Notes on Judges

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Judges

Also in ‘Lectures Introductory to the Earlier Historical Books of the Old Testament.’

Introductory Note

The Book of Judges has a specially instructive value, which is an important spiritual help for our times. The history records repeated instances of Jehovah’s deliverances of His chosen people after their successive acts of disobedience to His precepts and departure from His worship. Though that dispensation differs from the present, God as God is unchanged; amid the brazen-faced apostasy and the spiritual lassitude of Christendom the faithful may count that God will as of old raise up some Gideon or Barak and give a season of reviving to those who wait upon His name, as indeed in His gracious sovereignty He has often done at intervals in the past history of His church on earth. The Book of Judges encourages the hope that He will do so again before its final days.

In the period covered by the Book of Judges, the nation of Israel had taken possession of the land of their promised inheritance, and were nominally under the direct government of Jehovah. Moses, their leader in the wilderness, and Joshua, their leader and director in the division of the land, had both died. They had been chosen and fitted by God to be the spiritual guides and instructors of His newly-redeemed people. But the judgments and statutes given through Moses for the people to “observe to do in the land” (Deut. 12:1) were preserved in writing among them for their obedience,

while Joshua before his death gathered all the tribes to Shechem (Joshua 24) and in view of his immediate departure exacted from them the solemn covenanted promise, “The Lord our God will we serve, and His voice will we obey” (ver. 24).

But during the period of the judges Israel persistently disobeyed the commandments of Jehovah, and broke their own promise to Joshua. They forgot what God had done at the Red Sea and Rephidim, at the Jordan and at Jericho. They forsook the Lord God of their fathers, and served the gods of the surrounding nations. The tabernacle at Shiloh and its worship they despised. The code of righteous laws provided by Moses for art orderly national life acceptable to God they disregarded. Lawlessness prevailed throughout the twelve tribes. In short, the moral condition of Israel, redeemed to be in the eyes of all other nations a model of righteous government, is summed up in the final sentence of this Book: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

Because of this unfaithfulness and disobedience, the hand of Jehovah was time and again laid heavily upon them, as He had warned them through the mouth of Moses (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). They were spoiled and enslaved by the neighbouring nations whose idols they served. When they groaned under their chastisement, the Lord had pity upon them and raised up judges who delivered them from their enemies. But they “ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way”. So soon as the judge was dead, they fell into yet deeper depths of corruption. In Judges 2:11-16, the incorrigible evil of the children of Israel in the land of their

inheritance is expressly stated, and the Book goes on to show the many merciful and marvellous interventions by Jehovah to preserve the people from the righteous results of their own folly and wickedness and from the fate of the Amorites whom they had displaced in the land.

The Book of Judges deals with the history of Israel from the death of Joshua to the raising up of Samuel the prophet. There are three distinct sections: (1) a preface; (2) the account of the judges; (3) an appendix.

(1) The preface (Judges 1:1 - 3:6) shows the degeneracy of Israel and their lapse into idolatry after the death of Joshua. (2) The principal narrative of the Book (Judges 3:7- Judges 16:31) relates to the twelve judges whom God raised up to deliver the tribes from their servitudes to foreign nations and to give them periods of rest from the oppression brought upon themselves by their wilfulness and idolatry. (3) The appendix (Judges 17-21) records two infamous incidents of idolatry and immorality among the Israelites in illustration. of the debasements to which departure from God leads. The grave events named in the appendix are not placed chronologically. Probably, they actually occurred nearer to the death of Joshua than the death of Samson (Judges 16).

The main features of the Book of Judges are indicated and expounded in the reprint which follows of the two Lectures by the late William Kelly. They were intended to help and to stimulate readers to further study of this Book in search of still further enlightenment. It is hoped that by the blessing of God this laudable object may be achieved.

W. J. Hocking June, 1945.

The book of Joshua has shown the power of Jehovah in the conquests of His people, and this too distinguished from the measure of their practical taking possession of what was conquered. For as these are not the same things, so the line drawn divides the book into its two portions: first, the actual blow that was struck at the enemy; and, secondly, the measure in which they took advantage of their successes in order to enter on the positive enjoyment of their own possessions.

The book of Judges stand in painful contrast — the inevitable lesson of the first man. In it we are given to see the failure of the people of God to retain even what they had actually conquered; still more to press on in the acquisition of that which Jehovah designed for them. In both we have what clearly answers on the one hand to the blessing in which God has set Christians, and on the other to the ways in which the enemy has contrived to rob them of their just portion in the enjoyment of the Lord. This no doubt is a humbling lesson; but it is unspeakably gracious that God has given it to us in His word. It would have been overwhelming, if the New Testament had consisted of nothing but the inspired testimony of divine grace to that into which the Holy Ghost introduced the Christian in Christ. Yet not less humbling undoubtedly it is as God has given it to us. But otherwise there had also been utter depression; for it would be to leave us without divine solace: it would expose us to every kind of uncertainty, and to the utmost danger from the enemy, if God had not given us in the New Testament itself our book of Judges just as much as our book of Joshua. In short the Spirit of God has set out very clearly in the New Testament the departure from

their own proper privileges of those that had been brought into blessing. It has even shown us, with the greatest fullness and care, the ways in which Satan gained the advantage over those that bore the name of Christ.

Who can fail to notice divine wisdom in the fact that the worst features that were afterwards to appear in Christendom should be then manifest before the eye not indeed of all saints but of the Spirit of God, that they should so far exist, at least in form, as to furnish the just and fitting occasion for the apostles to pronounce, more particularly in the general epistles or the later writings, whether of Paul or of Peter, of Jude or of John — above all, in the book of Revelation? For this simple reason it is now only unbelief or negligence of Scripture that can be surprised. Let the shadows of coming evil be ever so filled out by developing facts, still they only verify the word of our God. Thus the confirmation of the word, being thus borne out not only in the good that God has imparted but in the havoc that the enemy has wrought among those that call on the name of the Lord, really turns when learned from God, into a very solemn warning, and the increasing vigilance of the saint, by making him feel the wisdom and the goodness of God in separating us — a thing always in its own nature repulsive, and naturally so to one who loves the saints unless there were an absolute call for it and confidence in His grace, whose will it is when unity is perverted to His own dishonour.

Granted that there are those to whom separation is no trial. They are not to be envied. It ought to be a sore trial which nothing justifies but the stern and solemn sense that we owe it to Christ — nay, further (as is

always the case, what we owe to Christ being the best thing for the saints of God), not only a necessary course for our own souls in allegiance to the Lord, but a warning due to those ensnared by the enemy. Do we truly desire the blessing of all the children of God? Who does not that loves the Lord Jesus? Must we not pursue, if it were only for their sakes, that which is most according to Christ? That which will be most salutary for them under such circumstances will surely be to show them the danger of desiring paths which they might too lightly tread — the paths of ease and yielding to the world, where Christ is unknown, forsaking what is true and holy to God's glory. "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments."

Thus it is then that the discovery of the declension of the people of God is turned to serious but real profit, yet never unless our souls are kept simple and self-judging, grave yet happy, in the grace of God. Hence you will find, taking the epistle of Jude as an instance, the care with which the Holy Ghost exhorts them to "build themselves up on their most holy faith," to "keep themselves in the love of God looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." It is not only brotherly affection, but higher up the stream, if from the same source. It is divine charity which is pressed. Never does the love of God lead to forgetfulness of His holiness, never in any way or measure to yield to the influences of evil that are flowing with a constantly increasing tide. This too we shall find in the Old Testament as in the New. In fact, if there be the same material looking at man, there is the same substantial truth if you look at God. Not of course that there was

equal development then as now; for unquestionably the time was not yet come for the fullness of that which was from God to be manifested; nor consequently for man to display his enmity, and hatred, and incurable evil. How could either be till Jesus was known? Still there was from the earliest day a new nature in the saints, and the testimony of the word and Spirit of God, who was always looking on to Jesus. But now that grace and truth are fully before us in Jesus, His invariableness revealed cannot but invigorate the affections and brace the conscience, associating all with Him who came to do God's will in exercised hearts towards God. He therefore keeps back nothing that is profitable, but tells us of our danger. He shows us how the people of God have always slipped, and what is more, that they slipped from the first — that departure from His will and ways was by no means a result of centuries. Neither of old nor after Christ did it require ages to betray, though of course it always went on growing. Contrariwise the common law of the first man is immediate and invariable departure from God. It is not meant by this that there may not be fidelity exceptionally by grace; but it is unspeakably solemn to find the fact always in scripture, that God no sooner gives a blessing than man misuses it, that the departure is immediate and that this is true of individuals as well as of communities. Both have their importance. It is true, as all know, from the first. We see it in Paradise; we see it after the world was renewed; we see it now in the chosen nation. The same thing reappears in the Christian profession, as the apostle warns the Roman saints from the example of Israel. And their failure too the book of Judges shows us to have been not merely among some here and there, but alas! everywhere. There might be great differences between

one tribe and another morally, as for instance relaxation was unquestionably more complete in Dan than in Judah; but the failure of Judah to rise up to the just recognition of Jehovah's glory on their part is plain from the beginning of the history in the land.

All this appears to me to be of no inconsiderable importance as meeting a difficulty that perhaps all minds have felt who have been somewhat exercised about the church of God. In the New Testament the church we see set up in fullness of blessing by redemption, as associated with Christ. Not only did the Holy Ghost act in power for the soul, but He was ever the witness of superiority over all circumstances for body and mind, and these displays of energy not confined to apostles those chief envoys of the Lord and instruments of the work of God on earth, but diffusing the victory of Christ over the church as such. B ut it is not merely that in the history that man has made of the church we find departure. There indeed it is most manifest for those that have eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. But the salutary lesson is this, that the simple child of God had got it all in the word, so that he needs no ecclesiastical history to show the solemn fact. The New Testament itself is amply sufficient; and indeed for most readers the histories that even saints of God have made of the church would but mislead. They palliate, excuse, or even justify the general departure from the word of God. Where not? Who can tell me one history that vindicates adequately the word and Spirit of God? So widespread and deep became the departure, that the very worst can hardly defend Christendom in the face of scripture. The grossest adulators of priestly power, those that sold

themselves to the purposes of ecclesiastical ambition, have not been able to veil the heinous iniquity into which what was called the church of God sank before long; but it is an immense mercy that the simplest child of God has got in his Bible, not only the moral profit of all the ways of God, and the analogies of every previous dispensation of God, but what concerns himself. His own place and privileges, his own duty on the one hand, he cannot find except in the Bible; but even also the history of his failure he can find nowhere so clear, nowhere so simple, nowhere so rightly shown and proved as in that perfect word of God. And further, the familiarity with evil everywhere out of scripture tends to blunt conscience, if not to make us content with it, and therefore to settle down as if it were hopeless to find a path according to God in the midst of abounding iniquity. Whether it be the Old Testament or the New, the word of God never forms such a path, nor ever excuses it even for the weakest; and it is important to see that it is not weakness that goes astray: it is the subtlety of unbelief that can pervert even scripture itself to justify its own will. Undoubtedly there is nothing that man's will may not find a reason for, perhaps too on the surface of scripture. There is no limit to its perverse ingenuity. But when the word of God is read with conscience, this is quite another thing. There the Shepherd's voice is heard and known. Not that He fails to tell the truth in any case, for indeed He does in every case; but He makes the truth felt wherever there is a conscience open to hear.

