-soldiers today facing an army of tanks. This had gone on for twenty years and now all the self-satisfaction of the Israelites had evaporated under the severe discipline of the Lord. All this because they again had done evil in God's sight.

When Christian believers fall away from the Lord into sin, and continue to be disobedient, as did the children of Israel, then they can expect to come under the discipline of a loving heavenly Father. The writer to the Hebrews tells us this in chapter twelve verses five to eleven. In verses ten and eleven we read: "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

If you are under the hand of the oppressor today because of disobedience to the Lord, then it is time to begin to pray in earnest for His forgiveness so that He may deliver you and restore you to fellowship with Him again.

In this fourth chapter of Judges we learn of Deborah, a prophetess who judges Israel. She lived in the central hill country about twelve miles north of Jerusalem. She is the only female judge of whom we read in the Bible. There were other women who were prophetesses, such as Miriam the sister of Moses, Huldah in the time of king Josiah, and the wife of Isaiah whose name we do not know.

God did not usually raise up women to these positions, but where He judged it necessary He did so. It was usually as a rebuke to men because they had failed, or in a time of spiritual decline when faithful leaders could hardly be found. In verse five we read that "the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided." She was the only one who could be relied on, for God had clearly marked her out. His stamp of authority was upon her and the people recognised it.

Often, in times of extremity and when men have failed in their duty, God has been pleased to raise up and bless women in the work of his kingdom. Only eternity will reveal what has been done by faithful women, sometimes working alone in difficult and dangerous situations. This does not in any way overturn the New Testament teaching on the different roles and functions of men and women in the Church. It is simply a plain fact before us here that God raised up and equipped Deborah for a role of guidance and leadership in her day. Besides that, He would give victory to Israel by another woman, Jael. Israel's deliverance would be in God's way and by whatever means He sovereignly determined.

One day Deborah sent for Barak of the tribe of Naphtali in the region of Galilee. She gave him God's word that he should call together ten thousand men out of the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor near the southern hills of Galilee. She would then lure out Sisera the commander of Jabin's army with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River, and victory would be assured.

Now you would think that a message like that from God through a prophetess would be all the encouragement needed. Yet here is where we seek the weak faith of Barak. He was soldier enough, ready to go and fight, but felt he could only do so if Deborah went with him. It was almost as though he viewed her as some kind of lucky charm instead of trusting in God's word alone. That lack of faith would be rebuked as eventually the battle honours were given to another and not to Barak.

How many blessings have we forfeited because of our lack of faith or because of our disobedience to the plain word of God? How often has spiritual success been given to other Christians because we failed in our preaching of God's Word or in our care for people? These are challenging questions that must be faced up to. It is easy to point the finger at Barak and ask, 'Where was his faith?' or 'Where was his courage?' It is more difficult to point the finger at ourselves and say, 'Where was my faith when the times of testing came?' It is painful to ask of ourselves, 'Where was my courage in the time of pressure or danger?' When evil forces seem to tower over us do we fail like Barak?

Heber the Kenite now comes into the story. His wife was Jael who features so prominently in what follows. The Kenites were nomadic tinkers who had originally lived down in the southern region of the Negev. Moses had married a Kenite woman, Zipporah, who was related to Heber who naturally would have been expected to feel some sort of kinship with the Israelites. However, the Kenites had co-existed happily with Israel's enemy and so Heber informed Sisera of Barak's troop movements and Sisera massed his opposing forces at the river Kishon. But this is just where God wanted them to be!

It was then that Deborah urged on Barak with this encouragement, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" In all our struggles as Christians our only confidence is that the Lord has gone ahead of us and prepared the way. It is for us to follow and so gain the victory.

From Deborah's song of victory, recorded in Judges chapter five, we learn that God sent a violent storm which caused the river Kishon to overflow, sweeping away many of the Canaanites. Added to that the heavy rainfall would soon cause the sodden earth to become a quagmire under the iron chariots of Sisera. All his advantage was lost and the Israelites swept through the confused ranks. One rainstorm sent from God and overwhelming superiority of the Canaanites was wiped out!

Sisera managed to escape on foot and fled to the tent of Jael, Heber's wife, where he was killed while he slept. The whole episode is summarised in verses twenty-three and twenty-four: "On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin until they destroyed him."

A terrifying and oppressive enemy had been put down before God's people in answer to their cry. Have we no such enemy to be subdued today? Indeed we have! Satan is far

worse in his subtle, persistent ways than any Canaanite king. But we have one wiser than Deborah on our side and far more powerful than Jael or Barak. In the first Letter of John chapter three verse eight we are told: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." Satan may harass us but he cannot harm us. He may threaten us but he cannot do more than he is allowed by God.

The closing lines of Deborah's song, at the end of Judges chapter five, say this: "So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength." Can you honestly say that you are one of those who loves the Lord? Is your life shining brightly, dispelling the darkness of evil around you?

Arthur Howe
Book of Judges
6 – Gideon I

This section of the book of Judges, dealing with a leader called Gideon, is so full of interest and with many fascinating details that it cries out for explanation and application. It will be most instructive for us to look at the main events in his life and draw valuable lessons from them.

I have entitled the first section of this study of his life "The Call and Preparation of Gideon." This occupies the whole of Judges chapter six. The very title reminds us that as Christians we are called by God to Himself and that He then shapes and prepares us to serve Him. Are you listening for his voice as you read his Word and hear Bible messages?

In this sixth chapter we are introduced to our unlikely hero, Gideon, who was from the tribe of Manasseh. He lived in a place called Ophrah near to Mount Tabor in southern Galilee. It was at that time when enemy raiders from the desert regions to the east and south were attacking the Israelites. Those invaders were the Midianites and Amalekites, who would cross the river Jordan and drive westward destroying and stealing crops.

