

HEROES AND MERCY

Judges

Thoughts come from a wide variety of sources. Some from messages I have heard from individuals, some from assembly Bible studies, some from home life and some from books I have read. The Holy Spirit is the Teacher who makes them real to me.

- "The Life Application Bible." Tyndale House and Zondervan
- "Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay," by Gary Inrig. Moody Press. Chicago

Judges 1

A SUBTLE CHANGE

This book covers a period of 325 years and provides many lessons as to how God begets strength out of human weakness. The key verse of the book is 17: 6 **"In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes."** Yet, **"God has chosen the weak things..."** (1Cor.1:27-29). God used Ehud (3:12-30), who was left handed and Shamgar with his ox-goad (3:31); Deborah (4:1-5:31), who would be considered the "weaker sex" though she was not a weak woman, and Barak (4:10,13) with 10,000 foot soldiers against an army with 900 iron chariots. He used Jael (4:21; 5:26) with a tent pin in her left hand and a hammer in her right and Gideon (7:1-8), whose army shrank to 300 men with pitchers, torches and trumpets to defeat the enemies of the Lord's people. A woman killed Abimelech (9:53) with a piece of a millstone and after him the judge was Tola, whose name means "worm." Again, another woman steps into the historical account, Samson's mother, whom God miraculously used to bring Samson into the world, who in turn could use the jawbone of an ass, to kill 1,000 Philistines.

(1:1) *"After the death of Joshua."* Joshua is a record of the time Israel trusted and obeyed the Lord; a book of conquest; a book of unity. Judges, on the other hand is a book of unbelief, disobedience and defeat. Division and anarchy mark its pages. Scripture is neglected and rejected. It is an account of what happens when people turn away from the Lord.

It is not uncommon for us as the people of God to go into a "dry patch" in our spiritual experiences shortly after times of victory and blessing. One of the causes is that there is a tendency on our part to think victory comes because of our strength, not realizing or at least admitting that God's "strength is made perfect in weakness," our weakness. Israel had entered the promised land and the Lord drove their enemies out from before them with hornets, and by His mighty power used His people in remarkable ways. But partial obedience is disobedience, and they left enough pro-idolatry, anti-God people there, that they became attracted to their sensual and ungodly ways.

Judges speaks to our time because it gives us living examples of people who served God and flourished in a similar time. It also tells us of people who did not succumb to the wave of sin. It clearly demonstrates to us what happens when a group of people pull back from wholehearted commitment to the Lord.

The book of Judges tells the story and gives us lesson after lesson of what happens when people turn away from God. Of this we can be sure: judgment against sin is certain. God does not ever cease to be righteous and holy. Compromising our God-given, Bible taught convictions, and disobedience to His divine will puts us in danger of losing out on His blessings now. Allowing sin to go without dealing with it and the wickedness that results, brings disaster to a nation, an assembly and an individual. There is a downward trend that leads to a downward spiral of sin when we do not learn from past history and live only for today and the "pleasures of sin for a season."

God has given us guidelines to live by to preserve us morally, spiritually and even nationally. Consistent living by the guidelines of the word of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and faithfulness in life and testimony, go together. Spiritual commitment and the motivation to please God, allows God to demonstrate His love and mercy to us. Even when we fail, when we repent of our sin and turn to Him in faith, He is willing and able to show mercy and forgiveness. He is a just God who wants the best for His children even when they fail and forsake Him.

Judges 1:15 *"And she said unto him, 'Give me a blessing: for thou hast given me a south land; give me also springs of water.' And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the nether springs."*

SPRINGS OF WATER.

She was given to a good man: a valiant warrior; a leader of men; a hero; a winner of battles. And yet we cannot feed on fame - we need food. We cannot live on reputation – we need reality. We cannot survive on

past blessings – we need present benefits. We cannot live long looking back – we must turn and look ahead to the future. She could have complained or looked to this new husband, Othniel to do everything for her, but she was her father's daughter. She had eyes in her head. She knew the difference between a south land and a north. And she didn't complain about the inheritance she had been given. She could see the problem and worry about it, or she could see the solution to the problem, and do something about it.

Achsah must have learned a lot by watching her father. His willingness to stand out against the crowd and popular opinion, set him apart from the people around. His physical and moral strength, were not acts of chance, but choices he made before the Lord his God whom he had learned to trust and obey. His fearlessness in the face of huge, fleshly men would've impressed his daughter that what was impossible to a man in his own strength, was easily done when God is working for me. So, even though Caleb was a man of old age and great and honorable before the people, she knew what she needed and knew where to get it. He alone could give her the water needed for the south land. The dry and arid south slopes could have all the nutrients needed in the soil, but it needed water to bring them out.

Achsah didn't ask for another field where the work wouldn't be so hard. She recognized that God had given the mountain to Caleb; he had asked for it and God gave it to him. She didn't ask for the north land where the summer heat wouldn't be so oppressive. She didn't ask for the west where the breezes from the Great Sea would cool the heated brow. She didn't ask for the eastern slopes where the morning sun would brighten the fields early so the hard labor could be over before the heat of the day. She accepted gratefully what she had been given. But knowing her sensible father would understand, she asked for a present, a sensible present; springs of water: water that she could carry to nourish fragile plants; Water that could bring from dry ground, life-giving food that was needed. Water that could make a desert blossom; water that would make the difference between famine and fullness was her simple, precise request. It would require her time, energy and strength to use the water, but she was willing to pay that price. All she wanted was water: that's all; not an aqueduct to carry it – just water. Not a waterfall with tepid water flowing noisily over the cliff that she could easily channel, but springs that she could dip from. Springs that would come cool and refreshing from deep in the earth. She knew if she received such a gift, it would be a blessing. Not just today, when the waterfall is making its noise but dries up in the late summer when it is needed, but a spring that never runs dry. Not a river flowing by, that requires little effort to draw from, but springs that will be there always, in season and out of season. Springs produce the needed food for sustenance, and that would also provide for the constant need for her life and that of her family for years to come.

Caleb must've smiled with deep satisfaction as this young lady, his own child, came to him in such wisdom as to "keep it simple", but also trust that indicated "You can do it if you will." He responded by giving her more than one could expect: upper springs that would flow full early in the season, and would enable her to easily carry it downhill all the way to where it was needed. Then to her grateful desire to receive from his fullness, he gave her the nether (lower) springs too, that would be there when all else failed. Those lower springs would bring blessing to her and her hero-husband and family, but also to those who lived below her who would benefit from the overflow and would live peaceably beside her because of the water they received.

Our Giving God is a great Benefactor, who does "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think." However, it is our responsibility (and right as children) to be specific, intelligent and appreciative of all that He gives as a result of our asking in faith. Her faith was in the person of her father to meet her need. Our faith is in our Father who tells us that when we come to Him, we "must believe that He is, and He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."

"O Father and God of all provision: I know every good and perfect gift comes from above. So, I don't think I am out of place asking for some springs of living water to quench my thirst today and make productive the food I want to pass on to others. Perhaps there could be some overflowing blessing for those that are downhill from here and will perish if they don't get a drink of the living water. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

JUDGES 1:16-34

CONSEQUENCES OF COMPROMISE

Less than whole-hearted commitment leads to decline. A declining spiritual life leads to the compromising of truth and lack of faith. The decay that follows compromise leads to apostasy and defeat. Oppression from the enemies of God follows defeat. But repentance and forsaking of sin brings deliverance. An important lesson to learn from Judges is that the attraction of ungodly people and unholy practices that tempt us, when

yielded to, will bring us down. How thankful we are there is "A way back to God from the dark paths of sin. And there's a door that is open that all may go in."

Fortunately for us, God was willing to chronicle the failures of Israel "for our sakes" so that we will be reminded that He expects us to act on His will, trusting Him to know what is best both now and in the future. After Joshua died Israel lost its grip on the promises of God and their faith in Him in the small things as well as the big battles. Even though they had moved confidently into the promised land under Joshua's leadership, after he was gone lack of discipline, weariness, fear and self-interest got them side-tracked from obedience to God.

God intends for us to keep and obey His commands and trust Him to guide us because He knows what is ahead of us. When we focus our minds and hearts on Him and His sovereign purposes, we are safe. But if we allow some charismatic leader with human wisdom to claim our attention and allegiance, we are putting ourselves in the place of danger. Our greatest threats are not war but moral decay, materialism, false religion and the attitude that "anything is alright as long as I get what I want." It is possible to make a strong start and soon fail because we "trust in man, and make flesh" our arm,

The book divides into three parts...

THE PREVIEW OF THE JUDGES: (1:1- 3:6) The cycle of sin.

THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES: (3:7- 16:31) The downward spiral.

THE PICTURE OF THE JUDGES: (17:1- 21:25) Spiritual anarchy.

The cycle of sin can quickly take hold of our interests and before long we don't realize what it is doing to God's people, let alone the people of the world all around us. A sophisticated college student was speaking to a missionary and asked, "What do you do when you can't take the superstition and violence and immorality any longer?"

Came the reply, "Simply get on a plane and go back to the mission field." Around us today is organized crime, youthful crime and homo-sexuality. Biblical morality is ridiculed; one rock star says, "I believe in nothing." Three young men from eastern Canada came west to where their rock star hero lived, and committed suicide just like he did. Today, it seems like there is a tidal wave rather than a flood of moral, spiritual and ethical anarchy. We are a society without standards. (Judges 21:25)

TURNING AWAY

It seemed like everything was going so well
Victories were gained as the enemies fell
Before God's people who by God's mighty power
Learned first-hand that our God is a strong tower -
But then they turned away from God.

It didn't seem like much right at the beginning
The challenge of conquest kept them from willfully sinning
Their objectives were clear, and their hands were full
It didn't happen at first, but later they felt the pull -
And gradually turned away from God.

In God they were conquerors, and so are we
Our faith and hope are in God where He wants it to be
But facts do not lie, when we are attracted to men
Sin takes advantage of us and soon we are like them -
And already we have turned away from God.

When we think we are safe and have full control;
The world and its systems take aim at our soul
The danger of temptation yielded to has a fatal attraction
So instead of loyalty and steadfastness we take the first action -
Of turning away from God.

It happened to them and it can happen to us
We turn to what is wrong instead of "In God We Trust"
To guard ourselves from sin's bad consequences
We need divine power are guidance to avoid the sentences
Of being away from God.

"Father, I know there is the present, and on-going, danger of turning away from Thee because of people and things around that attract. "I need Thee every hour, most Gracious Lord." Please enable Thy servant to stay in the paths of righteousness and away from anything that I know is wrong. Give me needed grace, wisdom and courage to be steadfast to Thee. I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 2:1-10

THE PASSING OF A GENERATION

It became obvious that there were changes taking place in God's people that were taking them farther away from God and closer to the world of sin around them. The angel of the Lord, Jehovah, not the covenant keeping God, came from the place of victory and blessing where Israel stopped after crossing the Jordan. It was at Gilgal where circumcision took place signifying the cutting off of the flesh and separation to God. It was there they kept the first Passover in the promised land. God appeared to Joshua there and they returned to Gilgal after their victories. Not just any place we choose is the place where God intends us to be. He doesn't abandon His people but He blesses in a special way where we are where He wants us to be doing what He wants us to do. He teaches us and guides us there through His word and the fellowship of God's people. We are not a family of wandering nomads going here and there on a whim of our own choosing, but "a pilgrim band in a foreign land" and a nation of kingdom people on a journey being guided and guarded by our Lord.

(2:1) Our God is a covenant keeping God. It was the angel, that said, "I brought ... I swore... I said... I will never." The Angel was the Lord Jesus Christ and the event was very important to God. When we meet with God, that event surpasses every other event and commitment we might have and should never be taken lightly by us because it is not taken lightly by God. Gilgal, was the place of victory and blessing. There the people of God were blessed. There were tears at Bochim (weeping) to the extent that it is known as the place of weeping and judgment instead of blessing. The cost of carnality is very high. We may think an action is insignificant because that is the way the world system measures it. But to God, complete obedience in fulfilling the terms of the covenant with us is very important. God had committed Himself to His people unconditionally. Their neglect of the terms of the covenant on their part, made the covenant ineffective. To Israel there was a significant change in their relationship with God. They had gone from victory to weeping and judgment.

God had done His part of the covenant. He had committed Himself unconditionally to His people. God had covenanted with Abraham, and promised three things.... 1. Descendants (seed) and 2. His seed would possess a land. From them, 3. Blessings would flow to the world. (Gen.12:3), and that has happened through the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Multiplied millions of people have been blessed with salvation and are in the kingdom of God. God protected and empowered Israel and made them a special nation that even impacts world events today. He had delivered Israel from Egypt, brought them into Canaan, cared for them for 40 years while they wandered in the wilderness. However, they did not obey His laws and did not love Him personally. Even today agnosticism and atheism are common among Israelis and Jews all over the world. They want to survive as a special nation, but look to other nations to help them do this rather than turn in repentance to God. God is still rejected as the Supreme Authority and the One who keeps covenant with His people. His promises to us are: sins forgiven, eternal life as a gift from Him, and we are His children.

(2:2) Israel was a covenant breaking nation. They had not obeyed God, nor had they fulfilled their responsibility to Him. Instead they made league with the enemy and they didn't tear down demon altars. The Lord had given them unlimited power. Judah did not have victory, because they did not trust God. Rather than follow Him wholeheartedly, they compromised. For God's people who turn away and fail, there is recovery following genuine repentance and forsaking sin and wrong. God has not abandoned His people. When we repent and follow Him then He can bless us. If not, we need to remember there are always consequences to sin that will follow and must be paid. They cannot be avoided. God allows opposition and oppression to come from those around as a means of bringing us back to Himself. It is wrong for us to take the blessings of God for granted as if He is obligated to us in any way. It is of "His mercies we are not consumed."

(2:3-5) The consequences of compromise are real. It is one thing to admit to sin. Remorse because of the consequences of sin is another, but true repentance involves our admission of guilt and accepting responsibility for our thoughts and actions that turn us away from God. But even more, involved in genuine repentance is deliberately forsaking sin. Tears are often a normal reaction to guilt when one is found out. The power of the intellect and the ability to choose, and commit to change are essential for true repentance and recovery to God. People may not realize it at the moment guilt takes over our emotions, but for many

there is the understanding that change is necessary and obviously evident. To seek to cover up sin is as wrong as the sin committed that brought the sense of guilt in the first place. The angel came as a purpose of grace to bring the nation to real repentance. The nations around are going to drag you down. Partial obedience leads to weeping. There is no joy in half-hearted spiritual experience. Uncommitted Christians are miserable people. There is no victory nor blessing, but defeat and frustration.

Any attempt to deceive does not blind God to anything about us. Deception when resorted to, deceives ourselves into thinking all is well when it really isn't. It is important for parents to realize they are responsible to teach their own children about God, why they are to believe in Him and trust the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation. We are to instruct them as to how and why they are to follow Him all through life. By following, obeying and loving God, a young person can find out early in life why we are here and what life is all about. It is not the school teachers' responsibility, nor the Sunday School teacher's to be held responsible to teach and demonstrate God's way. It is ours as parents and grandparents.

The second generation was now in control of the national identity and actions. Their parents were marked by fervor as they claimed the land God had promised. They were identified by compromise, their children by materialism and the grandchildren by apathy. With the passing of Joshua and that generation who came in to possess the land, and had experienced the delivering power of God, there came a change that affected the whole nation, but that change was not good. Decline morally and spiritually changed the characteristics of the whole nation. That decline set in motion the cycle of sin, judgment for sin, the need of times of repentance and temporary recovery to God. Some things can be changed for awhile because of fear or oppression and a sense of guilt. True recovery begins when a person is born again and their nature is that of a new creation.

(2:6-9) The impact of Joshua faded away as they relegated all that had happened in their history to sort of ancient history that was not relevant to their present day. Joshua was responsive to the word of God. (Josh.1:7-8) Joshua had active faith that had experienced not only the power of God in normal life but in supernatural ways. (Josh.1:5) The miraculous defeat of Jericho; the day the sun and moon stood still; victories -- even though he failed at times and the record of scriptures, testify as to how God used him. It was not because of his gift and ability but because he trusted God and ordered his life by the word of God. One man, committed unreservedly to God and His word, can make a great difference for good in the lives of God's people. One woman, living for Christ can bring blessing to many.

(2:10) Failure of the second generation may be partially avoided if those of an older generation commit themselves to pass on our faith and experiences with God to the younger generation. Hopefully, in that way they may want to obey, love and follow God because it is best, and the "right way." The nature of the failure of the second generation of Israelites was they knew *about* the Lord and His deeds; but they did not *know* Him. They became complacent about living for God and having fellowship with God. They had lost touch. Instead of wonder, they yawned, were complacent, lukewarm and apathetic. Apathy is the opposite of love; complacency grows like cancer. That same problem exists today as a cause of the failure in the things of God. People are satisfied with the status-quo: "Why bother? We're okay." Do we take God's blessings for granted and not acknowledge Him (Deut.6:10-12; 8:11-18)? "In everything give thanks." They neglected God's word-- ignored it; had no conviction about it. Which do I have? Second hand or personal conviction?

Judges 2:10. *"And also all that generation were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, not yet the works which He had done for Israel."*

ANOTHER GENERATION.

The names are the same; the places are the same
The faces are similar; the traditions are similar
They use the same language; they use the same words -
These are the people of another generation which knew not the Lord.

They are nice people; they want to live in peace
They name their dogs and cats; they personalize their animals
They don't want to hunt or fish; they would prefer to buy
This generation talks about "Mother Nature," but know not the Lord.

They are against war; they are willing to be tolerant
They don't want to criticize; they are willing to compromise
They have a lot; they are willing to share a little
This generation thinks they earned it, but know not the Lord.

They know there are hungry people; send somebody over to help
They know disasters have struck; send them some money
They know people are dying from disease; why doesn't somebody invent something
This generation has all the answers but don't know the problem, or the Lord.

They like the music and the drama; religious films and TV preaching
They want to belong - it is good for business; "no commitment please"
They want church weddings and white; never mind the adultery
This generation has a form, but know not the Lord.

Big is better in business, churches and money; small is failure
Pleasure is the meaning in life; possessions mean success
Work is a means to an end; worship is "occasional fun"
This generation worships materialism, but know not the Lord.

Truth is relevant; "your truth is different than my truth"
God is a force or idea or... anything you want; I am in control of my life
Nothing is absolute; that is intolerant and judgmental
This generation makes themselves god, but know not the Lord.

"It has happened O God; the people know not Thee or the wonderful works of God. To them everything is accidental or incidental to the exalted view of themselves. We are going down as a nation and a culture, O God. I am thankful to be in the kingdom of God and able to see things from Thy view. Help me to love this generation and try to reach some with Thy truth. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 2:10-23

WHEN THE JUDGE WAS DEAD

Sometimes it seems like we are wasting our time trying to teach the next generation the principles and practices that have been tested and proven to work for many past generations. There is an apathetic attitude toward God and His word, and yet people say they are "spiritual." There was another generation: (Judg.2:10) who in mind "Knew not the Lord." They would know all *about* the Lord but didn't *know* Him. "They forsook the Lord." This was a deliberate choice on their part. Even more, in their heart, they "Did evil." They served Baalim (the fertility god - Ashtaroth) and followed other gods of those who lived in the land that Israel did not fully possess. These who should have known better, in their self will, "Bowed themselves --provoked the Lord." The Lord's response to that departure was anger and in sovereign governmental dealings, used nations against them. Then He raised up judges from among their tribes to bring their sin before them and lead them back to God. The judges were "deliverers." The potential was there but a judge couldn't change peoples' hearts. The Lord "sold them" into the hand of Chushanrishathim (doubly wicked Chushan). There is only one Holy Spirit, and He "bears witness with our spirit" when we are born again and have the new nature that God gives to His true children. The Holy Spirit living in a believer is always there to guide us "into all truth," reveal Christ to us and show us "things to come." The attraction of the new generation to idolatry and sensual living, while maintaining a religious form, is usually because there has been no new birth.

However, there are times when a young Christian gets caught up in the cycle of sin time after time because the previous generation has failed to clearly teach the next generation to wholly obey, follow and love the Lord. Understanding doesn't too often come the first time a lesson or principle is taught. The application of truth in the affairs of everyday life and of assembly life has to be practical enough that the learner knows right away whether what they do, or don't do, is right. The practice of one generation passing on the truth of God to the next was a key feature of the law. They were to pass on the practical effects of obedience to truth to "their children, and their children's children."

In assembly life the saints need to commit the truth of gathering to the Lord's name alone to those who may look upon the fellowship of which we are a part as just another one of the evangelical churches in the area. There is a uniqueness about God's truth that does not blend in with the practices that are popular to the majority of people. Loyalty to the Lord has a cost to it that many do not want to pay. The Baal-worship of the people the Israelites let stay and lived among was attractive because there were things they could see and do. They didn't need faith. Baal worshippers created their own god to suit themselves. They believed it affected the weather and rain so small Baals we set up at brooks, in front of trees or wherever there was something that moved or had life. If they worshipped Baal, they believed they would have a fruitful harvest.

But there was an even more evil practice both in the worship of Baal and Ashtoreth. Prostitution and child-sacrifice were practiced in the name of religion. Selfishness is at the center of man's "will worship." It was

what motivated the people in the time of the judges and it is still prevalent today in the wicked evil practices of those who know not God. Strangely, the "people of God" were attracted to this. The sensual worship practiced by those around them turned them away from the Lord to succumb to the world, the flesh and the devil. It is not uncommon for people to abandon what is right for expediency, acceptance and pleasure that is practiced by those who don't know God. Even Christians sometimes want those who have no interest in God at all, to be their close friends. Jesus was "a friend of publicans and sinners" but never did what they did. Some say, "We have to be like them to win them." The truth is that they will not be won to the Lord until they see something in Christians and Christianity that attracts them to Christ and they know what they need is found only in Him.