This no doubt is the great instruction of the book of Judges. It is not the only one, thank God. The same book shows us the slipping away, or defection, of the various

tribes of Israel from the purpose of God in bringing them into the land — a purpose which, you must remember, will surely be carried out yet. No purpose of God ever fails in the end, whilst every purpose in man's hand fails for the time. These are two of the most prominent lessons of the word of God; and the reason is just this — all His purposes stand because there is a Second man: every purpose fails when entrusted to the first man.

It is of the first man we read here; but at the same time we have the testimony of the gracious power of God, not now in conquest, but in lifting up from time to time, and in partial deliverances. Your attention is called particularly to this. According to the analogy of God, it is not to produce anything but a partial interference after the first failure until Jesus comes. Then indeed deliverance will be complete; but God will have the evil felt, and, whatever may be His gracious intervention, He does not work in such a sort or after such a measure as would tend to enfeeble the sense and the confession of sin, the humiliation, the self-judgment, which become the saint in view of the present state of things. I have no doubt therefore that, for those that really take the word of God as He has given it, so great is His grace that a time of ruin may be made a season of special blessing. It is not a day of great prosperity that brings out the truth of things most before God.

Do you forget that He gives grace to the humble now? Do you suppose that there was not ignorance in the day of Pentecost? I am persuaded that you mistake the character of that wondrous day and of this if you doubt either. In presence of their then power the reality of the condition of individuals was not felt, as at Corinth, till gross evil came in, and party spirit began to divide the

saints; and those who ran well grew less vivid in their sense of Christ, and the preciousness of His grace and truth was dimmed in their souls, so that some went to law, and others to idol temples. Then the real condition of souls became manifest. How fared it with those that crave to the Lord? Did they necessarily go down in such a day? Far from it. It made the fidelity of Chloe's household, or that of Stephanas, more distinct; and more prayer, more groaning, more crying to God, would be surely the result in those that had the sense of Christ's love and glory. How sad the state of those so near and precious in His eyes as are the saints of God?

I have no doubt accordingly that it is a total mistake to suppose — if we take, for instance, the apostle Paul, or even persons far inferior to him, those labourers that were his companions, and who shared his sorrows as well as his joys — a great mistake to suppose that Peter or the others had juster feelings, or were more truly in communion with the Lord than he; yet, as we know, it was not given to him to be found in that wondrous scene where the Holy Ghost was first poured down from heaven. But assuredly the apostle drank more deeply into the sense of what man was in presence not merely of law but of grace, as well as of what God is as now putting honour on Christ. No doubt this is deep work; for there is a breaking to pieces of every thought and feeling of the human heart; and there results such a depth of experience, both of anguish on the one hand and on the other hand of confidence in the grace of God, as must thoroughly repay and fit the individuals concerned for such service as is according to God's own mind for a day of grief and ruin. In short, it matters little what the time is on which one may be cast if there be

faith in God, who is above all circumstances; for faith finds Him out and glorifies Him, whatever the circumstances may be.

This, it may be observed, is rather a general way of applying the book of Judges; but these remarks have been made for the very reason that we may read the word of God as a whole, allowing for differences (one need not say,) and, while we may seek to enter into and understand the just application of the Old Testament, that we. may also avail ourselves of what lies everywhere before us, those great and divine and ever precious principles of divine truth which we want, and which God has given us to meet us in the circumstances where we are now.

We need not therefore dwell on the minute particulars of the first few verses. I will only make a remark on one point; namely, the blessing which confidence in grace always receives from God. We know how Caleb was blessed; but we find also that God’s grace developed in his daughter the same confidence in grace. She looked for good, and failed not to get it; and we do well to cherish the same spirit. It glorifies God to expect great and good things from Him. Why should we doubt Him? Would we abridge Him to the pettiness of our own thoughts? He had brought His people into a goodly land, and His honour was pledged to bless them there. And yet not many there looked for the blessing. They thought of the difficulties, and they were discouraged. Such discouragement constantly leads to the dishonour of God. For if to complain of what God gives grieves Him on the one hand, on the other hand the enemy is most sensitive, and gathers encouragement to oppose from

the want of faith that is thus soon, too soon, manifested in our gracious God.

Nothing indeed so disturbs the world as to see a man thoroughly happy in the Lord. It is not finding fault with the world that rouses its feelings, but the certainty that you have got a blessing to which they do not even pretend. And this, my brethren, is not best attested by strong expressions about it. The most effective testimony on every subject may be indirect; nor is anything of greater power than the simple unaffected expression of our heart's satisfaction in a worthy object. Even the men of the world are sensible of this. There is nothing that so forcibly proves or disproves as that which does not lie on the surface, and is not said to serve a purpose. You are in trial, or difficulty, poor, persecuted, in prison, or dying; yet you are thoroughly happy. What can the world do with a man that nothing can conquer? It may oppose, insult, punish; but he only gives God thanks, and rejoices the more, and this without in the least making light of what is done. What can the world do with such a man? "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

It is refreshing therefore to see that. when God must give us many a failure, it is not all failure. Nor should it be so with us. It is an unhappy spirit that always dwells upon the dark side; but at the same time it is never a truthful spirit that does not take full account of it. Has not grace brought us, beloved brethren, into such a place that we can fairly look at anything and any one in the face? We have no reason to fear, except that we should not confide in our God, and that we should not also dread the letting slip ourselves — the letting in self

to anything that concerns the Lord. Then I grant you there are weakness and failure at hand.

But Judges 2 shows us another thing, a strange and very striking change. “The angel of Jehovah,” it is said, “came up from Gilgal to Bochim.” There was a deep significance here. Why should the angel of Jehovah come up from Gilgal? We have seen already what Gilgal was. Oh that we knew it better for our own souls! But this at least we have learnt from the word of God, that it was the place where the reproach of Egypt was rolled away. It was the place where flesh came under the execution of the sentence of death. Nor was this all. For it was the place in which the host was regularly encamped; and thence it marched out to conquer at the bidding of Jehovah, and thither it returned again. Mortification of the flesh is the true place of power in the Spirit, and this is what Gilgal means. It was where Israel was reminded of the judgment of God on self, on man’s nature, on that which is unclean, and only fit therefore to be cut off and cast away. There God led them back, and thence they came out in divine strength. But the angel of Jehovah now finds himself in a place as characteristic of the book of Judges as Gilgal was of Joshua. It is the place of tears. Not to know sorrow when the people of God have slighted Him and declined is not to know where His Spirit dwells. Hardness of feeling, never according to God, is most of all opposed to Him when the people have failed to meet His glory, when they have been unfaithful as a whole.

The angel comes then from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, “I have made you go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I sware unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break my covenant with you. And ye

shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars: but ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this? Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you. And it came to pass, when the angel of Jehovah spake these words unto all the children of Israel, that the people lifted up their voice, and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim: and they sacrificed there unto Jehovah"; and then in the middle of this same chapter (11-13), after the people had thus humbled themselves before God, we find that they turned away again. "They forsook Jehovah," it is said, "and served Baal and Ashtaroth." Their grief was but passing. "And the anger of Jehovah was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies." It was not merely now that there was a check. It was not that Israel had a passing humiliation. For Jehovah delivered them up expressly into the hands of their enemies; not that He did not love them, not that He would not work all for good, but that He must have the people in the truth of their state before He would prove Himself in the truth of His own grace. "Whithersoever they went out, the hand of Jehovah was against them for evil, as Jehovah had said, and as Jehovah had sworn unto them: and they were greatly distressed. Nevertheless Jehovah raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them. And yet they would not hearken unto their judges, but they went a whoring after other gods, and bowed themselves unto them: they turned quickly out of the way which their fathers walked in, obeying

the commandments of Jehovah; but they did not so. And when Jehovah raised them up judges" — that is, when they were brought down to this great distress, Jehovah appeared for them in showing them suited mercy — "Jehovah was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge: for it repented Jehovah because of their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them." But they would not hearken to their judges; "and it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, in following other gods."

If the children of Israel would abandon Jehovah to serve idols, they are themselves given up by Jehovah to serve idolaters. It is so with us. If we sin, this measures and defines our chastisement; and so grace works repentance when we turn and cry to the Lord in our distress.

In Judges 3. we have the details of this. The first two chapters are general. The nations come before us that were left to prove Israel according to the word of Jehovah. The earliest deliverer is brought before us in verse 9: "When the children of Israel cried unto Jehovah, Jehovah raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel, who delivered them, even Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother." So again we are told that afterwards "the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of Jehovah: and Jehovah strengthened Eglon [not the children of Israel, but their enemy] the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of Jehovah. And he gathered unto him the children of Ammon and Amalek, and went and smote Israel, and possessed the city of palm trees. So the children of

Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. But when the children of Israel cried unto Jehovah, Jehovah raised them up a deliverer Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man left-handed." Then we have details of the killing of the leader of their enemies, the king of Moab. Then again, in the end of the chapter, we are told of "Shamgar the son of Anath," who delivered Israel from the Philistines.

But there is one feature common to all these three deliverers which may be pointed out, and not, I think, without moral profit. There was in every one of them an apparent defect, and they were therefore men that no one but God would have put forward. One was a younger brother; another was a left-handed man; and the third slew the enemy with an ox-goad. Thus in each there was an element against the prospects of their success. There was awkwardness, seemingly, in the weapon employed, or in the left-handed man, or in the younger brother rather than in the eldest, the father's might and the beginning of his strength, as Jacob says. It was not the pride of the family, the first-born, but his junior, that went forth to victory. Not thus does man choose.

This feature, however, belongs characteristically to the ways of God in a broken state of things. The instrument that He employs when His people are fallen is not according to the same pattern as when all things are orderly in His sight. In short, when the people of God depart from Him, He marks it, not by withholding a deliverer, but by the kind of deliverance given them. I am persuaded that there is a fitness in His choice of instruments, and that the same men that He employed, say, to found and form the church, are not of the class which suits His thoughts when all things are fallen into

confusion. When the church was brought into being, when the ecclesiastical air was clear and bright, then it was simply a question of God working by the Holy Spirit upon earth in answer to the glory of Christ in heaven; then He raised up witnesses in accordance with the glory of Christ and the reality of His victory as man over Satan, as well as of His love in caring for His body, the church. When on the contrary the Christian profession had quite failed as a witness to Him, there could not but be God's answer to the cries of distress that went up from His saints; but none the less has each instrument a marked weakness in some particular or other.

So I cannot but believe it will be found, without exception, in this respect throughout the history of Christendom. Thus, if we look three or four hundred years back, we can judge with considerably more calmness than in forming an estimate of our own day; we are free at least from much which is apt to warp. We see that in those whom God then employed there was no deficiency in a certain sort of power. There was a great energy, with a palpable, large, and speedy result; and we, of all men, ought to be the last to forget whatever form or measure of blessing God has been pleased to shower on souls. Can we not, beloved brethren, afford to recognize it where and whenever it may have been? Ought we not to give ungrudgingly the honour that is due to the work of the Spirit of God by anybody? The more you are blessed, the more free and generous should you be towards others; the more simply and fully you have received the truth, the larger should your heart be in rejoicing at the activities of divine grace. You are called on, by the very richness of God's grace, and by the comfort and certainty of the truth He has given

your souls, to acknowledge whatever has been of God either in the past or in the present to His praise.