It was a cruel and merciless warfare that was waged because in verse four we read that no foodstuff was left for Israel and their animals. It is a sore trial when food is in short supply. It is an even greater trial when spiritual food is hard to come by. We read in the prophecy of Amos chapter eight verse eleven that there would come "a famine of the hearing of the word of God." This means that there would be such spiritual desolation that the word of God would be scarcely heard anywhere. One of the greatest blessing we can have is a plentiful supply of Bibles and of men who will teach faithfully what the Bible says. Never take for granted the spiritual food that is available. It may not always be there so plentifully.

Why was it in Gideon's day that such terrible suffering was being experienced? The answer is found in the first verse of the chapter: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years He gave them into the hands of the Midianites." God controls the destinies of all nations, raising up and putting down rulers in his sovereign will and allowing them to expand their empires or to see them crumble. In Daniel chapter four verse twenty-five we learn that God gives rule and authority to whomsoever He will. In Psalm seventy-five verses six and seven, we are taught that promotion comes from God who puts down one and sets up another. All earth's rulers are in his hand.

In this particular case the Midianites were allowed to be a chastening instrument against the Israelites because of their disobedience before God. At the present moment does everything seem against you? Are your plans going all wrong? Are you up against a brick wall, with your efforts seemingly thwarted? Can it be that God is chastening you and wanting you to seek after Him and turn away from yourself? Then "Seek the Lord while He may be found and call upon Him while He is near."

We read that the Israelites eventually cried out to the Lord because of the oppression they were suffering throughout seven long years. Now God did a strange thing in response to their pleas for help. In verse eight we learn that God did not grant an immediate deliverance to His people. Instead, a prophet was sent to them to call the people back to their covenant responsibilities and loyalties. You see, they had been untrue to God and his laws.

It appears that their crying out to the Lord for help did not indicate a true sorrow for their sin and a turning from it. In other words, a genuine repentance was not evident among them. God saw that they needed to hear his word, accept the challenge of it and put away their disobedience.

It is still true today that mere crying to the Lord for help and deliverance may not indicate a true repentance for things that are wrong. In Second Corinthians chapter seven verse ten, the apostle Paul says: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." A genuine repentance has definite effects in the life.

From verse eleven onwards of Judges chapter six, we are introduced to Gideon himself who was himself living under the conditions I have just described. We are told that an angel of the Lord appeared to him sitting under an oak tree belonging to Joash, the father of Gideon. It is interesting to note that in this passage this angel is also called the angel of the Lord and that Gideon addresses him as "Lord" in verse sixteen. Here we have another Old Testament appearance of the Son of God, as in the experience of Abraham and Joshua. How compassionate and patient He is with Gideon, gently encouraging him to go into battle for the Lord and his people. Still today, He gives to his people such encouragement saying, "I am with you always."

Gideon, like so many of us, expressed doubts about his own ability. "How can I save Israel?" he asked. "My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family." In answer to that the Lord's uplifting words were: "I will be with you and you will strike down the Midianites as if they were but one man." On that very same night Gideon, now emboldened and taking ten men who worked for him, destroyed the local altar of the false god Baal. On a new altar he offered a sacrifice to the Lord. He had made his first move, his initial stand for truth and righteousness. It was a call to the nation to have done with false worship and come back to God. He knew it would provoke a reaction and it did, but Gideon came through that immediate hostility.

Perhaps, like Gideon, you feel insignificant. "What could I possibly do for God?" you may be thinking. You can start by being true to Him, living for Him and shunning all evil. Everyone has to begin somewhere in this, and it is often in the small details of daily life that the start is made. Ask the Lord to help you make a beginning as He did with Gideon.

Shortly after Gideon's first move for God the Midianites and Amalekites crossed the river Jordan and encamped in their thousands in the Valley of Jezreel. This valley leads north west from the river towards the Mediterranean Sea. Their forces seemed to fill the area, making the situation look hopeless for the Israelites. So it is that God's children have often seemed a tiny minority, but God has been with them, upholding them.

What overwhelming odds faced the Israelites, yet in that very hour God acted to save them. In verse thirty-four we read that, "The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon". This virtually means, "the Spirit of the Lord clothed Himself with Gideon." God's Spirit completely possessed him. All through the Bible we see that when God intends to do a great work He mightily empowers the man or woman of his choice who is to do it. Great spiritual energy and understanding is imparted for a task that otherwise seems impossible. It is still true today, for God says to us that it is not by human power or wisdom that his work is accomplished, but by his Spirit.

Now this coming of the Holy Spirit on Gideon did not mean that he became superhuman. He was still an ordinary man and still a little hesitant. He wanted reassurance from God, so he asked for a special sign involving a fleece of sheep's wool. On the first night he asked for the dew to be on the fleece, but not on the earth around it. On the second night he asked for it to be the opposite way round. God in his patience and kindness granted both signs to Gideon.

There is danger here to be avoided. We are not Gideon, and if we are true Christians then the Holy Spirit lives within us and will guide us through the Bible if we seek God's guidance, approaching him through our mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not for us, in our day, to put God to the test, demanding special signs for confirmation. Rather it is our duty to walk

humbly before the Lord, trusting in Him and his Word. If you are not doing that, ask God to help you to do it so that his blessing may be upon your life, as it was upon Gideon's.

Arthur Howe
Book of Judges
7 – Gideon II

We now come to the main part of Gideon's story which I have called "Victory over the Midianites". This is that part of his life to which everything had been leading. This is what God had called Gideon to do. This was the outcome of the preparation about which we learned in the previous talk. It runs right through Judges chapters seven and eight.

