

THE BOOK OF JUDGES AND RUTH

INTRODUCTION

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DOCTOR WATSON wrote the volume on the Book of Numbers in this series. In the present volume he delineates the outstanding features of what has been called “Israel’s Iron Age.” The Books of Judges and Ruth are rich in character study. Doctor Watson unfolds the lights and shadows with a sense of perspective. The traits of the heroes, heroines and traitors of this tantalizing period of war and settlement stand out in the Biblical narrative. Those stirring times of anarchy and savagery were also relieved by exhibitions of piety and patriotism, as seen in the idyllic charm of the Book of Ruth. All this is vividly expounded by Doctor Watson, with impressive applications to our needs.

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THE BOOK OF JUDGES

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEMS OF SETTLEMENT AND WAR — <070101> JUDGES 1:1-11

IT was a new hour in the history of Israel. To a lengthened period of serfdom there had succeeded a time of sojourn in tents, when the camp of the tribes, half-military, half-pastoral, clustering about the Tabernacle of Witness, moved with it from point to point through the desert. Now the march was over; the nomads had to become settlers, a change not easy for them as they expected it to be, full of significance for the world. The Book of Judges, therefore, is a second Genesis or Chronicle of Beginnings so far as the Hebrew commonwealth is concerned. We see the birth-throes of national life, the experiments, struggles, errors, and disasters out of which the moral force of the people gradually rose, growing like a pine tree out of rocky soil.

If we begin our study of the book expecting to find clear evidence of an established Theocracy, a spiritual idea of the kingdom of God ever present to the mind, ever guiding, the hope and effort of the tribes, we shall experience that bewilderment which has not seldom fallen upon students of Old Testament history. Divide the life of man into two parts, the sacred and the secular; regard the latter as of no real value compared to the other, as having no relation to that Divine purpose of which the Bible is the oracle; then the Book of Judges must appear out of place in the sacred canon, for unquestionably its main topics are secular from first to last. It preserves the traditions of an age when spiritual ideas and aims were frequently out of sight, when a nation was struggling for bare existence, or, at best, for a rude kind of unity and freedom. But human life, sacred and secular, is one. A single strain of moral urgency runs through the epochs of national development from barbarism to Christian civilisation. A single strain of urgency unites the boisterous vigour of the youth and the sagacious spiritual courage of the man. It is on the strength first, and then on the discipline and purification of the will, that everything depends. There must be energy, or there can be no adequate faith, no earnest religion. We trace

in the Book of Judges the springing up and growth of a collective energy which gives power to each separate life. To our amazement we may discover that the Mosaic Law and Ordinances are neglected for a time; but there can be no doubt of Divine Providence, the activity of the redeeming Spirit. Great ends are being served, — a development is proceeding which will by and by make religious thought strong, obedience and worship zealous. It is not for us to say that spiritual evolution ought to proceed in this way or that. In the study of natural and supernatural fact our business is to observe with all possible care the goings forth of God and to find as far as we may their meaning and issue. Faith is a profound conviction that the facts of the world justify themselves and the wisdom and righteousness of the Eternal; it is the key that makes history articulate, no mere tale full of sound and fury signifying nothing. And the key of faith which here we are to use in the interpretation of Hebrew life has yet to be applied to all peoples and times. That this may be done we firmly believe: there is needed only the mind broad enough in wisdom and sympathy to gather the annals of the world into one great Bible or Book of God.

Opening the story of the Judges, we find ourselves in a keen atmosphere of warlike ardour softened by scarcely an air of spiritual grace. At once we are plunged into military preparations; councils of war meet and the clash of weapons is heard. Battle follows battle. Iron chariots hurtle along the valleys, the hillsides bristle with armed men. The songs are of strife and conquest; the great heroes are those who smite the uncircumcised hip and thigh. It is the story of Jehovah's people; but where is Jehovah the merciful? Does He reign among them, or sanction their enterprise? Where amid this turmoil and bloodshed is the movement towards the far off Messiah and the holy mountain where nothing shall hurt or destroy? Does Israel prepare for blessing all nations by crushing those that occupy the land he claims? Problems many meet us in Bible history; here surely is one of the gravest. And we cannot go with Judah in that first expedition; we must hold back in doubt till clearly we understand how these wars of conquest are necessary to the progress of the world. Then, even though the tribes are as yet unaware of their destiny and how it is to be fulfilled, we may go up with them against Adoni-bezek.

Canaan is to be colonised by the seed of Abraham, Canaan and no other land. It is not now, as it was in Abraham's time, a sparsely peopled country, with room enough for a new race. Canaanites, Hivites, Perizzites, Amorites cultivate the plain of Esdraelon and inhabit a hundred cities throughout the land. The Hittites are in considerable force, a strong people

with a civilisation of their own. To the north Phoenicia is astir with a mercantile and vigorous race. The Philistines have settlements southward along the coast. Had Israel sought a region comparatively unoccupied, such might, perhaps, have been found on the northern coast of Africa. But Syria is the destined home of the tribes.

The old promise to Abraham has been kept before the minds of his descendants. The land to which they have moved through the desert is that of which he took earnest by the purchase of a grave. But the promise of God looks forward to the circumstances that are to accompany its fulfilment; and it is justified because the occupation of Canaan is the means to a great development of righteousness. For, mark the position which the Hebrew nation is to take. It is to be the central state of the world, in verity the Mountain of God's House for the world. Then observe how the situation of Canaan fits it to be the seat of this new progressive power. Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, lie in a rude circle around it. From its seaboard the way is open to the west. Across the valley of Jordan goes the caravan route to the East. The Nile, the Orontes, the AEgean Sea are not far off. Canaan does not confine its inhabitants, scarcely separates them from other peoples. It is in the midst of the old world.

Is not this one reason why Israel must inhabit Palestine? Suppose the tribes settled in the highlands of Armenia or along the Persian Gulf; suppose them to have migrated westward from Egypt instead of eastward, and to have found a place of habitation on towards Libya: would the history in that case have had the same movement and power? Would the theatre of prophecy and the scene of the Messiah's work have set the gospel of the ages in the same relief, or the growing City of God on the same mountain height? Not only is Canaan accessible to the emigrants from Egypt, but it is by position and configuration suited to develop the genius of the race. Gennesaret and Asphaltitis; the tortuous Jordan and Kishon, that "river of battles"; the cliffs of Engedi, Gerizim and Ebal, Carmel and Tabor, Moriah and Olivet, — these are needed as the scene of the great Divine revelation. No other rivers, no other lakes nor mountains on the surface of the earth will do.

This, however, is but part of the problem which meets us in regard to the settlement in Canaan. There are the inhabitants of the land to be considered — these Amorites, Hittites, Jebusites, Hivites. How do we justify Israel in displacing them, slaying them, absorbing them? Here is a question first of evolution, then of the character of God.

Do we justify Saxons in their raid on Britain? History does. They become dominant, they rule, they slay, they assimilate; and there grows up British nationality strong and trusty, the citadel of freedom and religious life. The case is similar, yet there is a difference, strongly in favour of Israel as an invading people. For the Israelites have been tried by stern discipline: they are held together by a moral law, a religion divinely revealed, a faith vigorous though but in germ. The Saxons worshipping Thor, Frea, and Woden sweep religion before them in the first rush of conquest. They begin by destroying Roman civilisation and Christian culture in the land they ravage. They appear “dogs,” “wolves,” “whelps from the kennel of barbarism” to the Britons they overcome. But the Israelites have learned to fear Jehovah, and they bear with them the ark of His covenant.

As for the Canaanitish tribes, compare them now with what they were when Abraham and Isaac fed their flocks in the plain of Mamre or about the springs of Beersheba. Abraham found in Canaan noble, courteous men. Aner, Eshcol and Mature, Amorites, were his trusted confederates; Ephron the Hittite matched his magnanimity; Abimelech of Gerar “feared the Lord.” In Salem reigned a king or royal priest, Melchizedek, unique in ancient history, a majestic unsullied figure, who enjoyed the respect and tribute of the Hebrew patriarch. Where are the successors of those men? Idolatry has corrupted Canaan. The old piety of simple races has died away before the hideous worship of Moloch and Ashtoreth. It is over degenerate peoples that Israel is to assert its dominance; they must learn the way of Jehovah or perish. This conquest is essential to the progress of the world. Here in the centre of empires a stronghold of pure ideas and commanding morality is to be established, an altar of witness for the true God.