Looking back then, I say, according to the love and humility that can value whatever is from above, we can see no doubt the power that shook nations and gave them an open Bible in such a work as Luther's, or even in Calvin's; yea, in others inferior to these. But are we therefore to consecrate everything they said or did? Or are we to shut our eyes to that which manifestly showed the strange shape. of the earthen vessel? Certainly not. Far from complaining of such irregularities, I consider that they were in keeping with the state of things in God's sight, just as we see in Israel's case before us; just as the power of the Spirit which in general lifted above the manifestations of nature — such as we see, for instance, in a Paul, or even in a Peter, or in a John (where it is hard to say what one could blame) — suited the new-born church when the Holy Ghost was just given. It is not meant that there was nothing to judge, and that God did not see it; but still it would be hard for us to see it, judging fairly. Take the blessed apostles. It is in no way meant that they never slipped. Far from it; we know that they did; but what were slips of such as the apostles compared with the comparatively unjudged flesh of a Luther or a Calvin? In such as these, do we not come down to the left-handed men? or such as won victories with an ox-goad? That is, we see, in a day of utter weakness and declension, rather awkward witnesses, employed by God no doubt to accomplish His purpose, but with the significant mark that they were to the praise of His grace much more than to their own honour.

We have not done with the witnesses yet. There is another, perhaps more remarkable, and assuredly more singular in the form taken, in the next chapter (Judges 4); so that it seems evident that it is a principle here. I am not choosing out some particular cases; but taking all as they stand. Here then we find a deliverer unquestionably, and one much put forward by God, but who would not have been thought of in an orderly state of things. I need not tell you that I refer to Deborah now. Certainly she does not act according to natural order. But wherefore was this? It was according to grace, though a rebuke to the men of Israel. Further, it was the grace of God, who, in the form of the deliverer, contemplated the condition of His people; for He meant them to feel that things were out of course. So it was, and so only, that Deborah was employed.

Now this was a day of great trial: “And the children of Israel cried unto Jehovah: for he (Jabin) had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel.” It was a long-continued and grievous affliction: “And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedesh-naphtali, and said unto him, Hath not Jehovah God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun?” Here there is no doubt that God wrought sovereignly. She was a prophetess; she was the communicator of the

mind of God at that time — pre-eminently so. But there is more to note.

Was not this a rebuke to man — for instance to Barak? Undoubtedly, but it was according to the wisdom of God, and was ordered of Him to take that shape. It was the more remarkable, because one would not think at first sight such a thing probable as that a woman should be not only called out to direct men, but to direct them in a campaign — to direct the leader or general of the hosts of Jehovah. Surely therefore there was some marked and indispensable reason of God that should have so arranged it. “And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go.” Can any one say that this was to the honour of Barak — “If thou wilt go with me”? A woman’s going down to a field of slaughter indispensable to the leader! The general could not go without Deborah to bear him company, share the danger and ensure the victory! So it was. “If thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go. And she said, I will surely go with thee.” In her at least there was no want of confidence in God. But we shall see that we have God marking His sense of Barak’s unbelief: “Notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for Jehovah shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Another woman! Thus evidently on all sides of it the victory was altogether to the praise of God, and, as far as the form of it was concerned, man, Israel, general and all, ought to have received it as in this respect a humiliation. We need not dwell now on the particulars of this scene. These are more familiar, it may be, than the principle I have endeavoured thus to bring out plainly.

A song follows (Judges 5), as to which one need only make a general remark. It has often been a difficulty to

many souls how the Spirit of God could indite such a song — a song that triumphs more than usually in the carnage and ruin of the foe. But what is it that persons who cavil at it conceive of the Spirit of God? The root of the difficulty appears to be this, that men are apt constantly to judge from their own circumstances. Now if we think indeed that God's Spirit is bound to do or say nothing but what suits a Christian — that He has never written anything but what is the expression of His power in magnifying Christ to our souls — I grant you we could not have the song of Deborah. But then we could not have had the Old Testament as it is. The same principle that would supplant this song and deny its inspired character would, in my opinion, decapitate and destroy the Old Testament itself. It would leave us nothing at most but a few shreds of prophecy pointing to the Lord Jesus. It would dislocate, nay, blot out, the whole texture of the old oracles of God. The Spirit of God did work, but He wrought according to the state of the people of God then; and who but an infidel can deny the wisdom and the goodness of God in such a guidance?

The truth is that the only way to understand or to enjoy the Bible is the very same that we need to magnify God where we are now, and the same unbelief that sits criticising the Old Testament loses all power according to the New. The same men that find fault with the song of Deborah do not understand much better what the Spirit of God is in the Christian and in the church of God now. I am convinced that the darkness of unbelief which is allowed thus to dishonour the Old Testament meets its just retribution. What do such detractors really know of St. Paul or St. John? Nothing as they ought. When we approach the Bible as believers, when we draw near as

those who owe everything to God's grace that reveals to us according to His own wisdom, when we bend down before God as those that are willing to learn and grateful to be taught of Him, what then? The beauty, the excellence, the salutary character of every part of scripture more and more dawn upon our souls, and the very portions that were once difficult because of our (perhaps unconsciously) setting up to judge, when we ought still and always to take the place of learners, turn then into streams of blessing and light and strength for our own souls. Is it not the fact that the texts or whole books of the word of God that, even as believers, we felt our total inability once to read with profit are now what we most of all delight and rejoice in? And can we not therefore draw the simple and just conclusion from this, that if anything else be dim to us — and surely there is still much that is but little and very feebly entered into by our souls — all we want is to be more lowly, to be more thoroughly dependent upon God, who will reveal even this unto us?

In Judges 6 opens the preparation for another and a greater deliverance. On this we must say a few words more before we close. Here undoubtedly the Spirit of God may well prepare us for a larger work and for fuller lessons. It is not a deliverer despatched in a verse, like Shamgar. Neither is it a man that was employed overshadowed by the superior light and even courage of a woman, Barak being small indeed in comparison with Deborah. Here we have the grace of God interfering to raise up a deliverer when the Midianites had reduced the people of God to slavery for seven years. "And the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel: and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made them the dens

which are in the mountains, and caves, and strongholds." They had never been brought so low. To be like wanderers and fugitives in the land of God, in their own land, was a burning disgrace to Israel. But there was a deeper need. They had forgotten Jehovah, and gone over to Baal more than was ever known before: hence also the necessity for awakening to this him whom God would use. What was it before God? Gideon felt this, and he felt it all the more because he knew their servitude to Midian was Jehovah's doing, who was obliged, because of the moral condition of Israel, to reduce His people to so despicable a condition. What must God have felt so to deal with those He loved!

Midian then, "and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them; and they encamped against them, and destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it. And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto Jehovah."

How touching it is, my brethren, to find this so often repeated story! Any one but God would have refused to listen to such a cry, at least from such a people. For had they not over and over sinned, and been chastised, and cried? Had they not gone back, cried, and been delivered; then fallen into sin again, cried again, been delivered again — always crying, always delivered, and always falling back again, into a lower depth than ever? Only God could feel patience and show tender mercy to

such a people. For if they cried under the sore trouble which Jehovah brought on them for their sins, none the less did He answer, grieved for them and pitying them. “And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried unto Jehovah because of the Midianites, that Jehovah sent a prophet unto the children of Israel, which said unto them, Thus saith Jehovah God of Israel, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage; and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all that oppressed you, and crave them out from before you, and gave you their land; and I said unto you, I am Jehovah your God; fear not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but ye have not obeyed my voice. And there came an angel of Jehovah, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abi-ezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites.”

Mark the twofold process of the Lord. He sends first a prophet, then an angel; the one to bring their sin home to their conscience, the other to raise up a deliverer. He loves to extricate His people from the wretched consequences of their failure, but He will have the evil owned first.

Clearly therefore Gideon knew by experience what the state of the people was. His condition was in miniature what that of the people was in general. He was threshing wheat behind a winepress, no doubt for fear of the Midianites. The commonest duty of a man in Israel could not be done without the dread of those mighty and numerous foes; but “the angel of Jehovah appeared unto him, and said unto him Jehovah is with thee, thou mighty man of valour.” Now there is power that goes forth with

the word of Jehovah. What an encouragement to its object! What! the man that was cowering behind the winepress? This to be the choice of God to break the yoke of Midian! What grace on God's part! "And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if Jehovah be with us" — for on that he takes his stand — "if Jehovah be with us" — not merely "with me." He binds the people with the name of Jehovah, not merely with himself — the invariable mark of true faith and love. "If Jehovah be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not Jehovah bring us up from Egypt? but now Jehovah hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites." They were both true. It was Jehovah that had blessed, and it was Jehovah that had delivered into the hands of the Midianites; and that very fact, overwhelming as it was, is precisely what gives confidence. Had it been merely that the Midianites had got the better of Israel, this were nothing for faith, save indeed a denial of Him and of their relation to Him. But it was not so with Gideon. He sees that their affliction was the Lord's doing because of their sin. But the same Jehovah who delivered His people into the hands of the Midianites now said to the trembling son of Manasseh, "Jehovah is with thee, thou mighty man of valour."

A difficulty presented itself to his spirit. His heart was no doubt not without its exercises how all these things could be. It was not that he doubted; but he desired to have it explained. He was realizing the position of things before God; and Jehovah looked upon him, and said, "Go in this thy might." Was not this enough, that Jehovah was with him — the same Jehovah that had delivered over Israel to their foes? The God of Israel declared

Himself with him to deliver them now and to bring to nought the power of the Midianites. “Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee? And he said unto him, Oh, my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house. And Jehovah said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.” He asks a sign, it is true; and Jehovah answers. I am far from denying that there was weakness in the faith of Gideon; nor is it implied that there was not a drawback here as in all the others who have passed before us. But allowing all this, it must be allowed that, after the Lord graciously condescended to his weakness, we find the power of God at work in his heart and ways.

But it is a great lesson to which our attention may be drawn here, that the might by which God works for His glory is in no sense a consciousness of communicated power. Never before had Gideon so felt his own littleness, his family poor, himself the least. And now there is another and deeper feeling. “When Gideon perceived that he was an angel of Jehovah, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord Jehovah! for because I have seen an angel of Jehovah face to face. And Jehovah said unto him, Peace be unto thee, fear not: thou shalt not die.” He was consciously withered up before the presence of God — the habitual effect, as we find in the Old Testament continually, of meeting what is there called the angel of Jehovah. Gideon, strengthened by that which put the sentence of death on his nature, builds an altar in the confidence of the word given him, and calls it Jehovah-shalom. Thus he lays hold of the word of peace, and promptly acts on it; and when once he has done this

alone as a question between him and God, another great moral principle is seen. There is no groundwork for any deliverance according to God, there is no proper basis for His intervention, but the removal of all barriers between God and our souls. This is the prime necessity — peace, then work; but there is no service safe till the person is secured and in peace.

On the other hand, before God can according to His own mind use a servant with strangers or enemies, He will have him begin at home. This is the next thing traceable in Gideon's history. How act abroad if there is sin and dishonour of God in the family? "And it came to pass the same night, that Jehovah said unto him, Take thy father's young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove that is by it: and build an altar unto Jehovah thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down. Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as Jehovah 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." Still it was done. "And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was cast down, and the grove was cut down that was by it, and the second bullock was offered upon the altar that was built. And they said one to another, Who hath done this thing? And when they enquired and asked, they said, Gideon the son of Joash hath done this thing. Then the men of the city said unto Joash, Bring out thy son, that he may die: because he hath cast down the altar of Baal, and because he hath cut down the

grove that was by it. And Joash said unto all that stood against him, Will ye plead for Baal? will ye save him? he that will plead for him, let him be put to death whilst it is yet morning: if he be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar. Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, Let Baal plead against him, because he hath thrown down his altar."