The army of the Midianites was encamped in the Valley of Jezreel about fifteen miles west of the Sea of Galilee and near to the hill of Morah. The army of Israel was pitched beside the well of Harod a few miles to the south of their enemy.

Something quite astounding to our ears was said to Gideon by the Lord. It was this: "The people that are with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands." Now remember that the Midianites were a huge host spread out along the valley floor. The army gathered together by Gideon amounted to about thirty-two thousand. The army of the Israelites did not even begin to match that of their Midianite enemy. Yet here is God saying that Gideon has too many soldiers!

How strange are the ways of the Lord. Indeed, Isaiah chapter fifty-five verse eight tells us: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord." We are inclined to think in terms of having the right forces, the right equipment, the right strategy for the conflict. In our churches we can make the mistake of thinking that keeping up the numbers and the finances will ensure success. However, a lesson was being given to Gideon that we need to learn and re-learn for our spiritual benefit.

God's lesson was more or less this: "The people are too many, and so that they will not boast against me that their own strength saved them, I am going to reduce their numbers." The Lord had determined that He would give victory to an army of ridiculously small proportions. His purpose was to show that the conquest of the Midianites would be by his divine power, not by human superiority. This would be made obvious by the smallness of Gideon's attacking force. No place would be allowed for boasting or self-satisfaction in Israel's defeat of its enemies.

It is still true today that all the glory and praise must go to God and not to man. What was being taught then in the Valley of Jezreel needs to be remembered in our day. The Apostle Paul teaches us in his first letter to the Corinthians that God chooses the weak and despised things of the world to accomplish his purposes. It is all so that "no-one may boast before Him", as he says in chapter one verse twenty-nine. If we are to boast at all we are to "boast in the Lord." That's verse thirty-one. Our salvation in Christ Jesus is from God and He is to receive the praise for that great victory in our life.

God's first instruction to Gideon was for anyone who was afraid of the battle to return home. This produced an exodus of twenty-two thousand men. Just over two thirds of the army left the battlefield! More was to come. God warned that there were still too many, and a test was given to reduce the numbers even further.

The remaining ten thousand were to be brought down to the water and Gideon was to watch how they drank. Some knelt down with their faces in the water; others cupped their hands and raised the water to their mouth. About three hundred drank in this latter way and God commanded that these be set aside to go against the Midianites.

Why did God choose the three hundred? They were part of the ten thousand braver souls who had not returned home, so it was not for their courage. Was it for watchfulness, drinking with their head up? But the enemy was a few miles away, unlikely to surprise them, with sentries mounted around the Israelite camp. In all probability the method of drinking

was slightly unusual and this would give a smaller number of soldiers. The Lord would save by few, not many. The forthcoming victory would not feed Israel's pride in any way.

Next, God graciously encouraged his apprehensive leader, Gideon, by directing him to go and overhear something on the edge of the Midianite camp. With his servant, Purah, Gideon crept up to the enemy lines and heard one soldier tell another of a dream he had had. In it a barley loaf tumbled into the Midianite camp and flattened a tent. As barley grew in the hills and wheat in the plain, the meaning was obvious.

The soldier's friend responded: "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands." This was wonderful news for Gideon and we read that at that moment he worshipped God then returned to the Israelite camp.

Do you pause to praise God in silent prayer when wonderful news comes or some encouragement is given you in the course of the day? Do you thank God when some convicting truth from the Bible comes right home to your heart, a message from the Lord himself? Be ready to thank Him in swift acknowledgement of his goodness when it happens.

So, Gideon's men advanced through the darkness in three separate groups and positioned themselves around the enemy camp. At about 10 p.m., after the Midianites had changed their sentries, the Israelites startled them with a simple trick. Standing quite still they blew their trumpets, smashed the earthen jars in which they had hidden their burning torches, and cried out: "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" In the blackness of the night the enemy thought he was under encircling attack, panicked, broke camp and fled south-east towards the river Jordan. The Israelites followed in hot pursuit and utterly defeated them. The Midianites were driven some seventy miles across the river into what is now the country of Jordan.

Who could have envisaged such a victory? Everything seemed to be against Gideon and his people. Yet once again God showed that the power and the glory belong to Him alone. Years earlier Moses had encouraged the Israelites, when they feared the pursuing Egyptians, with these words: "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." Over two hundred years later King Jehoshaphat heard this message from one of God's prophets: "Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's."

All these instances show us that we need to trust in the Lord in the middle of life's battles, whether involving sin, circumstances, people or situations. We all face our Midianite hosts from time to time. We feel so weak and insignificant. We feel sure we shall be overwhelmed. Just remember Gideon and his three hundred men and the God who fought for them.

If you are someone who thinks that you can successfully fight against God and his people and the message they bring, then please think again. It is foolish to set yourself up in opposition to the Almighty. Turn from your hostility. Seek forgiveness through the Lord Jesus and his death for your sin on the cross. Make peace with God who will give you his peace.

Arthur Howe
Book of Judges
8 – Abimelech

This time we are going to look at a man called Abimelech, although he is not one of the judges of the people of Israel. We read his story in the Book of Judges chapter nine. He comes upon the scene as a ruthless, ambitious usurper, someone who overturns a fairly settled state of affairs and plunges the people into chaos and upheaval. He is a picture of what a judge ought not to be. He is a ruler who does his people no good at all.

This whole episode is a warning about choosing our leaders carefully and wisely as God's people. A wrong choice of pastor, church officer, youth leader or Sunday School teacher can bring disastrous spiritual consequences. To behave like the people did who so readily chose Abimelech to be their leader is not unlike that which sometimes happens in local churches. Easily led and undiscerning Christians can have their heads turned by an impressive or forceful personality and then live to regret it. That is how it was with Abimelech.