So far we move without difficulty towards a justification of the Hebrew descent on Canaan. Still, however, when we survey the progress of conquest, the idea struggling for confirmation in our minds that God was King and Guide of this people, while at the same time we know that all nations could equally claim Him as their Origin, marking how on field after field thousands were left dying and dead, we have to find an answer to the question whether the slaughter and destruction even of idolatrous races for the sake of Israel can be explained in harmony with Divine justice. And this passes into still wider inquiries. Is there intrinsic value in human life? Have men a proper right of existence and self-development? Does not Divine Providence imply that the history of each people, the life of each person will have its separate end and vindication? There is surely a reason in the righteousness and love of God for every human experience, and Christian

thought cannot explain the severity of Old Testament ordinances by assuming that the Supreme has made a new dispensation for Himself. The problem is difficult, but we dare not evade it nor doubt a full solution to be possible.

We pass here beyond mere “natural evolution.” It is not enough to say that there had to be a struggle for life among races and individuals. If natural forces are held to be the limit and equivalent of God, then “survival of the fittest” may become a religious doctrine, but assuredly it will introduce us to no God of pardon, no hope of redemption. We must discover a Divine end in the life of each person, a member it may be of some doomed race, dying on a field of battle in the holocaust of its valour and chivalry. Explanation is needed of all slaughtered and “waste” lives, untold myriads of lives that never tasted freedom or knew holiness.

The explanation we find is this: that for a human life in the present stage of existence the opportunity of struggle for moral ends — it may be ends of no great dignity, yet really moral, and, as the race advances, religious — this makes life worth living and brings to every one the means of true and lasting gain. “Where ignorant armies clash by night” there may be in the opposing ranks the most various notions of religion and of what is morally good. The histories of the nations that meet in shock of battle determine largely what hopes and aims guide individual lives. But to the thousands who do valiantly this conflict belongs to the vital struggle in which some idea of the morally good or of religious duty directs and animates the soul. For hearth and home, for wife and children, for chief and comrades, for Jehovah or Baal, men fight, and around these names there cluster thoughts the sacredest possible to the age, dignifying life and war and death. There are better kinds of struggle than that which is acted on the bloody field; yet struggle of one kind or other there must be. It is the law of existence for the barbarian, for the Hebrew, for the Christian. Ever there is a necessity for pressing towards the mark, striving to reach and enter the gate of higher life. No land flowing with milk and honey to be peaceably inherited and enjoyed rewards the generation which has fought its way through the desert. No placid possession of cities and vineyards rounds off the life of Canaanitish tribe. The gains of endurance are reaped, only to be sown again in labour and tears for a further harvest. Here on earth this is the plan of God for men; and when another life crowns the long effort of this world of change, may it not be with fresh calls to more glorious duty and achievement?

But the golden cord of Divine Providence has more than one strand; and while the conflicts of life are appointed for the discipline of men and nations in moral vigour and in fidelity to such religious ideas as they possess, the purer and stronger faith always giving more power to those who exercise it, there is also in the course of life, and especially in the suffering war entails, a reference to the sins of men. Warfare is a sad necessity. Itself often a crime, it issues the judgment of God against folly and crime. Now Israel, now the Canaanite becomes a hammer of Jehovah. One people has been true to its best, and by that faithfulness it gains the victory. Another has been false, cruel, treacherous, and the hands of the fighters grow weak, their swords lose edge, their chariot wheels roll heavily, they are swept away by the avenging tide. Or the sincere, the good are overcome; the weak who are in the right sink before the wicked who are strong. Yet the moral triumph is always gained. Even in defeat and death there is victory for the faithful.

In these wars of Israel we find many a story of judgment as well as a constant proving of the worth of man's religion and virtue. Neither was Israel always in the right, nor had those races which Israel overcame always a title to the power they held and the land they occupied. Jehovah was a stern arbiter among the combatants. When His own people failed in the courage and humility of faith, they were chastised. On the other hand, there were tyrants and tyrannous races, freebooters and banditti, pagan hordes steeped in uncleanness who had to be judged and punished. Where we cannot trace the reason of what appears mere waste of life or wanton cruelty, there lie behind, in the ken of the All-seeing, the need and perfect vindication of all He suffered to be done in the ebb and flow of battle, amid the riot of war.

Beginning now with the detailed narrative, we find first a case of retribution, in which the Israelites served the justice of God. As yet the Canaanite power was unbroken in the central region of Western Palestine, where Adoni-bezek ruled over the cities of seventy chiefs. It became a question who should lead the tribes against this petty despot, and recourse was had to the priests at Gilgal for Divine direction. The answer of the oracle was that Judah should head the campaign, the warlike vigour and numerical strength of that tribe fitting it to take the foremost place. Judah accepting the post of honour invited Simeon, closely related by common descent from Leah, to join the expedition; and thus began a confederacy of these southern tribes which had the effect of separating them from the others throughout the whole period of the judges. The locality of Bezek

which the king of the Canaanites held as his chief fortress is not known. Probably it was near the Jordan valley, about halfway between the two greater lakes. From it the tyranny of Adoni-bezek extended northward and southward over the cities of the seventy, whose submission he had cruelly ensured by rendering them unfit for war. Here, in the first struggle, Judah was completely successful. The rout of the Canaanites and Perizzites was decisive, and the slaughter so great as to send a thrill of terror through the land. And now the rude judgment of men works out the decree of God. Adoni-bezek suffers the same mutilation as he had inflicted on the captive chiefs and in Oriental manner makes acknowledgment of a just fate. There is a certain religiousness in his mind, and he sincerely bows himself under the judgment of a God against Whom he had tried issues in vain. Had these troops of Israel come in the name of Jehovah? Then Jehovah had been watching Adoni-bezek in his pride when, as he daily feasted in his hall, the crowd of victims grovelled at his feet like dogs.

Thus early did ideas of righteousness and of wide authority attach themselves in Canaan to the name of Israel's God. It is remarkable how on the appearance of a new race the first collision with it on the battlefield will produce an impression of its capacity and spirit and of unseen powers fighting along with it. Joshua's dash through Canaan doubtless struck far and wide a belief that the new comers had a mighty God to support them; the belief is reinforced, and there is added a thought of Divine justice. The retribution of Jehovah meant Godhead far larger and more terrible, and at the same time more august, than the religion of Baal had ever presented to the mind. From this point the Israelites, if they had been true to their heavenly King, fired with the ardour of His name, would have occupied a moral vantage ground and proved invincible. The fear of Jehovah would have done more for them than their own valour and arms. Had the people of the land seen that a power was being established amongst them in the justice and benignity of which they could trust, had they learned not only to fear but to adore Jehovah, there would have been quick fulfilment of the promise which gladdened the large heart of Abraham. The realisation, however, had to wait for many a century.

It cannot be doubted that Israel had under Moses received such an impulse in the direction of faith in the one God, and such a conception of His character and will, as declared the spiritual mission of the tribes. The people were not all aware of their high destiny, not sufficiently instructed to have a competent sense of it; but the chiefs of the tribes, the Levites and the heads of households, should have well understood the part that fell to

Israel among the nations of the world. The law in its main outlines was known, and it should have been revered as the charter of the commonwealth. Under the banner of Jehovah the nation ought to have striven not for its own position alone, the enjoyment of fruitful fields and fenced cities, but to raise the standard of human morality and enforce the truth of Divine religion. The gross idolatry of the peoples around should have been continually testified against; the principles of honesty, of domestic purity, of regard for human life, of neighbourliness and parental authority, as well as the more spiritual ideas expressed in the first table of the Decalogue, ought to have been guarded and dispensed as the special treasure of the nation. In this way Israel, as it enlarged its territory, would from the first have been clearing one space of earth for the good customs and holy observances that make for spiritual development. The greatest of all trusts is committed to a race when it is made capable of this; but here Israel often failed, and the reproaches of her prophets had to be poured out from age to age.

The ascendancy which Israel secured in Canaan, or that which Britain has won in India, is not, to begin with, justified by superior strength, nor by higher intelligence, nor even because in practice the religion of the conquerors is better than that of the vanquished. It is justified because, with all faults and crimes that may for long attend the rule of the victorious race, there lie, unrealised at first, in conceptions of God and of duty, the promise and germ of a higher education of the world. Developed in the course of time, the spiritual genius of the conquerors vindicates their ambition and their success. The world is to become the heritage and domain of those who have the secret of large and ascending life.