Thus does God honour the uncompromisingness of faith. The will of Jehovah was explicitly declared to Gideon. He had nothing but death to expect, had it not been the will of the Lord; but, come what will, "he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever;" and Gideon was content to abide all consequences. I do not of course say that he could definitely anticipate these blessed words of John to us; but he had the instinctive sense in his soul that there is nothing like obedience; and Jehovah had made His will plain about His own dishonour at home. Indeed the inconsistency would have been enormous of a man's going forth to deal with the heathen enemies of Israel, while Baal was worshipped in his own father's house. No doubt there was the difficulty for a son so boldly to deal with his father's idolatry; and the greater too for one who did not disguise from himself how little he was, as we find when the angel appeared just before, meddling with that which would shock the prejudices of the family and of all around. For nothing wounds more than that which treats their religion as nothing Again, whatever appearances may say, there is nothing so truly humble as obedience; nor is anything so firm as faith. There are many persons who seem to think that man's will is the only thing that is strong. It is a great mistake. Self-will — the action and energy of the flesh — is merely spasmodic; it soon passes away, and this in the measure

of its violence. But “he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.” There is never continuance except in obeying Him. Gideon then went forth in this his might. But his might was shown in his father’s house at home before it could be displayed abroad, and he wins a new name over the false god before a blow is struck at the Midianites, though they are seen now gathered together in Jezreel, for Satan was roused; and the Lord meets again his difficulties, giving him external and repeated tokens, as we see at the end of Judges 6.

The next chapter (Judges 7) shows him in public. The children of Israel gathered round him whose bold stand for Jehovah would soon be spread abroad; for they well knew how sinful it was for any, and for Israel above all, to worship Baal. “And Jehovah said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many.” What a blessed thing it is to have One to guide us who is entirely independent of circumstances! “The people that are with thee are too many.” Never before in going to war in this world was there heard such a plea. Though the principle might be seen perhaps in the selection from the twelve tribes under Phinehas to fight against the same Midianites before Moses was gathered to his people, they were, in God’s estimate, too many to go to war with a host like grasshoppers for multitude (Num. 31). It is good to have God to judge for us, whether in peace or war, service or suffering. “The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me. Now therefore go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead.” This was a distinct appeal to His own

word in Deut. 20:8: “And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren’s heart faint as well as his heart.” How precious thus to find God recalling His word by Moses! “And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand.”

But they are not few enough for the purpose of the Lord. “And Jehovah said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many; bring them down unto the water, and I will try them for thee there: and it shall be, that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I say unto thee, This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go.” The root of the mischief, which really had brought in declension, was that the people, ceasing to value what God had given, were not willing at first to contend for it, and that, having accustomed themselves to the presence of Jehovah’s enemies, they had fallen into their evil ways against Himself. The great moral lesson they had then to learn was what Jehovah is for His people. For Israel it was no question of numbers, or munitions of war; but of Jehovah, who would use and bless those only who have confidence, whose heart is to Himself. So it was brought down to a strange but searching test. “Everyone that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth” — not those that took the water with ease as at ordinary times, and like men. From this very thing, from themselves and their comforts, they wanted to be delivered. It was not here only a question of faint-heartedness, but of entire devotedness to the Lord and the work before them. We may not walk as men, nor

entangle ourselves with the affairs of life, to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ. The evil was in thinking that it was merely a question of man against man, whereas the faith that counts on God is willing even to be counted as a dog before Him. Those God would use must not seek their own ease or honour. They were men so hanging on the word and work of the Lord that to partake of the refreshing by the way, though it might be in the most hasty fashion, no better than a dog might, seemed intuitively good enough for them: their hearts were set on His task before them, and not on their own things.

This then at once severed those who cared not for themselves, but for what was given them by God to be done, from the men who, even upon such an occasion, could stay to consult their own habits, their own liking, their own ease. This I believe to be just the truth intended here for our instruction: with a little handful of that sort Gideon was to do his errand. “By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place.”

Then comes another remarkable dealing of God with other instruction for us. “Jehovah said unto Gideon, Get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thine hand.” He was encouraged, though it was a service of immense danger in appearance; but what is this to the Lord? Ours is only to obey. “But if thou fear to go down, go thou with Phurah thy servant down to the host: and thou shalt hear what they say; and afterward shall thine hands be strengthened to go down unto the host. Then went he down with Phurah his servant unto the outside of the armed men that were in the host.”

There is no book in the world comparable to the Bible for transparency. The writer was inspired to tell as calmly of Gideon's fear as of his courage. "If thou art afraid, go down with Phurah." Who but God could speak out so simply? He was afraid, and takes with him the servant. Where is the honour of the successful warrior? It belongs to God alone. "And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seaside for multitude. And when Gideon was come, behold, there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along. And his fellow answered and said, This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host. 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 Jehovah hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian. And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers." The cake of barley bread was no great thing in itself or in men's eyes. But so it is that God delivers, not by wit, power, or wealth, but by His Spirit working through a despised instrument. And Gideon worships as he hears. His confidence is in the Lord. He was less then ever in his own eyes: God filled them, and His people too had therefore a great place: "Jehovah hath delivered into your (not my) hand the host of Midian." Yet we know that their actual state was as

low as their number within was small. All turns on Jehovah; but these were His ways. And Gideon's faith saw it all done.

The two arrive about the beginning of the middle watch. "And they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands." Strange mode of fighting this — to us how full of suggestive instruction! We too have to bear testimony, not of ourselves, but of Christ, as they blew with trumpets; we too must have death working in us, if life in those we serve, and the earthen vessels breaking; and thus it is that the light can shine out brightly. For it is not only that we see the light of God's glory in Christ; our God would have it reflected more and more, as we are changed into Christ's image, beholding it, as by the Lord the Spirit. And the war-cry was heard, "The sword of Jehovah, and of Gideon." "And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried and fled. And the three hundred blew their trumpets." It was not their skill, nor their prowess, but their testimony, that was used, their loud testimony of Jehovah's mission, Jehovah's will, Jehovah's deliverance of the Midianites into their hands.

But if faith does not wait for numbers, nor rest on them in the battles of the Lord, others follow when the enemy has received a manifest defeat. "And the men of Israel gathered themselves together out of Naphtali, and out of Asher, and out of all Manasseh, and pursued after the Midianites. And Gideon sent messengers throughout all mount Ephraim," and accordingly victory was complete.

Many, however, who had no heart for the work when all was depression, are forward to complain of the

conquerors. “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. And he said unto them. What have I done now in comparison of you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer.” (Judges 8) It is admirable to find one who knows how to meet the chafed spirits, even of those who have done little to secure the victory. These men of Ephraim no doubt helped, and Gideon only said what was quite true. Everybody knows, I presume, that the main destruction of an army is far more when the battle is turned than when it rages. Those who fall during the struggle are comparatively few, while those who are cut down when it has become a flight may be very many; and therefore one can see how the mild answer of Gideon might be strictly true; but we do well to weigh the lowliness of it, and the willingness of him who bore the brunt, exposed to all danger, to take the least and give the highest place now that God had wrought for His people. Alas! it is as sweet as it is rare.

“And Gideon came to Jordan, and passed over, he, and the three hundred men that were with him, faint, yet pursuing.” Here we have another lesson, bright as to the conquerors, but a painful one as to others. The Christian has a divine spring of power against weariness; but are we always thus “pursuing”? Paul was. “This one thing I do.” How little it was valued in Gideon! He asked for refreshment for the three hundred; but he meets with taunt and reviling, and this Gideon remembers to their cost another hour; for it was heartless. The victory once secured, that which was needed to vindicate the outrage on Jehovah’s people in the execution of His work has its

grave place; for Israel was called to be the theatre for the display of God's earthly righteousness, which is the true explanation of all these things that are sometimes difficult to the Christian mind, if uninstructed in the difference of dispensations.

The chapter does not conclude without another and a serious warning. The request of Gideon becomes a snare to himself and his house. How painful this is, my brethren! How often we see that the result of the victory of faith is too great for the faith that won it! Gideon refused for himself or for his son to reign. "Jehovah," as he said simply and strikingly, "shall rule over you." But he desired the earrings of the prey, and made an ephod of the gold, etc., "and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house." Peace followed, and Gideon died in a good old age, leaving seventy sons, beside one born of a concubine. But "it came to pass as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baal-berith their god. And the children of Israel remembered not Jehovah their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side: neither showed they kindness to the house of Jerubbaal, namely Gideon, according to all the goodness which he had showed unto Israel." Thus manifest and lamentable was the breakdown in the faith that had done such things. For it was an effort to preserve by a form what can only be sustained by grace from the same source. How blessed for the Christian, for the church, is the presence of the Holy Spirit with us for ever! How inexcusable for Christendom the attempt to perpetrate some apostolic ephod, a snare to all that bear

the name of the Lord! Nothing can stand but the Spirit of God, nothing take its place; for He alone secures the glory of Christ in the church. This consequently is the true article of the church that stands, however momentous justification by faith is to the individual believer. And a form, however well-intentioned even, is no preservation from the grossest idolatry, but rather paves the way for any or every idol, as we see here after Gideon's death among the children of Israel, quick to forget Jehovah and the vessel of His delivering grace. Alas! the beginning of the mischief was in Gideon's house, and even in himself. One is worthy, One alone.

Second Lecture: Judges 9 - 21

My object being no more than a sketch, as most of you know, I desire to say but a few words on such of the chapters as bear a similar character to that which has been already pointed out in the early portion of the book. We see that God was faithful; but the fidelity even of those whom He used in deliverance is another matter. Their faith was owned; but it was of a sadly mingled and imperfect character. Indeed this is found regularly throughout the book of Judges. In the case of Abimelech it is seen most conspicuously, yet is it always true, though it may be occasionally more marked than at other times. In him we have a man who took advantage of the reputation for the power of God that had wrought by his father; but where anything of the sort is used for self, and not for God, bitter disappointment must be the result; and if there be anything more marked than another in his history, it is the solemnity of divine retribution. This is always true in the ways of God. What a man sows he must reap: if he sows to the flesh, of the

flesh he reaps corruption. And this is just as true of the saint as of the man who rashly or lightly bears the name of the Lord Jesus. In the latter case it is nothing but flesh, which becomes manifest in the long run; but even in the case of him who is truthful, whatever is carnal, whatever lets out that nature which is already judged, the confession of whose judgment is the very starting-point of a Christian, but which it is his calling to act upon and treat as a dead and condemned thing to the end — if he forgets this, then, in the measure in which he does so, it brings in that which the Lord must infallibly deal with. Now; in Abimelech's history we see that he had begun with the most intense selfishness — taking an utterly reckless advantage of those who had a better claim to represent their father than himself. The end was that he met with the judgment least of all to be coveted by man, most of all detestable to a proud spirit like his own. (Judges 9)

On Tola and Jair (Judges 10) we need not pause; but in Jephthah again we have solemn issues brought out But here again is found the same brand of what was worthless or untowardly in the instruments that God used in a day of declension "Jephthah the Gileadite," we are told in Judges 11, "was a mighty man of valour, and he was the son of an harlot." Abimelech was no doubt the son of a concubine; but here we descend lower still. Nevertheless he "was a mighty man of valour," who lived a kind of freebooter's life — the chief of a reckless company of outcasts and desperadoes. So low were things now in Israel, that even this man becomes an instrument of God's deliverance; and so evidently in all this was God stamping on the people His moral sentence of their state. He could not in their then condition

employ vessels of greater moral worth. He plainly intended to testify to their state by the agents whom He used for their good. (Judges 11)

Nevertheless we learn even from the lowest He deigned to work by that, while doubtless there was a most humiliating condition in Israel, God's rights were maintained for His people. Jephthah takes the greatest pains to prove, when he comes forward, that he has clear right on his side. This is an important principle. It was not merely that the people were unworthily oppressed by the Ammonites, but Jephthah does not venture to go to war, nor does the Spirit of God clothe him with energy for the conflict, until he had the certainty in his soul that the cause was a righteous one, and this founded upon the dealings of God with the children of Israel and with Ammon respectively. This is exceedingly instructive.