The seeds of the trouble were sown earlier. The closing part of chapter eight reveals that, although Gideon would not yield to the popular demand that he be the king, his lifestyle showed that it was something he really wanted. He built up what can only be described as a royal harem for he had many wives and no less than seventy sons. Gideon also had a mistress who lived in Shechem and their son was Abimelech, the man who would cause the people of God so much trouble.

It is tragic to read at the end of chapter eight that the children of Israel were no better spiritually than they were before the Lord had come to their aid through Gideon. We read that after the death of Gideon "they set up Baal-Berith as their god and did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hands of their enemies on every side." they forgot God's mercy and they forgot about the peace they had enjoyed during Gideon's forty years as their judge. Despite his faults, Gideon's guiding principle was "the Lord will rule over you." How quickly the people turned away from this after his influence was removed.

As Christians today let us thank God for His mercy when we have leaders and teachers whose guiding principle is obedience to God's Word, and who teach us faithfully, and who lead us by example in the ways of the Lord. Let us beware of the danger of forgetting how important this is. It is sometimes the case, when faithful leaders move on or die, that there is an abandoning of the old paths and of gospel truth. These are left in favour of crowd-pleasing messages that do not humble men and women in the presence of a holy God. Beware of being led astray into teaching and practices that result in spiritual confusion and a lack of reverence for the Lord.

The Israelites had become disobedient and forgetful of God's blessings. So the stage was set in Abimelech's day for something to go seriously wrong. This evil man gained power for himself by murdering all his half-brothers except one, Jotham, who managed to escape. And so Abimelech was crowned king in his home town of Shechem.

In verses seven to twenty of Judges chapter nine we are taken to the slopes of Mount Gerizim which lay south of Shechem. Jotham the surviving half-brother, shouts a message from the Lord to the people. The message came in the form of a fable. He spoke of all the trees wanting a king but the olive, the fig and the vine refused as they all had useful fruit-bearing to do. Finally, the bramble, or thorn bush, was asked to be king, and he agreed and invited the trees to take refuge under his prickly shade.

Jotham's point in all this was that men of wisdom and integrity would never have chosen a man like Abimelech who had come by his position through murder and intrigue. He

challenged them to ask themselves if they had acted honourably and in good faith in view of all that Gideon had done for them. He warned them that they faced certain judgement, saying that their murderous lack of gratitude, and by implication their disregard of the Lord, would surely bum up in their faces in due course.

And God did judge the wickedness of Abimelech and the Shechemites in His own way and in His own time. He permitted an evil spirit to stir up strife and discontent among those who originally supported Abimelech. This eventually led to outright war between them during the course of which the evil king was mortally wounded and put to death by his armour-bearer. The followers of Abimelech were scattered and so a most unhappy period of internal conflict among the people of Israel came to an end. It had all been so unnecessary and fruitless at a time when the real need was for the people to pull together, turn away from their false beliefs and practices, and humbly seek their God.

Abimelech governed Israel for three years and it must have seemed to those who longed for God to bring justice that evil had prevailed. But God's justice was being worked out stage by stage and the fire of his judgement eventually broke out and Abimelech and all who supported him fell. All may look smooth and successful in the pathway of wrongdoing, but in His good time God will bring it all down.

The writer of Psalm seventy-three faced the same question: "why do the wicked seem to prosper and succeed?" It may be a question you have asked as you have looked at the evil that goes on in the world today. It seems unjust that those who take no account of God and live only for themselves, and whose lives are far from holy, appear to sail through life without trouble. The psalmist had his eyes opened to the reality of the situation when he went into God's presence - into the sanctuary. He writes in verses sixteen and seventeen of Psalm seventy-three: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me until I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny." What is the final destiny of those who continue in their sinful ways? The psalmist goes on to say: "Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin." Eternal ruin is the certain end for all who turn their backs on God.

The judgement of God against sin is certain and one day it will fall as it did on the people of Israel when they turned their backs on Him to worship false gods and live lives full of wickedness. This theme of God's judgement is not a pleasant one, but it runs throughout Scripture. Without this justice the thought of God as holy and righteous becomes meaningless. God always judges sin and that is what the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ is all about. It was on the cross that your sin and mine was dealt with once and for all. The death of Jesus Christ was the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. He has been punished in our place so that we need never face God's righteous judgement.

Again and again, in the times of the judges, God reached out to his people in mercy to restore them and forgive them because He loved them. So today, this same holy, righteous God reaches out in love to a lost world ready to pardon, cleanse and accept all who come to Him in repentance trusting in his Son, Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Have you seen your danger and responded to God's love and accepted Christ as your Saviour?

Arthur Howe
Book of Judges
9 – Jephthah

You would have thought that after the bad experience with Abimelech as their judge and then the settled period under the two judges Tola and Jair the Israelites would begin to see what was good for them. Tola judged them for twenty-three years and Jair for twenty-two giving them a time of peace and prosperity under the merciful hand of God. Yet, as we read in judges chapter ten verse six, "the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord."

It seems as though they were determined to plunge headlong into disaster and to provoke the Lord their God shamelessly. We read in the same verse that not only did they worship Baal and Ashtoreth, the false gods of Canaan, but also the gods of Syria to the north-east; the gods of Zidon on their northern coast; the gods of Moab across the Dead Sea to the east; the gods of the Ammonites east of the Jordan; and the gods of the Philistines on their western border.

Can you see what they were doing? After all the mercy shown them by God, they were looking all around them and borrowing the worship and practices of their neighbours. It seems that the Living and True God was not good enough for them. He had become familiar, even boring, so they looked for excitement in other beliefs. They wanted easy-going standards of morality and freedom from the demands of God's law. And so they "forsook the Lord and no longer served Him." They turned away from all that should have marked them out as God's people and different from the nations around them and became indistinguishable from their neighbours.