Judah, moving southward from Bezek, took Jerusalem, not the stronghold on the hilltop, but the city, and smote it with the edge of the sword. Not yet did that citadel which has been the scene of so many conflicts become a rallying point for the tribes. The army, leaving Adoni-bezek dead in Jerusalem, with many who owned him as chief, swept southward still to Hebron and Debir. At Hebron the task was not unlike that which had been just accomplished. There reigned three chiefs, Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai, who are mentioned again and again in the annals as if their names had been deeply branded on the memory of the age. They were sons of Anak, bandit captains, whose rule was a terror to the countryside. Their power had to be assailed and overthrown, not only for the sake of Judah which was to inhabit their stronghold, but for the sake of humanity. The law of God was to replace the fierce unregulated sway of inhuman violence

and cruelty. So the practical duty of the hour carried the tribes beyond the citadel where the best national centre would have been found to attack another where an evil power sat entrenched.

One moral lies on the surface here. We are naturally anxious to gain a good position in life for ourselves, and every consideration is apt to be set aside in favour of that. Now, in a sense, it is necessary, one of the first duties, that we gain each a citadel for himself. Our influence depends to a great extent on the standing we secure, on the courage and talent we show in making good our place. Our personality must enlarge itself, make itself visible by the conquest we effect and the extent of affairs we have a right to control. Effort on this line needs not be selfish or egoistic in a bad sense. The higher self or spirit of a good man finds in chosen ranges of activity and possession its true development and calling. One may not be a worldling by any means while he follows the bent of his genius and uses opportunity to become a successful merchant, a public administrator, a great artist or man of letters. All that he adds to his native inheritance of hand, brain and soul should be and often is the means of enriching the world. Against the false doctrine of self-suppression, still urged on a perplexed generation, stands this true doctrine, by which the generous helper of men guides his life so as to become a king and priest unto God. And when we turn from persons of highest character and talent to those of smaller capacity, we may not alter the principle of judgment. They, too, serve the world, in so far as they have good qualities, by conquering citadels and reigning where they are fit to reign. If a man is to live to any purpose, play must be given to his original vigour, however much or little there is of it.

Here, then, we find a necessity belonging to the spiritual no less than to the earthly life. But there lies close beside it the shadow of temptation and sin. Thousands of people put forth all their strength to gain a fortress for themselves, leaving others to fight the sons of Anak — the intemperance, the unchastity, the atheism of the time. Instead of triumphing over the earthly, they are ensnared and enslaved. The truth is, that a safe position for ourselves we cannot have while those sons of Anak ravage the country around. The Divine call therefore often requires of us that we leave a Jerusalem unconquered for ourselves, while we pass on with the hosts of God to do battle with the public enemy. Time after time Israel, though successful at Hebron, missed the secret and learnt in bitter sadness and loss how near is the shadow to the glory.

And for anyone today, what profits it to be a wealthy man, living in state with all the appliances of amusement and luxury, well knowing, but not choosing to share the great conflicts between religion and ungodliness, between purity and vice? If the ignorance and woe of our fellow creatures do not draw our hearts, if we seek our own things as loving our own, if the spiritual does not command us, we shall certainly lose all that makes life — enthusiasm, strength, eternal joy.

Give us men who fling themselves into the great struggle, doing what they can with Christ-born ardour, foot soldiers if nothing else in the army of the Lord of Righteousness.

CHAPTER 2

THE WAY OF THE SWORD — ^{<070112>}JUDGES 1:12-26

THE name Kiriath-sepher, that is Book-Town, has been supposed to point to the existence of a semi-popular literature among the pre-Judaean inhabitants of Canaan. We cannot build with any certainty upon a name; but there are other facts of some significance. Already the Phoenicians, the merchants of the age, some of whom no doubt visited Kiriath-sepher on their way to Arabia or settled in it, had in their dealings with Egypt begun to use that alphabet to which most languages, from Hebrew and Aramaic on through Greek and Latin to our own, are indebted for the idea and shapes of letters. And it is not improbable that an old-world Phoenician library of skins, palm leaves, or inscribed tablets had given distinction to this town lying away towards the desert from Hebron. Written words were held in half-superstitious veneration, and a very few records would greatly impress a district peopled chiefly by wandering tribes.

Nothing is insignificant in the pages of the Bible, nothing is to be disregarded that throws the least light upon human affairs and Divine Providence; and here we have a suggestion of no slight importance. Doubt has been cast on the existence of a written language among the Hebrews till centuries after the Exodus. It has been denied that the Law could have been written out by Moses. The difficulty is now seen to be imaginary, like many others that have been raised. It is certain that the Phoenicians trading to Egypt in the time of the Hyksos kings had settlements quite contiguous to Goshen. What more likely than that the Hebrews, who spoke a language akin to the Phoenicians, should have shared the discovery of letters almost from the first, and practised the art of writing in the days of their favour with the monarchs of the Nile valley? The oppression of the following period might prevent the spread of letters among the people; but a man like Moses must have seen their value and made himself familiar with their use. The importance of this indication in the study of Hebrew law and faith is very plain. Nor should we fail to notice the interesting connection between the Divine lawgiving of Moses and the practical invention of a worldly race. There is no exclusiveness in the providence of God. The art of a people, acute and eager indeed, but without spirituality, is not rejected as profane by the inspired leader of Israel. Egyptians and Phoenicians have their share in originating that culture which mingles its stream with sacred

revelation and religion. As, long afterwards, there came the printing press, a product of human skill and science, and by its help the Reformation spread and grew and filled Europe with new thought, so for the early record of God's work and will human genius furnished the fit instrument. Letters and religion, culture and faith must needs go hand in hand. The more the minds of men are trained, the more deftly they can use literature and science, the more able they should be to receive and convey the spiritual message which the Bible contains. Culture which does not have this effect betrays its own pettiness and parochialism; and when we are provoked to ask whether human learning is not a foe to religion, the reason must be that the favourite studies of the time are shallow, aimless, and ignoble.

Kiriath-sepher has to be taken. Its inhabitants, strongly entrenched, threaten the people who are settling about Hebron and must be subdued; and Caleb, who has come to his possession, adopts a common expedient for rousing the ambitious young men of the tribe. He has a daughter, and marriage with her shall reward the man who takes the fortress. It is not likely that Achsah objected. A courageous and capable husband was, we may say, a necessity, and her father's proposal offered a practical way of settling her in safety and comfort. Customs which appear to us barbarous and almost insulting have no doubt justified themselves to the common sense, if not fully to the desires of women, because they were suited to the exigencies of life in rude and stormy times. There is this also, that the conquest of Kiriath-sepher was part of the great task in which Israel was engaged, and Achsah, as a patriotic daughter of Abraham, would feel the pride of being able to reward a hero of the sacred war. To the degree in which she was a woman of character this would balance other considerations. Still the custom is not an ideal one; there is too much uncertainty. While the rivalry for her hand is going on the maiden has to wait at home, wondering what her fate shall be, instead of helping to decide it by her own thought and action. The young man, again, does not commend himself by honour, but only by courage and skill. Yet the test is real, so far as it goes, and fits the time.

Achsah, no doubt, had her preference and her hope, though she dared not speak of them. As for modern feeling, it is professedly on the side of the heart in such a case, and modern literature, with a thousand deft illustrations, proclaims the right of the heart to its choice. We call it a barbarous custom, the disposition of woman by her father, apart from her preference, to one who does him or the community a servicer and although

Achsah consented, we feel that she was a slave. No doubt the Hebrew wife in her home had a place of influence and power, and a woman might even come to exercise authority among the tribes; but, to begin with, she was under authority and had to subdue her own wishes in a manner we consider quite incompatible with the rights of a human being. Very slowly do the customs of marriage even in Israel rise from the rudeness of savage life. Abraham and Sarah, long before this, lived on something like equality, he a prince, she a princess. But what can be said of Hagar, a concubine outside the home circle, who might be sent any day into the wilderness? David and Solomon afterwards can marry for state reasons, can take, in pure Oriental fashion, the one his tens, the other his hundreds of wives and concubines. Polygamy survives for many a century. When that is seen to be evil, there remains to men a freedom of divorce which of necessity keeps women in a low and unhonoured state.