Nothing justifies, in the work of the Lord, a departure from His mind or will. It does not matter what the line taken may be, no good end will ever be owned by God unless the way be according to His word and righteousness. Even the man who above all others perhaps illustrates the danger of rash vows in the joy of a divine deliverance, and that affecting him in the nearest possible way, was the very reverse of rash in entering on his service for the people of Israel. Hear what a solemn appeal Jephthah makes to the elders before he acts. Undoubtedly the desire of his own importance and aggrandizement is but too manifest; but when he enters upon the service itself, he not only takes care that the right should be felt by Israel to be indisputably with them, but that this should be known and pressed on the conscience of his adversary.

So he “sent messengers unto the king of the children of Ammon, saying, What hast thou to do with me, that thou art come against me to fight in my land? And the king of the children of Ammon answered unto the messengers of Jephthah, Because Israel took away my land, when they came up out of Egypt, from Arnon even unto Jabbok, and unto Jordan: now therefore restore those lands again peaceably.” The answer however was incorrect. The king of the Ammonites did not speak candidly. It was not true that the children of Israel had taken those lands as was pretended. The Ammonites had lost them before the children of Israel took them from others whom they might lawfully attack and despoil; but God had forbidden that the children of Israel should spoil either Ammon, or Moab, or Edom. God held even to the distant tie of connection — a most striking proof and witness of the ways of our God. There had been in ancient times a link between Ammon and Moab with the children of Israel: a cloud of dishonour and of shame overhung them; yet a link there was, and God would have this at least to be never forgotten. Years might pass, hundreds of years roll over, but moral principles and even natural relationships do not lose their power. And it was of the greatest importance that His people should be trained in this. The lands might be good pasture, the temptation great, the provocation given by Moab or Ammon very considerable. On human grounds there might be a just right of conquest; but all this would not do for God, who must decide everything even in the battles of His people. God does not permit Israel, because this one or that is an enemy, to take the place of enemies to them. He stands to it that they must never have an enemy unless it be God’s enemy. What an honour when Israel are permitted to take up only the

cause of God! They are not allowed to enter on campaigns out of their own head. What courage and confidence may they not then cherish!

So it was pressed on Israel then. The king of Ammon had forgotten, or had never enquired after the real righteousness of the case. What he felt was that these lands had once been his lands, and that the children of Israel now possessed them. More he knew not, nor wished to learn. But this was far from the true and full history of the case. The fact was that some other races and peoples had dispossessed the Ammonites of these lands. Now it was perfectly lawful for the children of Israel to treat them as intruders and strangers, who had no rightful claim, no valid plea why they should be restored. For we must remember carefully this, in looking at the dealings of God with the holy land and with His people Israel, God had always destined the land of Palestine for the chosen people. Had not He a right to do so? The Canaanites might have retreated from it; the Ammonites might have sought other lands. The world was large enough for all. There was at this time, as at every other, ample space for occupying here and there; and if the reason why they did not move was because they cared not for the word of God, they must take the consequences of their unbelief. They did not believe that God would enforce His claims. They had no faith in the promise on God’s part to Abraham or to his seed. But the time came when God would act upon that promise, and when those that disputed the title of God must pay the penalty.

Undoubtedly the children of Moab, Ammon, and Edom, for reasons of relationship at least, were exempted from the sentence to which God subjected the races of

Canaan. If some of these had taken away lands that belonged to the Ammonites, it was open and perfectly lawful in this case for Israel to put these intruders out of the land, and to take possession of whatever was their spoil. If Ammon could or would not seek to recover it previously, they had no title to claim now from Israel. It was on this principle then that Jephthah pleads the righteousness of the cause that was now to be decided by the sword between Ammon and Israel. Therefore is it explained with great care.

“Thus saith Jephthah,” was his answer, “Israel took not away the land of Moab, nor the land of the children of Ammon.” Nothing justifies departure from the word of God. It matters not what is the apparent good that is to be gained, or what may be the mischief that is to be avoided: the only place that becomes a believer is obedience. So says he: “When Israel came up from Egypt, and walked through the wilderness unto the Red Sea, and came to Kadesh, then Israel sent messengers unto the king of Edom, saying, Let me, I pray thee, pass through thy land; but the king of Edom would not hearken thereto. And in like manner they sent unto the king of Moab: but he would not consent: and Israel abode in Kadesh.”

And what did Israel? Resent it? Not so: they took the insult patiently; and these were persons who were called to be the witnesses of earthly righteousness. How much more are we, brethren, who are the followers of One who knew nothing but a life of continual sorrow and shame for the glory of God! This is our calling; but we see even in Israel that outside the limits, the very narrow limits, in which God called them to be the executors of divine vengeance even they calmly bear

and brook as they best might; and there were those that understood the mind of God, and knew perfectly well why they were not so called to do. They took it quietly, and passed along their way. “Then they went along through the wilderness, and compassed the land of Edom, and the land of Moab, and came by the east side of the land of Moab, and pitched on the other side of Arnon.” It was a great way about, and extremely inconvenient. Who doubted the unfriendliness of Moab and of Edom? It was known, but intended to be so; but for all that the children of Israel, as Jephthah showed, would not go against the word of God.

Now the moral importance of this was immense, for if they were simply doing the will and word of God, who could stand in their way? The object of the king of Ammon was to put the children of Israel in the wrong. Jephthah proves in the most triumphant way that the right was all on their side. “And Israel sent messengers unto Sihon king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon; and Israel said unto him Let us pass, we pray thee, through thy land into my place.” They did not wish to quarrel with the king of Heshbon, Amorite as he was, unless he were actually in the holy land; but it was of God that these Amorites, to their own ruin, would not let them pass peaceably through. This again makes the case of Israel still more clear, because it might have been supposed that surely the Amorite must be put out of the way, seeing that that most wicked race was devoted expressly to destruction. But no — “Sihon trusted not Israel to pass through his coast: but Sihon gathered all his people together, and pitched in Jahaz, and fought against Israel. And Jehovah God of Israel delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they

smote them: so Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that country. And they possessed all the coasts of the Amorites, from Arnon even unto Jabbok."

There was the plain and sure title of Jephthah. Israel had not taken these lands from Ammon at all They had taken them from the Amorite. If the Amorite got them from Ammon in the first instance, as was no doubt the fact, this was an affair not between Israel and Ammon, but between Ammon and Sihon. It was the business of the Ammonites to have defended their claims as best they could against the Amorites. If they could not make them good, if they had lost their land, and could not recover it, what had Israel to do with their affairs? The children of Israel were in no way responsible for it. They had won the land by the provoked fight which the Amorite had drawn them into. They had sought peace, and Sihon would have war. The result was that the Amorite lost his land. Thus in fact Sihon had assailed the Israelites against their will, who had taken the land from him. The title of the children of Israel therefore to that land was indefeasible.

God Himself had ordered things so. He knew right well that the presence of the Amorites upon their skirts would be a continual snare and evil. He permitted that there should be no confidence in the peaceable intentions of Israel, for the very purpose of putting them in possession of the land. Thus the king of Ammon had lost his old claim, and had no present title to question Israel's right of conquest. "So now." says Jephthah, "Jehovah God of Israel hath dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel, and shouldest thou possess it?" The king of Ammon might assail the

Israelites, and renew the arbitrament of the sword, but he was unrighteous in demanding the land from Israel. “Wilt not thou possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess? So whomsoever Jehovah our God shall drive out from before us, them will we possess.”

After having thus completely refuted his claim over the land on the ground of its being Ammonite, whereas in point of fact it had been won from them by the Amorite, and as such had passed into Israel’s hand, now he gives them a warning from the blows that God had inflicted on a mightier king than himself. “Art thou any thing better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? did he ever strive against Israel, or did he ever fight against them, while Israel dwelt in Heshbon and her towns, and in Aroer and her towns, and in all the cities that be along by the coasts of Arnon, three hundred years?” Thus it was proved that Israel had, in whatever light regarded, a valid title, not only from long-continued possession, but from a right founded on their conquest of one of the enemies devoted to destruction by God Himself, but an enemy who had wantonly attacked them, when they would have left him unharmed, as they would the Ammonite now. In every point of view therefore the ground taken by Israel was solid, and could not be disputed righteously. The king of Ammon had no just claim whatever Being thus proved to be in arms without right, the king of Ammon was only so much the more fierce, as is usual with people when convicted of a wrong to which their will is engaged. “Then the Spirit of Jehovah came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon. And Jephthah vowed a vow unto

Jehovah." Here the rashness of the man enters the scene, the consequence of which is a display of what was painful in the extreme. We have had the power of God acting in deliverance, but man alone is incapable even of a safe vow to Jehovah; and who could fail to foresee the bitter fruit of rashness here? Man is as weak and erring as God is mighty and good: these two things characterise the book from beginning to end. So in this rash vow says Jephthah, "it shall be that whatsoever," etc. The same word means whosoever. There is no difference as to form. I do not myself doubt that it was put in the broadest way. "It shall be that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me." He could, if he had reflected, hardly expect an ox or a sheep to walk out of the house. It was quite evident therefore that Jephthah was guilty of the greatest rashness in his vow. "Whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be Jehovah's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." What came out we know too well. It was his daughter and I do not doubt that he, in his determined unbending spirit, fulfilled his vow.

All are aware there are a great many who try to explain the difficulty away or soften it down. They need not be at the trouble. Scripture does not in any way vouch for the immaculateness of those even who wrought in faith. It does not throw a veil, as man loves to do, over that which is uncomely and distressing in those that bear the name of the Lord; especially as the very object the Spirit of God has here in view is to show the frightful results of a vow so little weighed before God, not at all drawn from His guidance. On the other hand, is there not real beauty in the obscurity in which Scripture treats a

matter so painful? We know that men make it a question for ingenious minds to speculate on. The spiritual man understands how it was. As the vow was without God, so an issue was permitted most offensive to the Holy Spirit. We can easily therefore comprehend how the holy wisdom of Scripture avoids details on a fact so contrary to the mind of God, as a man dealing thus with a human being, yea, with his own daughter. It seems to me then that the reserve of the Holy Spirit is as strikingly according to God as the rashness of Jephthah is a solemn warning to man.

After this we find how the pride of the men of Ephraim takes fire at a person of such an origin as Jephthah, spite of the signal deliverance by his means for Israel, so that they come forth to fight. (Judges 12) Jephthah might little desire such a conflict; nevertheless, where do we see meekness, where patience? And be assured, brethren, that in an evil world patience is morally much beyond power. Thus we may find the most striking manifestations of power in men as disorderly as the Corinthian Christians; but the same persons are a plain proof that it is a far harder thing to do the will of the Lord, and harder still to suffer according to God, than to work any miracles whatever.

The truth of all we find in our Lord Jesus. He was the power of God and the wisdom of God; but what shall we say of His obedience on the one hand, and on the other of His patience? Others may have shown as mighty works, as great displays of power; nay, even the blessed Lord Jesus Himself said, “Greater works than these shall ye do.” But where was there such devotedness in doing His Father’s will? and where such a sufferer? Indeed, for Him to obey in such a world must have been suffering It

could not be otherwise. As long as the world is under the usurped rule of the enemy of God, the path of obedience must always be one of suffering, and this, I may add, increasingly, as we see in Him. Jephthah knew little if anything of this; so the result was, that the Ephraimites, in their pride, meddled with this rude warrior, who dealt with them, we may be very sure, not more mildly than with his own daughter. He not only turned with the grossest insults on their speech, but fell on themselves, and slew at the passage of Jordan forty and two thousand men of one of the chief tribes of Israel. Such then was the bloody crisis at which a deliverer of Israel arrives in his unsparing resentment. Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon follow.