Idolatry is a fundamental sin because it denies God. To disregard God Himself taught in the first two commandments, leads to all the sins that follow in the Ten Commandments. Idolatry is evil in spite of what modern man might say. Idols of one kind or another are followed to satisfy the immoral, carnal and sensual part of the natural man who "wants to feel good about himself." There is no way idolatry and the worship of the One True God can blend. They are diametrically opposed. God is spiritual, moral and holy and there is no possibility of fellowship between light and darkness

Looking forward God had a strategy against complacency. Rather than allow Israel to wallow in apathy, He used the pockets of resistance to "test Israel." He desired people who knew how to trust Him in battle. These inexperienced ones had to learn that victory comes not from wisdom or skill but from a faithful God. Why does God not take away our sinful nature? Why do we have so many areas of weakness? Why so many unsolved problems in even the most biblically faithful fellowship? In order to shake us out of apathy and to teach us how to trust Him, God allows the difficulties to take place. We cannot stand still in our Christian experience. We advance or perish. Apathetic men accomplish nothing. Apathy and lowered motivation are the most widely noted characteristics of a nation on a downward path.

In spite of the evil in which the children of Israel participated, the nations around showed their true colors as enemies and tested them until they were groaning under servitude and oppression. Even though they deserved nothing from God, in mercy He raised up judges who could see what was happening to the people of God. Through these true heroes of faith who warned, taught and guided the people back to the Lord, there came deliverance from the oppressors. And God accepted them back even though they did not deserve His mercy.

When we rebel against God's revealed will and act and live in disobedience to Him, our enemies will overwhelm us until we become like them. or else repent and turn to God. There were God-fearing judges among the nation of Israel who were loyal to God. He used them to deliver His people and bring them back into fellowship with Him. Restoration can take place even through there will be consequences to our actions with which we will have to live. In Israel as long as the judge lived, the people followed his leadership. When he died, the awful cycle of sin began again.

We need to commit ourselves in loyalty and faithfulness to God in spite of what other people may do or the difficult situations of life in which we are found. Believers need each other in order to not be turned aside to modern day thought and religion. To be steadfast and unmovable is not easy without help. Religious activities that appeal to the flesh are only for man's interest, not God's. A self-centered religion that is attractive to our flesh, is not worshipping "the Father in spirit and in truth."

An old man was traveling on an ocean liner when a huge storm blew up without warning. One woman lost her balance and fell overboard. People stood frozen with horror as she struggled in the water. Suddenly, a man plunged into the waves, grabbed her and held her until a rescue boat came. When they were pulled out, everyone was astonished and embarrassed to discover that the hero was the oldest man on the boat; he was in his eighties. That evening they held a party to honor him.

When they called on him to make a speech, he rose slowly, looked around at the people for what seemed a long time, then said, "I would like to know just one thing." There was an embarrassed silence and then he went on to ask, "Who pushed me?"

So, it is with us; sometimes we must be pushed to get beyond apathy. Faith in God and obedience to His word leads to selflessness on the part of a Christian who wants to live for the Lord. Selfishness finds its motivation in those things that please me. The benefits of faith are never able to be fully understood or exhausted. We are able to live in this world in a way that pleases God by the help and guidance of the Lord. When that happens, our lives are also pleasing to us and there is a meaning and purpose behind all that happens.

For some strange reason those who knew about the Lord
Chose not to know Him personally and follow His revealed word.
The mighty works He did for them seemed unimportant, they did not care
As far as their lives from day to day, God was not even there
Worse even was their lack of appreciation, they had no gratitude
"I want to go my own way," was their obvious attitude
Bowing down before idols false, the Lord they did provoke
The path that leads to pleasing God, deliberately they forsook.

We wonder at such people who know better but have such apathy
And in this world where sin abounds, they live in complacency
From time to time God allows to come some serious problems, He puts to test
Those who claim they are the people of God, but live like all the rest.
In ancient days God raised up judges that they might speak for Him
In our days now a preacher's work is to warn the people of the dangers of sin
Some will listen and respond in faith that they might be forgiven
By God's mercy when a person turns in faith, he or she will go to heaven

God only can give a new nature to those who come believing
They realize mercy has been shown when truth they are receiving
Some turn in remorse and grief because sin has found them out
The ones who put their trust in Christ know what grace is all about
We cannot change a person's attitude or even the attitude of a nation
But God makes all things new to them, by His mercy He gives salvation
So we can only do what we can to bring understanding to the lost
God, in mercy saves their soul when they realize what salvation cost.

"O God of mercy, may we be able to speak Thy word faithfully tonight so that lost souls will change their attitude and earnestly seek the Lord, repent and believe the Gospel. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 3:1-11

A NATION THAT DID NOT LEARN

There seems to be an attitude in a nation as generations pass that the next generation is smarter, brighter, better and totally capable of making whatever changes they want without any input from the older generation, or even from the lessons of history. In fact, "revisionist history" is quite popular because it makes people think that the events of the past have very little, if any, bearing on the present and the future. The history of the nation of Israel is full of lessons for us that we can apply to situations in our day. They failed to completely drive out their enemies in the promised land as the Lord had commanded. Instead, they accommodated themselves to suit the lifestyle of those who were idolaters. Intermarriage began to blend the Israelites with those of different cultures and beliefs. But instead of the others wanting to be like the Israelites, the Israelites became like them.

When the downward cycle began, there was sin that was indulged in, and was soon accepted as normal. The various cultural groups that were left in the land were used by God to test the children of Israel to the extent that they became servants to the enemies of God. There will always be obstacles to righteous living and holiness. This kind of life is not attractive to unbelievers until they find themselves in some serious situation, and then they call on God. True, separation from the world system, its ways, its values and its motivation are not popular. They think we have a "holier than thou" attitude, and are not relevant to life in the world today. The next generation is taught in schools to be tolerant of everybody else and to not hurt their feelings. "We want everyone to "feel comfortable."

Obstacles are a test of faith that God allows to come into our lives. Obstacles will keep us looking to Him for guidance and the needed wisdom to overcome the obstacles. There are different situations that arise to test us as to where we have placed our trust. Problems that come to us in many areas of our lives are allowed to remind us of the principle of faith and how we are to apply faith to a matter to which we need a solution. God knows the reason for anything that comes our way. Sometimes people who oppose are used by God on our behalf to focus our attention on Him and strengthen our faith in Him. The early disciples in an incident recorded in the book of Acts said plainly to those who opposed them, "We ought to obey God rather than man."

The relationships we form in our lives affect our faith. They can be positive when we are built up in our faith by what we share with other people. Or they can be negative and bring us down and away from God if the Lord is not the objective behind the relationship. Any believer can tell when they are getting weaker in the

faith even though they may try to hide it. A Christian loses the deep inner joy that is characteristic of one who is in fellowship with God. In its place there is a light-weight, shallow giggle that is supposed to mean, "I am happy." Many unbelievers around us are very nice people and we are attracted to them. There is nothing wrong with sharing interests with others, helping them and showing interest in their well-being. But when that connection is in danger of becoming a yoke, we must back away.

Some of God's people, in spite of the scriptural and spiritual advice of brothers and sisters in Christ, deliberately go into unequal yokes with their eyes wide open. Usually it is not very long before they find there are fundamental differences that will hinder or stop their walk with the Lord. Business, religion, marriage, culture - all of these can bring a child of God into servitude from which they cannot escape. The Israelites added idol worship to their worship of God to avoid being persecuted by those over whom they should have claimed authority. Religions want to blend together today "to make Christianity more acceptable" to those around us who are not Christians. Nothing good comes from compromising the truth to make the worship of God more appealing to the natural man. Such an entanglement with unbelievers by compromising and imitating their lifestyle or even religious ways is a danger to our fellowship with God and His people. We can connect with unbelievers in friendship with the objective of letting them know who we are and what we believe. Never lose sight of the fact that we represent Christ.

The Israelites seemed to think that Baal, their god of agriculture, weather and nature - that their enemies worshipped; and Ashtaroth, the female goddess of fertility, had some beneficial features that appealed to them. We know better than to attribute any benefit to such idols, but, whether we like to admit it or not, there are things that claim our time and allegiance if we are not careful. Whatever my thoughts and attention are on most of the time may be my downfall. It has the potential of stumbling others and controlling me. The pursuit of materialistic gain, fame and self-interest can be an idol that claims us

Into this time of departure God raised up Othniel, The Ideal judge. (1:10 - 15; 3:9-11). He was the first one of the Period of the Judges: (3:7 - 16:31). During the times of the judges, Kirjath-sepher (city of the brook) became Hebron (place of fellowship). He and his wife, who also was one of God's people, were together in the work. He had learned by the example of Caleb. He was available for God to use so the Spirit of the Lord came upon him for the work set before him. He dealt with the Lord's people first and then went to war against the enemies. The Lord worked through him and a generation was blessed because of him. He had a strong family background (1/2 brother or nephew of Caleb) and he had seen the principles of trust and obedience in Caleb. Othniel was a man of proven ability who had won victories, was skilled and was proven in battle. He demonstrated courage when he took Cushan, Kirjath-sepher was a stronghold of giants. His personal faith (3:10) led him to be directed by the Lord. "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him." He was the man for his generation. The Spirit of God gave him the power to do extraordinary things in order to bring God's people back in repentance where He could show them mercy. As a result, the nation had forty years of rest.

Some lessons for us to learn from Othniel and this passage of scripture are that we need to spend time in Hebron. We need the fellowship of the Lord and His people. We need to reassess our love for the Lord and get to know the Book (the Bible) better. When we do, we may tremble before it as the Word of the Living God but the power of its instruction, we should be filled with the Spirit, cast out worldliness from our hearts, knowing that what we do will affect our families and associates. God gives physical, mental and spiritual strength in life so we can face the challenges will face with confidence in God.

Judges 3:9. "And when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel, who delivered them, even Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother."

DELIVERERS.

They are not all the same, these men raised up by God -
Each one is different and each one is committed to the Lord.
One had a strong background; he had learned the principle of trust.
Othniel had proven ability - through him a generation was blessed.
He demonstrated courage; he was truly a man of faith -
He had experienced God using him to bring about the peace.

Ehud was a different sort; he was more of a diplomat.
He planned ahead, used a two-edged knife against the king so fat.
Even when none came to help; he faced the problem alone -
And delivered Israel from Eglon, right in the king's own home.
We might have limitations wondering is there something we can do -

When trust is in the Lord alone, God is able to use me and you.

Shamgar was a farm laborer, he wasn't one of the greatest men.
He wasn't powerful and clever; he was just willing that God use him -
The enemy was religious, but had never come to know the Lord.
They had no Passover, no deliverance - they had no living Word.
Shamgar used his ox-goad, that was really all he needed -
He was one man under God's power, and by God Shamgar succeeded.

Those that God can use, are not all just the same-
For leading and guiding God's people is done in Jesus' name.
One person may seem ideal, he has all the known qualities -
And another may seem weak at first until you see him on his knees.
Another may seem limited in education and in verbal skills -
But God can choose and use a man who wants to do God's will.

Some seem so unassuming we wonder why the Spirit raised him.
His speech may not be so great and he has some real limitation.
It often is a surprise when such a one gets up to speak -
He knows the Book so well without knowing Hebrew or Greek
That one comments to another, "That brother knows His God,
I will follow his lead," and puts his feet where the man of God trod.

"O God, I thank Thee for the many people You put in my life to guide and teach me as well as correct me. I have been preserved from many problems and potential dangers that could have easily made my life a real mess. I praise Thee for every one used by Thee to give me such joy in the Lord as I have today. With all my heart I thank Thee, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 3:12-30

IT HAPPENED AGAIN

For the first time since Israel had come into the land God had promised them, they were attacked and put under servitude by three nations from outside of the land. Enemies from within had weakened their faith so they compromised with the religions of the idolaters. Such compromises may not seem serious at the first to some people, but anything we allow in our lives that leads us away from God is absolutely wrong. That attitude has farther reaching effects and consequences than we might imagine. The on-looking world saw the tendency of the Israelites to want to be like everyone else and took advantage of that tendency to gain control over them.

When strong, spiritual leadership is lacking, it is not long before God's people change to accommodate to those around us and what appeals to the flesh. Israel wanted the things of the flesh and that is what they got. Moab is a type of the flesh and so is Ammon and Amalek. The leader, Eglon (large and fat) was allowed by God to take over Jericho and defeat Israel in the place of their first victory when they entered the land. The flesh imposes itself on people and leaves no space to accommodate to scriptural truth and fleshly interests at the same time. Eglon was visible evidence of the flesh and he was surrounded by fat men who composed a formidable army under their extremely fat king.

We may not realize the seriousness of catering to the flesh until it overpowers us and "the lust of the flesh" takes control. Bad habits, evil practices and self-centeredness are so prevalent today that God's people are in danger of making "provision" for the flesh. There comes a time when we have to draw a broad line between ourselves and the world that feeds on the flesh, and stay on our own side with God and the minority. Separation has a cost that must be paid and cannot be avoided if we are going to walk with the Lord "in all pleasing."

The "fleshly lusts which war against the soul" will not accept a compromise. It is "all or nothing" as far as control in the lives of the people of God. The flesh is determined to have its own way. It wants to please "self" no matter what is right or wrong. The flesh is a law unto itself. There is nothing admirable with the flesh, and ugly flesh does not promote good companionship. Eglon was a very fat man with an army of fat men, but he sat alone in the cooling part of his house. He did not provide any comfort for others who were living in the flesh. Like that seated, pampered king sitting alone, the flesh against which we war, loves ease, idleness and the time to fulfill all its desires for self-gratification. We may not realize the true effect of the "flesh warring against the Spirit" until it is exposed in its true light as "dirt" within.

When the Lord Jesus Christ was here, He plainly taught what the flesh is that defiles the human heart. "Evil thoughts, adulteries, fornication, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil

eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these things come from within and defile the man." We need to recognize sinful flesh is an enemy of the soul and "make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof." There is no easy way to deal with the flesh. It must be put to death. The apostle Paul was pressed in his flesh and knew that the only way of victory was through the Lord Jesus Christ. The judge, Ehud, is a type of the Lord in mercy doing that for His people.

Ehud, the diplomatic judge, was a prominent man whose reputation was established as one who could be trusted by others to do for them what they could not do. Even though he was the son of a quiet man, Gera (meditation), from the smallest tribe of Israel, Benjamin, Ehud (union, praise, majesty) could represent the people. Whether the fact that he was left-handed was considered a limitation or an asset, he knew how to use his left hand effectively. His right hand was "hindered," maybe injured or with a lasting defect, so he turned his left hand into a tool to be used for God. The tribe of Benjamin had a lot of left-handed soldiers who were effective when needed. No matter what others may say or do, God has given us all we need to fulfill the task each task to which we have been charged.

Sometimes people are so disheartened that we may have to act alone to initiate the solution to a problem. It is not uncommon for people to not want to "rock the boat," and so leave undone that which we should and could do. Ehud was a courageous man who was not afraid to face, and deal with alone, the problem the Lord's people had, even though he was by himself. But neither did he act in haste or take a rash action. He carefully planned what he was going to do; organized himself to follow a series of events step by step so he would not be caught unawares. Time spent in preparation for a work is not wasted time.

A spiritually committed man is always conscious of the presence of the Lord with him. For God's people, any battle we face is the Lord's battle and He will use us in the way most suited to His purpose. When we accept that as a fact, we will easily admit it is the Lord who delivers us from our enemies. We do not have power or control over the flesh. It must be defeated in the same way Ehud, and those who finally joined with him, were able to totally eliminate the army of "lusty (fat) men" without allowing anything connected to the flesh to remain. The result of eighty years of peace that followed was because one man was willing to be used by God by striking at the root of the problem and finishing it completely.

Eighteen years under another powerful force
Eighteen years slowly ran their course
Eighteen years being told what to do
Eighteen years of servitude too

What you worked for wasn't yours to keep
You never found what it was you left to seek
The satisfaction you looked for was not to be found
Because of attractions of the flesh you are tightly bound

After the time of testing had awakened the conscience
And the flesh had taken control with its awful sentence
God in mercy moved to raise up a suitable man
To liberate people even though they lived in the promised land

The man he chose could be trusted with responsibility
He was careful to plan deliverance by God-given ability
It was not a desperate nor impossible thoughtless plan
He went to the root of the problem - and obscene fleshly man

There is no easy way to deal with the sins of the flesh
Fellowship with God and the flesh will never mesh
The flesh has to die and the Spirit have full control
By divine wisdom and power, He is the guardian of the soul

"Father, it is a great comfort to know Thou art aware of everything that happens in my life - whether it is good or bad. I pray that I will not dishonor Thee in any way by giving way to the pressures of the flesh. I understand they will be with me as long as I am in the body. Thanks for understanding me, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 3:31

INSIGNIFICANCE

Shamgar (pilgrim, the stranger), was one of the six little men of the judges. There were thirteen judges. Thirteen is the number of rebellion. Seven were big men; six would be considered little men because little

is said about them. With the exception of Shamgar, there was peace when the little men judged God's people. These were ordinary, self-effacing, quiet men. Often the big men in their own eyes or in the eyes of others bring trouble. They are sometimes men of self-importance, prominence, and worldly influence. Shamgar was a farm laborer, not a man of war, but "he also" delivered Israel as did Othniel and Ehud. One does not need to be great, clever or trained in divine things; just raised up of God.

Shamgar was the kind of man we can identify with who is normally overlooked in the assembly of God's people. When those Philistines came, he used what he had trusting the power of God to do what He alone could do. A normal ox goad would be a stick about eight feet long with a sharp point on one end and a flat piece of iron on the other used to clean off the plow share. A man plowing in a field could reach from the back of the plow to the ox with the goad and poke the animal so it would keep moving forward. We don't need to be a sophisticated, skilled, well trained person for God to use in His work, and especially when it comes to defending the people of God from attack by enemies. If we are sure as a Christian who we are, and use what we have to preserve the testimony of God against those who may seem a lot like us as believers except they trust in their own "convictions," and act in their own "spiritual" interests, God can use us. There are times when the outcome of a matter completely depends on us. We have to decide whether we will stand and fight, or cut and run. Others may not want to address the problem hoping it will go away on its own. The longer we wait, to deal with such a matter, the more it will escalate.

To face 600 men alone would be considered foolish, suicidal and a lost cause. But one man who in faith acts under divine authority, God can entrust a victory, and knows he will not for a moment claim he won the victory by his own skill and power. Such a person who God uses is humble enough to be used, and trustworthy enough to do the impossible. Without the normal procedure followed by warriors or the equipment soldiers use, this faithful man preserved God's people.

The enemy was the Philistines. They came originally from Egypt but had never been delivered from bondage as had the Israelites. They had no blood of the Passover in their history nor anything that could compare with that. They had no miraculous Red Sea experience. They started in the same place and finished in the same place as Israel. But they had never known the lash, burden nor bondage. There are those who have had no conviction of sin, no desire to be forgiven, no blood and think they need no new birth. They profess to be in God's land but are at home in the world. They are nice, refined, "Christianized," religious people. But they ambush the Lord's people on the roads, robbing them of freedom in Christ, paying a man to come between us and God.

God can choose to use completely different kinds of people, from different kinds of occupations, and very different personalities. Othniel was a man of proven ability, superior character, spiritual depth, fine background. Ehud had what was perhaps a serious limitation. He was prominent, courageous, capable and had a problem with his right hand that could have been a serious defect, but he planned out what needed to be done and did what he was able to do. Shamgar was a plain man with an ox-goad who would've been overlooked apart from the fact that he was available for God to use.

The people God uses are seen by three great principles: [a] He uses different kinds of people [b] God uses people who draw their strength from Him (Isa.40:29-31). [c] God uses people who trust Him and step out in faith.

Hudson Taylor: "He (God) trains someone to be quiet enough and little enough, and then He uses him."

Judges 4

WISE WOMEN

We may not realize those who we think are okay being with, really aren't. Life in the kingdom of God is not compatible with life in the world. The Lord was behind the servitude the children of Israel had to endure from those they had not dealt with in God's way before. Sin overlooked, may rise up to bite us at a later time. When God's people "do what is evil in the eyes of the Lord," that expresses how serious sin is. This is not some lightweight matter to God even though it may be a common practice among the people around us. Enemies from within appear to be harmless friends at first and we can get used to them and they to us.

It may be because we have become soft on sin ourselves and think the problem is gone, when suddenly we are surprised when the attack takes place. At first it may just be a sort of distancing of people from us and when contact is renewed, it is on the basis of us doing what they want, rather than them wanting what we want. Twenty years of putting up with sin ourselves can make us realize that this is a hopeless situation. By having put up with sin for years does not mean we escape the consequences of sin.

Finally, when we are awakened to our failure, we will be ready to turn to God for His help in this problem. We need God's control, God's strength and guidance. Such a time can be a very good thing for us although the process of recovery may seem hard. God often will choose a very special person, man or woman, to lead and guide us by the Holy Spirit back into the paths of righteousness of His choosing. Those people need to have exceptional wisdom and be people of integrity in themselves. They need insight from God to know His will and the courage to do it.

Deborah (eloquent) was the person of God's choosing for that time. She was the exceptional judge. She was from the tribe of Ephraim and lived between Ramah (the high place) and Bethel (the house of God). By the time twenty years had taken their toll on the Israelites they were willing to seek her help for this matter of oppression from local enemies. Jabin seems to be the title of a ruler such as "Pharaoh" in Egypt or "Abimelech" of the Philistines or "Herod" in the New Testament. In Joshua 11, Jabin (understanding, wise, wisdom) the king of Hazor, is slain. Contrast that with "Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God;" "Christ Jesus, who is made unto us wisdom, righteousness...." (1Cor.1:24, 30). Then compare this with the "wisdom of the world," "wisdom that knew not God," "wisdom after the flesh," "man's wisdom." The wisdom of God makes all these foolish.

Jabin, king of Canaan, is a picture of Satan. He was defeated and slain in the past. (Heb.2:14,15). Satan was defeated at the cross. Yet he was still living, opposing God's people, and subdued by them. (1Pet.5:8). Satan is continually opposing, accusing, slandering and challenging God's people. He will be utterly destroyed in the future. (Rev.12:7-12; 20:7-10). The servitude of Israel wasn't his fault though. it was their own. They didn't learn the lessons of the past. They deliberately did evil again and turned from God to pagan idolatry. Consequently, they were "sold" into bondage. In that condition they were unarmed (5:8) and humanly speaking, hopeless.