Sadly, the same happens among God's people today. The old strict standards of God's Word don't look half as appealing as the current ideas of morality and behaviour. Life-styles of those around seem much more exciting. Why, out there in the world people have a great time. Their religion doesn't cramp their style. People don't frown on you if you don't apply strict standards to yourself. They seem to be more understanding and live life to the full. This was just the way the Israelites of old thought and it took them further and further away from the Lord until again He had to act in judgement using the very people whose ways they sought to imitate to punish them. For eighteen years they suffered under the hands of their enemies because of their disobedience.

As God's people today we are called upon to be holy, a people set apart for Him. We are to be a people who are different from the world around us, to have as our standards and our aims those things that are pleasing to the Lord and which are in accordance with his Word. Remember the words of Peter in his First Letter chapter four verse seventeen: "For it is time for judgement to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?"

Once again, in their extreme times of suffering, the children of Israel began to be convicted of their sin. They said to the Lord, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now." And they put away the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. What mercy there is in the heart of our God towards His repentant people. We read in Judges chapter ten verse sixteen, "And He could bear Israel's misery no longer." As Christians we have in our Lord Jesus Christ a merciful high priest who is able to sympathise with our weaknesses. Even though we suffer for our sin He is not unmindful of what we go through. *We also have the promise that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us because the blood of Christ cleanses us completely.*

It is in the eastern region of Gilead, across the Jordan, where tension was building with the Ammonites, that we are introduced to the next judge, a man called Jephthah. His story is told in Judges chapters eleven and twelve. He is a most unlikely character from the human

standpoint. He was something of an outcast because his mother was a prostitute. Because of this his half-brothers drove him out of the family home and we are told that he moved a little way north to the land of Tob and "a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him."

When the Ammonites gathered to attack the Israelites the leaders of the Gileadites went to find Jephthah and bring him back as their commander. He had evidently gained a reputation as a fighting man and a leader and the elders of Israel wanted to make good use of these capabilities. It reminds us once again that the Lord chooses the despised things of this world to confound the mighty. We see how God raises up His own instruments of power, however unlikely they may be.

When God brings deliverance to His people He works in His own way, often to the surprise of those who are praying and waiting. Out of obscurity God can bring a powerful preacher, missionary or reformer to do a great work, to the confounding of God's enemies. This was about to happen with Jephthah, son of a prostitute and sneered at by his brothers.

The elders of Gilead urged him to accept the leadership, assuring him of a welcome among the people. He was also offered the reward of headship of the Gileadites once the Ammonites were dealt with. It was to the children of Ammon that Jephthah now had to direct his attention. First of all he sought a diplomatic solution to the Ammonites' complaint that the Israelites had taken their territory. He reminded them that it was God who had given victory to them enabling them to settle east of the Jordan. Why, then, should the Ammonites suddenly lay claim to the land after Israel had been settled there for three hundred years? Jephthah wisely sought a peaceful solution first of all, rather than confrontation. Sad to say, Jephthah's conciliatory approach failed and the king of Ammon paid no attention to his message.

Certainly, when faced with a difficult situation we as Christians should always try the diplomatic approach first of all.. We are instructed in Romans chapter twelve verse sixteen: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." And Paul reminds us in Second Timothy chapter two verse twenty-four that: "the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful."

In verse twenty-nine of chapter eleven, we read: "Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah." The Lord was empowering him for the battle that lay ahead - just as He had done with Gideon many years before. It appears that, like Gideon, Jephthah worshipped the true God and the result was an overwhelming victory for God's people, and their enemy was subdued. In verse thirty-two we read that it was the Lord who gave the Ammonites into Jephthah's hands. Remember, as children of God in our fight against the enemy, the battle belongs to the Lord, and we can only win in the power of His Spirit who lives in us.

Sadly, it is at this point that we read that Jephthah made a rash promise to the Lord. It was not something that was required of him by Jewish law and it was certainly not demanded by God. It is a case of misplaced zeal and is a lesson to us that the best of men are only men at best. Before the battle with the Ammonites he vowed to the Lord, "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." It was a rash vow indeed because on his victorious return from battle who should meet him, coming out of his house, but his daughter, his only child. It is not without significance that we read concerning Jephthah that he could not break his vow to the Lord, and that his daughter acknowledged this and that it was the Lord who had given the victory. Surely this is an indication that here was a godfearing family.

It is a deep mystery as to why God allowed Jephthah to fulfil his unwise vow, but in various places in the Old Testament God's message to His people is "I never required this of you",

or "I never commanded you to do this for me." God does not approve of all that in His sovereignty He allows. We must walk quietly and humbly before Him, keeping strictly to His Word and not straying beyond it.

Beware of making rash promises to God in the form of 'If you will do this for me, Lord, then I will make such and such a sacrifice for you, or I will dedicate myself fully to your service.' As the old hymn says, our walk with the Lord is simply a matter of "trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

Jephthah was a man who experienced the mighty power of God in his life and yet he speaks to us of the need for sanctified wisdom and good understanding, especially if we are in a position of spiritual leadership.

Arthur Howe
Book of Judges
10 – Samson

In this programme we come to the most famous judge of all, Samson. His great exploits of strength and courage are widely known even by those who hardly ever read the Bible. His story is spread across four chapters of the Book of Judges so it would be impossible to cover them all in detail. All we can do over two programmes is give an outline of his life and draw some lessons from it.