In the next chapter (Judges 13) we begin a new kind of instrument God raised up for His purpose; and in this case the state of the people was such that God severs him to Himself as a Nazarite. A stronger proof there could not be desired, that the people, as a whole, were far from God. In all ordinary cases a Nazarite was one who had taken a peculiar vow of separation to God, but lasting only for a short time. In the instance before us it was an extraordinary Nazariteship, stretching through the whole life. But what a Nazarite was Samson! Outwardly indeed he was separate. We have here one of the strangest and most humbling of histories recorded in Scripture, and withal singularly marking that very truth that we have so often ere this referred to: how little moral strength keeps pace with physical power as it wrought in and by Samson. Of all the deliverers that grace ever raised up, there was not one who for personal prowess was to be compared with Samson; but of all those, where was the man who fell so habitually

below even that which would have disgraced an ordinary Israelite? Yet was he a Nazarite from his mother's womb! It seems therefore that the two extremes of moral weakness and of outward strength find each its height in this extraordinary character.

But we must look a little into the great principles of divine truth that meet us in weighing the history of Samson. His very birth was peculiar, and the circumstances too before it; for there never had been as yet a time when Israel had been so enslaved; and undoubtedly the deliverer, as we have traced regularly hitherto, so here again to the last, is seen to be according to the estate of the people, with whatever might or success God might be pleased to clothe him. "And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of Jehovah; and Jehovah delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years." It was a long time, we might have justly thought, in the days of Gideon, to have known seven years' subjection; but we hear of a far longer period in the case of the Philistines, the hottest and most pertinacious of the hostile neighbours of Israel, and so much the more galling as being within their border. For forty years the people groaned under their hard mastery. We shall find too that Samson's feats of power, great as they were, in no way broke the neck of Philistine oppression. For on the contrary after Samson's days, the sufferings of the children of Israel reached even a higher degree than they had ever attained under Samson or before.

However this may have been, we may notice first the quarter whence deliverance was to come: "There was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites." It was ordered of God that it should spring from that tribe,

which was more than any other marked, not merely by a weakness that portended danger to themselves, as we shall see, but by a moral laxity which would finally afford a suited subject, as indeed from the beginning it had been intimated prophetically in the last words of their father Jacob a-dying, for the fatal result of departure and apostasy from God. Of this tribe Samson was born.

The circumstances also were highly remarkable. “His wife was barren, and bare not. And the angel of Jehovah appeared unto the woman” with the promise that a child should be born, at the same time enjoining that she was to drink no wine nor strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing; and that, when the child was born, no razor was to come upon 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.”

There was another whom God would employ at a later date to destroy the power of the Philistines, a man of another spirit, and of a hand very different from Samson’s. I speak of course of David, the son of Jesse. Whatever might be wrought now was but the beginning of deliverance for Israel. God would magnify His power, but only as a witness now and then; nothing more. Anything like full deliverance must await that day, itself a type of the day of Jehovah.

The woman then tells her husband of the angel’s visit, and they both entreat Jehovah, Manoah particularly, that the man of God might be sent again. Jehovah listens, and His angel appears to the woman, who summons her husband, when both see the angel as he repeats his message with its solemn injunction. Separateness from what was allowed to an Israelite was not only

commanded but made life-long in Samson's case, as I cannot but believe it significant of what was due to God in consequence of the state in which the people of God then lay.

In due time the child was born, "and the Spirit of Jehovah began to move him at times in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol." His chequered history follows. "And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines, and he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife" (Judges 14). His father and mother remonstrate in vain. ''Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines?" Samson was just as self-willed as he was strong. "And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well. But his father and his mother knew not that it was of Jehovah, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines."

Now that the occasion calls for it, one may notice by the way the transparent boldness of Scripture, as wonderfully instructive as the reserve we have already remarked. If man had the writing of the story, would he have dared to speak out thus plainly? I doubt that any believer, without inspiration, would have felt it desirable to write that verse, and many more, as God has done it. If unveiling the fact at all, he would have apologized for it, denounced its evil to clear himself, spoken much perhaps of God's permitting and overruling. Now I am far from denying that it is right for us to feel the pain and shame of Samson's ways. But there is one thing that

God’s Spirit always assumes — the perfect goodness and the unswerving holiness of God. And this, beyond all doubt or fear, we are entitled always to keep before our hearts in reading the Bible.

Never then let the breath of suspicion enter your soul. Invariably, when you listen to the written word of God, range yourself on His side. You will never understand the Bible otherwise. You may be tried; but be assured that you will be helped out of the trial. The day may come when nobody appears to lend you a helping hand. What is to become of you then? Once allow your soul to be sullied by judging those living oracles, and real faith in the Bible is gone as far as you are concerned. If I do not trust it in everything, I can trust it in nothing.

So dangerous is apt to be the reaction against one ever so honest; the more you have trusted, when you begin to doubt, the worse it is apt to be, even with poor erring man, who knows not what a serious thing it is. Nor ought anyone to allow a suspicion until he has the certainty of that which can be accounted for in no way save by guilt. And this, I need scarce say, is still more due on the score of brotherly relation and divine love, not merely on the ground of that which we might expect for our own souls.

But when God and His word are in question, it ought to be a simple matter for a child of God. How often it is ourselves who make the difficulties of which the enemy greedily avails himself against our own souls and His glory! For objections against scripture are always the creation of unbelief. Difficulties, where they exist for us, would only exercise faith in God. The word of God is always in itself not only right, but fraught with light. It

makes wise the simple; it enlightens the eyes. “The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.”

Undoubtedly there are many things in scripture of which we are ignorant; but then we are not entitled to interpret the word of God by ourselves. There is such a thing as to be taught of God. The Holy Ghost is given for this as for other purposes. It may often be doubtless that we are obliged to wait, and a wholesome thing too for our souls it should be. It is well sometimes for all those who teach that they should be obliged to learn; well that they should be forced to feel that they do not know; an excellent moral lesson that they should confess it — not only be conscious of it, but own it; for indeed the necessary claim of scripture is that it be confided in as the word of God, though it does not thence follow that we are competent to explain all. By the Holy Spirit only can we enter in and enjoy.

It is not here meant that there is any special difficulty in that which has been the occasion of these general remarks; still less is it implied that he who speaks makes any pretension to know anything as he ought to know, more than those he sees around him. If through the unction from the Holy One we know all, it is equally true that we all are but learners.

Again, it is not of course any attainment of mine that leads me to speak as I have done now. If I have spoken strongly, it is only, I trust, what becomes every believer. I have taken no ground beyond your own, my brethren; but surely this is a ground that calls you to assert the very same inestimable privilege that I boast as by grace a man of faith. It is not the vanity of setting up oneself

as possessed of exclusive powers or special means of attaining or explaining anything; for I should distrust anyone who pretended to anything of the sort, no matter who or where he might be. But that which does good to every saint and to every soul is the unqualified confidence in God and His word, which, if it does not reproduce itself in hearts purified by faith, at least deals with the consciences of all others till utterly blinded by Satan. Nor are you thus called to believe anything like an extravagance, though it surely would be so if the Bible were a human book, and so to be treated like any other, which after all even infidels do not: witness their occupation with it and zeal against it. Who troubles himself with the Koran or the Shastres, save their votaries?

But scripture claims always to be the word of God — never the word of Isaiah or Ezekiel, of Peter or Paul (1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Peter 3:15, 16); for, whatever the instrument may be, it is as truly God's word as if the Holy Ghost had written it without a single instrumental means. If this be submitted to (and you might more consistently reject the Bible altogether, if you do not submit), one sees the hollowness and falsehood of sitting in judgment upon it: for who can question that to doubt that which comes directly from God Himself would be to take the place, not merely of an unbeliever, but of a blasphemer or an atheist? And if unbelief be probed home, it comes to this: it is a virtual denial of God's veracity, of His revelation, if not of His being.

But returning from this to the simple tale of Samson's life, I take it as the plain fact that God meant us to learn that He saw fit at that time to deliver by an unworthy instrument, by a man who showed how low he was, if

only by the moral incongruity of an Israelitish Nazarite seeking a wife from the fiercest of Israel's uncircumcised enemies. The grossness of such conduct is left to tell its own tale; and yet God, by the man that was thus pursuing his own self-willed course, meant to overrule the occasion for His glory, snapping the more violently the ties which Samson's ungoverned passion and low thoughts induced him to form. The descent is great, when one bearing the name of the Lord slights His word and seeks a path of his own. If God permits him for a season to do his own will, what shame and pain he must reap ere long! Meanwhile the man, morally speaking, is ruined — his testimony to His name being worse than lost. Even if God interfere and produce the direct opposite of the fleshly enjoyment which self-will had sought, it is in no way to the man's praise if God effects his purposes by his acts, spite of wrong and folly. Never indeed is good the fruit of man's will, but of God's. This only gains the day; for it alone is as wise and holy as it is good. I take it therefore, that in the present case there is nothing to stumble the simplest believer, though no doubt there may be to one who knows not God and His word. Alas! how many there are in these days of audacious free-thinking who are disposed to sit in judgment on His word, and give His revelation no credit for telling us the truth as it was and is.

Whatever then might be Samson's motives and conduct, it was the Holy One, as we are told, who prompted him against the aggressors of Israel. "It was of Jehovah, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel. Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath, and came to the vineyards of Timnath: and,

behold, a young lion roared against him." Thus there was an arrest on the road. We know that the spirit of ease and self-indulgence readily finds a lion in the way — can make one where none is; but here was a real lion that roared against the self-willed youth. "And the Spirit of Jehovah" — to some minds a marvellous fact under the circumstances — "came mightily upon him." It is the expression of the agent of divine power — in no way the seal of redemption or the earnest of the inheritance, as we know Him dwelling in us now since the shedding of the blood of Jesus. It was the energy of His Spirit who thought of His people showing out by the way, as we have remarked, in that wayward man the fallen state to which they were reduced by their own sin, with the highest claims outwardly but morally in as low a condition as could then be conceived. "And the Spirit of Jehovah came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand."

Samson stands alone; of Israel none with him, as with the others before him. There was the plainest proof of what God could be, even where there was but one man to work by; but this very fact showed to what a depth was Israel now sunk. It was bad enough when Gideon had only three hundred that God would employ. What was it when there was only one, and such an one as Samson? In order to have communion, we must have some good which is shared together. There was, there could be, none any longer as Israel was.

What a picture of the true state of things! Even his father and mother knew nothing about their son's movements. Everything was out of course. Scanty honour paid he to his parents, but ardently gave himself up to the pursuance of his own plans. Yet was God

behind and above all; and God, deigning to employ even such a man, at such a time, and under such circumstances, to accomplish, or at least to begin, the deliverance of His people.

Samson was afterwards about to put a riddle to the Philistines from this lion. But did he heed the lesson conveyed in the fact himself? Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Treat Satan as Satan when he betrays himself; and what can he do against the name of the Lord? Yet is the victory won by God's Spirit, without anything in the hand; but it is by direct antagonism to the enemy, not by guilty connection with his instruments. Grave truth! Ah! why did not the strong man learn wisdom in the fear of Jehovah, as he again visited the place where his first lesson was given? His victories had then been as holy as they were brilliant; for he surely needed not to have defiled his Nazariteship by an unholy marriage in order to have punished the Philistines.