Deborah was God's answer to their need. As a prophetess, she received revelations from God. There were other women as well who did this: Miraim (Ex.15:20); Huldah (2Kings 22:14-20); Anna (Lu.2:36); Four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8,9). Her husband was Lapidoth (flaming torch; of earth). Deborah was a judge who was conscious of her responsibility. She saw a need (5:6,7) and she was realistic about meeting that need. She set a goal; she enlisted the help (4:6a) of Barak (lightning; from heaven). She motivated the help (4:6b-9) he could give when she confronted him with God's command; strengthened him with God's promise and encouraged him with her presence. She knew that to act without preparation was not going to work and that she needed to develop a plan (4:6-7). Almost anyone can see a need, but it is another thing to come up with a plan to deal with it. Her faith (v.14) was not in the skill of her leadership, nor in the number of people that could be rallied to face the opposition. Even though there was planning, and the rallying of the people, there was no question about victory (vs.10-24) because it was God's plan.

As far as Barak was concerned, he may have been strong and agile, but he knew his limitations. He knew he needed the help of one who really knew God. He had not learned to trust God only. He had 10,000 with him but he needed one particular woman who knew God and communicated with Him. Numbers do not guarantee victories. God can use who He chooses and wants people who are willing to act for Him to the best of their ability, using what they have. Iron chariots cannot withstand the power of God unleashed through willing servants.

There were three stages that brought the conclusion to the battle that brought an end to the twenty years of servitude. The military situation was that Israel was outmanned (10,000); totally out-supplied by 900 chariots of iron versus no spears or shields; out-positioned because they were men on foot on a flat plain who were up against chariots; like infantry alone opposing a huge tank force. The second stage was the intervention of God (v. 15; 5:21). The brook Kishon became a torrent and the chariots and horses got mired and bogged down so the enemy could not escape the army of the Lord. Third was the death of Sisera (v.17-24). Even though at the battle of Mount Tabor, all of Sisera's men were dealt with completely and permanently, their leader, Sisera escaped the hands of the victorious army. In one family, the husband, Heber, chose to be neutral, and probably was inclined toward the army of 900 "iron chariots." His wife, Jael, sided with Israel. Neutrality in spiritual things is really impossible. Sisera fled to the tent of a non-Israelite where a pagan woman (Jael) defeated the leader of the enemies with a hammer and nail.

Judges 4:21. *"Then Jael Heber's wife took a nail of the tent, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died."*

A HAMMER AND A NAIL.

Some people and things pass quickly by like ships in the night -
For a short time, close together, then soon gone out of sight.

Nothing was accomplished, each just happened to pass that way -
So, we've looked and briefly talked, with not very much to say.

Others connect briefly, and significant things are done -
Like plants that open up and fruit ripening in the sun.
We meet at a conference gathering and interact for a day or two -
Then go our separate ways to home or work or school.

Some contacts made however, though short, have great effect.
Some things and folks are different, but change things when they connect.
A saw and a piece of wood only meet for quite a short time -
One goes away forever changed while the other remains the same.

A hammer and a nail had brief contact in the hands of a woman named Jael.
Each was of little account alone, the hammer was needed by the nail.
With a few brief contacts together, they changed a nation's history.
Then each went back to doing whatever, they had been involved in previously.

I may never know the value of a simple word spoken in due season.
It may be in the future my Lord will let me know what was the real reason.
A brief encounter happened that didn't last for very long -
But one who had a need or was weak, was helped by one who was strong.

A stop may happen on a road and another gives a helping hand.
One may not remember it at all, but the other in a distant land
May see a need and remember, someone helped me in the name of the Lord,
And the result will be astounding as they pass on a faithful word.

Don't forget the little things, or leave undone a simple task.
Don't ignore a need or some question that even a child might ask.
God has used before simple tools like a nail and a hammer -
And He can use what's in your hand to change someone forever.

“There are times O God, when I wonder whether what I am doing has little value. I am not always able to judge the necessity of a work but I know every need is known to Thee. If I am leaving some area of work undone, or if there is some need that arises quickly, please give me the nudge I need or in some way make me aware of how to deal with those things. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Judges 5

THE TESTIMONY OF SONG

Songs are a way of identifying and remembering important events so they can be retold from one family to the next and one generation to the next. Unless the historical accounts of life lived and lessons learned during those times are passed on in some way, each generation is doomed to have to relearn and reapply the lessons that should have been taught and practiced by the passing on of truth. Songs and victories go together. Many national anthems are written about victories of one kind or another that are retold and put into music so patriotism can be promoted. Singing song is a means of unifying people into thinking the same thoughts at the same time about the same things. If said only in voices without music the words are usually unidentifiable. When words are put to music what was only discordant sounds now becomes clear words and when the music is written so tones change, the whole practice of singing a song becomes very pleasurable. Often the greater the number of people singing at one time, the greater is the impact both on those who sing and those who listen to the singing.

Songs of praise and worship of God go together. In the same way we commemorate important events in song, like, "At the Cross, at the Cross, Where I first saw the Light," so our attention is focused on a Person in a song like "Savior, we remember Thee." All of those who participate beginning with myself to the whole group, are joining our hearts together with the objective of focusing on Jesus. From that united voice, comes far more individual thoughts of worship because the attention is placed on our Lord. Songs and celebration go together. Carols at Christmas time, special hymns and songs at weddings, even appropriate songs at a funeral are used by the Spirit of God to convey truth.

Songs and their words, in times of uncertainty and times of sorrow, go together to provide comfort and a balm to troubled souls who are facing enormous changes, loss and confusing issues. When matters of concern arise, "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus, look full in His Wonderful Face," can take a person beyond the pressures of the physical and of the moment and put them into a spiritual perspective.

Deborah and Barak sang a song of praise that is often called "Deborah's Song. Her song (Judges 5) made the same day victory was assured when Jael drove the nail into Sisera's temple, commemorated the victory on the same day so there would be no misrepresentation of the events. In the song there is the same priority of praise expressed; the leaders who led and the people who volunteered, were all incorporated into the ballad. The desperate situation (vs.5-8) was addressed; the response to the challenge (vs.2,9) was mentioned. The song was spontaneous, practical (v.13) and individual. Included was the motive for the volunteer service some gave. The right attitude toward God (v.31) and the right attitude toward service, was in the song (v.23). Reuben would not act (vs.15,16); had only emotion. Gilead was out of fellowship (v.17); voluntary lack of fellowship. Dan lacked growth (v.17); just wanted things to stay the way they were. Asher lacked vision (v.17).

Those four tribes would not come to help drive out the enemies they had not driven out themselves. They may have stopped short because they [a] were without faith and did not rely on God to help [b] would not put forth the effort needed because of complacency [c] feared the enemy and were without hope regarding the outcome [d] did not want to antagonize those with whom they did business so that they like those who are without God in the world. Disobedience and lack of faith lead to lack of power to overcome obstacle and opposition.

Judges 5:3. *"Hear, O ye kings; give ear. O ye princes: I, even I, will sing unto the Lord; I will sing praise to the Lord God of Israel."*

SING PRAISES.

The voices rise together - lifting to louder tones
 Then softer, slower and lower they move -
 The cadence and tone reflecting an attitude.
 The attention of everyone who hears and participates
 Is focused - all thinking the same thoughts
 Every singer saying the same words at the same time
 Unified and unifying the whole congregation -
 Singing praise to the Lord our God.

The body language speaks silently as the words flow
 Heads are held higher tipping back, eyes may close
 Or focus on some high place above all distractions
 Hands open and close, fingers are moving
 Feet are moving and tapping to the sound and the words
 Rhythmic as the sound lifts and falls; slows and speeds
 The attention of all is directed outward and upward -
 Praising with song the Lord God.

The battle is reviewed, enemies included in the story
 Remarkable ways that God worked included in the words
 Out-of-the-ordinary events acted on and completed
 Ways that the righteous acts of God changed lives
 The difficulties, the subtleties and the results
 All put into the words that unify us and glorify God
 Rehearsing to hearers, watchers and participants -
 Praises to the Lord our God.

Failures and dangers; hopes and hurts sound forth
 In singing words telling of the faithfulness of God
 Those involved and those afraid find their places in verse
 Enthusiasm and commitment, foes and fears
 Testifying, challenging, reminding us of the goodness of God
 Spiritual celebrations give a vent - an outlet to the hearts
 For those who move in and through spiritual warfare -
 Resulting in praise to the Lord our God.

"The impact of spiritual songs and hymns, O God, are easily felt when we join in one voice to sing our praises to Thee. Some of our songs are of the journey here on earth and others of the hope of heaven. The ones that usually touch us most are those telling of Thy grace and mercy and the work and victory of our Lord Jesus Christ. May I never stop singing in my heart, In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 6:1-10

AN IMPLACABLE ENEMY

In the previous cycles of the fall into sin of the children of Israel, they usually followed the same pattern of departure. There was a decline of faithfulness to God that led them to compromise. Compromise leads to a decay in spiritual living and people begin to accommodate to sin. Decay leads to apostasy when people turn away from God and find ways to justify what is wrong and think they are the ones who can interpret what parts of God's word they will obey and what they will ignore. Decay and apostasy lead to defeat in the Christian life because the standard of righteousness is no longer effective in the believer. The Spirit of God has been grieved and quenched, and our guard against the enemy has been let down until we are subjugated to the oppression of our foes. Thank God that when there is true repentance and genuine turning to God, He gives deliverance. In the case of the children of Israel, God raised up judges who were heroes of faith.

Othniel, the ideal judge, speaks of the defeat of the world, Chushanrishathaim. Shamgar was the pilgrim and stranger judge. Ehud, the diplomatic judge speaks of the defeat of the flesh, Moab/ Eglon. Deborah, the eloquent judge, and Barak and Jael speak of the defeat of the devil, Canaan. Now we have a new enemy, Midian (strife). Midian was one of the sons of Abraham by Keturah (Gen.25:1). He had five sons. Even though relatives may have close ties, "strife" is ready to spring into action at any time. When we get away from God and act independently of His revealed will, strife may be a discipline of God to bring us back from the path of waywardness. At times even though no one around us may know and we are keeping up the appearances of being who and what we should be, in heart, we forget the Lord. Strife causes, instead of friendship, confidence, freedom, and openness: silence, separation, suspicion, whispering. Instead of "love one another with a pure heart fervently," we find we are "biting and devouring one another." The Midianites were "as grasshoppers." They were everywhere. Strife does the same thing. It can spread rapidly from one conversation to another and before long a whole company of God's people is divided. Midian came into the land "to destroy it," not just to gain from its wealth. It wanted nothing less than annihilation of the testimony of God through the people of God. Israel was "greatly impoverished." Israel lost their freedom (v.2) even to live in their own homes, and had to resort to hidden shelters to survive. The people of God lost their fruitfulness (vs. 3,4) to the ravages of strife and all its associated connections. They even lost their food (v.4) to the grasping hands of strife that claimed the very source of their survival.

There had always been conflict between Midian and Israel. In an earlier battle Israel had nearly annihilated the Midianites but now they had repopulated and regrouped. Strife is never done with its objective of dividing, conquering and destroying God's people. Even so, Israel as a people had to be brought down to nothing. They couldn't claim the fruit of their labor for themselves. Their homes were no longer theirs. Their only shelter was makeshift hiding places in caves and hidden shelters. They had to hit "rock bottom" before they turned to God in desperation.

So, whose fault was it that all this happened to the people of God? Was it the enemy of the children of Israel who was at fault? The enemy, Midian, was used of God to deal with His own people and their own incomplete obedience to Him. That incomplete obedience, although it starts out well, when left undone leads to idolatry, intermarriage and everyone doing "what is right in their own eyes." In this fourth downward spiral, the cycle of sin gains momentum and the devastating effect is greater than before. When we sin, we can expect suffering and difficulty to be allowed by God as a corrective measure to stop us and bring about repentance that is genuine, not just words. To know something is wrong is one thing. To repent, turn from and forsake that sin, is quite another thing.

When the children of Israel cried to God because they were "greatly impoverished," God, who knows the hearts of all men, did not send deliverance to them. He sent a prophet. The prophet told them plainly why the disaster had fallen upon them and who was at fault in the situation in which they were found. In order for us to remain in fellowship with God, we must daily be in communication with Him through His word and the fellowship of prayer. This needs to be a constant commitment, not an intermittent practice to be engaged in, in times of emergency. When things begin to go wrong, instead of waiting for the problem to go away and we are in the middle of struggles and despair, it is incumbent upon us to halt immediately and turn to the Lord in confession and forsaking of sin.

Judges 6:6. *"And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto the Lord."*

STRIFE.

It came from not too far away, and from those of ancient kin,
In just a short time it worked its way creating fear in men.
Strife has a terrible effect on those who try acting on their own -
It has the potential to divide God's people from leaders to those at home.

Strife doesn't abide alone - it brings a multitude of other sins
That come along with it to destroy a work God Himself begins.
With strife come doubts and fears to attack and try to defeat
God's people and a work of God before it can be complete.

Defeat of strife will happen when God's people stand together -
We will have to face the problem; not ignore it when we gather,
But deal with the cause that made it come, see what we did that's wrong,
Then endeavor to shut strife out, pick ourselves up and move along.

Israel thought the cause was Midian, they didn't face their own and evil choice,
So, God sent strife along to make them stop and listen to His voice.
Far too often we look at others and place on them the blame,
Ignoring our responsibility for it and complaining to our shame.

When each of us is willing to admit, I am part of the cause of strife,
And determines before God, I will not go on until I make this right;
Then God steps in to bring an end to the division and the pain,
Giving us insight and teaching us lessons so it won't happen again.

How sad it is when we have to learn the same lesson over and over.
It is a result of pride and self-interest or sin we try to cover.
But maybe we can learn if we will take heed to the damage that is done -
And deal with issues when they are small, well before they get full-blown.

“O God, my Father: I want to be a peaceful man who does not initiate strife. There will probably be times when I will still have to stand up against what I know is wrong, but I am asking for help to do this in the spirit of grace that any divisiveness will be avoided by a self-defined line in the sand. May I always be cognizant of Thy word and how any potential problem can be scripturally dealt with before it causes strife. I pray this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

It has happened again, O why didn't I act wisely at the first?
Tension and strife have come, and the fellowship we had like a balloon has burst
To meet face to face and discuss the issue is now something we avoid
Just to come across each other even at a distance; each is privately annoyed
Strife has its way of overcoming all the good that we used to see in each other
And its ultimate intention is to impoverish and separate brothers
It is a tool of the powers of darkness to use suspicion and strife
To hinder and even stop the impact of a well-lived joyful Christian life.

What do we need, where can we turn, how can an end be brought to this nonsense?
Why doesn't someone come and preach and pass on that brother his sentence?
Surely it is easy to see the reason for the problem is that other man's attitude
For all that I have done, he and his crowd don't show the least gratitude
We need a deliverer, some one to come and from this strife set us free
Then we can get back to being the kind of people we are intended to be
What do you mean, the problem may be with me? I'm not the guilty one!
He needs to be taken to task for not appreciating all the good I've done!

Then comes the prophet - the man who speaks for God sees beyond words to the obvious
He points out my faults and failures, the self-centeredness to which I've been oblivious
Then in words that convict my conscience - and following, speaks plainly to me
It hits me like a hammer blow, the problem is one I chose not to see
I am the one who needs to confess to my brother and make amends
I am the one on whom the restoration to warm fellowship again, depends
The voice of God to my seared conscience I previously have ignored
But now to end this strife and division, to God Himself for mercy I implore.

“Father, may any strife or divisive spirit that hinders Thy word be dealt with quickly in a scriptural way. May barriers caused by differences of opinion be removed by my humble repentance and forsaking of self-will. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Judges 6:11-18

LIMITED VISION

Under Midian Israel had lost their freedom, their fruitfulness and their food. Their numbers had increased as "grasshoppers" and they had come in to "destroy the land" and impoverish the people of God. That is typical of the destructive nature of strife and it is the same today as it was then. With poverty came bitterness, and with bitterness came despondency that overcame the people. The results of strife affect every part of our lives whether it be in homes among our families, in assemblies where the testimony of God's people is affected or in the nation when violence and self-interests destroy the peace that is needed to succeed and flourish. Dealing with strife does not come easy. People are humbled to the dust where the only way to look and recover is up. In our human weakness we are unable to deal with the problem but when the Lord is acknowledged and called upon, there is given the needed strength. An available man with an exercise who knows what has happened, God can use that man.

Gideon became the fifth judge. He must have been a man of strength who knew how to be a "hewer" as his name implies. He could thresh grain in a very unlikely and uncomfortable place, and was willing to do what was necessary to bring about the provisions needed by his family. As is made plain further on in the account of this humble judge, he was able to use an ax effectively. Gideon's weakness was that he had not yet acknowledged that the calamity that had fallen on God's people was their fault. When they had neglected God and disobeyed Him, they put the blame in the wrong place. Gideon was something like the man who came to his psychiatrist with a problem.

"Doctor, you must help me. Everything's wrong. I feel worthless. My friends tell me I have a terrible inferiority complex. Can you help me?" A week later after testing and evaluation the man came back and the psychiatrist said, "Friend, I have some good news and some bad news for you. The good news is that we have proved you do not have a complex. There is no doubt about that. But the bad news is, you are inferior."

Gideon had questioned God because of the problems he and the nation faced and wondered why God had not come to help and deliver them. There will always be problems in life and Christians are not immune from them. When they come and we finally are brought to face them, the first place we should look is at ourselves and within ourselves. If we find areas in life where we have sinned by either commission or omission, there is no one else to blame but ourselves. Confession and forsaking sin is how we find mercy that is needed. We are called to serve God in specific ways. It is up to us to rise to deal with the problems and not make excuses for ourselves. When God's promises are clear to us, we need to move forward in faith and trust Him to give us the ability and strength needed for the work before us. Instead of excusing ourselves, we need to get up and move ahead.

When we know there are issues to be faced and problems to be solved, we look for guidance, and that is only right. The problem often is we don't know where to find the solution. God's guidance doesn't always come out of the blue in some miraculous way. Often it comes clear to us the fact that the solution is found in the activities in which we are presently engaged. What we are working on now deserves our attention until it is completed. When God gives us something new to do, it seldom means leaving our present work unfinished or in jeopardy. God's call for future work may come while we are working our way through the challenges of the present moment.

Gideon's vision was limited in that he was committed to meeting the challenge of food for his family. He showed initiative by making use of the winepress, a most unusual place to thresh grain, so that his activity was hidden from the Midianites. Strife is always lurking in the area but when we are meeting urgent needs, strife often is not present. It was there God met him. It was in the place of his urgent activity that God surprised him with the fact that He knew what Gideon was doing, even though the Midianites didn't. It was also there that God set about to expand his limited vision to include the call of God to meet the needs of others. He doubted the call because he doubted himself. His sense of inadequacy had to be overcome by faith in God. We are not sufficient in ourselves to accomplish all that is necessary in the work of God. In everything, and in every way, we need God.

When there is even limited vision, the Lord can add to that and enable us to rise to the challenge. Such a challenge involves real sacrifice, which in turn comes at the cost of our own survival. Vision also means reaching out beyond our own comfort zone to act on what God says. When we turn over what we own, God takes it. With vision there is the conviction God is in control. A genuine person of faith knows that victory comes from God. Vision means there is a willingness to go forward in simple obedience to God. Five minutes of obedience is worth more than a month of study. Understanding and vision go together and by learning from others, we are made strong. Vision means evaluation of a matter from God's perspective. Self-importance interferes with God's plans. When our vision is with divinely given insight, we will have the wisdom to share that vision with others. Though Gideon was hard to convince, when he was sure that God

was in the matter, he acted on his convictions with speed and enthusiasm. His own perceived personal limitation yielded to obedience to divine authority and he gave his new responsibilities his full attention.

There will always be times when I cannot see far ahead
Moving forward in darkness and fog brings a certain dread
Of dangers unseen, either real ones or perceived
That limits my vision so instead of opportunities seized
I labor and wait with self-centered fear and trepidation
Even though I know God is in control of every situation
And can bring to pass by His own might and sovereign will
A solution to a problem that we may be pondering still.

When God moves to act, and brings about a needed solution
We can know with assurance He has in His mind a conclusion
That will ultimately bring blessing although there is pain in the present
We would choose to avoid because its action is so unpleasant
Yet with faith in Him who knows the beginning and the end
We go through step by step each event that He chooses to send
Because our confidence is in Him who we've proven never fails
And we trust His guidance to get through all that following Him entails.

Vision isn't wishful thinking, but it is looking farther ahead
Then is normal to those who have learned that He has led
Us to go through deep waters to dry land and mountains high
That we may see beyond the valleys and deserts to our home in the sky
Where the Holy One sits and knows each and every event
Because from His place of authority and His hand He has sent
Both the problem and solution that will sharpen our own vision
So that we will claim for ourselves every divinely given provision.

This is all allowed by God, even sent, so that we will learn
To act in obedience to His will and in each matter arising turn
To Him for the guidance we need to enhance our needed vision
And bless Him who in grace keeps giving with His holy precision
All that is needed by us from His limitless abundant supply
And is available for us to grasp and claim when in faith we do apply
The initiative that is to be taken when from Him the vision is given
Though we may not know now or ever the outcome or the reason.

"I gladly accept Father, the fact that I do not have the right to know every reason behind every action Thou dost sent. I am simply trusting Thee because I know Thee well enough to be assured that whatever comes to me is for my good, and hopefully, for Thy glory. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 6:19-24

GOD IS WILLING TO WAIT

Gideon's excuses and awareness of his limitations were all put out in the open before the Lord as if He didn't know about them. The Lord understands our doubts and fears. He knows the situations we are in personally and is fully aware of what is happening around us. After all, everything is under His sovereign authority. Further, He does not expect us to go beyond our own experiences alone. He said to Gideon, "I will be with thee." The same is true for us today. We are not left "to go a warfare" at our own charges. We are not asked by the Lord to do what we cannot possibly do. When we follow Him by faith, He opens the way before us and gives the power to accomplish the service He has for us to fulfill.