Yet, thus treated, woman has always duties of the first importance, on which the moral health and vigour of the race depend; and right nobly must many a Hebrew wife and mother have fulfilled the trust. It is a pathetic story; but now, perhaps, we are in sight of an age when the injustice done to women may be replaced by an injustice they do to themselves. Liberty is their right, but the old duties remain as great as ever. If neither patriotism, nor religion, nor the home is to be regarded, but mere taste; if freedom becomes license to know and enjoy, there will be another slavery worse than the former. Without a very keen sense of Christian honour and obligation among women, their enfranchisement will be the loss of what has held society together and made nations strong. And looking at the way in which marriage is frequently arranged by the free consent and determination of women, is there much advance on the old barbarism? How often do they sell themselves to the fortunate, rather than reserve themselves for the fit; how often do they marry not because a helpmeet of the soul has been found, but because audacity has won them or jewels have dazzled; because a fireside is offered, not because the ideal of life may be realised. True, in the worldliness there is a strain of moral effort often pathetic enough. Women are skilful at making the best of circumstances, and even when the gilding fades from the life they have chosen they will struggle on with wonderful resolution to maintain something like order and beauty. The Othniel who has gained Achsah by some feat of mercantile success or showy talk may turn out a poor pretender to bravery or wit; but she will do her best for him, cover up his faults, beg springs of water or even dig them with her own hands. Let men thank God that it is so, and let them help her to find her right place, her proper kingdom and liberty.

There is another aspect of the picture, however, as it unfolds itself. The success of Othniel in his attack on Kiriath-sepher gave him at once a good place as a leader, and a wife who was ready to make his interests her own and help him to social position and wealth. Her first care was to acquire a piece of land suitable for the flocks and herds she saw in prospect, well watered if possible, — in short, an excellent sheep farm. Returning from the bridal journey, she had her stratagem ready, and when she came near her father's tent followed up her husband's request for the land by lighting eagerly from her ass, taking for granted the one gift, and pressing a further petition — "Give me a blessing, father. A south land thou hast bestowed, give me also wells of water." So, without more ado, the new Kenazite homestead was secured.

How Jewish, we may be disposed to say. May we not also say, How thoroughly British? The virtue of Achsah, is it not the virtue of a true British wife? To urge her husband on and up in the social scale, to aid him in every point of the contest for wealth and place, to raise him and rise with him, what can be more admirable? Are there opportunities of gaining the favour of the powerful who have offices to give, the liking of the wealthy who have fortunes to bequeath? The managing wife will use these opportunities with address and courage. She will light off her ass and bow humbly before a flattered great man to whom she prefers a request. She can fit her words to the occasion and her smiles to the end in view. It is a poor spirit that is content with anything short of all that may be had: thus in brief she might express her principle of duty. And so in ten thousand homes there is no question whether marriage is a failure. It has succeeded. There is a combination of man's strength and woman's wit for the great end of "getting on." And in ten thousand others there is no thought more constantly present to the minds of husband and wife than that marriage is a failure. For restless ingenuity and many schemes have yielded nothing. The husband has been too slow or too honest, and the wife has been foiled; or, on the other hand, the woman has not seconded the man, has not risen with him. She has kept him down by her failings; or she is the same simple-minded, homely person he wedded long ago, no fit mate, of course, for one who is the companion of magnates and rulers. Well may those who long for a reformation begin by seeking a return to simplicity of life and the relish for other kinds of distinction than lavish outlay and social notoriety can give. Until married ambition is fed and hallowed at the Christian altar there will be the same failures we see now, and the same successes which are worse than "failures."

For a moment the history gives us a glimpse of another domestic settlement. "The children of the Kenite went up from the City of Palm Trees with the children of Judah," and found a place of abode on the southern fringe of Simeon's territory, and there they seem to have gradually mingled with the tent dwellers of the desert. By and by we shall find one Heber the Kenite in a different part of the land, near the Sea of Galilee, still in touch with the Israelites to some extent, while his people are scattered. Heber may have felt the power of Israel's mission and career and judged it wise to separate from those who had no interest in the tribes of Jehovah. The Kenites of the south appear in the history like men upon a raft, once borne near shore, who fail to seize the hour of deliverance and are carried away again to the wastes of sea. They are part of the drifting population that surrounds the Hebrew church, type of the drifting multitude who in the nomadism of modern society are for a time seen in our Christian assemblies, then pass away to mingle with the careless. An innate restlessness and a want of serious purpose mark the class. To settle these wanderers in orderly religious life seems almost impossible; we can perhaps only expect to sow among them seeds of good, and to make them feel a Divine presence restraining from evil. The assertion of personal independence in our day has no doubt much to do with impatience of church bonds and habits of worship; and it must not be forgotten that this is a phase of growing life needing forbearance no less than firm example.

Zephath was the next fortress against which Judah and Simeon directed their arms. When the tribes were in the desert on their long and difficult march they attempted first to enter Canaan from the south, and actually reached the neighbourhood of this town. But, as we read in the Book of Numbers, Arad the king of Zephath fought against them and took some of them prisoners. The defeat appears to have been serious, for, arrested and disheartened by it, Israel turned southward again, and after a long *detour* reached Canaan another way. In the passage in Numbers the overthrow of Zephath is described by anticipation; in Judges we have the account in its proper historical place. The people whom Arad ruled were, we may suppose, an Edomite clan living partly by merchandise, mainly by foray, practised marauders, with difficulty guarded against, who having taken their prey disappeared swiftly amongst the hills.

In the world of thought and feeling there are many Zephaths, whence quick outset is often made upon the faith and hope of men. We are pressing towards some end, mastering difficulties, contending with open and known enemies. Only a little way remains before us. But invisible among the

intricacies of experience is this lurking foe who suddenly falls upon us. It is a settlement in the faith of God we seek. The onset is of doubts we had not imagined, doubts of inspiration, of immortality, of the incarnation, truths the most vital. We are repulsed, broken, disheartened. There remains a new wilderness journey till we reach by the way of Moab the fords of our Jordan and the land of our inheritance. Yet there is a way, sure and appointed. The baffled, wounded soul is never to despair. And when at length the settlement of faith is won, the Zephath of doubt may be assailed from the other side, assailed successfully and taken. The experience of some poor victims of what is oddly called philosophic doubt need dismay no one. For the resolute seeker after God there is always a victory, which in the end may prove so easy, so complete, as to amaze him. The captured Zephath is not destroyed nor abandoned, but is held as a fortress of faith. It becomes Hormah — the Consecrated.

Victories were gained by Judah in the land of the Philistines, partial victories, the results of which were not kept. Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron were occupied for a time; but Philistine force and doggedness recovered, apparently in a few years, the captured towns. Wherever they had their origin, these Philistines were a strong and stubborn race, and so different from the Israelites in habit and language that they never freely mingled nor even lived peaceably with the tribes. At this time they were probably forming their settlements on the Mediterranean seaboard, and were scarcely able to resist the men of Judah. But ship after ship from over sea, perhaps from Crete, brought new colonists; and during the whole period till the Captivity they were a thorn in the side of the Hebrews. Beside these, there were other dwellers in the lowlands, who were equipped in a way that made it difficult to meet them. The most vehement sally of men on foot could not break the line of iron chariots, thundering over the plain. It was in the hill districts that the tribes gained their surest footing, — a singular fact, for mountain people are usually hardest to defeat and dispossess; and we take it as a sign of remarkable vigour that the invaders so soon occupied the heights.

Here the spiritual parallel is instructive. Conversion, it may be said, carries the soul with a rush to the high ground of faith. The Great Leader has gone before, preparing the way. We climb rapidly to fortresses from which the enemy has fled, and it would seem that victory is complete. But the Christian life is a constant alternation between the joy of the conquered height and the stern battles of the foe-infested plain. Worldly custom and sensuous desire, greed and envy and base appetite have their cities and

chariots in the low ground of being. So long as one of them remains the victory of faith is unfinished, insecure. Piety that believes itself delivered once for all from conflict is ever on the verge of disaster. The peace and joy men cherish, while as yet the earthly nature is unsubdued, the very citadels of it unreconnoitred, are visionary and relaxing. For the soul and for society the only salvation lies in mortal combat — life-long, age-long combat with the earthly and the false. Nooks enough may be found among the hills, pleasant and calm, from which the low ground cannot be seen, where the roll of the iron chariots is scarcely heard. It may seem to imperil all if we descend from these retreats. But when we have gained strength in the mountain air it is for the battle down below, it is that we may advance the lines of redeemed life and gain new bases for sacred enterprise.