Alas! we next hear of Samson's visit to the Philistine woman who pleased him well: no small sin for an Israelite, as it is worse for a Christian, to marry one of the world. "And after a time he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcase of the lion: and, behold, there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcase of the lion. And he took thereof in his hands, and went on eating, and came to his father and mother, and he gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion. So his father went down unto the women: and Samson made there a feast; for so used the young men to do." Then follows the story of his companions and the riddle — a riddle which he was clever enough to put, but

which he had little faith to understand or appropriate himself. Is it not evident that Samson feebly knew what God was teaching him by the lion which he slew, and by the lion's carcase which he found with the honey in it? Carried away by his uncurbed feelings (to whatever end God might turn all, for He always governs), he was mighty to act; but as to intelligence, little more than an unconscious instrument. yet did he propose a most instructive riddle, which set forth justly the then condition of the people of God.

In that image we have the enemy in great power, but God infinitely above him, able as well as seeing fit to use the least worthy vessel of His power, and out of the slain enemy to furnish the sweetest refreshment. How triumphantly has it been done in Christ our Lord, but in how different a way! Absolutely immaculate Himself, He was made sin for us, that we might become God's righteousness in Him who for us by death annulled him that had the power of death, and gave us out of that defeat our unfailing comfort. Bright contrast between Samson and the man that overthrew Satan on that cross where He Himself reached the very climax of weakness! For He won by no external strength but by suffering. He was crucified in weakness, but rose in the power of God; but there, instead of folly, instead of shame, instead of unhallowed alliance with the enemies of God, how does unsullied perfection shine in Him of whom we boast! The result in the type alas! is that, whatever might be the victory over the lion and whatever the sweetness of the honey, the effort to connect himself with the woman of Timnath turns out no small trouble to the man of might, whose anger was kindled at the treachery which sold his riddle, and, when his wife was given to the

companion he had used as his friend, issued in such vexation for the Philistines as is known to us all. (Judges 15:4, 5)

This again leads to a bitter vengeance of the Philistines on those of Timnath who had served him so ill — the very fate befalling them at last, to escape which at first the woman had lent herself to the basest treachery. (Compare Judges 14:15 with Judges 15:6.) Now it was that God wrought for His glory. He extricated failing Samson from the direct consequences of his sinful association; but He dealt retributively with treachery by the hands of their own people. For “the righteous Lord loveth righteousness”; and in its measure it is very striking to see the way in which this came out even in the case of the worldly uncircumcised enemy. We can all understand righteousness where the ground is clearly sanctioned of God; but is it not also strengthening to our hearts to find that, even where all was dark and faulty, God knows how to give effect to His principles? He has no doubt secrets of grace above all difficulties and wrongs: of this we cannot doubt for a moment; and indeed we have abundant proofs of it here. The earth is destined to be the theatre where God will display righteousness reigning; but even now, while things are out of course, and His enemy is in power, He holds to His own character, owning and using all He can.

After this we see the Philistines the object of the severest chastisement from Samson, who smote “them hip and thigh with a great slaughter, and went down and dwelt at the top of the rock Etam.” There he encounters a new trial, which sets before us the state of Israel in the most painful light. Is it not increasingly true that we can go no lower, whether we look at the people of God or the

last deliverer in the book of Judges? Is it possible to conceive a conjuncture of its kind more humiliating? Not till they desired a king like the nations. But alas! even when God gave them one in a man after His own heart, we then trace greater abominations under the lines either of those who broke off in self-will or of those who turned the line of promise to nothing but corruption. We are arrived at the end of this sad history. Picture in imagination, if you can, how God could descend more to meet a degraded people; yet was it just then that the outward exploits against the foe were so brilliant. But if God's people have got into subjection to the world, none are so heartless about, if not bitter against, him who breaks fully with the enemy.

Samson is now absolutely isolated on the rock Etam. There is not a man that sympathizes with him, not even in Judah; yet Judah, we know, was the royal tribe in the purpose of God from the beginning, as in fact its type followed in David. This makes their behaviour the more remarkable here. "Then the Philistines went up, and pitched in Judah, and spread themselves in Lehi. And the men of Judah said, Why are ye come up against us? And they answered, To bind Samson are we come up, to do to him as he hath done to us. 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?" Judah! is this the tribe for the praise of Jehovah? is this the tribe that men praise? Could, at the beck of the Philistine, there be found at once three thousand men so willing and prompt to betray the champion of Israel? three thousand men of Judah! One could understand three thousand men of the Philistines; but to what a deplorable pass in Israel were things

come, when three thousand men of the worthiest tribe were thus obedient to the Philistines, and joined against the strong deliverer to hand him over, bound a prisoner, to the tender mercies of those that hated him and despised them! Is it they who say to Samson, “Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us?” Not only were they in slavery, but content to be slaves, yea, traitors. Could a people descend lower in human things?

Alas! it is no new thing to faith; Jesus knew it to the bottom. It was His brethren who sought to lay hold on Him as beside Himself, His brethren who did not believe on Him. It was not for their lives, but for the truth He confessed, that His own people would have Him die.

“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.” There is little moral elevation in Samson, little in any way to command respect or love. “As they did unto me, so have I done unto them.” We see a man, not without faith indeed (Heb. 11:32), though his confidence was largely in the strength with which God had invested him, rather than in Him who would yet prove Himself the sole source of it; a man who was roused by personal affront and desire of vengeance, not by a solemn duty; a man who slowly and weakly wakes up to any sense of his mission, who is ever too ready to sink down again into the lowest indulgence of fallen nature among the enemy. In short Samson appears to me a man with as little, or as low, an appreciation of what it was to fight the battles of the Lord, as God had been pleased to use in any epoch throughout inspired history. “And they said unto him, We are come down to bind thee, that we may deliver thee into the hand of the Philistines. And Samson said unto them, Swear unto me, that ye will not fall upon

me yourselves." What an opinion he had of them! And as naturally as possible too they take it. They have no shame nor resentment on their part at this accusation of treachery. Their moral condition indeed was the very lowest, below nature itself, towards their deliverer. "And they spake unto him, saying, No; but we will bind thee fast, and deliver thee into their hand: but surely we will not kill thee. And they bound him with two new cords, and brought him up from the rock. And when he came unto Lehi, the Philistines shouted against him: and the Spirit of Jehovah came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands. And he found a new jawbone of an ass and put forth his hand, and took it, and slew a thousand men therewith. And Samson said, With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men."

Nor was this the only intervention of the Lord, but personal succour follows at His hand. For "it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking, that he cast away the jawbone out of his hand, and called that place Ramathlehi. And he was sore athirst, and called on Jehovah, and said, Thou hast given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant: and now shall I die for thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised? But God crave an hollow place that was in the jaw, and there came water thereout; and when he had drunk, his spirit came again, and he revived: wherefore he called the name thereof En-hakkore, which is in Lehi unto this day." We have seen before, from the earlier part of the book, the remarkable manner in which, either personally or in the weapons that were

employed, God was acting mysteriously at this period of Israel's history. To those who discern what a witness it is that the people were far gone from Him here the principle reappears in all its strength — the isolation of the man himself, the circumstances that had brought about the rupture with the foe, the mind of Judah, if not treacherous to the Israelite, cowering before the uncircumcised, and now the strangest of weapons for war that Samson uses against them — the jawbone of an ass.

Never was there failure of divine power with Samson against the foe; but moreover the pitifulness of Jehovah is marked towards His poor servant (for did He disdain when the thirsty man called on Himself, as he cried to God in his distress?). Bad as were the features we have seen, we have to see even worse still; yet he was heard and answered when he called.

We do not find in Samson the generous disinterestedness of grace that could suffer affliction with the people of God, and is willing to be a sacrifice upon that faith. We have nothing like a Moses in Samson. Not without faith, he was a combatant ready to fight the Philistines at any odds. No doubt it was a wonderful display of physical force on the one hand; as on the other those he vanquished were the unrelenting enemies of God's people. Still the overt thing to Samson seems to have been that they were his enemies. This certainly stimulated him though I am far from insinuating no better underneath. But the good was hard to reach or even to discern, the evil abundant and obvious, "And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years." It appears to me that the Spirit of God brings in this little notice of his judging

Israel here in order to show that this is the normal close of his history. Nor should we wonder at it. Not that God did not work mightily afterwards, and even more in his death than in his life. But it need surprise none that the proper history of this judge terminates according to the mind of God here; for what has the Lord to tell in the next chapter? We have seen how grace overruled, broke up an evil association before it was consummated, and gave him righteous ground to take vengeance on the Philistines, followed by his judging Israel for twenty years.

"Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot;" yet here, though fallen lower than ever, we find power put forth under these deplorable circumstances. "And they compassed him in, and laid wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, saying, In the morning, when it is day, we shall kill him. And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that is before Hebron." The man thus went forth in the confidence of his strength, and to outward appearance did things just to make the enemy feel what he could do, with as little exercise toward God as could well be found in one that feared Him.

But again, "And it came to pass afterward that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah." And here we confront not simply the old offence repeated, and in the grossest form of fleshly corruption, but along with it an infatuation as extraordinary as his degradation. This indeed becomes distinctly the moral of the tale. Delilah sells herself to

the Philistine lords to entangle the champion of Israel, now beguiled by his lusts: else the various efforts to seize him must have otherwise opened his eyes to her guile and their murderous malice. But the wages of transgressors are hard, and the guilty man falls under the strange woman's spell again and again. Such is the blinding power of sin; for was he ignorant of her vileness or of his own danger? But the crisis came; and we see that at last, pressed by the harlot's toils, he tells out the secret of Jehovah. On his unshorn locks hung his invincible might by divine will. There was but one thing really involved — obedience. Alas! he fell, as did Adam at the beginning, and all since save one — Christ. But how perfectly He stood, though tried as none ever was or could be but Himself! Do we know what a thing obedience is in God's eyes, even though it may be displayed in the simplest manner? It is the perfection of the creature, giving God His place, and man his own; it is the lowliest, and withal the morally highest place for one here below, as for the angels above. In Samson's case, tested in a seemingly little sign but a sign of entire subjection to God, and this in separation from all others, it was obedience; not so in our case, where we have the highest treasure in earthen vessels, but obedience in everything, and this formed and guided by the Spirit according to the written word, now set in the fullest light, because seen in the person, and ways, and work, and glory of Christ. It is no mere external sign for us who know the Lord Jesus. But the secret of the Lord in our case involves that which is most precious to God and man. We are sanctified both by the Father's word and by Christ glorified on high. But we are sanctified by the Spirit unto the obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus, and are called to obey, as the wife her husband.

Therein are involved thus the very highest and deepest privileges that God could communicate to the souls of men on earth.

To Samson, as we see, it was far different. His secret was to keep his hair uncut, with all strength annexed to it. But if it was his hidden power, it acted also as a test; and now the enemy possessed it, disclosed to a harlot, who had wrung it for gold from his foolish heart. Whatever might have been his low state through unchecked animal nature, whatever his delinquencies before, so long as he kept his secret with God, strength never failed him from God, be the strain what it might. Jehovah at least was — could not but be — true to the secret. But now, as we know, the one whom he had made partner of his sin wheedled it from him that she might sell it to the Philistines.

Degraded to the utmost, Samson becomes their sport as well as their slave. But God was about to magnify Himself and His own ways. “And it came to pass when their hearts were merry that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison house; and he made them sport: and they set him between the pillars. And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them. Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport. And Samson called unto Jehovah, 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.” Again we

see the man, and his character in its weakness is before us, even at that solemn moment.