First of all let us look at "Samson's birth and rise to fame". You will find this in Judges chapter thirteen verses one to chapter fourteen verse twenty. Whatever we may think of Samson and his weaknesses or failings, we have to recognise that God sent him as a saviour or deliverer to Israel. Not only that, God sent him to an undeserving, backslidden people. How that speaks of God's mercy in sending his Son into the world to be our Saviour and Deliverer. However, unlike Samson, the Lord Jesus had no weaknesses or failings. We are reminded by the apostle Paul in Romans chapter five verse eight that "God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

In the opening verses of chapter thirteen of Judges we see once more the wickedness of the people of Israel: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines who ruled over them for forty years." "Again", it says! We might well ask "How many more times will they turn away from God?" But then do we need to ask the same question of ourselves? How often have you or I fallen or forgotten our blessings and taken God's mercy for granted? How many times has God forgiven me and been patient with me through the years? How merciful is our God to us, just as He was with rebellious Israel.

As a consequence of Israel's waywardness the Lord allowed the Philistines to oppress them for forty years. From reading the life of Samson it would appear that he was born about half-way through that period. The circumstances of his birth are exceptional as with other leading figures used by God. We can think of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel and John the Baptist. In each case their mothers were, humanly speaking, unable to have a child, but God granted their desire.

In the case of Samson we do not know his mother's name, but we are told that his father was Manoah from the tribe of the Danites. The angel of the Lord came to Manoah's wife and foretold the birth of a longed-for son. He was to be no ordinary child and he was to be brought up as a Nazirite. A Nazirite was someone who took a vow of dedication to the Lord, pledging to live a life of purity, discipline and abstinence from alcoholic drink. As a mark of this he would leave his hair uncut. Clearly the Lord had in mind something exceptional for this child. Indeed, we learn that as the boy grew, "the Lord blessed him, and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him ..."

That description of the Lord's activity reminds us again that each judge raised up by the Lord was empowered by His Spirit. They were able to do the work and lead the people aright because of that anointing or spiritual endowment. Samson was the last such judge before God raised up Samuel to lead His people. Let us always remember that work for God can only be accomplished by the Spirit of God. Human energy alone is insufficient. The word of the Lord to the prophet Zechariah was: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty." It is futile to attempt any work for the Lord unless we are stirred by the Spirit and empowered by Him.

At the opening of Judges chapter fourteen, Samson is a young man and one day he left his home and travelled about six miles south-west to a place called Timnah which was in Philistine territory. There he saw a Philistine girl whom he decided he wanted to marry. He

returned home and told his parents who were dismayed that he wanted to marry a Philistine girl and not a girl from among the people of Israel.

But Samson was determined to have his own way. "She is the right one for me", he said to them. Does that sound familiar? Here is a young man who has made his mind. He will go his own way in the matter. The people of Israel had been commanded by the Lord to keep themselves separate from the idolatrous nations around them. They were not to inter-marry with them. What trouble was caused to the nation whenever they disregarded this command that had been given.

What trouble follows even today from marriages where one is a child of God and the other is not. If you are a Christian seeking a marriage partner, then heed the words of Paul to the Corinthian believers in Second Corinthians chapter six: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.' Therefore come out from them and be separate."

We see in Judges chapter fourteen verse four the sovereignty of God in this situation. He is going to use even Samson's wilful disobedience to achieve deliverance of Israel from the Philistines. We read that when Samson said to his father concerning the Philistine girl, "Get her for me. She is the right one for me": "His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel." So often in the Old Testament Scriptures we see the sovereign Lord using even the disobedient and the immoral to achieve His merciful purposes for his people. This is because He is in control of history and uses whom He will to bring about all that He has planned.

In the verses that follow we read of Samson's encounter with a lion which he destroyed because "the Spirit of the Lord came on him in power so that he tore the lion apart." Here is the first glimpse of that physical strength for which he became famous. The devil, we are told in First Peter chapter five verse eight is "like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour", and we are encouraged to "resist him firm in the faith." We too need the Spirit of God to make us strong when we are attacked or tempted in our spiritual battle as believers. If a Christian finds it hard enough, how will you do in life's battles if you do not have the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour and the power of the Holy Spirit within you? Turn from your sin and place your trust in the Saviour who is mightier than all the forces of darkness. With Christ in your life the devil may roar, but he cannot harm you.

Arthur Howe
Book of Judges
11 – Samson Part 2

In this second programme about Samson we think about “His Fame and his Fall.” Against the wishes of his family and the command of God, Samson went through with his marriage to the Philistine girl who lived in Timnah, but what trouble it brought! During the wedding celebrations Samson set a riddle for his Philistine companions: “Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong something sweet.” Samson was referring to honey that he had taken from the carcass of a lion he had killed, but the young men didn’t know this. Samson promised each of them a set of new clothes if they could solve the riddle before the time of feasting was over. They could not solve it and forced Samson’s wife to find the answer for them. After much persuading, Samson told her the answer and she secretly told the Philistines.

When Samson realised what had happened he was very angry and went to Ashkelon, twenty-three miles away on the coast, and, using the strength God had given him, he killed thirty Philistine men, took their clothes and gave them to those who had cheated him. Once more we see the Spirit of God driving Samson to confront the enemies of God’s people and bring judgement on them using the physical power he had been given.

There is a lesson we can draw from this. If you or I are to wage war successfully against wickedness and error it has to be by spiritual power from God. Our spiritual enemies may be within ourselves or in the world around us or possibly in the church. If we are weak spiritually, careless or prayerless we shall not win many battles, if any at all. Our spiritual power as believers comes from the Holy Spirit of God within us as we yield to Him and allow Him to fill us.

After the events surrounding his marriage Samson, burning with anger, left his wife and returned to his father’s house. Because he thought that Samson no longer loved her, the girl’s father gave her to someone else. When Samson found out, on a subsequent visit to see his wife, there were severe consequences for the Philistines. Samson destroyed their cornfields, their vineyards and their olive groves in an act of revenge. But the situation became worse and the Philistines then killed Samson’s wife and her father in retaliation. Samson responded to this murderous act by killing many of them.