A mark of the humanness and, shall we not also say, the divineness of this history is to be found in the frequent notices of other tribes than those of Israel. To the inspired writer it is not all the same whether Canaanites die or live, what becomes of Phoenicians or Philistines. Of this we have two examples, one the case of the Jebusites, the other of the people of Luz.

The Jebusites, after the capture of the lower city already recorded, appear to have been left in peaceful possession of their citadel and accepted as neighbours by the Benjamites. When the Book of Judges was written Jebusite families still remained, and in David's time Araunah the Jebusite was a conspicuous figure. A series of terrible events connected with the history of Benjamin is narrated towards the end of the Book. It is impossible to say whether the crime which led to these events was in any way due to bad influence exercised by the Jebusites. We may charitably doubt whether it was. There is no indication that they were a depraved people. If they had been licentious they could scarcely have retained till David's time a stronghold so central and of so much consequence in the land. They were a mountain clan, and Araunah shows himself in contact with David a reverend and kingly person.

As for Bethel or Luz, around which gathered notable associations of Jacob's life, Ephraim, in whose territory it lay, adopted a stratagem in order to master it, and smote the city. One family alone, the head of which had betrayed the place, was allowed to depart in peace, and a new Luz was founded "in the land of the Hittites." We are inclined to regard the traitor as deserving of death, and Ephraim appears to us disgraced, not honoured, by its exploit. There is a fair, straightforward way of fighting; but this tribe, one of the strongest, chooses a mean and treacherous method of gaining its

end. Are we mistaken in thinking that the care with which the founding of the new city is described shows the writer's sympathy with the Luzzites? At any rate, he does not by one word justify Ephraim; and we do not feel called on to restrain our indignation.

The high ideal of life, how often it fades from our view! There are times when we realise our Divine calling, when the strain of it is felt and the soul is on fire with sacred zeal. We press on, fight on, true to the highest we know at every step. We are chivalrous, for we see the chivalry of Christ; we are tender and faithful, for we see His tenderness and faithfulness. Then we make progress; the goal can almost be touched. We love, and love bears us on. We aspire, and the world glows with light. But there comes a change. The thought of self preservation, of selfish gain, has intruded. On pretext of serving God we are hard to man, we keep back the truth, we use compromises, we descend even to treachery and do things which in another are abominable to us. So the fervor departs, the light fades from the world, the goal recedes, becomes invisible. Most strange of all is it that side by side with cultured religion there can be proud sophistry and ignorant scorn, the very treachery of the intellect towards man. Far away in the dimness of Israel's early days we see the beginnings of a pious inhumanity, that may well make us stay to fear lest the like should be growing among ourselves. It is not what men claim, much less what they seize and hold, that does them honour. Here and there a march may be stolen on rivals by those who firmly believe they are serving God. But the rights of a man, a tribe, a church lie side by side with duties; and neglect of duty destroys the claim to what otherwise would be a right. Let there be no mistake: power and gain are not allowed in the providence of God to anyone that he may grasp them in despite of justice or charity.

One thought may link the various episodes we have considered. It is that of the end for which individuality exists. The home has its development of personality — for service. The peace and joy of religion nourish the soul — for service. Life may be conquered in various regions, and a man grow fit for ever greater victories, ever nobler service. But with the end the means and spirit of each effort are so interwoven that alike in home, and church, and society the human soul must move in uttermost faithfulness and simplicity or fail from the Divine victory that wins the prize.

CHAPTER 3

AT BOCHIM: THE FIRST PROPHET VOICE — <070201> JUDGES 2:1-5

FROM the time of Abraham on to the settlement in Canaan the Israelites had kept the faith of the one God. They had their origin as a people in a decisive revolt against polytheism. Of the great Semite forefather of the Jewish people, it has been finely said, “He bore upon his forehead the seal of the Absolute God, upon which was written, This race will rid the earth of superstition.” The character and structure of the Hebrew tongue resisted idolatry. It was not an imaginative language; it had no mythological colour. We who have inherited an ancient culture of quite another kind do not think it strange to read or sing:

*“Hail, smiling morn, that tip’st the hills with gold,
Whose rosy fingers ope the gates of day,
Who the gay face of nature dost unfold,
At whose bright presence darkness flies away.”*

These lines, however, are full of latent mythology. The “smiling morn” is Aurora, the darkness that flies away before the dawn is the Erebus of the Greeks. Nothing of this sort was possible in Hebrew literature. In it all change, all life, every natural incident are ascribed to the will and power of one Supreme Being. “Jehovah thundered in the heavens and the Highest gave His voice, hailstones and coals of fire.” “By the breath of God ice is given, and the breadth of the waters is straitened.” “Behold, He spreadeth His light around Him;... He covereth His hands with the lightning.” “Thou makest darkness and it is night.” Always in forms like these Hebrew poetry sets forth the control of nature by its invisible King. The pious word of Fenelon, “What do I see in nature? God; God everywhere; God alone,” had its germ, its very substance, in the faith and language of patriarchal times.

There are some who allege that this simple faith in one God, sole Origin and Ruler of nature and life, impoverished the thought and speech of the Hebrews. It was in reality the spring and safeguard of their spiritual destiny. Their very language was a sacred inheritance and preparation. From age to age it served a Divine purpose in maintaining the idea of the unity of God; and the power of that idea never failed their prophets nor passed from the soul of the race. The whole of Israel’s literature sets forth

the universal sway and eternal righteousness of Him who dwells in the high and lofty place, Whose name is Holy. In canto and strophe of the great Divine Poem, the glory of the One Supreme burns with increasing clearness, till in Christ its finest radiance flashes upon the world.

While the Hebrews were in Egypt, the faith inherited from patriarchal times must have been sorely tried, and, all circumstances considered, it came forth wonderfully pure. "The Israelites saw Egypt as the Mussulman Arab sees pagan countries, entirely from the outside, perceiving only the surface and external things." They indeed carried with them into the desert the recollection of the sacred bulls or calves of which they had seen images at Hathor and Memphis. But the idol they made at Horeb was intended to represent their Deliverer, the true God, and the swift and stern repression by Moses of that symbolism and its pagan incidents appears to have been effectual. The tribes reached Canaan substantially free from idolatry, though teraphim or fetishes may have been used in secret with magical ceremonies. The religion of the people generally was far from spiritual, yet there was a real faith in Jehovah as the protector of the national life, the guardian of justice and truth. From this there was no falling away when the Reubenites and Gadites on the east of Jordan erected an altar for themselves. "The Lord God of gods," they said, "He knoweth, and Israel he shall know if it be in rebellion, or if in transgression against the Lord." The altar was called *Ed*, a witness between east and west that the faith of the one Living God was still to unite the tribes.

But the danger to Israel's fidelity came when there began to be intercourse with the people of Canaan, now sunk from the purer thought of early times. Everywhere in the land of the Hittites and Amorites, Hivites and Jebusites, there were altars and sacred trees, pillars and images used in idolatrous worship. The ark and the altar of Divine religion, established first at Gilgal near Jericho, afterwards at Bethel and then at Shiloh, could not be frequently visited, especially by those who settled towards the southern desert and in the far north. Yet the necessity for religious worship of some kind was constantly felt; and as afterwards the synagogues gave opportunity for devotional gatherings when the Temple could not be reached, so in the earlier time there came to be sacred observances on elevated places, a windy threshing floor, or a hilltop already used for heathen sacrifice. Hence, on the one hand, there was the danger that worship might be entirely neglected, on the other hand the grave risk that the use of heathen occasions and meeting places should lead to heathen ritual, and those who came together on the hill of Baal should forget

Jehovah. It was the latter evil that grew; and while as yet only a few Hebrews easily led astray had approached with kid or lamb a pagan altar, the alarm was raised. At Bochim a Divine warning was uttered which found echo in the hearts of the people.