I am far from doubting that God wrought in him whom He had made the champion of His people. Let no man question that Samson was in prison or that he lost his eyes for nothing. I feel pretty assured that he saw clearer morally without them than he had seen in any sense with them. He had far too often made a wretched use of them in times that were past; and even now, in spite of the work of God in his soul, was there nothing weightier, was there nothing deeper, was there nothing to lament over more than the loss of those two eyes? It was Samson feeling for himself, yet not unpitied of the Lord; for there was One above Samson Who heard. And this is the great point for us that we can and ought to count on. Let us not forget that we have got a nature exempt from nothing we deplore in Samson, and the person that does not believe it may live to prove it, especially if a believer, who should know himself better; whilst he who does take it home to his soul is thereby enabled to judge himself by the Spirit before God.

But what a God we have to do with, as Samson had! and how He magnified Himself in that hour of supreme chagrin and of his deep agony, when he was made to sport before those uncircumcised haters of Israel, and the witness, as they fondly hoped, of their idol's triumph over Jehovah. Samson felt it easier to die for His name than to live thus in Philistia. But God reserved great things for his death. What a figure of, but contrast with, His death who only pursued to that final point His absolute devotedness to the will of God, not doing it only but suffering it to the uttermost, and thus righteously by

His death securing what no living obedience could have touched!

Nevertheless, I have little doubt that, though the dying hour of Samson brought more honour to God than all his life, its manner was in itself a chastening in its character; and in this, too, may one discern a representation of the condition to which Israel had come similar to what was noticed in the life and person of Samson. For what can be more humiliating than that one's death should be more important than one's life? Such was the point to which things had come (an inglorious one it was for those concerned), that the best thing for Israel and Judah, the best thing for God's glory and for Samson himself, was that he should die. "And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life." And his brethren, as we find, came up, took him away, and buried him. "He judged Israel twenty years," is the repetition of the word at this point.

The end of the book — and it is important to make this remark — consists of an appendix. It is in no way a carrying forward of the history. We have come to the close as far as the sequence of persons and of events is concerned. We could not go lower than Samson; but we have what was. exceedingly necessary for us to learn — the fact that the dismally wretched condition that we have seen throughout all the Judges was true even from

early days; and therefore the Spirit of God giving us this as a sort of supplement, or a conclusion, but with such marks of time as show that it was of a comparatively early date (and this can be proved before we have done with the book), is, I think, of considerable interest and importance. I presume that the reason why these incidents are not given before in the order of time may have been that, if inserted earlier, it would have completely interrupted the course of the history, and the main instruction of the book of Judges. It is only another proof of what we have always to assume in reading the Bible — that not only the things given are divine, but that the arrangement, even when they look somewhat disorderly, is just as divine as the communication itself. There is not a single jot in the Scriptures that God has written or ordered which is not worthy of Himself; nor is there the least possibility of improving either.

Here then we have certain facts, apart from the historic course, introduced in these words: “There was a man of mount Ephraim.” The great point of the preface is that “in those days there was no king in Israel” — the opening words of Judges 18. “And in those days the tribe of the Danites.” It is the Danites again; only the account of Samson is chronologically at the close, whereas the new tale, as we have remarked, was comparatively early.

There was then “a man of mount Ephraim whose name was Micah,” who, not satisfied with carrying out the impiety of his mother in making a graven and a molten image of silver dedicated to Jehovah, for this purpose gets a Levite to be consecrated as his priest. What avails the show of Jehovah’s name, or form of consecrating a Levite to be priest? Ceremony is easy and attractive to the flesh, and there may be the more, as there usually is,

where there is least power or reality. It is at least certain that the whole business was heinously evil, and none the less because Micah settles down with the persuasion, “Now know I that Jehovah will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest” (ver. 13).

Judges 18 shows that the moral condition, especially of the priest-Levite, was as bad as the religious state. His heart was glad of a better living and of a larger sphere (verses 19, 20), as he goes off from the house of Micah with the lawless children of Dan to blot out Laish with fire and sword, and call their new city after their own name, where the graven image was set up, and a succession that failed not till the day of the captivity of the land; for error takes root faster, and bears fruit more luxuriantly as well as permanently than the truth.1 Yet there is little reason to suppose that the exile of the land means Shalmaneser’s, but rather under the Philistines; for it was merely all the time the house of God was in Shiloh. There being no king is in contrast with other lands which had kings, as Israel themselves subsequently. (Compare Ps. 78:60, 61) Such are the prominent points of instruction in this appendix. The first and gravest departure is that Jehovah could be so forgotten and so shamelessly dishonoured as to set up in His name a rival; and the more seriously it was set about, so much the worse. It was flying in the face of His law and word to have an idol; it was adding profane insult to enter on its worship with such ceremony as to get a Levite consecrated priest in order to invest it with solemnity. We have seen the political confusion: here is the religious aspect of Israel so soon after entering the holy land!

Is it then a matter of wonder that men went wrong in early days under the Christian profession? The danger was incomparably greater where the trial was to stand to the truth fully revealed and to walk in the Spirit, and not subjection to commandments and ritual observances. The ruin of Christianity was when two systems so distinct got confounded. And be assured that if the people of God fail in their responsibility to God, they are not to be trusted elsewhere. I am not speaking of what men of the world may be, for they may be conscientious and honourable in their own way; but it is different with God's people. Never trust those that bear the Lord's name, if they are false to Him. The case before us, in Judges 17, 18, is one where God was openly, deliberately, and systematically dishonoured.

But there follows a second tale of excessive atrocity in a moral way, which begins in Judges 19. in terms expressly similar to the beginning of Judges 18: "And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite sojourning on the side of mount Ephraim, who took to him a concubine out of Bethlehem-judah." The fact which comes out first is that Gibeah of Benjamin was scarce better than Sodom or Gomorrah, on which Jehovah rained fire and brimstone for their uncleanness. I need not dwell on the deplorable details. Suffice it to say that even in such a state the immediate feeling of the common conscience in Israel (roused, it is true, by an awful appeal to the twelve tribes) could not but reply that "there was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds." So it

was. “Then all the children of Israel went out, and the congregation was gathered together as one man.”

Be it remarked, that what drew out their unanimous condemnation was not an outrage done to God’s name. Where was the just horror at the idolatry of Micah? Contrariwise it was courted and continued down to the captivity. Men then, as now, feel not for a lie or a libel of God; they are sensitive when their own rights are touched. But He knows how to wake them up from such disgraceful insensibility. Therefore does the second part of the appendix (Judges 19, 21) find a place directly afterwards. And we see that those who cared not for the injured name of Jehovah have all their feelings drawn out when man was wronged. But God takes means to make them feel what such a state comes to. O what a mercy it is to have God to take care of our walk! But, in order for us to know the sweetness of that care, it becomes us to care for Him, His name and glory. Not as if He could not care for His own; but our strength, comfort, and blessing are in His name. In Him we may confide, who loves us to the end. Should we not then rejoice in the Lord? The truest deliverance from self is in that work where all was judged, and evil put away for ever. Then can we joy in Him, and it is our strength for all service, and is the spring of worship. There is nothing good without His name.

Alas! how the very thought of Jehovah’s name seems lost at this time among the children of Israel. Their keenest feelings were in favour of the Levite and his concubine, wounded to the quick by the abominations of the men of Gibeah; and therefore, whatever of human affection may be in evidence, we certainly learn how little faith Jehovah could then find in the land of Israel. As man

then was so prominent before their minds, so also their revenge was merciless to the bitter end. God was in none of their thoughts. They spread abroad the revolting tale; they readily respond to the call for their advice and counsel. The result is that “the people rose as one man, saying, We will not any of us go to his tent, neither will we any of us turn into his house. But now this shall be the thing which we will do to Gibeah; we will go up by lot against it; and we will take ten men of an hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and an hundred of a thousand, and a thousand out of ten thousand, to fetch victual for the people, that they may do, when they come to Gibeah of Benjamin, according to all the folly that they have wrought in Israel. So all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, knit together as one man. And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, What wickedness is this that is done among you? Now therefore deliver us the men, the children of Belial, which are in Gibeah, that we may put them to death, and put away evil from Israel. But the children of Benjamin would not hearken to the voice of their brethren the children of Israel: but the children of Benjamin gathered themselves together out of the cities unto Gibeah, to go out to battle against the children of Israel.”

Undoubtedly the iniquity was beyond measure on the part of the men of Benjamin, and an utter disgrace to God or even to Israel. But there can be no question that the course taken by the men of Israel was calculated to increase the difficulty a thousand-fold. It was purely human. Where was their humiliation and grief before the Lord? They decide on matters first, and the case becomes only another instance of man’s folly in dealing

with evil. Having decided out of their own heads, they then turn to God, and ask Him to bless them in their efforts to exterminate Benjamin. Thus, after having made all their arrangements, “the children of Israel arose and went up to the house of God, and asked counsel of God, and said, Which of us shall go up first?” Is not this an instructive as well as striking fact? Still more is what follows; for God fails not to deal with us on our own ground. According to our folly He may answer us, as well as withhold an answer. But in the end He acts in His own way, which will ever be what we little expect.

Here God had to rebuke the people, even when morally right in the main, until the wrong their state and haste mixed up with it was purged out. In judgment He must have righteousness; but He remembers mercy. It is an instance of the same thing that we have often seen before in other forms. Thus He bids the men of Judah go; but the men of Judah were shamefully beaten, and were forced to weep before Jehovah. This, at least, was right. “Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up and wept before Jehovah until even, and asked counsel of Jehovah. saying, Shall I go up again to battle against the children of Benjamin, my brother?” another point, still more important, going along with it. When we really are found in sorrow, and in circumstances that call for sorrow, before Jehovah, the heart is open to feel for the wrong-doer. They were filled with thoughts of destruction against Benjamin, and the remembrance that he was their brother had not even entered their minds before.

Now, broken down before God who had ordered their defeat, they are made to feel for their brother, guilty as he was, no doubt. Still this became their relationship,

yet the children of Israel have the answer from Jehovah, “Go up against him.” Nevertheless they were beaten the next day; for they must be disciplined before the Lord before He could use them to deal with their brother. “Benjamin went forth against them the second day, and destroyed down to the ground of the children of Israel again eighteen thousand men; all these drew the sword. 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 Jehovah, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before Jehovah. And the children of Israel enquired of Jehovah, for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days.”

Here is the proof of the time when all this occurred. It has been already said to have been an early fact in the history of the “Judges,” and not chronologically near the close of the book. The evidence is stated here very clearly. Phinehas, we know, was alive during the days of the wilderness, being the leader against Midian before Moses died, and one of those that crossed the Jordan. Yet he is still alive when the tragic deed was done which had nearly uprooted the tribe of Benjamin in its results. “And Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days, saying, Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And Jehovah said, Go up; for tomorrow I will deliver them into thine hand.” They had been at length brought down to their right place before God; they had taken the shame to themselves; the Lord had chastised them, and they had needed and deserved it righteously. Now they could deal with guilty Benjamin. We are not in a position to deal with another until God

has dealt with that which is contrary to His name in our own soul; and so it was that the men of Benjamin were utterly smitten and well-nigh exterminated.

The last chapter of the book shows us the ways and means in which their hearts were drawn out, in order to repair the dismal gap which divine judgment had wrought in Benjamin, and indeed in Israel.

1 It is possible that verse 30 may be one of those later additions which Ezra or one of the prophets was inspired to make in putting together at a subsequent epoch the books of Scripture. If this be so, the captivity might be the Assyrian, and not that of the Philistines. But verse 30 seems adverse to this view. There is no difficulty in principle either way.