The offering Gideon wanted to give to the Lord was not just the desire for affirmation of God's call, but was also an expression of faith. For people in dire straits, it was a costly offering to give an ephah of scarce flour, one of the small goats he had hidden from the Midianites and the broth that would have fed the family. His act of worship was not a casual activity in which he was engaged. He gave the best he had to give and God obviously accepted it in a visible unusual way. Fire came from the rock as God accepted the burnt offering, meal offering and the drink offering which Gideon presented. The flesh of the kid of the goats speaks to us of the burnt offering - and of our Lord Jesus Christ who was "obedient unto death." The unleavened cakes, the meal offering, teaches us of the humility, the lowliness of Christ. The poured-out broth as a drink offering, takes us to the place where our Lord, "poured out His soul." Even though he didn't see the angel after the offering was accepted, the Lord plainly spoke to him and assured him of the peace that was between them. We too experience peace as a result of God's satisfaction with the sacrifice of Christ on our

behalf. There is no point in waiting for some overpowering feelings before pressing ahead with God's calling. Accept what the Lord says, act on what He commands, and trust Him to do what He has promised.

By coming face to face with the "angel of the Lord," Gideon was changed. He was never the same again. That experience in a difficult time, taught him in a way that would have never been learned if the times were easy. We come to understand God in ways when we are in hardships that are indelibly impressed on us for life. "My strength is made perfect in weakness." When we experience God's grace in those hard times, our character, humility and ability to connect with other people spiritually is greatly enhanced. We become conscious of God and less self-conscious. It is inevitable that we become more conscious of God's presence when we worship and know that worship has been accepted.

At the time of our new birth we come to know God and the Lord Jesus Christ. "This is life eternal." Usually there is very little awareness of who He is and His holiness, His greatness and His majesty at that time because we are mainly conscious of having been saved by His grace. It is in the events that follow when we are under stress of one kind or another, we learn what the "peace of God" is really like. Our Lord reveals to us in many different ways the aspects of His being when "we walk in the light as He is in the light." The walk of faith gives us understanding of what "Jehovah-Shalom, the God of Peace," really means. "The peace of God which passeth all understanding," keeps our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. The doubts pass; the repentance and faith become real; disobedience is confessed and forsaken; obedience claims its priority in our lives.

God who is willing to wait for the results of genuine repentance and faith, is willing to forgive us for our doubting ways and gives us the promises of His presence and power. The reality of our return to faith will be seen in the facts and acts of true worship when we turn from ourselves and our ways, and submit to His gracious ways. Our vision then becomes sanctified and scriptural. We are willing to act under divine authority because the Lord enables us to see by faith, that which normally we would miss because of our fleshly and worldly limitations.

Some principles related to leadership in the story of Gideon are that we need initiative: the first step in bringing something about. Initiative demands 1. *A call to action:* Judg. 6:14 "Go in this thy might." That is a dynamic command; a divine imperative from the highest possible Authority. "I sent thee." The strength of the Lord makes it possible for us to answer this clarion call. The challenge to stir and quicken, comes to us from the Lord in spite of our fears, inhibitions, misgivings and apprehensions. Gideon's life had been touched from above in a similar way to Deborah, Paul, Abraham, Mordecai. 2. *Availability:* Judg.6:25. When we know what needs to be done, we must be available, obedient and daring. There are times when we hesitate for fear of making a mistake but the "false gods," that create strife, have to go. Esther, Rebekah, Hannah, David and Samuel all had to act in spite of their fears. 3. *Loyalty:* Judg.6:26. The challenge to one of those who are loyal to the Lord, is always lofty. Gideon's first hour of glory, was when the gods were torn down, trees felled and a sacrifice was made. Nicodemus, Elisha, Jonathan all had to go against the crowd. Initiative calls for 4. *Leading:* Judg.6:27. He blew a trumpet and by the action on the part of one man he galvanized all to action like Moses, Joshua and Deborah. 5. *Dealing with doubts:* Judg.6:36-40 is never easy for anyone who knows their limitations. Gideon dealt with doubts by using the fleece on the floor, the same place where he had his first dealings with God. The first time he was the fleece; the second, Israel would be blessed. Doubts were experienced by John, Thomas and Sarah and yet God was able to use them to bring blessing to others. 6. *A sense of timing:* Judg.7:1 is important once a course of action is clear. He did not delay, nor drag his heels but advanced in faith as did Jael, Bartimaeus, Philip and Zaccheus. 7. *Worship as a reality:* Judg.7:15. Later, by a Midianite tent with only Purah (fruitful) as a witness, he worshipped. God gives faith, courage, strength and a serenity of His presence when we are willing to do what we have been told to do. Abraham didn't know where he was going and Simeon didn't know when he was going to see the Lord Jesus. They just trusted God and were worshipers in the right place according to God's timing. 8. *Responsibility:* Judg.7:17. Once he was assured of victory, Gideon wasted no time swinging into action. Once in an obvious leadership role, the responsibility for the entire group who followed rested on him. Timothy, Gaius, Priscilla/Aquila, Esther all realized much depended them on acting responsibly.

It is when our vision has been enhanced to see things around us as God see them, that our initiative moves us to step ahead in faith and apply ourselves to that which God has called us. Initiative by itself can be dangerous if the parameters of divine guidance are not adhered to. That is why vision must come first. The steps taken by faith with God-given confidence, then allows us to begin to see as God sees and our whole perspective is changed. Once Gideon caught a vision of the Lord, then the events surrounding him didn't seem impossible to change. He saw things through God's eyes. When direction was given by the Lord, he acted with initiative and the Lord began to work through His chosen judge. The results of that led in turn to

an appropriate perspective of all that was happening and why. The corrective measures were applied and God, in His own way and time, brought the desired actions of His people to where they were delivered from the crippling power of strife.

There are examples of perspective in Jn.13:2-17; 21:15-19. [1] Perspective is a certain point of view in understanding or judging things or happenings, especially one that shows them in their true relation to one another. Judg.6-8; 2Cor.3:6-11; Hab.1:1-4; 3:17-19. Essential to perspective is balance. 6:16 It is one thing to envisage dreams and conquests; it is quite another to carry them out. [2] *Recognition of needs*, 6:17 when brought to the attention of most of us, when given a job to do, dredge up a *score of excuses*, why it can't be done. We must depend on divine intervention for success. [3] *Quietness of soul*: 6:27. is a key to perspective. Very often, the greatest accomplishments for God are carried out in the quietness of our inner lives. Here, away from view, we carry out our private and personal commitment entrusted to us by the Lord. When we, [4] *Understand our impact on others*: 6:31-32, invariably, our conduct and character make an impact for good or evil upon our contemporaries. Perspective is the dynamic that transforms us, guides the faith of others, stirs slumbering spirits and startles sleeping souls. Godliness polarizes people. [5] *Any change must be superior to what has been destroyed*: 6:35. When one knows God, he becomes a channel through which courage and strength flows to others and is a blessing and inspiration to touch, revive, and refresh. [6] *Focus*: 7:2,4,5,7,9. Timid men focus on the foe, not on the One who would lead them to triumph. The water test wasn't so much for the men as for Gideon's faith in God. The combat ratio of 1: 450 was the same as Elijah's. [7] *Usefulness is proportionate to our willingness to be little*: Judg.7:14. The Lord knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our strengths and weaknesses. He deals with us in infinite integrity. Self-importance can interfere with the ongoing plans of God. To be counted of little consequence in our own ability and estimation makes us useful. Perspective enables us to [8] *See the big picture*: 7:24. In a look at the overall picture, Gideon diffused the Ephraimites' complain in a gentle, good-natured, humorous, humble way.

WAITING AND TRUSTING

The Lord waited, He knew the man, He knew his fears
He knew his need of a sign, something physical to appear
And settle his actions of faith to where by faith he could act
Confident that the Lord was in control to make deliverance a fact.

It is not always easy to walk by faith at first
One is afraid of consequences that come to burst
On unsuspecting heads who stand up against strife
Not realizing the lasting effects can make or ruin life.

So, the Lord waits, and then the man of faith returns
Arms full of that which cost a lot, and God with holy fire burns
That which is a sweet savor to Him from a man's full heart
Now he, by God's power and grace, can make a start.

When the eyes of faith rise above the natural to spiritual vision
And when the work and word of God are applied to the present condition
Those whose vision gives direction to solve the difficulties in the way ahead
Move forward in confidence in the Lord - and nothing dread.

Plans are made and the honor of God prompts initiative
Leaving complacency behind holy vision gives incentive
Actions take the places of ideas and distant dreams
And faith propels one forward making reality out of schemes.

Perspective in us is developed as we go ahead by faith
There is a great delight as the joys of victory we taste
Then life in God becomes real and we know why we are here
God's plans for us and our reason for being becomes clear.

"Father, I thank Thee for Thy patience and willingness to not abandon me when I am so often slow to act. I do not want to complicate the process of acting in Thy will. By Thy grace imparted to me, I will seek to just take the next obvious step as it opens up before me. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 6:25-40

ACTION AND ASSURANCE

When God is able to use a person to carry out a designated work that person will be one who has vision enough to see the need and rise to the challenge. To reach out beyond what has been a "comfort zone," is an act of faith and conviction. We know what is wrong and God gives the understanding as to what is right. Added to that is the perspective that we don't need to make a big fuss so that everyone knows what we are doing. Quietly go about beginning the work God has given in a balanced, clearly defined way with a certain recognition of what the results will be. A person who is available to God with a sense of loyalty to the Lord and a willingness to go ahead with initiative, will soon find there are others who are willing to follow your lead. In any work a sense of timing as to what and when is appropriate will soon make evident there are open doors through which we are to enter.

Before there can be deliverance for God's people, the cause of the discipline must be removed. When the Lord's people have any other god, or person, or thing of any kind that is in first place – that is evil in the sight of the Lord. The test of personal faith comes first and it begins at home. To deal with sin, we need the altar. To have an altar we have to get rid of any hindrances. Faith is not demonstrated by being fearless but by being obedient. Obedience will cause anger on the part of some people who do not want anything done that seems to their minds to be intolerant. People who get used to sin find it very hard to deal with sin. However, there are those who will face their own guilt and will step up and be counted after they repent and turn from that sin. Usually such people are ready to support one whose faith in the Lord has been made evident. When one's reputation has been established as one who trusts God, others will catch fire from your flame.

Judges 6:27. "Then Gideon took ten of his servants, and did as the Lord had said unto him: and so it was because he feared his father's household, and the men of the city, that he could not do it by day, that he did it by night."

Baal had to go! There was no easy way to do it. The trees had to be cut down. Any vestige of evil has to be removed and burned. Baal had to go now! Not tomorrow or some other day more convenient. When the Lord gives us His instruction, we are not to wait on our time but must act on His. Baal had to go now no matter what people might think! Not everyone, and perhaps not anyone will understand or agree with the Lord's directive, but I must obey Him in spite of the consequences. We can expect opposition from apathy, but that is no reason to hesitate to carry out God's revealed will. The altar and sacrifice had to be established, and in faith Gideon did what God said. "Jehovah-Shalom" (the Lord sent peace) was the result of an act of faith.

When Gideon threw down the altar of Baal, the altar to God could be erected and the right sacrifice made. I must pull down all "Baals" in my life if God can use me to lead His people to victory. Anything that seeks a prior claim on me in any way, has to go. Gideon did this by night and probably in fear, but he did it! His initial act of faith may have been done in fear so he acted at night. God recognized the work of faith, not needing the fearlessness of His chosen vessel to make the work a success. The ten men were adequate witnesses to satisfy the claims of the law. I may be afraid and not be willing to make a big deal of the needed change – but Gideon's boldness by night made his father bold by day. A solid, serious, God-directed action will have God's blessing and He can make changes where and when I least expect it. God began His work of saving Israel through Gideon quietly without excitement. God's work does not depend on some strange emotion and pent up excitement, but is solid and serious as any work of God should be. God is sovereign and can use me, and through me, use others. May I truly be ready and willing.

The actions of faith will usually cause anger on the part of some people. They do not want anything to disturb what they have become used to even if they know it is sin. Apathy and complacency do not like to be interfered with. Others may rise to the occasion and follow the lead of a person God is using. The Holy Spirit acted through Gideon to produce the needed result for the time and place. We are thankful that the Holy Spirit is in us in these New Testament times, and is able to act on our behalf at any moment. We have already received all the guidance we need to fulfill the call of God. Our guidance is the Word of God - our Guide is the Spirit of God.

In spite of victories that God has brought about through vessels that He can use, we often still have fear and unbelief. For some reason they don't seem to go away permanently. Those two enemies of a believer stick together. The only way we can deal with them is to apply the opposite duo of facts and faith. The facts are contained in the scriptures of truth and faith acts on those facts. God acts in sovereignty according to His will. His will is already known. It is there for us to read for ourselves. How we apply those facts is up to us. It is a waste of our time to try and deal with our doubts about a matter when we already have the truth defined. God intends us to act in faith rather than seek to put demands on Him by using the "fleece method." A problem is not solved by knowing the answer but by acting on what the Guide has already said we are to do.

Some biblical principles that we need to keep in mind are that God has already given us the Guide, and He is much more important than what we would consider guidance. We have the word of God for guidance and "the peace of God" is the umpire or referee who controls our actions. The fact that God gives us the desire to please Him and serve Him is guidance enough. It is up to us to take each step into the unknown future with full confidence in the Guide. There are times when the counsel of other people will assure us as to the actions we are to take.

Shall I go ahead or shall I wait?
The answer is unclear.
I have a lot of things on my plate -
There's a lot to do right here.
But the call of the Spirit is unmistakable
I don't have any options.
The sovereign plans of God are unbreakable
I have been given only one direction.

So in faith it is time to step into the unknown
Even though the future is obscure.
It would only be self-will if I were shown
All God intends me to endure.
Instead with confidence in the Guide
We step out in faith assured.
That He knows the end and will not hide
What His grace has already procured.

The problem is known, it is nothing new -
Sin is still rampant in our day.
I will not ever in this life get through
With all that I should do and say.
But there's a calm assurance that the Lord controls
Everything so He can work His will.
Those who to His will give the keeping of their souls
Enjoy in this life the words, "Peace, be still."

"O God, I know there are times for planning and times for action. I admit I have sometimes spent a lot of time in planning and very little time in action. Other times there has been a lot of action and not a lot of planning. I am asking that I will have sense enough to know when to plan and when to act. It seems that this trip has been going the way we had planned, but this last couple of nights has made me wonder whether we are in the right place here. The need is obviously great so maybe that is the assurance I needed. Thanks very much in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 7

GOD GIVES VICTORY

When 32,000 men who are essentially unarmed and untrained farmers and laborers are called to go up against an army of 135,000, many who were able to ride into battle on camels, then it was only natural for them to have some fear and trepidation. The uniqueness of the situation was that the Lord had already promised victory before the battle started. In our frail humanity we often cannot look beyond our human experience and human reasoning to the authority and power of our sovereign Lord. To set these aside and move confidently forward by faith is not common to man. We have to learn from the Lord, by the way of His choosing, the fact that self-sufficiency is a serious handicap in spiritual warfare. When we think we win battles in our own strength, we will find ourselves on the losing side.

There are some common sense practices to follow when called upon to serve God in any situation. There needs to be a sense of timing. Don't wait until it is too late to do anything about the immediate problem. Gideon and those with him rose up early. Another thing to consider after evaluating a situation as God sees it, is to focus our attention on the matters at hand first that have to be dealt with before getting to the big problem. Warfare without preparation pretty well assures losing the battle. Arrogance and pride have no place in the work of the Lord. When God says there are too many men, then there are too many no matter what we think. When the time comes to test the faith of the Lord's people, that must be done with understanding. Confidence in the outcome of a battle against temptation and challenge must come from trusting the Lord - not ourselves. When it comes to gathering the Lord's people, I have to ask myself, "Do I cause strife or unity?" Spirit-filled people will always gather God's people together. Gideon blew the trumpet (Spirit of God upon him). The people gathered together in preparation for battle and Gideon and all the

people rose up early. They pitched beside the well Harod (trembling). Midian was on their north. Their position was important. Camped by the hill of Moreh (instruction), reminds us that victory comes "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord."

Fear is a legitimate emotion, but in our weakness, we still can trust God. He knows how to give courage and strength in spite of fear. He knows what we need to overcome in our times of uncertainty. Really, we are only useful in proportion to our humility and faith. Practical dependence on the Lord will enable us to see the big picture and have the needed insight to initiate and carry out our divinely appointed tasks.

In compassion and grace, the Lord sent Gideon and his servant Purah to the Midianite camp to give them the assurance they needed. In that great camp at the precise place and precise moment God used a dream about a barley cake to strengthen Gideon's faith. God can use the least and lowest to bring out the best and highest. The Lord assured Gideon again of victory through one soldier telling his dream to another. The sovereign Lord controls even the "thoughts and intents" of the hearts and minds of all men. In that way there is not a person who is exempt from their responsibility to believe God. "God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when sleep falleth upon men ..." When assurance comes from the Lord as to what needs to be done now, it is our responsibility to act on what He has told us. The sovereignty and greatness of God has to be learned, and through that means, His will has to be acted upon. A radical dependence on Him leads to wholehearted confidence in Him.

When the spirit of fear has been replaced by power, love and sound mind, perceived obstacles are no longer a problem to us. Gideon learned the lesson that what is of little value in itself, is of great value when the Lord uses it. Purah, Gideon's servant, would have learned much of God by his association with his master. It is appropriate for those who are older to take those who are younger along with them, even when we are going through problems that seem to us to be huge. No matter how I analyze a situation, it is well to teach others our confidence is in God. We know He is in total control. We may not know how God is going to accomplish His work and keep His word. We just know He is going to do it and we are to obey Him and do what He commands.

There was never a question about victory happening. That was clearly promised by the Lord. But we need to be prepared for victory. There had to be preparations for the army. The numbers began at 135,000 to 32,000. The army had to learn the most important principle of warfare is the glory is God's alone. There was the test of fearlessness so 22,000 went home. There was the test of fervency. It was a simple test carried out in plain view of the Midianites. It seemed like a simple test to see if when a person drank water, they lapped like a dog in order to keep alert to what was going on around them. God's tests come when we are unaware of the fact it is a secret test. The significance of the test was to make sure the 300 had the right perspective. We need to remember: do not take your eyes off the enemy; do not forget your purpose; do not take unnecessary time even with life's necessities. Now the numbers were 450 to 1. That meant simply: depend on God or perish. By that means Israel had to learn again that God gives the victory. "It is not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord."

Our part in the plans for victory is first of all, trust the Lord. The preparation of Gideon was that he had to go to the camp of the Midianites, both Gideon and Purah. There they would again be reminded that God is sovereign. They learned that from the dream of the Midianite. Gideon was again caused to realize it was God fighting the Midianites. That teaches us again some of the circumstances of worship. Gideon's worship was real because he had experienced and learned: balance, recognition of his need, availability, loyalty to God and His people, leadership of God's people, quietness of soul, how to rise to the challenge, the ability to reach out, action to take, the understanding of the impact of others, real convictions, a sense of what is valuable, understanding of that which is right, timing as to what is appropriate, and willingness to respond with his heart to the Lord his God. Until he had his confidence in God alone and could worship in reality, he wasn't ready for battle. God put fear into Midian as a way of preparing the Midianites for defeat. Else why would they be afraid of 300 men?

In order for us to accomplish the work our Lord puts before us, we need to commit ourselves to maintain an orderly approach to the work, keep both hands full to attend to the business at hand and not get sidetracked. We must hear the word of the Lord and obey it. When our Lord instructs us to do what must be done, we must enthusiastically act. The fear that was in Gideon was replaced by faith and confidence. The confidence that was in the Midianite army of 135,000 was replaced by fear of "the sword of the Lord and of Gideon." 300 faithful men who were fervent in spirit so they could shout with a loud voice, and had their fears replaced by the promise of God, were exactly the ones the Lord wanted to use. They were not depending on weapons in their hands. They had a horn to blow - an alarm to awaken those who slept; a jar to break at the same time as 300 others that would have the disconcerting sound of hand-to-hand combat; a light to shine

as evidence of the power of an army surrounding them in a dark night; and a voice to shout as a signal to all as to who they served. These are the same items the Lord uses today in the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged.

We have the trumpet of warning to sound to those who are asleep in their lethargy and sin. We have the container of the light of truth to break open and let the Gospel message to shine forth. We have the privilege and responsibility to herald the word of God forth to defeat the powers of darkness and bring salvation to those in bondage. To most people, the practice of fighting fire with fire, or equals against equals, is the way things should be done. But how are the powers of darkness to prevail? How do you fight against those who oppose and do not use weapons? It is impossible for strife and evil to be victorious when our miracle-working Lord uses the means and people He chooses to bring about victory. When all is settled with the problem of strife, there may still be times when conciliatory words and diplomacy can be used to calm down brothers and sisters, who didn't get the recognition they think they deserve. The Ephraimites were heady, high-minded, vaunting themselves, puffed up and they thought they were the greatest tribe in Israel (Josh.17:14). There will always be someone wanting to start fresh trouble; usually about their own self-importance. Their complaint was that they hadn't been asked to go. Nobody stopped them from going. Someone makes a move and God blesses it, and instead of saying "Praise the Lord," they say, "You shouldn't have done it on your own. You should've asked us."

The unity of God's people will come, when we respond with a Christ-like spirit even though there is weakness and fear at first. Hard words and a big stick do not unify God's people. Defeat of strife comes when God's people stand together "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" and then God intervenes on our behalf. The unity of saints that is needed comes with humility, honesty and hope that can be expressed. Ultimately all of us have to say, no matter what our role has been in some challenging situation, "To God be all the glory for the victory won," - and we will bow in humble adoration and worship to Him alone.

Judges 7:15. *"And it was so, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and the interpretation thereof, that he worshipped, and returned into the host of Israel, and said, 'Arise; for the Lord hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian.'"*

SUCCESS.