There appears to have been a great gathering of the tribes at some spot near Bethel. We see the elders and heads of families holding council of war and administration, the thoughts of all bent on conquest and family settlement. Religion, the purity of Jehovah's worship, are forgotten in the business of the hour. How shall the tribes best help each other in the struggle that is already proving more arduous than they expected? Dan is sorely pressed by the Amorites. The chiefs of the tribe are here telling their story of hardship among the mountains. The Asherites have failed in their attack upon the seaboard towns Accho and Achzib; in vain have they pressed towards Zidon. They are dwelling among the Canaanites and may soon be reduced to slavery. The reports from other tribes are more hopeful; but everywhere the people of the land are hard to overcome. Should Israel not remain content for a time, make the best of circumstances, cultivate friendly intercourse with the population it cannot dispossess? Such a policy often commends itself to those who would be thought prudent; it is apt to prove a fatal policy.

Suddenly a spiritual voice is heard, clear and intense, and all others are silent. From the sanctuary of God at Gilgal one comes whom the people have not expected; he comes with a message they cannot choose but hear. It is a prophet with the burden of reproof and warning. Jehovah's goodness, Jehovah's claim are declared with Divine ardour; with Divine severity the neglect of the covenant is condemned. Have the tribes of God begun to consort with the people of the land? Are they already dwelling content under the shadow of idolatrous groves, in sight of the symbols of Ashtoreth? Are they learning to swear by Baal and Melcarth and looking on while sacrifices are offered to these vile masters? Then they can no longer hope that Jehovah will give them the country to enjoy; the heathen shall remain as thorns in the side of Israel and their gods shall be a snare. It is a message of startling power. From the hopes of dominion and the plans of worldly gain the people pass to spiritual concern. They have offended their Lord; His countenance is turned from them? A feeling of guilt falls on the assembly. "It came to pass that the people lifted up their voice and wept."

This lamentation at Bochim is the second note of religious feeling and faith in the Book of Judges. The first is the consultation of the priests and the oracle referred to in the opening sentence of the book. Jehovah Who had led them through the wilderness was their King, and unless He went forth as the unseen Captain of the host no success could be looked for. "They asked of Jehovah, saying, Who shall go up for us first against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" In this appeal there was a measure of faith which is neither to be scorned nor suspected. The question indeed was not whether they should fight at all, but how they should fight so as to succeed, and their trust was in a God thought of as pledged to them, solely concerned for them. So far accordingly there is nothing exemplary in the circumstances. Yet we find a lesson for Christian nations. There are many in our modern parliaments who are quite ready to vote national prayer in war time and thanksgiving for victories, who yet would never think, before undertaking a war, of consulting those best qualified to interpret the Divine will. The relation between religion and the state has this fatal hitch, that however Christian our governments profess to be, the Christian thinkers of the country are not consulted on moral questions, not even on a question so momentous as that of war. It is passion, pride, or diplomacy, never the wisdom of Christ, that leads nations in the critical moments of their history. Who then scorn, who suspect the early Hebrew belief? Those only who have no right; those who as they laugh at God and faith shut themselves from the knowledge by which alone life can be understood; and, again, those who in their own ignorance and pride unsheathe the sword without reference to Him in Whom they profess to believe. We admit none of these to criticise Israel and its faith.

At Bochim, where the second note of religious feeling is struck, a deeper and clearer note, we find the prophet listened to. He revives the sense of duty, he kindles a Divine sorrow in the hearts of the people. The national assembly is conscience stricken. Let us allow this quick contrition to be the result, in part, of superstitious fear. Very rarely is spiritual concern quite pure. In general it is the consequences of transgression rather than the evil of it that press on the minds of men. Forebodings of trouble and calamity are more commonly causes of sorrow than the loss of fellowship with God; and if we know this to be the case with many who are convicted of sin under the preaching of the gospel, we cannot wonder to find the penitence of old Hebrew times mingled with superstition. Nevertheless, the people are aware of the broken covenant, burdened with a sense that they have lost the favour of their unseen Guide. There can be no doubt that the

realisation of sin and of justice turned against them is one cause of their tears.

Here, again, if there is a difference between Israel and Christian nations, it is not in favour of the latter. Are modern senates ever overcome by conviction of sin? Those who are in power seem to have no fear that they may do wrong. Glorifying their blunders and forgetting their errors, they find no occasion for self-reproach, no need to sit in sackcloth and ashes. Now and then, indeed, a day of fasting and humiliation is ordered and observed in state; the sincere Christian for his part feeling how miserably formal it is, how far from the spontaneous expression of abasement and remorse. God is called upon to help a people who have not considered their ways, who design no amendment, who have not even suspected that the Divine blessing may come in still further humbling. And turning to private life, is there not as much of self-justification, as little of real humility and faith? The shallow nature of popular Christianity is seen here, that so few can read in disappointment and privation anything but disaster, or submit without disgust and rebellion to take a lower place at the table of Providence. Our weeping is so often for what we longed to gain or wished to keep in the earthly and temporal region, so seldom for what we have lost or should fear to lose in the spiritual. We grieve when we should rather rejoice that God has made us feel our need of Him, and called us again to our true blessedness.

The scene at Bochim connects itself very notably with one nine hundred and fifty years later. The poor fragments of the exiled tribes have been gathered again in the land of their fathers. They are rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple. Ezra has led back a company from Babylon and has brought with him, by the favour of Artaxerxes, no small treasure of silver and gold for the house of God. To his astonishment and grief he hears the old tale. of alliance with the inhabitants of the land, intermarriage even of Levites, priests and princes of Israel with women of the Canaanite races. In the new settlement of Palestine the error of the first is repeated. Ezra calls a solemn assembly in the Temple court — “every one that trembles at the words of the God of Israel.” Till the evening sacrifice he sits prostrate with grief, his garment rent, his hair torn and dishevelled. Then on his knees before the Lord he spreads forth his hands in prayer. The trespasses of a thousand years afflict him, afflict the faithful. “After all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, shall we again break Thy commandments, and join in affinity with the peoples that do these abominations? wouldest not Thou be angry with us till Thou hadst consumed us so that there should be no

remnant nor any to escape?... Behold we are before Thee in our guiltiness; for none can stand before Thee because of this." The impressive lament of Ezra and those who join in his confessions draws together a great congregation, and the people weep very sore. Nine centuries and a half appear a long time in the history of a nation. What has been gained during the period? Is the weeping at Jerusalem in Ezra's time, like the weeping at Bochim, a mark of no deeper feeling, no keener penitence? Has there been religious advance commensurate with the discipline of suffering, defeat, slaughter and exile, dishonoured kings, a wasted land? Have the prophets not achieved anything? Has not the Temple in its glory, in its desolation, spoken of a Heavenly power, a Divine rule, the sense of which entering the souls of the people has established piety, or at least a habit of separateness from heathen manners and life? It may be hard to distinguish and set forth the gain of those centuries. But it is certain that while the weeping at Bochim was the sign of a fear that soon passed away, the weeping in the Temple court marked a new beginning in Hebrew history. By the strong action of Ezra and Nehemiah the mixed marriages were dissolved, and from that time the Jewish people became, as they never were before, exclusive and separate. Where nature would have led the nation ceased to go. More and more strictly the law was enforced; the age of puritanism began. So, let us say, the sore discipline had its fruit.

And yet it is with a reservation only we can enjoy the success of those reformers who drew the sharp line between Israel and his heathen neighbours, between Jew and Gentile. The vehemence of reaction urged the nation towards another error — Pharisaism. Nothing could be purer, nothing nobler than the desire to make Israel a holy people. But to inspire men with religious zeal and yet preserve them from spiritual pride is always difficult, and in truth those Hebrew reformers did not see the danger. There came to be, in the new development of faith, zeal enough, jealousy enough, for the purity of religion and life, but along with these a contempt for the heathen, a fierce enmity towards the uncircumcised, which made the interval till Christ appeared a time of strife and bloodshed worse than any that had been before. From the beginning the Hebrews were called with a holy calling, and their future was bound up with their faithfulness to it. Their ideal was to be earnest and pure, without bitterness or vainglory; and that is still the ideal of faith. But the Jewish people like ourselves, weak through the flesh, came short of the mark on one side or passed beyond it on the other. During the long period from Joshua to Nehemiah there was too little heat, and then a fire was kindled which burned a sharp narrow path, along which the life of Israel has gone with ever-lessening spiritual

force. The unfulfilled ideal still waits, the unique destiny of this people of God still bears them on.

