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Those Other Judges

In spite of their flaws, some more obvious than others, the days of the judges (or saviours) of Israel present us with some of the Old Testament's highest drama. Who of us has not thrilled to the sight of Barak's ten thousand as they flew headlong down the precipitous flank of Tabor toward the 'discomfited' troops of Sisera in the valley below? Who would not have been awed to watch Samson carry off the gates of Gaza, doors, posts, 'bar and all'? Or the day he brought down the house at the end of the last scene in his life? Would we not have thrown backs our heads in laughter if we had heard the news at the market the day after Ehud bearded the lion in his den at Eglon's winter palace in Jericho? And if only we had been privileged to watch from a distance as the lights came on on the night 'the sword of the Lord and of Gideon' avenged seven years of Midianite oppression? Moving stories every one, but Othniel and Ehud, Deborah and Barak, Gideon and Samson are not the only judges in the book. What of those other judges?

There was Shamgar. Even his name is listed as 'of uncertain derivation'. The days in which he lived were not easy. As Deborah and Barak sang, 'In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways', Judg. 5. 6. For resources, they had only the Pentateuch for a Bible and perhaps a few psalms. The Holy Spirit did not indwell each believer as He does today. As far as we know, there were no local gatherings for mutual encouragement during those dark times. While the enemy made havoc of the people of God

‘there was no king in Israel’ around which to rally. And it had been eighty long years since Ehud had driven back the Moabites from Israel’s southwestern border.

At such a time as that, Shamgar, son of Anath, stepped into the breach. His weapon? An ox goad. His opponents? Six hundred Philistines. His simple eulogy? ‘And he also delivered Israel’. Shamgar could teach us the simple secret of victory over such imposing foes today.

A goad assumes there will be opposition, for that is what it is designed to do – to apply to an immovable object a compelling reason to co-operate. Saul of Tarsus discovered this and found it hard indeed to kick against the One whose will he resisted, Acts 9. 5. Moses had observed the same thing with the Israelites in his day, ‘But Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness; then he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation’, Deut. 32. 15.

A goad has a point which is only useful when driven home. As the Preacher put it, ‘The words of the wise are as goads’, Eccl. 12. 11. If it was all that Shamgar had, then he would not yield to the forces pitted against his people. Let others take crooked bypaths to avoid the uncircumcised foe; he would not. ‘The wicked flee when no man pursueth; but the righteous are bold as a lion’, Prov. 28. 1.

A goad can serve as an effective weapon if there is nothing else at hand. Shamgar would have been a fit role model for Israel in the early days of King Saul. ‘Now there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make

them swords or spears: but all the Israelites went down to the Philistines, to sharpen every man his share, and his coulter, and his axe, and his mattock. Yet they had a file for the mattocks, and for the coulters, and for the forks, and for the axes, and to sharpen the goads. So it came to pass in the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people that were with Saul and Jonathan', 1 Sam. 13. 19-22. The Philistines could co-exist with the people of God as long as Israel was unarmed. And is it not true in our day that we have largely been disarmed by the enemy? Once known as people of the Book, there is a decided lack of good swordsmen among us.

But wait! A goad is not a sword, to be sure, but Shamgar found it quite suitable to get the job done. If we cannot yet handle the mighty sword of Goliath as it was in David's hands to behead the enemy, nor the sword of Jonathan as he used it to humble a garrison, we still have our files to sharpen the goads, v. 21. 'Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend', Prov. 27. 17. When public ministry is not what it ought to be, then let us individually stir up one another with some wise words learned from God in the quiet place. Let the Shamgars among us not lose heart. Encourage one another daily, to take the high road, to be ready for opposition from the enemy, to have our point ready, to make it well, and to stick at the job until we also are used to deliver the people of God.

Who Loves Muslims?

Even if you don't know the actual statistics, you see the trend. Islam, religion of the False Prophet, is on the rise around the world. It has inundated Indonesia, stirred the passions of thirty or more nations in the Middle East, is flooding into Western Europe, and may be constructing a mosque in your neighborhood at this very moment.