Real success is not by some chance -
Or because of wishful thinking in the dead of the night.
It begins when we pray and study to learn God's plans -
And then God uses you beyond physical might.
Learning to trust Him may take quite some time -
When we still think like the world and the power of many.
Who would ever think a pitcher and a light to shine,
Would bring a mighty victory and soundly defeat the enemy.

Of course, we know it was God who gave Israel that great success.
But just the same, He wanted some men to participate -
Then they would learn from victory, God wanted to bless
Not only now but in future years when they would go forth in faith.
The sword was the Lord's and was Gideon's sword too -
And God moved the host of "strife," everyone to flee.
When strife arises and we don't know what to do -
Then listen carefully to the One who says, "Come unto Me."

There may be some things we can do to deal with strife -
But the best thing of all is, to in fervency pray
That God will come in and help me to set my things right -
And He will give me the right things to do and to say.
I can sit by in fear, or fuss and complain -
But that's no solution, there are changes to make -
That God can make plain when I'm listening to Him -
And He brings success when His directions I take.

"O heavenly Father, I am listening this morning to Thy counsel so that if and when strife arises and a battle against it must be fought, I will be ready to act in the strength of the Lord. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 8

VICTORY AND DEFEAT

The attitude of the elders of Ephraim were so childish that we may have the inclination to discount it as only the foolish ranting of touchy people. There is a lesson for us to learn, however. Disunity is often motivated by jealousy or wounded pride. The danger that follows spiritual victories may come from our fellow believers who for one reason or another feel they compare unfavorably with those who God has used for His sovereign purposes. "A soft answer turneth away wrath," is a good principle to remember and act upon, rather than aggressively defend our actions or throw out a challenge. Satan still seeks to create tension among the people of the Lord. It is far more important to promote unity than to stand up in pride to defend ourselves. When we keep our eyes on the enemy who is seeking to undermine the work of the Lord, we will see who pushes the disunity caused by pride and jealousy.

The Israelites on the east side of Jordan refused even the most basic request, food for the troops fled to the desert, not expecting, to Gideon and those who were "faint yet pursuing." They may have been worried about revenge from the Midianites who had fled to the desert, not expecting Gideon and his men to follow them that far. Both those in Succoth and Peniel feared for themselves instead of having faith and rejoicing in the victory the Lord brought to His people. When we act in a way that is expedient rather than in faith, there are bitter consequences that follow. How good it is when we can share in the work of others, by supplying needs they have in the work in which they are engaged. To support a work of God is a privilege to us and an encouragement to those who are out front in the battle for the salvation of sinners.

Usually we are enthused and even excited when we hear about a work of God that is going on through the efforts of our brothers and sisters in Christ. There is no unity when there is only religious sham, and when those who claim they are identified with the name of the Lord reject the truth of the scriptures. There is no unity when our goals are different, and false unity actually hinders the work of God. The Israelites of Succoth didn't appreciate the victory that had been won. They had no trust in God, no knowledge of God - in fact they didn't even mention the Lord. They showed no kindness towards their brethren, and instead of helping Gideon, they mocked him. It cannot be stressed too much that those who labor in the fields of the world deserve our interest and support in every way possible.

God will prevail over every obstacle or every vacuum that is left because the people of God have failed in their responsibility. Even though spiritual ingratitude might have the tendency to discourage us, the victories of the Lord will still be won in spite of indifference and opposition. When there is compromise with the world and people avoid facing the cause of strife, there will be defeat and backsliding. Strangely, even though some may win against strife, rather than giving spontaneous praise to God, people merely breathe as sigh of relief and think they did what was needed by themselves. Instead of thanking God with grateful hearts, the Israelites acted like Gideon had won the victory by himself. They looked at him as the victor rather than the Lord. 300 men winning a victory over 135,000 was obviously a work of God. A praise-less, thankless heart is evidence of carnality. If God is not at the center of our lives, everything is out of balance. It is even possible to acknowledge the work of God in our lives and still not really thank Him.

Indifference to the Lord and what He is doing will bring a just recompense. Disdain of that which is obviously a work of God and disinterest in what is being done elsewhere, has a demoralizing effect on God's people. Never minimize the seriousness of ignoring what God is doing and/or siding with the enemy for fear of repercussions the actions of faith will bring. The fleshly ways of men refuse to give God all the glory for the great things He has done, and will seek to take credit for what has been done. It is imperative that we GIVE GOD ALL THE GLORY for the victories He brings to pass in our life and service.

Just punishment took place when the Midianites kings were put to death. However, Gideon was prepared to put the responsibility of doing what he should do in the hands of his son. We should never expect those who are immature to take the responsibility of leadership. Not only is that an unfair burden of responsibility on one who is not ready for it, but it should make those who lead aware of the seriousness of their role in the work of God. He raises up those who He wants to lead His people. We cannot arbitrarily take that position of delegating serious judgments on those who are immature.

The people of Israel gave credit to Gideon for that which he did not do. It was an obvious work of God to bring about victory in the way He did. It was an obvious work of God to bring about victory in the way He did. Gideon knew the Lord was the victor and he knew the Lord was the ruler over Israel. He knew the people made a request that was not God's will. Men must never seek to take the place of God no matter what people say and do, or even what we may wish would happen. Gideon wisely refused to do what he knew was wrong. That great refusal was a good choice on his part. However, he must have recognized the failure of the priesthood in the nation. There is no mention of the right priesthood in the whole book of Judges. Gideon apparently wanted to have a functioning priesthood in Ophrah instead of the one at Shiloh, the place

of God's choosing. Perhaps it was his vanity that caused him to want to be a priest because he had offered a sacrifice of the burnt offering, meal offering, drink offering and the Lord had accepted it with fire from the rock. He must have seen his position as a mediator between God and the people as a priest instead of a judge so he made a large ephod out of the gold people brought.

The ephod Gideon made was larger than the one the high priest wore. Sixty pounds of gold with all the trappings must have been very impressive. Making that ephod was a great mistake. Good intentions do not make a thing good or right. Decline in one area leads to a decline in all areas of life. That was spiritual adultery that Gideon had initiated even though his original motive may have been good. The people ended up going after the ephod instead of the Lord. It is an easy step from the idol-worship of an ephod, to Baalism and worship of false deities. Most failures in our lives as believers come in that which is associated with priestly practices. An ephod was a testimony of priesthood. When worldliness and worldly elements are introduced into holy things, a form of godliness with the "power thereof" is the sad result. People would rather have symbols to worship and bow before, than to God. Wrong motives lead to lasting problems.

Gideon led the nation but he didn't lead his family. Wealth and prosperity can carry one away from the Lord today the same way as it led Gideon away. He wasn't a king but lived like a king. He wasn't content with his large family but went after that was not his to have. The result was his whole family suffered. He had a good start but a bad end. It is far better to have a good start and a consistency in pursuing proper objectives in life and have a good end. Partial obedience is really spiritual defeat. What I profess must be followed by consistent practice through life. The objectives before me in my life are to be God's objectives. In our greatest victories we are in danger of our greatest defeats. What we claim as a right for ourselves may be a stumbling block to others. Success in one area of life and service doesn't give us the right of authority over others.

Judges 8:1. *"And the men of Ephraim said unto him, 'Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites?' And they did chide with him sharply."*

ARGUMENTS.

At times it is after the action, and the victory is already won -
That arguments arise over who gets credit for all that is done.
Is it better to be out in front, where the battle is hot and fierce?
Or is the real work done in the "clean up" that may take many years?
Both jobs are really important only the one gets all the glory -
But if the other one isn't done, then that's a different story.
It is not worth making a fuss or arguing over which one is so great -
All that produces is bad feelings and no one can win that debate.
Give credit where credit is due, no matter who gets the praise -
Enjoy the results together, and move together to better days.

Pride demands recognition, it has a way to separate friends.
Even when the result benefits all, each seems to have a different end.
The objective is to defeat the enemy, not to be lifted up on high -
Just be ready to help regardless; don't be like a child and cry
That you have been treated unfairly so you are going away to sulk -
Stand firmly united as one, and be happy when God gives results.
After all, it's God's work we are doing and He will surely prevail -
He knows what needs to be done and what each one's work entails.
Give God all the recognition and glory; He can bring good out of bad -
In that way we can rejoice, instead of arguing - that makes every one sad.

Small things as well as big can each stumble and trip up our life in one day -
Leaving us consequences to live with, as well as a big price to pay.
Failure to trust God completely can create problems even between brothers,
And from two in an argument comes, division that reaches to others.
Whatever creates a stumbling block or hinders, victory and a united front -
Get rid of it and resolve to avoid anything that united growth will stunt.
Plan ahead well in advance, what the consequences perhaps will be -
Because even a good idea, might bring a bad problem or ideology.
Spiritual growth and freedom don't necessarily come because a motive is good -
Negative results can be averted when by God's plan we follow those who lead.

"O God who knows the thoughts and intents of every heart: may I ever be on guard against anything that would bring arguments into the midst of God's people. I know I need to keep before me the goals that are scriptural and not some much the way my

plan to reach the goals differ from that of others. Help me to be ready to consider their view and be ready to change mine if necessary. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 9

CONFLICT FROM WITHIN

Gideon started out well when he was young and knew his limitations. He knew who he was and as a humble judge, God could use him to deliver His people from external strife. However, when he was older his successes went to his head and he made an ephod that looked like an idol and was worth a lot of money. The result was that the man God had used when he was young, led God's people back into idol worship when he was old. It is possible for a servant of God to bring about great blessing and lead people out of Christendom, and yet at a later time leave a spiritual vacuum that will be filled with that which is not of God or even lead them back into Christendom. Those who have been used to bless can be responsible when they are old for leaving serious problems behind them.

Abimelech, Gideon's son from a woman who was not his wife, chose to go with "his mother's brethren" rather than with his own brothers, the sons of Gideon. That brought about conflict for control. When we reject the true King, we will find ourselves ruled by a usurper. Gideon had left the nation in a spiritual vacuum but we do not live in a vacuum. We will either walk "in the flesh or in the Spirit." Gideon's great victory was because he had been obedient to the word of God. His greatest failure was because he did not consistently practice the word of God. We will either go ahead or back because in a spiritual vacuum Satan will rush in to fill that vacuum. Two major factors that influence our lives are our parents and where we live. Abimelech was a product of Gideon's failure. He had no legal rights from his father. Even though he had his father's genes he didn't have his name, nor did he have respect for his father's lifestyle, morality and name. The second influence on Abimelech was the city of Shechem where the spiritual confusion of the nation was obvious to be seen. As a pagan, immoral society they tolerated the most outrageous, murderous act of 69 sons of a national hero being killed in their community. Abimelech is revealed as an utterly ruthless man willing to do anything to gain his ends.

Leadership among God's people is an important responsibility which demands a constant awareness of our need of God. Opposition from within an assembly often finds its origin where there is a vacuum that needs to be filled. Internal conflicts come when one or more wants control. One person may have a desire for a leadership position for the wrong reason. That in turn leads to conflict between brethren that leads to sides being taken by God's people. Some are never satisfied unless everything is done exactly as they want. All it takes is one to step into leadership and they rally around that person with the purpose of making changes that will make our testimony more acceptable to the majority in spite of what the word of God says. The only way to resolve that conflict is to walk in the Spirit.

God had not been given His rightful place even though Gideon refused to be the king of Israel. He adopted a kingly lifestyle and in a way was an unofficial king. Abimelech had learned enough from his father that he openly lobbied to "reign" over the people of God. Because of the failures of Gideon when he was older, there was no difference in the attitude of the children of Israel toward God even though outward strife had ceased. There national life still had a vacuum that was not filled by turning back to God. The family life of Gideon was also a vacuum that opened the way for internal conflict. There are inevitable consequences that follow bad choices whether we are young or old. It is best to start out well even though one feels inadequate; continue well through the pressures of life and end well with little to show for it, and still have a humble spirit; then to start well, gain much and end wealthy and carnal.

The decline of personal standards will bring internal strife. When spirituality is compromised and carnality takes its place, there comes a lust for power and control. Position becomes more important than people. Things take the place of spiritual character. Programs and public perception of our fellowship becomes more important than the will and word of God. A carnal man thinks in a fleshly way, acts in the flesh and enjoys worldly-fleshly companionships. What Gideon started; Abimelech carried farther. Shechem was the place where idol-worship had ended in the past, but where carnality rose up under Abimelech's leadership. Self-exaltation is really self-worship. Devious carnal people had come to live in Shechem. Even the value of a human life had declined to one piece of silver.

Abimelech wanted the position God had reserved for Himself as ruler over His people. At Shechem (crossroads) Abraham had stopped generations earlier and Jacob's sons had killed the men of Shechem. It was at Shechem where Joseph's bones were buried, where Israel renewed its covenant with the Lord and where the nation would divide. No matter how important a place may be for various reasons there is serious danger when ambitions are self-centered instead of God-centered. It happens in assemblies of God's people

where His name has been honored for years. God intends our "religion" to be the attitudes of our hearts, to serve God's people, to be a help to those in need - not to bring oppression. But politics and religion often find themselves together seeking to succeed in a business-like way with profits being measured by numbers who attend meetings rather than by character traits and commitment to the scriptures. True faith is genuine and sincere without ulterior motives.

Because a person comes from a line of people with a spiritual heritage doesn't mean one is spiritual. Carnal men like prominence and want to be known as leaders who can tell others what to do and how to do it. Spiritual men recognize their inability and need of God. Spiritual men will not push for a strong leadership role but will be conscious of being placed in that position by the Holy Spirit. They will often be quiet and unassuming as they fill the role of a true servant among God's people. Carnal men will often push for change that will adapt to public appeal. Abimelech wanted to be the absolute ruler at any cost, and gathered to himself discontented people from a splinter group. Disaffection leads to dissatisfaction.

Jotham had escaped the fate of his 69 brothers and in this way. God chose to use the first parable recorded in the Bible to teach a very important lesson to the people. He pointed out that the whole problem wasn't because of Abimelech but "all the trees," referring to the whole nation of Israel. They chose the "bramble" over the other three fruitful trees. The olive tree represented Israel in testimony, the fig tree Israel politically and the vine tree the fact that Israel was chosen by God and for God. To us the olive tree reminds us of the Holy Spirit filling us for usefulness for God. The Spirit-filled man honors God by leading the saints to God in spirit and in truth. He honors men by being filled with the fruit of the Spirit and doesn't want the idle job of being king. The fig tree man teaches us the value of sweetness and goodness. He may not be a public leader of people but shows humility, grace, uprightness and Christ-likeness. He is a sympathetic and empathetic person who is in fellowship with the Lord and His people. A leader with the characteristics of the vine is one who cheers the hearts of the Lord's people and brings pleasure to God and man. He does what is right and wants to bring good and blessing that expresses the joy of the Lord. The character of a leader often sets the course of those he leads. Good leadership is productive and beneficial.

Abimelech was the opposite of what God intended leaders to be and was like the bramble, a thorn bush. A bramble is always a problem, causes discomfort and unease. The bramble-like person looks for followers, finds fault with others and suggests himself as a leader. Such a person is really worthless and only want honor for themselves and are willing to destroy others to get it. There are those who come among us to exploit and take advantage of unstable situations. There is no reference to the Lord's will and they used the discontent and internal strife of God's people to promote their own agenda. The outcome of internal conflict is the result of great but false promises that bring disillusionment and destruction. Discontented people tend to create splinter groups that promote dissatisfaction. There are quite a few ways people use to influence others that leads to a wrong end.

We may wonder why God doesn't stop evil right away, but He deals with people in His way to bring about righteous judgment that will change people themselves, rather than produce temporary external changes that do not last. We may have to wait for quite a long time before God can bring about a spiritual change. Carnal people often stop at nothing and have to be dealt with by divine intervention as in the case of the death of Abimelech. False promises lead to false freedom which leads to self-destruction. Our only recourse is to "walk in the Spirit" and "make no provision for the flesh."

Judges 9:2. *"Speak, I pray you, in the ears of all the men of Shechem, whether is better for you, either that all the sons of Jerubbaal, which are threescore and ten persons reign over you, or that one reign over you? Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh."*

CONFUSION.

A humble man is used of God -
Through him many are blessed.
He is a father of many but is not satisfied at home -
He strays from God's leading - he sins -
He creates confusion.

He becomes concerned with getting rich -
He is snared by a counterfeit god.
After his death his family is divided -
An idol of mixture between true and false becomes a god.
Confusion reigns.

A divided family is a snare to many - people choose sides
Craftiness wins over fickle hearts.

False words and evil, vain persons go together -
Seventy men of one family die in one place.
Confusion kills.

The result of confusion leads to bitterness -
Bitterness takes deep roots that defile many.
Defiled minds take sides against integrity -
Hundreds die as a result of one man's confusion.
Confusion multiplies.

Plotting increases near and far -
Jealousy eats as does a canker -
Bold, bragging words deceive many -
Communities and cities become enemies.
Confusion spreads.

What started when a humble man became proud;
Divided his family and brought death -
Caused cities to take sides -
Created enemies out of patriots.
Confusion wins.

“It is everywhere, Lord God, in business, in government, in churches, in homes, in families - even in marriages. Confusion seems to be impossible to stop or even slow down. Please, O God, here in this place where we are preaching, and in every place we will go in the weeks to come - keep us from causing any confusion and help us to eliminate any confusion that might already be there. The opinions of men that are not based on Thy Word, really create confusion that hinder Thy work. Help me to be ready, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Judges 10

QUIET BUT UNCHANGED

After the turbulent times of Abimelech were past when he died, two men who seemed to be quite balanced, rose from two different parts of Israel and brought stability to the nation for forty-five years. For twenty-three years, Tola(worm) judged Israel from Shamir (thorn) in Ephraim even though he was from Issachar. Issachar as a tribe preferred peace and quietness to war and so had learned to live comfortably alongside of the world around, even though they were different. As far as doing anything that was dramatic or noteworthy, Tola didn't have a dramatic testimony. But he did work to establish and maintain peace among God's people. He understood the times and what was needed. He must have been a man of wisdom to do what was required for God's people following the terrible time of Abimelech.

A gentle, humble, lowly man with a quiet testimony was the person who was needed to bring peace to the people. He would have been a great contrast to Abimelech. A quiet, consistent man who has a good testimony is of great value among God's people today. Even though Tola moved from Issachar to Ephraim, he had an effective testimony on the touchy Ephraimites. To establish and maintain peace after troublesome times is no easy matter. It takes a steady hand, a quiet but firm voice, and God-given wisdom to keep a balance for twenty-three years. We need men like that who understand the times and are able to keep the direction of a local testimony in a straight, biblical, consistent course.

Apparently, Jair (enlighten), the judge who followed Tola, was an influential man of wealth. Each of his thirty sons had his own donkey (his own car in today's terms). He also had thirty cities under his jurisdiction perhaps through his sons. For twenty-two years he was able to use his influence and with the support of his sons, maintained stability. Between these two judges, one from the west of Jordan and one from the east of Jordan, there was a stability and peace for forty-five years. In spite of the peaceful times, the hearts of the children of Israel were not changed. The outward lifestyle was apparently the way it should be, but then, as now, when the heart is not changed, all it takes is changing social practices and changing times, and God's people follow the crowd.

When Tola and Jair died evil was still in the hearts of the Israelites. We may not do anything worthy of note in our lives, but I would like to in some way affect the hearts of people in the sphere of our influence. The people of God went farther away in every cycle of departure. There were now seven different false gods they followed. Christendom is a false god that has hindered the Lord's people for generations. But now there are many more idols that attract. Materialism, pleasure, changing laws, technology, acceptance and tolerance of evil have joined Christendom and the Lord's people chase after these as much or more than the will and word of God. We will never see the seriousness of apostasy until we see the seriousness of sin. The

stupidity of sin is spiritual insanity. People will continue in sin until there is nowhere else to go. Then they turn to God for help in desperation. The apostasy of Abimelech and the quiet leadership of Tola and Jair didn't bring Israel back to God.

When the Philistines to the west and the Ammonites to the east brought Israel into a crushing bitter slavery for eighteen years, the Israelites finally cried out to God. Even though Ammon and Moab were distant relatives, that didn't make them merciful. In their cries of remorse and regret to God, there was no evidence of repentance. So, the Lord's reply to their cries was to go to the things they had worshipped for their relief. People today will trust in their riches, their relationships, their religion for relief from the bondage of sin. But wealthy rehabilitation clinics, self-help classes, therapy sessions and counselors do not deal with the fundamental problem of sin.

"We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please, rescue us now," indicated repentance instead of regret. Regret is an emotional response to a difficulty. Remorse for wrong is a far-cry from the admission of guilt personally. Repentance changes the mind, will and direction. The result of repentance is not only an admission of guilt, but a reordering of life and a complete turn-around to go the opposite direction. When Christians realize the seriousness of sin and deal with it, the change is not a superficial response to regret. Discipline is necessary, either self-discipline or discipline imposed by others until we get to the end of ourselves. Then we will find that God, in love, mercy and grace works in a just way to bring about the blessing we seek.

Judges 10:15. *"And the children of Israel said unto the Lord, 'We have sinned: do Thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto Thee; deliver us only, we pray Thee this day.'"*

THEY NEVER LEARN.

For some unknown reason I cannot fully understand -
There is a strange quirk in sinful fallen man.
Each generation resists lessons the former one learned -
And goes back to - and beyond - the wages of sin they earned,
Adding to their sins a whole lot of their own
Refusing to act on the consequences shown
To them by those generations before decimated by sin
And the new one has to go back and experience again
What they could've avoided if only they'd listened
To those who learned by hard experience in their generation.
God does not ignore and will not overlook
The willing departure from truth and the God they forsook
To be like the world around thinking their way is more fun -
Giving up their integrity, worship - even daughters and sons
To worship what is evil, licentious and bad,
Instead of what is holy, thinking they will be sad
If they can't do what they want with no restrictions at all,
Not considering the consequences and how far down they'll fall,
When the fun times are past and reality sets in,
And they have to pay over and over the wages of sin
They earned because they wouldn't listen or give attention
To what God said, and what was learned by the earlier generation.
Stop what you are doing! Do not take another step!
Learn what you sow is what you are going to get -
Far more than you sowed the results surely will be,
Because you wouldn't listen and learn from past history.