Bochim is a symbol. There the people wept for a transgression but half understood and a peril they could not rightly dread. There was genuine sorrow, there was genuine alarm. But it was the prophetic word, not personal experience, that moved the assembly. And as at Florence, when Savonarola's word, shaking with alarm a people who had no vision of holiness, left them morally weaker as it fell into silence, so the weeping at Bochim passed like a tempest that has bowed and broken the forest trees. The chiefs of Israel returned to their settlements with a new sense of duty and peril; but Canaanite civilisation had attractions, Canaanite women a refinement which captivated the heart. And the civilisation, the refinement, were associated with idolatry, The myths of Canaan, the poetry of Tammuz and Astarte, were fascinating and seductive. We wonder not that the pure faith of God was corrupted, but that it survived. In Egypt the heathen worship was in a foreign tongue, but in Canaan the stories of the gods were whispered to Israelites in a language they knew, by their own kith and kin. In many a home among the mountains of Ephraim or the skirts of Lebanon the pagan wife, with her superstitious fears, her dread of the anger of this god or that goddess, wrought so on the mind of the Jewish husband that he began to feel her dread and then to permit and share her sacrifices. Thus idolatry invaded Israel, and the long and weary struggle between truth and falsehood began.

We have spoken of Bochim as a symbol, and to us it may be the symbol of this, that the very thing which men put from them in horror and with tears, seeing the evil, the danger of it, does often insinuate itself into their lives. The messenger is heard, and while he speaks how near God is, how awful is the sense of His being! A thrill of keen feeling passes from soul to soul. There are some in the gathering who have more spiritual insight than the rest, and their presence raises the heat of emotion. But the moment of revelation and of fervour passes, the company breaks up, and very soon those who have won no vision of holiness, who have only feared as they entered into the cloud, are in the common world again. The finer strings of the soul were made to thrill, the conscience was touched; but if the will has not been braced, if the man's reason and resoluteness are not engaged by a new conception of life, the earthly will resume control and God will be less known than before. So there are many cast down today, crying to God in trouble of soul for evil done or evil which they are tempted to do, who tomorrow among the Canaanites will see things in another light. A man

cannot be a recluse. He must mingle in business and in society with those who deride the thoughts that have moved him and laugh at his seriousness. The impulse to something better soon exhausts itself in this cold atmosphere. He turns upon his own emotion with contempt. The words that came with Divine urgency, the man whose face was like that of an angel of God, are already subjects of uneasy jesting, will soon be thrust from memory. Over the interlude of superficial anxiety the mind goes back to its old haunts, its old plans and cravings. The religious teacher, while he is often in no way responsible for this sad recoil, should yet be ever on his guard against the risk of weakening the moral fibre, of leaving men as Christ never left them, flaccid and infirm.

Again, there are cases that belong not to the history of a day, but to the history of a life. One may say, when he hears the strangely tempting voices that whisper in the twilight streets, "Am I a dog that from the holy traditions of my people and country I should fall away to these?" At first he flies the distasteful entreaty of the new nature cult, its fleshly art and song, its nefarious science. But the voices are persistent. It is the perfecting of man and woman to which they invite. It is not vice, but freedom, brightness, life and the courage to enjoy it they cunningly propose. There is not much of sweetness; the voices rise, they become stringent and overbearing. If the man would not be a fool, would not lose the good of the age into which he is born, he will be done with unnatural restraints, the bondage of purity. Thus entreaty passes into mastery. Here is truth; there also seems to be fact. Little by little the subtle argument is so advanced that the degradation once feared is no longer to be seen. It is progress now; it is full development, the assertion of power and privilege, that the soul anticipates. How fatal is the lure, how treacherous the vision, the man discovers when he has parted with that which even through deepest penitence he may never regain. People are denying, and it has to be reasserted, that there is a covenant which the soul of man has to keep with God. The thought is "archaic," and they would banish it. But it stands the great reality for man; and to keep that covenant in the grace of the Divine Spirit, in the love of the holiest, in the sacred manliness learned of Christ, is the only way to the broad daylight and the free summits of life. How can nature be a saviour? The suggestion is childish. Nature, as we all know, allows the hypocrite, the swindler, the traitor, as well as the brave, honest man, the pure, sweet woman. Is it said that man has a covenant with nature? On the temporal and prudential side of his activities that is true. He has relations with nature which must be apprehended, must be wisely realised. But the spiritual kingdom to which he belongs requires a wider

outlook, loftier aims and hopes. The efforts demanded by nature have to be brought into harmony with those diviner aspirations. Man is bound to be prudent, brave, wise for eternity. He is warned of his own sin and urged to fly from it. This is the covenant with God which is wrought into the very constitution of his moral being.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the scene at Bochim and the words which moved the assembly to tears had no lasting effect whatever. The history deals with outstanding facts of the national development. We hear chiefly of heroes and their deeds, but we shall not doubt that there were minds which kept the glow of truth and the consecration of penitential tears. The best lives of the people moved quietly on, apart from the commotions and strifes of the time. Rarely are the great political names even of a religious community those of holy and devout men, and, undoubtedly, this was true of Israel in the time of the judges. If we were to reckon only by those who appear conspicuously in these pages, we should have to wonder how the spiritual strain of thought and feeling survived. But it did survive; it gained in clearness and force. There were those in every tribe who kept alive the sacred traditions of Sinai and the desert, and Levites throughout the land did much to maintain among the people the worship of God. The great names of Abraham and Moses, the story of their faith and deeds, were the text of many an impressive lesson. So the light of piety did not go out; Jehovah was ever the Friend of Israel, even in its darkest day, for in the heart of the nation there never ceased to be a faithful remnant maintaining the fear and obedience of the Holy Name.

CHAPTER 4

AMONG THE ROCKS OF PAGANISM — <070207> JUDGES 2:7-23

“AND Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being an hundred and ten years old. And they buried him in the border of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, on the north of the mountain of Gaash.” So, long after the age of Joshua, the historian tells again how Israel lamented its great chief, and he seems to feel even more than did the people of the time the pathos and significance of the event. How much a man of God has been to his generation those rarely know who stand beside his grave. Through faith in him faith in the Eternal has been sustained, many who have a certain piety of their own depending, more than they have been aware, upon their contact with him. A glow went from him which insensibly raised to something like religious warmth souls that apart from such an influence would have been of the world worldly. Joshua succeeded Moses as the mediator of the covenant. He was the living witness of all that had been done in the Exodus and at Sinai. So long as he continued with Israel, even in the feebleness of old age, appearing, and no more, a venerable figure in the council of the tribes, there was a representative of Divine order, one who testified to the promises of God and the duty of His people. The elders who outlived him were not men like himself, for they added nothing to faith; yet they preserved the idea at least of the theocracy, and when they passed away the period of Israel’s robust youth was at an end. It is this the historian perceives, and his review of the following age in the passage we are now to consider is darkened throughout by the cloudy and troubled atmosphere that overcame the fresh morning of faith.

We know the great design that should have made Israel a singular and triumphant example to the nations of the world. The body politic was to have its unity in no elected government, in no hereditary ruler, but in the law and worship of its Divine King, sustained by the ministry of priest and prophet. Every tribe, every family, every soul was to be equally and directly subject to the Holy Will as expressed in the law and by the oracles of the sanctuary. The idea was that order should be maintained and the life of the tribes should go on under the pressure of the unseen Hand, never resisted, never shaken off, and full of bounty always to a trustful and obedient

people. There might be times when the head men of tribes and families should have to come together in council, but it would be only to discover speedily and carry out with one accord the purpose of Jehovah. Rightly do we regard this as an inspired vision; it is at once simple and majestic. When a nation can so live and order its affairs it will have solved the great problem of government still exercising every civilised community. The Hebrews never realised the theocracy, and at the time of the settlement in Canaan they came far short of understanding it. "Israel had as yet scarcely found time to imbue its spirit deeply with the great truths which had been awakened into life in it, and thus to appropriate them as an invaluable possession: the vital principle of that religion and nationality by which it had so wondrously triumphed was still scarcely understood when it was led into manifold severe trials."^{fi} Thus, while Hebrew history presents for the most part the aspect of an impetuous river broken and jarred by rocks and boulders, rarely settling into a calm expanse of mirror-like water, during the period of the judges the stream is seen almost arrested in the difficult country through which it has to force its way. It is divided by many a crag and often hidden for considerable stretches by overhanging cliffs. It plunges in cataracts and foams hotly in cauldrons of hollowed rock. Not till Samuel appears is there anything like success for this nation, which is of no account if not earnestly religious, and never is religious without a stern and capable chief, at once prophet and judge, a leader in worship and a restorer of order and unity among the tribes.