Paul and Carol Bramsen love Muslims, and have served the Lord among the Muslim Wolof people in Senegal, West Africa, since 1991. One of their more effective and widespread ministries has been through radio.

One of the fruits of that labor, free for the plucking by others with a heart for Muslims, is the recently released book, The Way of Righteousness. This substantial 544-page volume is attractively produced with a full-color cover. But it's what is inside that counts. As Paul writes:

The Way of Righteousness (TWOR) is an English translation of one hundred 15-minute radio programs which I first wrote in the Wolof language for the Muslims of Senegal, West Africa. With Islam's perspective of God, man, and salvation in mind, TWOR chronologically presents the key stories and central message of God's prophets. All one hundred programs are interconnected, yet each stands alone—challenging the listener to consider God's way of righteousness. Several lessons are adapted from Trevor McIlwain's effective chronological series, Firm Foundations.

The author suggests that the book has a two-fold purpose: first, for Muslim readers, written simply, biblically, lovingly, and wisely for a reader of this faith;

second, for translation into other languages for radio (or video) broadcast. I would add a third. I'm reading the book to get a better grasp of the Muslim mindset (I meet Muslims all the time, and you probably do, too) and to find a more effective way of communicating the gospel to them.

The Way of Righteousness, after an introductory chapter entitled "God Has Spoken," launches into a simple survey of the whole Bible. Covering everything from "What is God Like?" (Gen. 1) to two chapters concluding the book called "What Do You Think About Jesus?" the book could actually be used as a teacher's (or parent's) guide to teach young people right through the Word of God. It would also be great for the large Muslim prison population in the US. This book has as many uses as a Swiss Army knife.

There are four helpful appendixes to the book. Appendix A gives a scheme for putting all 100 messages on 20 cassette tapes. Appendix B gives a list of 16 enlightening Wolof proverbs and their gospel applications, a reminder that one of the most effective means of communication (as modeled by our Lord) is through story-telling. Appendix C introduces the chronological method of Bible teaching and its premises for those not familiar with it. Appendix D, "Insights into Islam," is worth the price of the book.

By the way, you can contact the author via email at:

tworbook@iname.com

You can also view the lessons on the internet at:

http://injil.org/TWOR/

Paul Bramsen has done the Church a great service with this book. But as he writes: “I cannot claim originality for this series any more than one who arranges a bouquet can take credit for the fragrant aroma and exquisite beauty of the flowers. These lessons are a simple arrangement of the glorious Word of God and a display of the One who is ‘altogether lovely.’”—J. B. N., Jr.

Lessons From the Amish

It was not only that it was the third school shooting in less than a week that caught America's attention. It was the surreal image of police tape, investigators and news crews set against the backdrop of Amish horses and buggies and locals dressed in their simple attire.

That such senseless violence should erupt in the heart of Amish country was almost unthinkable. And as the news came out that the gunman should have so cruelly blasted such innocents in this inhuman way—the act seemed to touch even the hardest hearts.

But the Amish, renowned for their nonviolence, would not leave the watching world with that memory. Instead, it would be another scene near rural Georgetown, PA, perhaps even more shocking to a society now grown calloused by constant exposure to violence.

As Fox News put it: "Dozens of Amish neighbors came out Saturday to mourn the quiet milkman who killed five of their young girls and wounded five more in a brief, unfathomable rampage. Charles Carl Roberts IV, 32, was buried in his wife's family plot behind a small Methodist church, a few miles from the one-room schoolhouse he stormed Monday. His wife, Marie, and their three small children looked on as Roberts was buried beside the pink, heart-shaped grave of the infant daughter whose death nine years ago apparently haunted him."

Then the report notes: "About half of perhaps 75 mourners on hand were Amish."

Such forgiveness seems almost unthinkable to Western society. And one reason, it seems, has been the attempts

over the last century to eradicate the concept of sin from our collective consciousness. If sin, guilt, wrong-doing are no longer currency, what then of forgiveness? In a world filled with such senseless acts, forgiveness becomes the most senseless of all, if there is no such a thing as sin.