"O God, are we never going to learn that history repeats itself unless we pay attention to Thee and Thy Word? How can we break this tight cycle of repetitive sinning that affects us in our nation and even personal lives? I am thankful for the Holy Spirit that blows the whistle on us when we are wrong; for the Word of God that tells us what is right; and love for Christ and Thee that motivates me to want to not go the wrong way in life. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 11

GRACE, FAITH AND THE LAW

When the Lord's people have gotten so far away from God that they look for "what man is he," then the Lord acts in His own way to bring them back to Him. God used a castaway, Jephthah, who by nature was a man with a grudge. Spiritually, he was a man who knew the Lord wanted to serve the Lord and wanted to fight for the Lord. His brethren put him out, not just because of a scripture (10 generations for an illegitimate child) or a scriptural principle (Abraham and Ishmael), but for covetousness ("thou shalt not inherit..."). Legality

quotes scripture, legality boasts of divine principles but it comes from a hardened heart, not from grace or a gracious heart. A person's birth and worth are measured by God, not by what people think of him. In a way Jephthah was alone except for God's grace. He was not wanted by those who were legalists and would be able to give a scripture reference for their rejection of him. The man God used, nobody else wanted. There is no special mold we must fit; no stereotype. Jephthah was not a prisoner of his past as far as God was concerned. God can use the most unusable for His glory.

Some suffering we may be called upon to go through is the result of the decisions of others, but God can use us in spite of the circumstances over which we have no control. If we don't consider our need of God personally, it is possible we will look to men instead for affirmation. We may create a problem ourselves if we let prejudices of any kind to control us. At the same time, we may be a solution to a problem if we see people as God see them.

Jephthah, the man God used was a bandit chief living in Tob, an area of conflict. He was a "Robin Hood" kind of character. During that time, he learned military warfare and strategy. God was able to use what he learned during this time. Our life before conversion may have taught us some experiences God can use. The broken fragments of life may have made us a victim for some reason, but how I act and react is my choice, not the result of the way others have acted. By God's grace shown to us, we can overcome the attitude and actions of others and live by faith ourselves. That choice is up to me. God can use any person He chooses in spite of character defects in ourselves. Grace takes us above and beyond the law. Legal men may be covetous, judgmental and despise and reject us, but that does not hinder God from working through the person He appoints for a task.

Jephthah had learned leadership when he made "worthless men" into an effective force. Jephthah had learned to know God. He obviously had some misconceptions about God but used the name of God more than any other person in the book of Judges. He was committed to God even though his knowledge of God was not deep but real. God, in love allows discipline and suffering to bring about restoration and fellowship with Him. Too often we have a vindictive spirit against those who have created problems for us. Even though Jephthah knew the Lord, self-love and a desire for preeminence was still a motivating factor in his heart. He did not have a forgiving spirit and would not let go of the past rejection he had experienced. What we say with our lips may not be what we mean in our hearts. When that is the case, we are as legalistic as our covetous brethren only in a different way for a different reason. It is not difficult to hide an ulterior motive behind a scriptural argument.

The man God used came from being an outlaw or at least a brigand to being a leader. Jephthah wanted victory over the enemy, but he also wanted headship over his brethren. He wanted them to "eat humble pie." For that reason, he would take the leadership and use the skills he had learned when he led outcast men. He had not forgotten nor forgiven his brothers for the treatment he had received from them, and so insisted on them constraining him to lead them. He didn't apply for leadership but God put him there. He was living his life conscious of God's presence. Love for God and love for the people of God is how the Holy Spirit raises up a person to guide. Leadership by constraint of men, persuasion and man's authority leads to strange leadership practices.

Even though a person may have a strong personality and be a person of strong convictions, that is not always a good thing when called upon to lead the Lord's people. A person can be an out-and-out witness in Gospel work and can loudly condemn sin in the ungodly, but if they act that way toward the saints, they are not a Spirit-led leader. Jephthah tried negotiating with the enemy to find out what they wanted from the Lord's people. There are those who want us to "cross-pollinate" in order to live more comfortably in this world of sin. The man God used tried to be diplomatic and he confronted the Ammonites with the truth. He had a firm grasp of the truth of Israel's history. There are times when it is important to check your history; check your theology (God gave us the land); check your logic (for 300 years you've done nothing to recapture the land). He didn't argue probability or dispute possibility; he stood firmly on that fact. We must tell the world the facts of Jesus Christ; of the Gospel - not experiences or feelings. When conflicts, compromises or any manipulation by men is tried, we must remember, "The Lord, the Judge" is the One who has the final word. In dealing with serious matters we must rely on facts, not emotions. "God gave them into his hand." When the enemy wouldn't listen to truth, the time came to act. "The Spirit of the Lord came...." and God used Jephthah to give victory. God can take a man from the scrapheap and use him.

Unfortunately, Jephthah, in spite of his faith was Ignorant of God's Person. He tried to make a deal with God. His sincerity was not with the understanding of faith. He believed God could be bribed; therefore, had a false view of God. He should have known God does not delight in what hurts. He believed God might abandon him partway through the battle therefore he had a false view of God. He had tried political

persuasion with the enemy and thought he had to persuade God to act on his behalf. He was ignorant of God's Word. Zeal without truth is dangerous. He was committed before God legally (legalist) but because he was ignorant of God's word (Lev.27) he didn't know a person's life could be redeemed by a certain amount of money. If he had known God's word or if someone had told him God's word, his daughter wouldn't have died. Ignorance breeds ignorance. The rash act in making the vow he made was not an act of faith but of doubt. We should remember a rash act or statement on my part may be more keenly felt by others than by me. We may pass judgment on others and later on have to eat our own words. A legal person may experience grace himself, and act in faith, but the law a hard-hearted person stands by, may hurt him most in the end.

Judges 11:31. *"Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."*

IMPETUOSITY.

Not everyone has as good a start as some others -
There are times when children suffer from the sins of their father,
And the follow up to that is a sense of rejection -
That is not easily dealt with even after salvation.

God is not limited to only those of a good name,
And His work is not done only by people of fame.
He can use who He chooses no matter their past -
To do a work for Him when they on Him faith cast.

Each person is different of that there is no doubt.
Some people are quiet and others often lead with their mouth.
They say things to quickly, and really mean what they say -
Not realizing when they do there are consequences to pay.

Impetuosity can be dramatic and make people sit up and listen -
With a loud tone of voice or tears in eyes that glisten -
But when the heat of the moment has come and then gone,
And reality sets in - we learn impetuosity can be wrong.

It is hard to learn when one is naturally like this
That decisions made on the spur of the moment aren't really best.
Faith is admirable and necessary when placed
In the One who can't fail and acts with power and grace.

It is a lesson to me when I read of impetuous decisions,
To make sure I have God's sanction before taking action -
Because a lot is at stake - much more than acts of the moment -
When I make a rash statement, it will want true fulfillment.

"I know I have been guilty, Father, of acting in haste and sometimes making a statement that has not been thought completely through. I am thankful as I have been getting older, that I have learned the value of waiting on Thee, and waiting much longer that I have in the past. Even now I am asking Thee to give me the sense of waiting longer than I am prone to for clear guidance before taking an action. I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 12

TOUCHY PEOPLE

It is to be expected when there are times of victory that joy, encouragement and edification would be the result as the Lord's people share in good fellowship the results of divine work done for us and through us. Unfortunately, there are those who find reason to be critical and complain even in times of great blessing. By their very nature, complaints and criticisms are destructive and divisive. The results at best are pettiness and quarreling instead of joy. Usually the results go farther than that to a shattered unity and unhappiness that divides God's people and creates a problem from which comes the darkness of "war" between brethren.

The touchy Ephraimites were ignorant of their personal responsibility. Touchy people are like this. They let others do the work and they criticize or condemn what the others do. The Ephraimites were small in number but knew what they considered were their rights. They seemed to be ready and willing to fight the enemies of the Lord's people after the battle was over. They wanted to share the glory and benefits after the pain and hard work was done. Anger and jealousy led to arrogant and aggressive behavior. Petulant and touchy

people seem to have a lot to say in a confrontational and malicious way. Such people seem to think we should pay attention to them just because they holler and make a lot of noise. Those who have grace usually seek to pacify and calm them down seeking peace instead of pettiness among brethren.

Apparently Jephthah had asked for the help of the Ephraimites in the serious situation that the Gileadites were having with the invaders from Ammon, but while the Ephraimites were waiting to see the outcome, or were discussing what they would do, the men of Gilead went ahead and did what needed to be done under divine direction. But when the men of Ephraim came with their touchy threatening, the response of Jephthah and the men of Gilead was much different than that of Gideon who had appeased those touchy people before. Ephraim came threatening and armed to make war with their brethren, and found no tolerance at all with their taunts, threats, touchy and belligerent behavior. They found their brethren not willing at all to take the insulting words and jealousy. To their total lack of wisdom, they found they were put to the sword and 42,000 men of Ephraim died as a result.

The place where unity was most common, the crossings of the Jordan River, was the place where the disaster was the greatest. Assemblies of God's people should be a united place where the catalyst of our common faith is the strongest, but it can also be the place of our greatest defeat. No one wins when there is conflict between brethren. Lack of wisdom, jealousy, touchiness and aggressive behavior on one side, will bring bitterness, anger and malicious retribution on the other side. There is something terribly sad about believers who are against each other. Healing never completely takes place and barriers are there placed by legalistic attitudes on both sides that are passed on from one generation to the next.

Ignorance due to legalism is dangerous. The battle with Ephraim was not Jephthah's fault but he showed no grace. He treated his brothers as enemies. Revenge against the touchy people was wrong also and the rash actions of a hard-hearted legalistic man brought death, disgrace and tragedy. Bitter words lead to bitter actions and bitter results. There are unreasonable men who will make a man "an offender for a word," or as in the case of the men of Gilead with the Ephraimites, and offender for a letter in a word. Nobody really wins in such situations as this.

Jephthah was a decisive, skilled, articulate, strong man of faith in the Lord, but he could also harbor bitterness and act rashly without considering the lasting effect his actions would leave on those who followed him. There needs to be a balanced attitude on both sides when there are differences between brethren. Making threats and ultimatums indicate a lack of grace and spiritual discernment. Ignorance of God's will and ways because of a legalistic attitude leads to deadly results and disaster. Even in spite of the terrible events, for six years Jephthah was able to judge Israel and keep order with his legal ways of authority.

Three times in this chapter we read "after him," so that the succession of four judges gave Israel freedom from the oppression of their enemies for thirty-one years, and a measure of stability prevailed. Ibzan of Bethlehem was probably a man of wealth and widespread influence through his sons and daughters who had connections through their marriages. For the seven years of his judgeship there was no recorded times of tension, so he probably was able to maintain a consistent testimony with God's people for those years. Elon (strength) seems to have been a quiet man of character as his name suggests and enabled there to be ten more years of consistent peace and testimony. Abdon may have remembered the twenty-three years Tola lived among the Ephraimites, and who had thirty sons who each had a donkey of their own. He too was a man of wealth and influence who provided personal and peaceful (donkeys, not horses) means of transportation for his own forty sons and thirty nephews. He was able to keep the peace and unity of Israel for another eight years. Even the Amalekites who lived there did not seem to be a problem as long as Abdon was the judge. The wealth and influence of a quiet man may not always be appreciated at the time, but it did keep order among the Lord's people. Such leaders are very valuable to us even though they may not have done mighty exploits.

Judges 12:3. *"And when I saw that ye delivered me not, I put my life in my hands, and passed over against the children of Ammon, and the Lord delivered them into my hand: wherefore are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me?"*

CONTROVERSY.

Complacency can lead to laziness
Laziness can lead to ease
Ease can lead to observation
Observation refuses to seize
A moment of time when opportunity comes -
And others win victories when you are safe at home.

Lack of responsibility leads to mistrust

Mistrust quickly leads to doubt
Doubt can lead to false charges and lies
False charges and lies can stop a good work -
God had begun by giving a great victory
Yet between brothers it led to great controversy.

Two are at fault, though one first complained
He was out of the loop - just overlooked.
The second wasn't at fault, but he could have acted
In grace rather than the path of vengeance he took -
For grace can restore when controversy raises its head,
And many should have lived who now are dead.

Differences of opinions are often stated to me -
Some believe differently about little things.
It is not necessary that we all agree
Avoid the controversy insignificant things bring.
When a truth or sound doctrine begins to be challenged -
Then stand up and be counted, for God's truth be valiant.

“O God, I fear those “little foxes that spoil the vine.” Far too often there have been problems arise over little things and the big things have been ignored. Give me wisdom to know the difference, and the grace to act in Christ-likeness when issues arise that need to be addressed. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Judges 13

TRAGIC SILENCE

The apathy of the Israelites after forty years of domination by the Philistines is a testimony as to how far the people of God can go when they are not a separated people. The silence of Israel, is an eloquent testimony to their apathy. There was no crying out to God for a deliverer or a judge; not once. They didn't realize their danger of losing their identity as the people of the Lord completely. In the perilous times of the last days, there is little evidence of the awareness of sin among the people of God and little interest in the wonder of the grace of God towards us. Israel at their lowest state had gotten used to servitude to the Philistines and didn't turn in repentance to God as they had before. Because there was no national repentance, there was no national deliverance. There is a principle that we should never forget: "Whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Hard hearts reap hard consequences. If we are not careful and keep in fellowship with God, we too can get used to sin and accept the assimilation of God's people into the culture of the religious and social world. It started with trade because of the worldly strength of the Philistines and then moved further into intermarriage and cultural bondage. Christendom has a strong appeal to carnal believers who want to be like those around us. Materialism, pleasure, and worldly success is soon followed by religious and personal ties to that which is not of God.

Philistine assimilation and Israeli apathy were the key to God's purposes through Samson. Zorah (hornet's nest) was where God first connected with Manoah's wife. The tribe of Dan was noted for treachery against their brethren. It was prophesied about Dan that he would be like a serpent lying in wait to poison others. The "hornet's nest" is typical of satanic influence and attacks that come against God's people. Manoah's name means "rest," but not the rest of peace but of lethargy, indifference, carelessness and apathy. Manoah's wife reminds us that God uses "the weak things to confound the mighty." His strength "is made perfect in weakness," so she was the one to which "the angel of the Lord," the Lord Jesus Himself (Wonderful) came to bring the message of hope. To the smallest tribe that was basically unsuccessful and barren, God came. He made His connection with a faithful couple, who in spite of weakness and lethargy, still had the fear of God about them. Twenty-first century Christians face the same danger of assimilation of being slowly squeezed into the mold of the world around us. We must commit ourselves to the word and will of God no matter what the religions of the world, or "Christian churches" do to make themselves acceptable to "the Philistines."

So the Philistines who had the ability to smelt iron and make iron weapons, used the two most effective weapons of trade and intermarriage. The Philistines had a strong hold on the Israelites and were choking them to death by compromise and assimilation. Israel was not enslaved by military dominance but by spiritual and cultural seduction. The Lord in grace, raised up a for the times to begin a work of recovery for His people. His unique birth was based on a promise from God. His parents were a godly couple even though they were living among apostates. They also knew the heartbreak of being childless. When the Lord came to Manoah's wife, Manoah did not doubt her. The next message was the same but God told them about Himself. "The angel of the Lord" (the Lord Jesus Christ); My name is "Wonderful" - "God." Samson

was born by God's miraculous intervention and his birth was announced by the Lord God. Isaac was the only other in scripture, apart from the Lord Himself, who had this announcement.

His unique lifestyle was dictated by God He was to be a Nazarite, "to set apart, to separate," separated by God, to God by the Nazarite vow. In the nation the Nazarite vow was voluntary; motivated by love and faith; was for a purpose in which one was dedicated to the Lord; separated to the Lord and devoted to the Lord. It was symbolic: the Nazarite was to abstain from fruit of the vine (luxurious living); not cut his hair (public sign); avoid contact with dead bodies (preeminence of God in his life). The Nazarite vow was temporary when it was entered upon voluntarily. Samson's lifetime separation as a Nazarite was commanded by God. God was not looking for a national liberator but an individual who would be separated to Him. He would be fighting personal battles. The other judges led a repentant people against the enemy, but Samson never had one man join with him. He was the one man who realized a person or nation could not compromise and remain free to serve God. The Israelites were losing their identity but were so ignorant of what was going on, that when God sent Samson, they were ready to hand him over to death rather than upset the Philistines.

Even though the Philistines came from Egypt, they came a different way than the children of Israel. They never had the Red Sea experience. Many people claim their place in the promised land today without ever having experienced the fact that Christ died for me personally. Philistines never crossed the Jordan River to get into the land. Many don't understand what it means that I died with Christ and am separate from the world. It is quite easy for some of God's people today to accept what passes for Christianity but is not the reality of new life in Christ. Manoah and his wife knew the value of the burnt offering and the meal offering, so with honor, respect and faith - worshipped the One who came with the promise. When the promise was fulfilled, they taught what they were told to teach, "he shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb to the day of his death."

The times in which Samson lived called for the separation of the man. His ministry was going to be a unique ministry. He shall "begin" to deliver Israel from the Philistines. The work he started he was not going to complete. The deliverance the people of God needed was total defeat but they gained only partial victory in the twenty years Samson judged Israel. The Spirit of God gave him great personal strength to fight great personal battles. We are taught not only about the terrible consequences of sin through the story of Samson, but also of the blessings of grace. Samson was mainly a failure but the failures are very instructive. We learn the value of separation which at first seems like isolation but has the purpose of blessing behind it, and we learn about the dangers of assimilation on the other hand, and how far it can take us away from God.

God has a purpose in teaching us about the man, Samson. Lessons to be learned by us confront us with great truths about separation. Separation is a positive dedication to the Lord Jesus Christ. Samson was separated from certain things but mainly he was separated unto the Lord. Samson's separation turned out to be negative. By position he was separated to the will of God but in his heart he was not. His separation was formal and legalistic. Spirituality isn't dictated by what we do not do. Separation to Christ and for Christ is positive and joy-filled. Our needed strength for living for the Lord comes from separation from the world and those believers who live like the world. All around Samson were Israelites who never lifted a finger against the Philistines. They had been assimilated, compromised and integrated into the culture around them. God does not call us to isolation, but equally does not call us to be like the world. Separation is accompanied by enablement to live as God intends. God equipped Samson to live a separated life and similarly gives us the Spirit to enable us to live distinctively for Him in the world. The pattern for separation is the Lord Jesus Christ. (Jn.17:15-17). It is His intention that we live in the world for Him. The Lord spent time with sinners and sought out and ministered to sinners. He did not do what they did. He was separated in character. He was distinct in His life but He connected with them to bless them. That is what we should be doing in this world.

Judges 13:5. *"For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines."*

A START.

A nation of people - blessed, but turning away from God
Going further away in heart gradually - then turning deliberately
To do evil - in full view of the Lord who chose them for Himself -
Who removes His protection - and a whole generation is captives.

A husband and wife - godly in spite of all going on around them
Not strangers to heartache - trusting the Lord; not doubting each other
Chosen by the Lord - appointed by Him to train a miracle child
A son to be used of the Lord to make a start - hope to a new generation.

A Heavenly Visitor with a message of hope to those living in a dark day
A start is to be made to bring deliverance to the captives
His countenance is like that of God Himself - creating fear because of holiness
His name is "Secret" (Wonderful) - God has visited His people.

A boy-child has been born of a promise made by God Himself
A heritage from the Lord is given with a purpose to fulfill - a calling
He is going to make a start on a work that only God can do
A nation is being awakened to the power of God - back from evil.

His life-style was to be different, set apart from that of others, separate.
His name is "Samson", serving like the sun - a light for his generation
He was called to a life-time of separation - different in looks, long hair
Different in food and drink, no wine, no luxurious living - God was first.

He had a good start, like so many others - believing father and a believing mother
Training for God was in place each day, careful in food and careful in play
God was preeminent in every decision, the parents obeyed the heavenly vision
He had a good start when he was at home - hopefully he will keep on in the days to come
BUT....

"We sometimes have high expectations, Father, when a new opportunity arises to make changes that are positive and good. I have been let down and I am sure I have let others down. But I am asking for wisdom and grace to now just make a start on the things that are wanting, but to be available to Thee to bring things along to a proper conclusion. I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 14

POTENTIAL VS REALITY

Samson had everything in his favor at home. His background was strong because he had two faithful parents and had a good start with the promises of God to support him. There are obligations that go along with blessings. "To whom much is given, much is required." What we do with what God gives us is really up to us. With all of our privileges, if we are not careful, we can find ourselves squandering all God has given us. We can live way below our potential if we do not discipline ourselves and commit ourselves to the Lord unreservedly. Godly parents and a godly home life do not guarantee godly children or a godly life. Many Christians children waste their potential because they are attracted to a worldly "Philistine" life.

Samson had great potential for blessing for Israel, which was controlled by the Philistines. But Israel was compromised by intermarriage and cultural integration. The people were being assimilated into the ways of the Philistines. When the Lord's people live complacent and apathetic lives, we need to take care that we don't leave the wrong impression on our children. If they think we are rejecting divine authority, they will be inclined to reject ours. Parents who practice self discipline and family discipline may find that to be practiced by their children - at least to a certain extent. Believing parents don't guarantee believing children. Under God, Samson had great potential. He had a godly home life. He had a miraculous birth. He had a unique life-style. He had a special ministry of the Holy Spirit who mightily came upon him to kill the young lion and later thirty men were defeated. God has given us great resources: the new birth, the Holy Spirit, God Himself in Christ.

However, we cannot make our children be who they are not. For some reason Samson was controlled by his passions and was the kind of person who did what he wanted in spite of his godly parents. One person described Samson's flaw with the words, "He was a he-man with a she weakness." He allowed the betrayal of his call and direct disobedience to the Word of God. He rejected authority - of God's word and of his parents. He was "doing what was right in his own eyes." This is the same with many today. He refused to practice self-discipline; he was controlled by his passions; he was satisfied with ritual obedience (legalist at heart) but lived in license. If I do not discipline my life, I quickly lose my power. Almost anything can begin to take the place of the Lord. Even things that are good and beautiful in their own place can be the cause of great damage. Self-discipline is submitting to the will and timing of God.