After this he moved away eastwards to the region of Judah and lived in a cave at the rock Etam. The men of Judah pleaded with him to give himself up to the Philistines in case their overlords carried out some fearful reprisals. He allowed himself to be bound with two new ropes on the promise that the men of Judah would not kill him themselves but hand him over to their enemy. This they did, but Samson was not finished yet!

We read in Judges chapter fifteen verse fourteen that as the Philistines approached him, “The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax and the bindings dropped from his hands.” He was ready for battle. We read that picking up the jaw-bone of a donkey he struck down a thousand men and gained another great victory in the strength given to him by God. After such exertion he felt that he would

die of thirst. He called upon the Lord who answered him by bringing water from the rock. "When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived."

Maybe you have experienced something like that after some great spiritual battle. You were tired, exhausted and in need of spiritual renewal. The Lord our God is the same today. He is still merciful in hearing our cries for refreshment and strengthening. Time and again, as we cry to Him, He brings us refreshment through his Word and as we pray.

Sadly, now we must turn to the fall of Samson. You will find this in chapter sixteen of Judges. Tragic Samson, so strong yet so weak, had not learned his lesson and returned yet again to Philistine territory. While in the city of Gaza he denied what he should have been as a Nazirite, dedicated to the Lord, by sleeping with a prostitute. His folly nearly cost him his life with the men of Gaza waiting to capture him. But the wily Samson slipped away in the middle of the night, lifting the city gates from their mountings. He carried them on his shoulders some thirty miles away to the east near the city of Hebron.

This further step of disobedience, involving himself with the enemies of God's people, marked the beginning of Samson's downfall. The pattern of his life had changed and he was disobeying God with greater ease as the time went by. Soon he would involve himself with Delilah, the woman who would destroy his character and cause him to lose his physical strength. By constant nagging, and in collusion with his Philistine enemies, Delilah got from Samson the secret of his God-given strength.

Even before he was born the Lord had said to Samson's mother, "No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines." This does not mean that it was his long hair that gave him superhuman strength. It was simply a sign, a reminder to Samson of his dedication to God. While he walked in obedience his Lord would be with him and he would experience the power of God's Spirit upon him. But now Samson would become the victim of his own folly and disobedience. His enemies came and with Delilah's help they cut off his hair and his strength was gone.

Again, we can draw a spiritual lesson from these events. Like Samson we can be easily led astray. One sin, one act of disobedience is followed by another. Soon a pattern is established it becomes easy to ignore the voice of conscience which grows quieter and quieter with each act of rebellion against God's Word. Tragically Samson wasted all the blessings and power he had known and suffered the bitter consequences of his actions.

Have you ever had the sorrowful experience of putting your trust and affections elsewhere than in the Lord? Like Samson you have been betrayed, realising only too late that your spiritual strength was nearly gone. Keep close to the Lord Jesus for He has said that He is like a shepherd and his people are his sheep. They are to listen to Him and be led by Him and He will feed them by his Word. You can read about this in the Gospel of John chapter ten.

The tragic moment came for Samson when his enemies managed to cut off his hair while he slept. When he tried to resist capture later he found that he was helpless. Judges chapter sixteen verse twenty records the awful fact, "But he did not know that the Lord had left him." How terrible to be without God or his power. How tragic for any servant of the Lord today to have lost spiritual power and go blithely on in ignorance. David, repentant of his sinfulness, declared his need of God's Holy Spirit in his life. In Psalm fifty-one verse eleven he cries: "Do not take your Holy Spirit from me." He had lost the fellowship and nearness and joy of the Lord because of his sin. The Spirit of the Lord never departs from any true child of

God for He is in us, but that sense of his closeness and the realisation of his power is lost when we walk in disobedience as Samson did.

For Samson his failure meant capture, being blinded by the Philistines and being brought down to Gaza to grind corn in the prison house. In the process of time, however, Samson's hair began to grow again. No doubt this reminded him of former days when God's power came upon him and he won great victories over the enemy. Do you look back on times in your life when you knew more of God's power and strength in your life? Was there a time when you lived victoriously for your Saviour? Are you now. Perhaps, like Samson, feeling that God is far away because of wrong things in your life that have not been repented of and forgiven? If so note carefully now what happened to Samson.

His enemies brought him into the temple of Dagon, their god. The crowds mocked and jeered at Samson who was now their humiliated victim. But as he experienced this torment Samson offered up to God one final, desperate cry for help: "O sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more..." The wonder of it is that God heard and answered him!

New strength was given him and he caused the collapse of the temple, and Samson died along with all those in the house of Dagon the false god of the Philistines. Judgement fell on many who were God's enemies that day. Yet how much more might have been accomplished if Samson had been true to God all through his life. He was the last of the judges and had ruled Israel for twenty years. He is a tragic warning of the dangers of playing fast and loose with God.

The way to victory for the people of God is by godly, faithful living. As it says in First Peter chapter two verse nine, by our life we are to "proclaim the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light." Ask the Lord to help you to live consistently like that.

Arthur Howe
Book of Judges
12 – Micah and the Danites

Up to now in our journey of discovery through the Old Testament book of Judges we have seen in the history of Israel that there were many ups and downs in the spiritual life of the nation. After a period of disobedience and decline God would mercifully raise up a deliverer to save them. Now, towards the end of Judges, it is no longer a case of going astray and then coming back to God again. The people seem to go into a moral and spiritual free-fall, like a sky-diver who has just jumped from an aircraft.

It seems as though all restraints are removed. There is nothing to hold them back. There is no merciful intervention from God. Indeed, no one seems to be seeking God or calling on Him. Does the Bible give any indication of what was going wrong? It certainly does, making it quite clear in chapter seventeen verse six where we read: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."