Of course, forgiveness at the human level has its limits. What Charles Roberts needed—and what many of the Amish need, along with the rest of the world—is to unlock the biblical secret of divine forgiveness. It requires an abandonment of all self-effort, all meritorious works, all religious observances as a means of obtaining grace. This is a necessity for true repentance. There must be instead a casting of one's case upon God, accepting the Lord Jesus as Savior and His finished work as the only means of salvation.

Our prayer for this Amish community, and for a watching world, is that the conclusion of this awful chapter will be a discovery by many of the unmerited forgiveness of the Lord.

Permutations

per•mu•ta'•tion, noun, a way, esp., one of several possible variations, in which a set or number of things can be ordered or arranged. I think about arrangements these days because we have four teens in the house. It is a remarkable thing how many different combinations of people, events, modes of transportation, and crises can develop in such a situation. From the most recent National Review magazine (Aug 13), I learned that the game of checkers has succumbed, after 18 years and hundreds of computers whirring away at the University of Alberta. Chinook, the program they developed, has been trained to give the best possible response to any one of the—hold on to your checkerboard—500 billion billion possible board positions! So schools of higher learning have come to this.

This brings me to my point. You know what happens as family connections grow. The more people who have input regarding a particular event, the more likely compromises will have to be made. Decisions are made either by seeking the best possible arrangement for the most number of people (most of your relatives live near such-and-such a park where the reunion is to be held), by deferring benefit to another event (we'll have Christmas at my house and Thanksgiving at yours), or by superior fiat (we're going to my mother's this year, and that's that!).

Imagine what it must be in the divine throne room as the Lord looks down on more than six billion souls, each with a will, and each with a determined tendency to veer off the path. Add to that the evil counsels of the infernal

forces, natural calamities, wars, deaths, and every other seemingly contrary event. Yet somehow, in spite of human failure, rebellion, and demonic sabotage, the will of God is actually accomplished. And not only in some general way, but as Paul would write concerning believers, "All things work together for good to those that love God" (Rom. 8:28).

What rest there is in the sovereignty of God, not because He somehow micromanages every move. Rather the wonder of it is this: having giving freedom (albeit limited) both to man and demon, when both have done what seems almost always opposite to what God wants, God's will is still done. The cross—with the devil's entrance into Judas and his subsequent betrayal, the Sanhedrin's scheming, and the Romans' kangaroo court—ultimately accomplished the will of God.

God's sovereignty does not mean He bullies His creations, but that He has found sublime ways to overcome man's stupidity to bring blessing to us in spite of ourselves.

Discerning Truth From Error

With so many varied teachings being promoted by professing Christians, it is easy to get away from true Biblical teaching. The following is a list of helpful guidelines provided by J.B. Nicholson Jr. at the Ontario workers and elders conference held in Markham in May 1995.

Any teaching - no matter who is giving it - can be tested with the following nine questions. If the answer is "yes" to any one of these questions you can be sure that the teaching is not sound, balanced doctrine.

1. Does it demean the person of Christ: His nature, His offices or His work?

2. Does it elevate man apart from the cross work of Christ and the believer’s standing in Christ?

3. Does it depend on an obscure verse or a forced interpretation?

4. Does it contradict the overall tenor of Scripture: God’s person, provision, plan, people?

5. Does it unduly emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit?

6. Does it encourage wrong behaviours or elitist attitudes?

7. Does it confuse Israel, the Kingdom and the Church?

8. Does it focus our attention on the temporal rather than the eternal? on the material rather than the spiritual?

9. Is it a thinly disguised version of a contemporary secular trend?

If the teaching passes all of these tests, or if you are unsure if it does, then it is worthwhile to subject it to this final test, to which an answer of "no" is a strong warning to be careful: Is it believed by those whom you know to be walking with the Lord and are Christ-like?

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