We may warn and instruct our young people as to the fact that "the world, the flesh and the devil" are our enemies, and they may still ignore what we teach. The Philistines were Israel's greatest enemies and yet Samson was attracted to them and their lifestyle. Christendom has gone so far that even real believers are attracted to the present-day forms of religion as long as there is entertainment and pleasure to go along with it. But God, by authority and power in His divine providence works to bring about His purposes. Samson

had good parents, great strength and yet he wasted his potential greatness. Great strength in one area of life doesn't make up for great weakness in other areas. Samson never got what he wanted but the greater tragedy was he never became the man God wanted. He used his special gifts for his own selfish purposes.

He had everything in his favor at home but didn't appreciate the godliness that would have kept him from failure. Despite Samson's disobedience, God was still going to carry out His purpose. We are responsible for our failures and cannot excuse sin, but in God's providence, His purposes will be carried out. Samson's sin started him on a downward path his parents would have nothing to do with. Once the blessings that have come to us from the cross-work of Christ lose their attraction for us, then we are getting away from God and the world claims our attention. The four downward steps in Samson's spiritual journey began with the violation of his vow. Then there was contact with a dead carcass. Perhaps he was consciously guilty at the drunken party because as one who had the vow of the Nazarite on him, he was not to drink strong drink. The riddle he gave was not the proposal of a Spirit-filled man. That went farther to the downfall of compromise. There were two bitter lessons he had to learn. When you marry a woman you marry her relatives, and it is hard to resist the tears of a woman. He lost his honor, his bet, and his wife. He was a great contrast from the Nazarite - Samuel who changed the course of the nation.

Eight times in the account of Samson's life as recorded in the book of Judges we read of "going down." He went down first and then saw what he wanted. When we first remove from the place God has placed us and from the people of God, then our affections are in danger of being attracted to the wrong person and wrong objectives. The whole process of departure doesn't happen in an instant. The tribe of Dan had failed to take their inheritance in the valley and so the Philistines claimed both it and the city of Timnath. One failure leads to another. The first downward journey of Samson was to that city and he saw what he wanted because it appealed to the "lust of the flesh." He first "saw her," then "Talked with her," and "she pleased him." The first thing to go when we get away from God is our spiritual eyesight. Then our character suffers and our freedom goes.

The closer Samson got to the Philistines the farther away he got from his godly parents. He demanded of them, "get her for me." He found his pleasure in her instead of what was righteous. When we forget who the enemy is, then we start fraternizing with the world, start catering to the flesh and find ourselves under attack by the devil who comes as a roaring lion. One thing follows another and we find ourselves where we shouldn't be, doing things we shouldn't do, and getting involved in that which is none of our business. Then we are defiled, and because we are defiled that makes a difference in our fellowship with God and His people. That difference creates a division and the division produces deception. However, we need to remember that failures and weakness does not stop God from working His will.

On two occasions in this chapter we read that "the Spirit of the Lord" came upon Samson. In spite of his failures and wrong view of things, and the Nazarite vow that was binding on him for life, the Lord was in control. "It was of the Lord" in that God allowed the beginning of deliverance for Israel. He was down by the vineyards where he was close to that which was forbidden to him. While he was there the young lion came out against him which he killed with his hands. Later he touched the dead carcass which he should not have done. And yet, in spite of his faithlessness on those occasions of failure, God was faithful to him. A guilty conscience and shame, causes us to hide those things that are wrong. In that kind of a setting we may charge others with being deceitful and at the same time are deceitful ourselves.

So-called Christianity can adapt a non-confrontational approach to the Gospel and even fundamental doctrines until it realizes it cannot win the battle of the mind for the souls of people. When God is working, He can use the basest of men and the darkest of circumstances to produce the results His sovereign will has designed. A woman in Timnath, a harlot in Gaza and a woman in the valley of Sorek cannot stop the work of God - even when they use tears to bring about the designs of evil against a child of God.

The riddle, the reward and the threat were all used by the Lord to begin to deliver the children of Israel. There are downward steps in the spiritual journey that begins with carelessness on the part of one who comes near the border of the world. The men of Ashkelon were the first fatalities in the Lord's plan to set His people free. This world under its "god" is never in favor with being compatible with godly people who follow the scriptures, serve God and want to please Him with all their hearts. It may take on a pleasing cloak to cover dark designs, but God knows what we do not know.

Judges 14:6. *"And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand: but he told not his father or his mother what he had done."*

WASTED POTENTIAL.

Godly parents watching with ever saddening eyes
A son: miraculous in his birth - lengthening hair of separation
Obvious strength given by the Spirit of God to begin the deliverance of Israel
But...
A godly home doesn't guarantee a godly son
Believing parents who had dealings with God don't guarantee a believing son
A special ministry given by the Spirit of God and empowerment by the Spirit of God
Has great potential.

A great flaw in character becomes evident
A weakness for women overcomes a call from God
A he-man with a she-weakness is a sure sign of personal disaster
But...
The Spirit of God still came upon him
His strength was not abated and he still had divine power
God was still able and willing to use him to begin to deliver His people
The potential is still there.

He disobeyed the Word of God
He rejected divine authority for selfish reasons
He did what was right in his own eyes controlled by his passions
But...
He could have practiced self-discipline
He did experience power over animals and men
He did learn that God can take away what a person selfishly wants
And he wasted his potential.

We are responsible for our failures
We cannot blame others, or circumstances, or God
We can practice self-discipline and know God's power in it
But...
We have choices to make
We know God has purposes to fulfill in us
We know God is able to recover a wayward child to the path of righteousness
We do not have to waste our potential.

"I have been blessed above many Father God, with parents who knew and loved Thee, with the scriptures of truth taught early to me, with an assembly life that was biblical, with opportunities to be involved in divine things. May I never underestimate the worth of blessings of this sort. They help keep from wasted potential. I give thanks in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 15

REVENGE OR JUSTICE

When Samson returned to his wife in Timnath, he found she had been given to another and he began to take personal revenge. "This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines." He began taking seriously the call of God in his life and took action to strike at the Philistines at the source of their life - their food source. By setting the fields, vineyards and orchards on fire, he certainly got the attention of the enemy and God used him to begin deliverance for Israel. However, violence begets violence. If we choose sin there will always be consequences. Three lessons in verse 10 - 12 regarding the consequences of compromise are first, the people of God can become accommodated to the status quo and will accept that as normal if it is continued. Secondly, compromise is more comfortable than commitment to the call of God. Complacency will put up with compromise under the excuse of being tolerant of people's differences. Third, compromisers have no time for the committed. Those who are committed to the Lord and to obedience to the word of God are an embarrassment to those who are willing to compromise the truth of God.

By its very nature revenge begins a cycle of retribution and retaliation that can only be broken by forgiveness. The attraction of a form of godliness is only outward. Samson burned product but the Philistine enemies burned people. Samson's retaliation went further as he attacked those who had burned his wife and her father. Going down further and staying on the rock Etam (place of wild beasts) he placed himself in Judah. The people of Judah were ignored by the enemy because, then as now, compromisers are no threat. The people were doing the enemy's work for them. If we are not positively for the Lord, we can become a hindrance to the cause of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is possible for us to lose sight of the true nature of sin and sinners. One may be at the pinnacle of life and have experienced great accomplishments, but that great

power can be defeated by the lack of self-discipline. The Philistines were a much greater problem than the girl. When sin is allowed to continue it has consequences that have a much greater effect than we could have ever expected.

The complacent people of Judah were afraid of both the Philistines who were fundamentally opposed to them even though they had accommodated with them enough that they could co-exist, and Samson, who even though he was not a good example of one who followed the Lord, was a man of faith. The Philistines met with no resistance from the men of Judah. Judah had accommodated to the way things were. They were defeated and degraded by compromise so they were ignored as a threat of any kind, and actually did the work of capturing Samson for the enemy. In a way this whole scene is an example of Samson's faith. This goes beyond personal revenge to a display of Samson's faith and God's power. His faith shines the brighter against the background of Israel's compromise. His faith is seen in three ways. First, his treatment of the Jews. He was gentle with them even, though they were mistreating him so badly. He submitted to being bound with two cords by the 3000 Jews. Also, in his approach to the enemy. They shouted against him and he responded with calm courage. He knew his God and that gave him strength. Third, His victory of faith. The Holy Spirit came upon him in power; a fresh jawbone with all its teeth in it was there; and his trust was in God.

In spite of his unfaithfulness to his calling and Nazariteship, God was faithful to him and by the power of the Spirit of God upon him, he won a victory in which 1000 of the enemy was slain, and water miraculously came from God to quench his thirst. Samson took credit for what happened even though he knew his strength was from God and had faith in God to give the victory. We are vulnerable in times of victory because self-pity may overtake us, especially if we feel others have let us down. It is not unusual for depression to come upon us and we feel drained emotionally. When we are that vulnerable position after a victory, we need to give God all the glory for the victory and the accomplishments that follow. We are safeguarded when all our attitudes, actions and words are focused on God. Samson could be victorious when he trusted God.

Apparently, this victory gave Israel 20 years of stability even though Israel was under Philistine dominance. In this prayer of Samson's, the only recorded one in his life prior to his death prayer, he knew his power was due to his fellowship with God. He knew he was God's servant. He knew the Lord had called him to deal with the enemy. When we understand our position before God, this affects our practice. Victory comes on the basis of our position in Christ. Victory often makes us vulnerable to defeat. We lose fellowship with Christ. Let-down often follows emotional experiences. How gracious and full of compassion is God's answer. He supplied water in a way Samson knew it was from Him. God does answer prayer today the same as then. He established Samson's judgeship for twenty years. Because he trusted God, Israel followed his leadership. Even in a nation committed to the status quo, Samson was committed to freedom under God. Judah had decided to co-exist with the enemy and side with them against God's deliverer, an obvious act of disloyalty when they bound him. He had gone where the Philistines gathered, he broke the bonds and used part of a dead carcass to defeat the foe. Even though he threw away the jawbone he focused attention on himself but then faced his dependence on God for water.

Some lessons we can learn from the past are that no matter who we are or what we do, we need the Lord. In our weakness and dependence, we need the Lord. When we have been victorious in some way, we must be sure to give God ALL THE GLORY. No matter who or what others think about us, we are the Lord's servant. We cannot expect everyone with whom we have dealings to be the same, there are differences in people. When all is said and done, to the best of our ability, we need to admit to ourselves our need and inability to accomplish anything without the strength of our God. In times of danger, difficulty and victory, we are in great need of being in fellowship with the Lord.

Judges 15:11. *"Then three thousand men of Judah went to the top of the rock Etam, and said to Samson, 'Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us? What is this that thou hast done unto us?' And he said unto them, 'As they did unto me, so have I done unto them.'"*

DOWNWARD STEPS.

A vow was made but was not kept - God keeps track of this
When terms are made but they aren't met - consequences you cannot miss.

A drunken party where you should never be - can only go from bad to worse
Things happen there for all to see - self-control lost in the noise.

Compromise may seem best at first - until the end result is seen
To go back after the bubble has burst - you have lost the good that might have been.

Self-respect and honor have value - worth much more than you may have thought
When they are lost, victory is hollow - you have to live with what sin has bought.

For greed and lust, you can lose a lot - Samson lost his wife for pride
It is possible to never gain what you lost - for pride many a man has died.

Revenge is like a monster of old - when we indulge it its awful claim
Scary to look at and out of control - it will raise its vicious head again.

Revenge never makes forgiveness possible - although it claims it will bring satisfaction
It moves in a cycle that is unstoppable - is deceptive because it repeats its action.

Self-pity is like a plant with poisoned fruit - if I feed on its fruit, I will always be ill
It brings soul-sickness along with it - and the results of self-pity will be with me still.

"I have learned, O God, that one thing always leads to another - whether bad or good. May I always keep the focus of my life on Thee and Thy ways lest I start a downward course that will leave me without a useful and meaningful Christian life. May I always look at the difficulties and the blessings from Thy viewpoint so that I don't get quickly sidetracked by the little things that jump up to claim my attention. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 16

NOT DONE YET

There were five major cities of the Philistines, each one with a ruler who wanted to maintain the prosperity they had even at the expense of others. These rich powerful men wanted to be rid of Samson, so when he went to Gaza to a harlot, the time was ripe, they thought, to capture him. We may think a matter is acceptable because "everyone does it" but there is always a high price to pay for sin, no matter what the issue is. "When lust is conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." There are always consequences for any action we may take. For those things that are good and done for God's glory, or for those that are done for the pleasures of sin, there are good or bad consequences.

Samson's lust, and the gates of Gaza may have seemed to be a done deal and a personal victory at the time, but what he sowed in Gaza he reaped in the valley of Sorek. A person can be involved in a spiritual work for the Lord for twenty years, and still fall into sin. It is possible to get out of fellowship with God when we are engaged in spiritual service. The deception of temptation cannot be completely avoided. Temptation is not sin - yielding to it is. Samson did not fail because the temptation was too strong or because it was inescapable. He failed because he trifled and played with sin. Probably during the 20 years of judgeship he went to Gaza with self-confidence that reveals carelessness in spiritual life as well as physical. He was out of fellowship with God. His confidence was based on the flesh and his life was in conflict with the will of God. He was filled with carnal self-confidence.

Now he had power without purity; strength without self-control. For 20 years he had enjoyed a life of victory, not once defeated. Instead of thankfulness it produced spiritual complacency in him. The result was his Nazariteship meant very little to him. Because he had experienced no defeats, only more of God's grace, he might have thought that God was not concerned about immorality and broken vows. There are at least three reasons why we succumb to temptation when it enters our lives. Moral compromise deceives us and always makes us vulnerable. There is a start at the top of an incline rather than a fall off of a cliff. Personal purity is a critical issue in every Christian's life. Temptation comes in attractive forms and has the power to manipulate us. Sin usually comes as desirable, good, fulfilling rather than ugly and destructive. Temptation comes when we chose wrong company. Nothing shapes our character more than the people with whom we chose to spend time. We need to learn to help people say, "NO," and to stand alone with grace and strength.

Process of temptation begins with a sense of interest and then gradually works closer to the source of our power. Temptation urges us to try a thing, and then to try it again. The principles of temptation begin with the fact that when we trifle with temptation it traps us. The scripture plainly states, "Flee immorality" (1Cor.6:18); "Flee idolatry" (1Cor.10:14); "Flee these things (materialism) (1Tim.6.11); "Flee youthful lusts" (1Tim.2:22). Samson chose not to flee and lost his character. Life-style, leisure and even occupation may be lost in order to preserve one's character. Self-confidence blinds us to reality. You cannot trifle with sin and keep it in bounds. Sin makes a fool of us. Samson's hair held no magic but it indicated that at least in a measure he had trusted God. By pride and self-indulgence his life was devastated.

Lust, and the gates of Gaza led to love, and the lap of deceit, and finally loss and the blindness of sin. Before one of God's children makes any kind of a commitment to another with a view to marriage, decide what kind of person you believe God is leading you to before passion takes control of you. Determine if faith is real and character is righteous. Personality, temperament and the commitment to solving problems rather than running from them, are more important and gratifying than love and passion. Take time and be patient when making decisions that affect the rest of our life. The pleasant appearance and attention a person show toward you may appeal, but deceit and honey often go together. No matter how attractive, or persistent a person may be, do not surrender to nagging. Coldness and underhanded calculation often go together. Pretense and professions of love often go together. Flattery and temptation also go together. We all need God to help us distinguish between deception and truth. The unrelenting pressure of deception and pressure of the lust of the flesh brings one down.

Dignity, honor and self-respect fall before the persistent pressure of unrestrained lust. To resist the pull of affection to follow the Lord is one of the most difficult things a disciple has to face in life. A believer who thinks they can bring the unbeliever to faith in Christ, or even get a carnal believer to follow them, needs to remember that seldom happens. Because Samson had refused to discipline his own life, God disciplined him in chains and fetters under the control of his enemies. In grace God stripped away everything that kept him from trusting God. This is the work of the Refiner. Discipline promotes maturity and restores usefulness. Discipline happens to those who the Lord love. It hurts sinners and those around him who have no love or time for God. It heals and changes behavior when heeded.

Loss of strength, willingness and strength to serve the Lord, liberty in Christ, commitment to walk in the light, and spiritual discernment, follow disobedience to God and yielding to the flesh. Delilah, the deceiver became rich when she brought Samson into bondage. It was God purpose to restore Samson. His last downward journey to Gaza brought him into slavery. No matter how far, we fall we are not beyond the possibility of God's forgiveness. While forgiveness was immediate, restoration was gradual. The consequences of sin are not erased. Sin traps, blinds, deceives and controls us when we yield to it. The loss of his eyesight was permanent. However, even after failure and sin takes place, there is a place for recovery. Forgiveness follows repentance and confession of sin. That is immediate. Restoration takes time. The growth of his hair was a visible indicator that his fellowship with God was growing.

In Samson's prayer, he accepted God's forgiveness, he was trusted wholeheartedly in God, and finally he was committed unreservedly to God. Final victory comes after admission of failure, acceptance of forgiveness, acknowledgement of fellowship with God and acting in faith. Samson had gone down so many times that it could discourage us unless we realize God is not done with us yet. The conclusion of the story of Samson is that after his death he was "brought up" to where he started.

Judges 16:28. *"And Samson called unto the Lord, and said, 'O Lord God, remember me, I pray Thee, and strengthen me, I pray Thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.'"*

STRENGTH IS NO MATCH AGAINST PERSISTENCE.

Temptation begins with dulcet sounding words
That flatter and please the carnal nature of men.
But deception and truth come from opposite poles
The one leads to life - the other to humiliation.

Self-confidence and carelessness get along with each other
They have a lot in common in the human ego.
Right behind them come carnality just like their brother
Never letting a careless man think that it is really a foe.

Power without purity is really a great weakness
Although it can make a big show displaying its strength.
Power has a tendency to show itself heedless
Not realizing, without purity it cannot continue at length.

Self-control and strength are strangers unless God
Is in full control and can give guidance to each one.
Conflict and strength give each other a nod
As they parade themselves publicly until one is done.

Persistence keeps at it like rain on the roof
Until strength is so frustrated it gives in to its power.
The only way out of its clutches is truth

And that truth may bring have consequence that bring you lower.

One way alone can bring back part of what has been lost
Repentance and confession of failure must be made.
Even then sin has its consequences and a very high cost
Because restoration and recovery have a price to be paid.

Quietly without notice a new persistence is growing
Although most may never see the changes that take place,
Until we see evidence that one who God has forgiven
And strength is again used by one who experiences God's grace.

“Heavenly Father, I am made to see that even though may have gone a long, long way from Thee, there is forgiveness and a measure of recovery that can be experiences because of Thy continual drawing of a wayfaring person back to Thee, and thank Thee for this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Judges 17

MAN-MADE RELIGION

The remainder of the book of Judges reveals the over-all effects of religious, political and moral decay. Life lived without moral and spiritual standards that are unchanging, goes in a downward spiral again and again. The events in the later part of the book may have taken place long before the time of Samson. We learn from this conclusion of the unfolding of the three hundred years of the judges what happens when people make up their own religious practices to suit themselves and how self-made religion leads to self-seeking service when people are dissatisfied with the laws of God. Life without moral and spiritual standards fails again and again, and the people of God are left spiritually starving. When that happens, it seems like anything goes, "and every man does that which is right in his own eyes."

God's commands were to be taken seriously and applied to life in order to live productively with "quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty." It is no different in any time or generation. Independence and self-reliance must be kept within the parameters of God's revealed will and word. Some people have the idea that I will do what I want, how I want and when I want no matter what God or anyone else says. That superficial satisfaction leads to spiritual failure, weakness and ultimately, spiritual starvation. When that happens there is no power for righteous living and people fall first, then nations, under external pressure because of internal weakness.

The example of Micah is given to show us how things can happen and why we should be aware of who we are and what we are doing. Micah was a thief of the worst kind. He stole a fortune from his own mother. There was nothing in his life for God because he had no spiritual foundation under him to support him and had no spiritual example to guide him. He was following the way of the whole nation doing what he thought "was right in his own eyes." Israel followed the same cycle of failure time after time because they would not follow the Lord with their heart. There were times of repentance and submission under the different judges but the people were only following the accepted form, not the living and true God. Micah and his mother were no different. She cursed on the thief who took her eleven-hundred pieces of silver, and Micah must have gotten afraid of the judgment of God falling on him, so he confessed the robbery to his mother. His confession was without remorse or repentance and she basically said her son was a good thief and blessed God with the same mouth she had cursed with.

Between the mother and the son, the laws of God were broken over and over without hesitation. It is possible to become so used to sin and forget the inevitable consequences of sin, that we will continue to do what we know is wrong because judgment hasn't immediately fallen. Religious apostasy can sound like it is holy, and with a more reasonable approach to divine things, than the word of God plainly states. The mother said she was giving the silver to God for religious purposes, a carved and a molten image. However, she kept nine hundred pieces for herself. She was a covetous cunning woman who had a covetous and cunning son. We communicate our values to our children in ways we may not realize. Parents who do not discipline or correct their children can expect failure and deceit in time to come. Micah began as a thief and then became an idolater. From there he established a false priesthood that led to man-made religion. Any view of God that demeans Him, whether it be images or humanly designed worship, misleads people and may cause their eternal damnation. Micah's "house of gods" containing the ephod and teraphim was a false place of worship even as he made his own son a false priest. What an awful perversion of that which is truly right in God's eyes, when we do "that which is right in our own eyes."

The young Levite who came from Bethlehem-Judah must have not been supported by the people as was the Levite's right under God's plan. He was also living in a place that was not one of the designated cities of the Levites. In the wrong place, doing the wrong thing leads us to go to other wrong places to do other wrong things if we follow "that which is right in our own eyes." The young Levite became a priest under contract to Micah. Moral decay affects people like a communicable disease, and affects the work of the Lord as well. Servants begin to serve people for money rather than God for the sake of truth. The young man left where he was for material reasons instead of spiritual reasons, and went on an aimless journey just "looking for a place." Those who look for "a place" can usually find one, but it will be in the wrong place. Those who serve for money will find themselves compromising truth and serving in "a house of gods." This Levite should have been appalled at the offer to be a paid priest, but rather he gladly took it.