In other words everyone was self-centred. Their point of reference was self and self only. They were saying, "does it seem right to me? If so, then I'll do it!" No reference was brought made to God or to His Word. It all sounds strangely familiar, doesn't it? For many there are no absolute standards of truth or morality. No God-given principles by which to live. These days it all comes down to how you feel about something. It simply depends on what most people are comfortable with. Many today measure their actions and attitudes by how something appears to them and if they themselves are happy with it. But just look at the moral and social chaos and upheaval this is causing. God has been relegated almost into oblivion in most people's thinking, and they acknowledge no spiritual guidelines.

This was the situation in Israel with a downward spiral into spiritual confusion and moral degeneracy that threatened their survival as a people who could serve God. In chapters seventeen and eighteen of Judges we are introduced to a man called Micah. He lived in the central hilly region of Ephraim. Now it would not be fair to say that the spiritual decline all started with this man, but he was no doubt typical of many at that time. He is set before us as an example and warning of how things can quickly go wrong when God's Word is ignored or forgotten. We are given a picture of the catastrophic consequences that can flow from a bad spiritual beginning.

We read that Micah stole some silver from his mother. However, he returned it and we are astonished to read that his mother had dedicated it to the Lord for her son to make images to worship in his house. What kind of confusion is this? It seems to be borrowing practices from the people around, yet associating the name of the Lord with it. And that is not all. Micah made these idols and then appointed his son as a priest for his private religion. And to make matters worse he also appointed a young man of the tribe of Levi to be his personal priest and offered him a fine salary, clothing and upkeep. Had he never read the Scriptures or heard them read? Did he not know that the Tabernacle of the Lord was at Shiloh, not very far away, with properly appointed priests from the family of Aaron? The Levites were helpers in the Tabernacle, but never priests.

Micah's ignorance or wilful disobedience of God's Word is revealed in his words after he had made his arrangements: "Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest." Here he is, trampling over all that God had established and ignoring the second commandment which forbade the worship of other gods. He was overturning all that God had ordained, and then more or less congratulating himself for it. It was either gross ignorance or extreme folly. Whatever the case, it was an affront to God and no good could come of it. Chapter eighteen of Judges records what happened.

Before we come to that, let's consider the warnings that these events present us with. Even today we find people who get an idea, a religious inspiration that seems to them to be

good and spiritual. Like Micah they feel sure that the Lord will bless their enterprise. Others fall in with the idea, it grows and develops and attracts support financially and in other ways. Sadly, even when everything seems to be solid and influence and authority grow, then suddenly some problem, some shock, some scandal comes to light. Why is this? Because the Lord was not in the enterprise at all.

The principles of God's Word were not followed either through ignorance, or personal pride, or even wilful disregard. God has many ways of dealing with such things and often people are left to wonder how they were taken-in so easily. So test everything closely by the Word of God to avoid repeating Micah's error. If what is being done is contrary to God's revealed will and law then it is to be avoided at all costs.

Micah was probably typical of many among the people of Israel in his day. It is likely that in many other homes there were idols being worshipped alongside the worship of the Living God. That was a recipe for spiritual disaster that would eventually call down the judgement of God upon the nation. The Lord had told His people centuries before: "you shall have no other gods beside me", but they had fallen away and been corrupted by following the ways of the people around them. Let this be a warning to us in our day.

Chapter eighteen of Judges describes how the folly of Micah ultimately brings about his downfall. About thirty miles south-west of Micah's home there were the people of the tribe of Dan looking for a place to settle. The Philistines were too strong for them to gain the area of land allotted to them, so they were on the lookout for a more peaceful region. Five spies were sent out to explore the land and they came to Micah's house where they spent the night. While there they met the young Levite appointed by Micah to be his personal priest and they asked him, "What are you doing in this place? Why are you here?" He told them about Micah's arrangement and so they said to him, "Please enquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful." We read that the false priest answered them: "Go in peace. Your journey has the Lord's approval." Isn't it strange how easily people invoke the name of God. Here was a Levite in breach of God's appointed ways, calmly sending these Danites on their way supposedly with God's blessing. It is a reminder to us that not all those who use God's name to validate their actions, or in blessing others, truly belong to Him or are walking according to the truth.

Sometime later, after the spies had reported their findings, six hundred men of the Danites set out to take the new territory and on the way they too stopped at Micah's house. While there they helped themselves to his household gods, and when the Levite objected they bribed him with an even more inviting offer than that of Micah: "Why be priest over a single household when you can be priest to a whole tribe?"

It is sad how people can fall prey to flattery and generous offers. Yes, people can be bought. It is said that everyone has his price. It is as true now as it was then. That young Levite had already abandoned his principles when he accepted Micah's offer. It was an easy thing to go along with the Danites. Such attitudes and actions should not be found among God's people today.

How ironic when we read of Micah desperately trying to recover his stolen images. He had been outbidden. One kind of corruption gave way to another. The thief had himself been robbed. The one who had corrupted the Levite found that others could corrupt his personal priest even more successfully. The one who had abandoned the standards of God's law was himself harshly treated by those who had no regard for it themselves

The Danites moved on and took the territory that had been found by their spies. There they set up the image they had stolen and established their own order of priests. Like the other tribes of Israel they were living and worshipping in a fashion hardly different from the godless people around them.

Where does it all end? Where will we end up if we start doing that which is right in our own eyes? It may be only in seemingly small things, but we have to be so careful. Our views of God, of the Lord Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit and our worship and behaviour, all have to be according to what is right in God's eyes, not ours. If you have been going wrong, like Micah and that young Levite, is it not time to repent and come back to the Lord in humility?