It is possible for us to sacrifice all that we know is right and should stand for, just to gain material advantage and become well-off. Religious "hucksters" know how to get money from people and assure them they are doing what they do for God, and at the same time be privately getting wealthy. He corrupted what should have been a holy priesthood. It wasn't long before he had a better offer, with more prestige and more people. Jonathan, moved up in the eyes of men because the circumstances dictated his move and he "did that which was right in his own eyes." Self-made religion by a self-seeking man, became a self-serving form of service that was evil in the eyes of God.

Judges 17:6. *"In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes."*

HOMEMADE WORSHIP.

They sounded so holy, those words of a son to his mother
She in turn speaks to him "in the name of the Lord."
All she had saved, he had taken and now returns all her money
And she gets some of it melted to make a private, silver god.

One thing led to another and before they were done
They had a separate place made for the gods they worshipped.
He even went so far as to consecrate one of his own sons -
In their "homemade worship," they the true God totally missed.

Even those who should know better, instead of following God's Word
Left the plan of the Lord and sold themselves out for money.
When one is hired for "homemade worship" he no longer serves the Lord
His obligation is to his master; to the truth he has not any.

It is going on still, just like in those ancient days
Everyone does what he wants, what is right in his own eyes.
Whole-hearted commitment to God, His work and His ways
Has to wait until he gets his golden handshake and retirement prize.

When a man is young and has his health and strength
He is called by God to bear the yoke in his youth.
He hasn't spent his best years for "gods" that will sink
Into nothing, but instead served his Lord, His Gospel and His truth.

"Homemade worship" is only part of the departure that has come -
Whatever is convenient to me and will help me get ahead -
Is what motivate many who would never leave their home,
What they leave for God at the end is an empty cup with its dregs.

O God, help me to guide these men who are here for this time
To pass along to them the important things others passed to me.
May these young men of strength and intelligence continually shine -
And throughout their lives ahead teach others true worshipers to be.

"I am very thankful, Father, that these men have been willing to commit these months to Thee and Thy Word. Give them an earnest desire to pass on Thy truth to others. Give them a heart for Thy people and Thy work. Give them vision that will take them beyond the ordinary. By Thy Spirit, move their hearts to fear Thy name. Please don't let them just leave the last part of their lives for Thee. I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

Judges 18

LIVING WITHOUT LAWS

Seeking to live a normal life without unchanging standards to give guidelines to control a society, a family and a church leaves a vacuum and leads to chaos. Disrespect for each other, an ungodly pursuit of self-interest and hard-hearted demands instead of love ultimately makes life miserable for everyone. Self-interest leads to moral decline and depravity. Moral depravity leads to biting and devouring one another until we turn

on our own people. "Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." At the end of such a downward cycle is regret, remorse and deep, deep sadness. The last part of the book of Judges demonstrates this fact.

The tribe of Dan had been designated land in Joshua's day and it was sufficient for them. However, they did not trust God to help them conquer the area He intended for them, so the Amorites drove them into the hills and kept the fertile valleys for themselves. Consequently, some men of Dan went north looking for a place they could take for themselves where they wouldn't meet with much resistance. Laish wasn't part of the land God promised but was an area the Danites thought they could easily conquer. The five men who stopped for the night at Micah's house recognized the accent of the young Levite who was the man-made priest. A child of God may get a long way from fellowship with God and His people where he pursues self-interest, but there are usually signs and words that he cannot hide even though he lives with a guilty conscience in his backslidden condition.

The young Levite "priest" was disobedient because God's laws are not changeable but he did things his way. He was carrying out priestly duties in a private house instead of at the tabernacle in a designated city. Father's need to realize they are the ones responsible for their families both temporally and spiritually. The priest was disobedient because there were idols, both carved and cast that were linked with his priestly service. There was an ephod that was there for him to put on that was made by a man's own imagination; a garment made of a glorious color and decked with all kinds of things of beauty. Idols may be impressive carved works like crosses, saints or other dead people, and the castings of metal may produce statues and images before which people are inclined to bow, but all of it is wrong. A man may do like the Levite who claimed to speak to God when he does not, and may get away without any immediate consequences. One has well said, "God does not always settle accounts in October."

People often attend church services as a place to interface with other people for a wide variety of reasons. Some "like the music" and the atmosphere of a church service is entertaining to them. Some go to relieve a sense of guilt for things done and hope by being there God will not make them reap what they have sown. Others go for business purposes so they can make connections to buy and sell. Others may go because they are lonely and want friends. Other go to churches to ask for money because Christians are usually willing to give some financial aid. Other people go to learn a language in its purest form. The Lord Jesus Christ told a woman that they "who worship the Father must worship Him in Spirit and in truth."

The ephod, the idols and the priest were all that Micah had. He was without God, without anything that spoke of Christ, without any hope of acceptance by God through the efforts he made. Neither he, the Levite-priest, nor the Danites took God into consideration. They just wanted God for selfish gains. Nothing the world has to offer of any kind: religious, business, social or entertainment will fill the spiritual void people have when God is left out. Micah's home life was without God. The Levites religious life had no regard for God's laws. The Danites quest for land was apart from divine guidance. Any of us can get very far away from God when we forget who we are and ignore the claims of God on us. God does not guide us to do wrong. Personal success, wealth, popularity and good health are not necessarily indications of God's blessing. The resemblance of worship by mans definition doesn't mean it is true worship. Godliness is not just a claim we make. It is seen in our motives as well as our actions.

The children of Dan chose the easy way and got so far away from Shiloh that it was easy for them to not go to the place where the Lord had placed His name. The people of God were to meet the Lord in the way He chose and the place of His choosing. There was no king in Israel, no recognized authority of men, and they had rejected God's provision by refusing to take it for themselves. So, the Danites on their own, butchered an unsuspecting people and changed Laish to Dan. On the way there earlier, the five spies who had passed Micah's house, told the six hundred soldiers with them of a ready-made ephod, carved and cast idols, and a priest who could be bought with money. Lawlessness has a tendency to blind us to our own faults and vulnerability, and will lead us to disregard others.

Disregard for others takes us farther away so that we may be willing to use spiritual talk to work a deal for our advantage. From there we will dismiss righteousness by justifying shady dealing as "good business." The results will probably be the destruction of personal testimony, despising of Christian testimony in general, and an on-going pattern of disobedience to God. What seems to us as harmless habits at first can soon dominate our values. Deteriorating values lead to wrong attitudes and practices in life until we find ourselves in bandage to what we knew was wrong. Living without laws and unchanging standards designated by a righteous, holy and just God. leave people without guidance in life and hope in the future.

"Forever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven."
"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever."

Judges 18:3. *"When they were by the house of Micah, they knew the voice of the young man the Levite: and they turned in thither, and said unto him, 'Who brought thee hither? And what makest thou in this place? And what hast thou here?'"*

AN ATTRACTIVE OFFER.

*"Why are you here, don't you know of a better situation?
A man of your caliber should be way up in rank."
With flattering words, a hireling moves on to bigger and better things -
His words making each situation seem better to those who pay -
While his disrespect for God grows.*

*"Any place is okay; after all it is not the place that counts -
It is your heart that matters, your love to everybody, your motive."
And the hireling does in his own house, what God wants done in His -
The idols he made he carries with him as he accepts an attractive offer -
And his disrespect for God shows.*

*"What does God say, are we going to prosper, get rich?
Are we going to be important? Are we going to get 'big?'"
And the hireling claims to speak for God when God didn't speak to him
And when his gods were stolen, he went with them for an attractive offer -
And his disrespect for God he knows.*

*"You think one thing, and I think another. You have one truth and I don't bother,
Because it is what the people think and want that counts not the truth."
And the modern hireling goes the way he thinks and that suits him -
While all the time, the house of God is still in its place at "Shiloh" -
And disrespect for God he knows, and shows, and grows.*

"There are times, Heavenly Father, that I wonder if some people are trying to get me to say what they want said in public but do not want to say it themselves. I am praying here that I will always be ready to speak for God, but not to speak for man. May the words I say and the thoughts I pass on be from Thee alone to those who will be in an audience to listen. May I speak with grace seasoned with salt; may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart always be acceptable to Thee. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 19

DECLINE OF MORALS

When we see the sad results of a deteriorating society and the apparent disintegration of all that maintained cohesiveness in the people of a nation or a family, we are inclined to ask, "What in the world happened?" That is what happened - the world!! The decline of moral order in a society is a result, not the cause, of the problem. In Israel the problem began when they did not carry out the command of the Lord to eliminate idolatry and all of its influences from the land God had promised them. He was with them in many ways to help them claim for themselves what He had given them. Others also claimed the same ground in a way we call "squatter's rights" so they had to be driven out. The influx of hornets was God's first line of attack on their behalf so they could follow and remove the idols and those who worshipped idols, and take that which was rightfully theirs.

However, there was a "touchy-feely" attitude then as now, and the people of God seemed to think there was something good in everything if you looked hard enough for it, so don't be too hard on people. When we start to do that "which is right in our own eyes," there is no end to it. A casual attitude toward God and sin which led to idolatry was the root cause of the decline of Israel. Moral depravity is a result, not a cause. When faith in God begins to disintegrate, that is because of a tolerant attitude toward the world's ways and then we become participants in religious sin. "It works for them. Why don't we try it?" Before long religious idolatry is accepted among the people of the Lord.

When faith, and consequently our commitment to truth begins to disintegrate and decline, the decline in morals soon follows. Departure from the practice of biblical principles brings disunity among the people of God as those who hold fast to scriptural practices are considered old-fashioned and not relevant to the new day in which we live. "We need to learn to adapt to changing social mores," they say. When that happens, we lose the power we had and become weak because of our disobedience to God. When we forget God, we forget our purpose in being here. When we forget our purpose in being here, we lose our moral standards. When we lose our moral standards then any changing laws men make because it is expedient and "right in

our own eyes" is easily accepted. When that is accepted, then we are capable of doing anything our depraved nature desires.

A Levite who lived in a very remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, allowed his lust to control him and took a "concubine," not a wife, to satisfy his sexual cravings without his commitment. When God's word is ignored, anything goes. Instead of regarding God's laws and God's word, we can become used to whatever a depraved society accepts. A slave woman is who he had, so it apparently did not disturb him too much when she was untrue to him and had another man as well. He had little regard for her, for God's laws and the standards of righteousness because he "did that which was right in his own eyes." Later, at his convenience, he went to get her again from her father's house. The inconvenience of righteousness and godly living has turned many who profess faith in Christ into those who are quite at ease in the world. They drink the world's strong "adult beverages," listen to the world's music, enjoy the world's leisure-time pleasures and don't mind the world's kind of speech.

Hospitality, public acceptance was of a high priority in those areas and in those times, even though women were mistreated and dishonored. The Levite and the old man from the same hill country of Ephraim who was living in Gibeah were much alike. Both were selfish, lacked courage, want to avoid conflict and were willing to disobey God's laws. When moral depravity sets in, brotherly love goes out. When social protocol has more authority than justice, righteousness and compassion, we know moral convictions have been replaced by evil. Israel failed to be governed by God's moral law and made the laws of the land to suit themselves. When that happens, lawlessness prevails and atrocities occur. In Gibeah that concubine was raped repeatedly until she died. The Levite took matters into his own hands when he sent twelve pieces of her body to all the tribes of Israel.

We may leave the practice of doing God's will slowly without hardly knowing its effects on us let alone others. Before long what I do and think will begin to undermine others and the "majority rules" becomes the standard by which we are expected to live, rather than what the word of God says and the will of God is. When we deliberately substitute our way of religious activity for God's way, we have committed spiritual anarchy which leads to moral decline and decay. What happens to individuals, is soon accepted by the nations and the guidelines God has given, and have been followed for generations, are abandoned leading to terrible evil. Perversions then are accepted and later, defended. Soon those very perversions become law and are considered essential, and right, in order for us to have freedom. Freedom to do evil as well as to do right is what eventually happens when "every man does that which is right in his own eyes."

Judges 19:30. *"And it was so, that all that saw it said, 'There was no such deed done or seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds.'"*

DISINTEGRATION.

Faith in God seemed to disintegrate, but no one seemed to care
As they went about living, it would appear they didn't know God was there.
That same mind-set coursed throughout the nation as its unity began to die
It took a terrible crime to make people think and begin to wonder why.

When God is left out people begin to act, to do things that are unspeakable,
Loss of purpose and dignity leads to hardened hearts that are unbreakable.
Who would think that two men could be so cowardly as to send a woman to die,
They didn't want to get hurt so they sacrificed her, the body on the step did lie.

Protocol was more important to them than the moral convictions they lacked,
When a person gets away from God to do evil, it is very hard to come back.
God has His standards made plain in the law; they are there for us to live by,
But when they are ignored it is often the case it is the innocent around that die.

To awaken a nation a man desecrated a body intended to make people think.
Whatever possessed him to commit such a deed, how far down can a man really sink.
When God is forgotten and consequence ignored, people go farther and farther away.
They don't really care if they get what they want, who cares what others will say.

Never get used to the evil around: turn it off, turn away - run and flee
For much as I pray and trust in my Lord, I fear what might happen through me.
I must keep my heart, my will and my mind on the Lord and what He calls me to do,
I can trust Him amidst disintegration around to protect and guide me straight through.

“O Righteous God, how often I read reports and wonder at the terrible events that infect our society and think how You can spare any of us. How can I ever get used to such things and yet I must confess at times I am not moved at the evil actions I read and hear about. Help me O God, to maintain a sensitivity to righteousness and an abhorrence of all that is evil, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Judges 20

SUBNORMAL BEHAVIOR

One man out of touch with God and acting in the deception of the flesh, can cause more damage and suffering to the people of God than we could ever imagine. A Levite who should have been serving God but was moved by his own lust to take a woman who was not his wife. As a result of his own self-centered cowardice, she was terribly abused and killed. By his own perverted sense of justice, he caused the death of over 60,000 of his countrymen. One wonders at the person away from God who feels justified in creating havoc, bitterness and tragedy among God's people. Is he really a child of God? What ever happened to his mind and heart make him think this action he is determined to take could possibly be right? One thing we do know; the Lord hates lies, even under oath, and one who sows discord among his brethren.

The Levite in the self-righteousness of his own spiritual poverty, did what was "right in his own eyes," and appealed to the corporate identity of Israel to bring about his desire for revenge. Unless one party in a matter is willing to forgive, revenge, once it starts, is never satisfied. This man misrepresented the facts by leaving out his own selfishness and cowardly act and put a religious spin on the event. He did not admit his own failures and showed no sign of remorse for what he did. When one turns away from the standards of righteousness God has established in His word, it isn't long before spiritual discernment is lost. Then one becomes blind to his own guilt and looks for someone else to blame for the moral depravity that permeates a whole society, and soon, a whole nation.

It was not long before eleven of the tribes of Israel took matters into their own hands and did that which was "right in their own eyes." One person who is only concerned about himself and is blind to his own guilt, got others involved in this tragedy and soon had brethren united against one of their own tribes. Israel united to do what they wanted; not necessarily what God wanted. The people of Gibeah did not want to deal with the worthless "sons of Belial," and the tribe of Benjamin did not want to deal righteously with those of Gibeah. A misguided form of unity and lack of good judgment brings about consequences that go far beyond what we anticipate. To defend an unrighteous cause or person, and to be so self-assured that we don't go to God for guidance, is evidence that moral deterioration has permeated our assembly, family and/or nation.

The tribe of Benjamin foolishly refused to punish the guilty but actually defended them because they did that which was "right in their own eyes." The eleven tribes who said they will fight until Gibeah is destroyed, and those who didn't join in the fight would be killed - and even further said that no Israelite woman would ever marry a Benjamite, also did that which was "right in their own eyes." There doesn't seem to be any stopping the course of evil once we ignore the word of the Lord and begin taking things into our own hands. Brethren turn against brethren, even as the Israelites turned against the tribe of Benjamin. In a civil war, no one really wins when all is said and done. But in times of failure that end up in a battle in which serious casualties are taken, tears flow, an awareness of failure comes, and then an awareness of our need of God.

When casualties began to mount and two battles were lost, the Israelites got beyond the religious forms and got down to doing real business with God. When that happened, one man in touch with God, Phinehas, was able to step in and fill the gap between form and reality. Phinehas was tried and proven, and was finally listened to. Not only Benjamites were spiritually and morally sick, but because they refused to deal properly with the evil among them, they were completely defeated. When we get past a complacent attitude toward God, departure, decline and then depravity and get back to the Lord, there can be victory. However, 38,000 dead from the united tribes, and 25,100 dead Benjamites teach us that one self-centered man can create havoc, bitterness, tragedy and deep wounds that are almost impossible to heal.

If we commit ourselves to living our lives as God intends according to the scripture; and if we serve Him in the way the Lord intends - with grace and truth; and if we allow brotherly love to be demonstrated among us - we will experience life and service for our Lord Jesus Christ in a way that will please and glorify Him.

Judges 20:26. *“Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.”*

CIVIL WAR.

It started long before the terrible trigger took place,

The Lord's people went their own way and the Lord they displaced.
They didn't take sin seriously not realizing there's a cost to pay -
65,100 deaths in three days.

To proud to admit to moral degradation -
Not willing to face the consequences of humiliation -
Loyal to their own people and not caring about a disunified nation
They lost nearly a whole generation.

When a people are not loyal to God but are loyal to their own -
When the moral fabric of a nation unravels right down to the homes -
When the criminal who committed the sin won't face up to what he's done -
Then God withdraws protection until pride is gone.

Action was withheld that should have been taken forcefully -
The act that started the war should have been dealt with personally -
If they had at first come to God in humility -
The war could have been over hastily.

We should never underestimate the consequences of even one sin -
We should always deal with sin before it happens again -
Serious problems can be averted before a war begins -
When God's people come in contrition to Him.

"It is possible Father, that we have overlooked some things that need to be dealt with now. If such has happened, please bring it to my attention. If there is something I can or should do, please let me know. If there is something ahead that can be stopped before it gets too big, please give me or any who should know, understanding as to how to face the problem and settle it effectively and to Thy glory. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Judges 21

REFLECTION AND REGRET

There is a deep, deep moral sickness that comes over a society when people celebrate perversions for pleasure. Israel had accepted perversions for so long they had become used to them until one happened that was beyond the pale. Then they took things into their own hands and made oaths that were "right in their own eyes." They devised their own plans and left God out as they went farther and farther in sin. Because of their own revenge, they planned their own way of restoration of order. Strangely when a whole generation of people has turned to follow the dictates of their own fallen nature, all semblance of justice and public righteousness fades. It is happening here today in a way much too similar to the days of the judges in Israel.

The "sons of Belial" in Gibeah who took what they wanted and thought rape was alright even when it resulted in death and moral depravity. The Benjamites accepted homosexuality and rape to the extent they defended those things in spite of what was right - and what other people who disagreed with them believed. The other tribes of Israel also thought retaliation and revenge was alright even to the massacre of innocent people and kidnapping of young women. This whole downward spiral into moral depravity began when the children of Israel did not destroy the worship and idols of Baal. The dark world of false religion leaves the hearts of men and women wide open to unclean living and no fear of the Lord.

People are not a whole lot different in any age or place in history. In their demand for freedom they insist they have the right to do as they please. Spiritual sin leads to moral sin. Sexual sin makes life cheap so rape, desecration, slaughter, massacre and kidnapping become common-place. Young people can even see these things in games and movies that leave an imprint on their brain that does not go away. Birth control has brought casual sex among young people and that in turn leads to the abortion of unwanted children. Substance abuse leads to lack of control and may go as far as euthanasia. Same-sex marriage leads to the disintegration of families and the loss of a moral compass for our children and the generations to follow. When we, as frail, mortal men make ourselves the final authority of our practices and doctrines without reference to God and His will, there is a price that everyone has to pay. To selfishly set ourselves up as those who decide what is right and wrong undermines the whole of society and will ultimately bring down a nation.

Even though the judges were famous for the deliverance they brought to the nation of Israel for periods of time, they were far from perfect people. In spite of the personal failures God used those people of faith and they made a lasting mark on the history of their nation. Faith in God and a commitment to obey Him is the

only alternative to moral decay. Lives lived for the Lord Jesus Christ under the standards of righteousness and truth as taught in the scriptures, is the best we can pass on to the people of our day and our own families. Biblical convictions and moral conduct will keep us in fellowship with our Lord here and enable us to live in view of the future.

Judges 21: 25. *“In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”*

TURNED AWAY FROM GOD.

Schemes and plans bizarre, deep in the minds of men
Who lie awake dreaming ungodly thoughts and fantasies;
So obtuse and strange as to raise serious questions
About their sanity; mental acuity seems to have been abandoned -
Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Where do such dark schemes come from? Beyond human -
The twilight zone of standard-less living creates havoc -
Minds trained in godly homes go so far away into the night -
One wonders - “Where did he come from? Is this my child?”
Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Not one, but many gravitate - moving together - multiplying their darkness
Pitting one against the other - past dark sayings to evil imaginations -
Past evil imaginations to challenges that must have come from hell -
And then acting out their imaginations to the death of thousands -
Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Women and children run, with flashing swords reaching for them -
Blood-thirsty men without shame of conscience murder the innocent
To keep their word on lesser matters of small consequence -
Justifying the blood-red blade in the name of their heritage -
Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

No fear; nor reverence for God - no respect for the life of others - only self.
No thought of consequences - no consideration of self-guilt
No willingness to repent - no consideration of God's laws
No thought for the tomorrow of their children - no honor - no self-respect
Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

“This dark book of Judges, Father, raises many specters of darkness and evil when Thy people forget Thee or ignore Thy claims upon them. This isn't happening to us, is it Father? Surely, we have the sense to discern this kind of departure from the paths of Thy choosing. O preserve me, O God, for in Thee do I put my trust. My eyes are on Thee now. May I never have them focused on any other place, person or thing. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”