The general survey or preface which we have before us gives but one account of the disasters that befell the Hebrew people — they "followed other gods, and provoked the Lord to anger." And the reason of this has to be considered. Taking a natural view of the circumstances, we might pronounce it almost impossible for the tribes to maintain their unity when they were fighting, each in its own district, against powerful enemies. It seems by no means wonderful that nature had its way, and that, weary of war, the people tended to seek rest in friendly intercourse and alliance with their neighbours. Were Judah and Simeon always to fight, though their own territory was secure? Was Ephraim to be the constant champion of the weaker tribes and never settle down to till the land? It was almost more than could be expected of men who had the common amount of selfishness. Occasionally, when all were threatened, there was a combination of the scattered clans, but for the most part each had to fight its own battle, and so the unity of life and faith was broken. Nor can we marvel at the neglect of worship and the falling away from Jehovah when we find so many who have been always surrounded by Christian influences drifting into a strange

unconcern as to religious obligation and privilege. The writer of the Book of Judges, however, regards things from the standpoint of a high Divine ideal — the calling and duty of a God-made nation. Men are apt to frame excuses for themselves and each other; this historian makes no excuses. Where we might speak compassionately he speaks in sternness. He is bound to tell the story from God's side, and from God's side he tells it with puritan directness. In a sense it might go sorely against the grain to speak of his ancestors as sinning grievously and meriting condign punishment. But later generations needed to hear the truth, and he would utter it without evasion. It is surely Nathan, or some other prophet of Samuel's line, who lays bare with such faithfulness the infidelity of Israel. He is writing for the men of his own time and also for men who are to come; he is writing for us, and his main theme is the stern justice of Jehovah's government. God bestows privileges which men must value and use, or they shall suffer. When He declares Himself and gives His law, let the people see to it; let them encourage and constrain each other to obey. Disobedience brings unfailing penalty. This is the spirit of the passage we are considering. Israel is God's possession, and is bound to be faithful. There is no Lord but Jehovah, and it is unpardonable for any Israelite to turn aside and worship a false God. The pressure of circumstances, often made much of, is not considered for a moment. The weakness of human nature, the temptations to which men and women are exposed, are not taken into account. Was there little faith, little spirituality? Every soul had its own responsibility for the decay, since to every Israelite. Jehovah had revealed His love and addressed His call. Inexorable therefore was the demand for obedience. Religion is stern because reasonable, not an impossible service as easy human nature would fain prove it. If men disbelieve they incur doom, and it must fall upon them.

Joshua and his generation having been gathered unto their fathers, "there arose another generation which knew not the Lord, nor yet the work which He had wrought for Israel. And the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baalim." How common is the fall traced in these brief, stern words, the wasting of a sacred testimony that seemed to be deeply graven upon the heart of a race! The fathers felt and knew; the sons have only traditional knowledge and it never takes hold of them. The link of faith between one generation and another is not strongly forged; the most convincing proofs of God are not recounted. Here is a man who has learned his own weakness, who has drained a bitter cup of discipline — how can he better serve his sons than by telling them the story of his own mistakes and sins, his own suffering and repentance? Here is

one who in dark and trying times has found solace and strength and has been lifted out of horror and despair by the merciful hand of God — how can he do a father's part without telling his children of his defeats and deliverance, the extremity to which he was reduced and the restoring grace of Christ? But men hide their weaknesses, and are ashamed to confess that they ever passed through the Valley of Humiliation. They leave their own children unwarned to fall into the sloughs in which themselves were well nigh swallowed up. Even when they have erected some Ebenezer, some monument of Divine succour, they often fail to bring their children to the spot, and speak to them there with fervent recollection of the goodness of the Lord. Was Solomon when a boy led by David to the town of Gath, and told by him the story of his cowardly fear, and how he fled from the face of Saul to seek refuge among Philistines? Was Absalom in his youth ever taken to the plains of Bethlehem and shown where his father fed the flocks, a poor shepherd lad, when the prophet sent for him to be anointed the coming King of Israel? Had these young princes learned in frank conversation with their father all he had to tell of temptation and transgression, of danger and redemption, perhaps the one would never have gone astray in his pride nor the other died a rebel in that wood of Ephraim. The Israelitish fathers were like many fathers still, they left the minds of their boys and girls uninstructed in life, uninstructed in the providence of God, and this in open neglect of the law which marked out their duty for them with clear injunction, recalling the themes and incidents on which they were to dwell.

One passage in the history of the past must have been vividly before the minds of those who crossed the Jordan under Joshua, and should have stood a protest and warning against the idolatry into which families so easily lapsed throughout the land. Over at Shittim, when Israel lay encamped on the skirts of the mountains of Moab, a terrible sentence of Moses had fallen like a thunderbolt. On some high place near the camp a festival of Midianitish idolatry, licentious in the extreme, attracted great numbers of Hebrews; they went astray after the worst fashion of paganism, and the nation was polluted in the idolatrous orgies. Then Moses gave judgment — “Take the heads of the people and hang them up before the Lord, against the sun.” And while that hideous row of stakes, each bearing the transfixed body of a guilty chief, witnessed in the face of the sun for the Divine ordinance of purity, there fell a plague that carried off twenty-four thousand of the transgressors. Was that forgotten? Did the terrible punishment of those who sinned in the matter of Baal-peor not haunt the memories of men when they entered the land of Baal worship? No: like

others, they were able to forget. Human nature is facile, and from a great horror of judgment can turn in quick recovery of the usual ease and confidence. Men have been in the valley of the shadow of death, where the mouth of hell is; they have barely escaped; but when they return upon it from another side they do not recognise the landmarks nor feel the need of being on their guard. They teach their children many things, but neglect to make them aware of that right-seeming way the end whereof are the ways of death.

The worship of the Baalim and Ashtaroth and the place which this came to have in Hebrew life require our attention here. Canaan had for long been more or less subject to the influence of Chaldea and Egypt, and had received the imprint of their religious ideas. The fish god of Babylon reappears at Ascalon in the form of Dagon, the name of the goddess Astarte and her character seem to be adapted from the Babylonian Ishtar. Perhaps these divinities were introduced at a time when part of the Canaanite tribes lived on the borders of the Persian Gulf, in daily contact with the inhabitants of Chaldea.”^{f2} The Egyptian Isis and Osiris, again, are closely connected with the Tammuz and Astarte worshipped in Phoenicia. In a general way it may be said that all the races inhabiting Syria had the same religion, but “each tribe, each people, each town had its Lord, its Master, its Baal, designated by a particular title for distinction from the masters or Baals of neighbouring cities. The gods adored at Tyre and Sidon were called Baal-Sur, the Master of Tyre; Baal-Sidon, the Master of Sidon. The highest among them, those that impersonated in its purity the conception of heavenly fire, were called kings of the gods. El or Kronos reigned at Byblos; Chemosh among the Moabites; Amman among the children of Ammon; Soutkhu among the Hittites.” Melcarth, the Baal of the world of death, was the Master of Tyre. Each Baal was associated with a female divinity, who was the mistress of the town, the queen of the heavens. The common name of these goddesses was Astarte. There was an Ashtoreth of Chemosh among the Moabites. The Ashtoreth of the Hittites was called Tanit. There was an Ashtoreth Karnaim or Horned, so called with reference to the crescent moon; and another was Ashtoreth Naamah, the good Astarte. In short, a special Astarte could be created by any town and named by any fancy, and Baals were multiplied in the same way. It is, therefore, impossible to assign any distinct character to these inventions. The Baalim mostly represented forces of nature — the sun, the stars. The Astartes presided over love, birth, the different seasons of the year, and — war. “The multitude of secondary Baalim and Ashtaroth tended to resolve themselves into a single supreme pair, in comparison with whom the others

had little more than a shadowy existence.” As the sun and moon outshine all the other heavenly bodies, so two principal deities representing them were supreme.

The worship connected with this horde of fanciful beings is well known to have merited the strongest language of detestation applied to it by the Hebrew prophets. The ceremonies were a strange and degrading blend of the licentious and the cruel, notorious even in a time of gross and hideous rites. The Baalim were supposed to have a fierce and envious disposition, imperiously demanding the torture and death not only of animals but of men. The horrible notion had taken root that in times of public danger king and nobles must sacrifice their children in fire for the pleasure of the god. And while nothing of this sort was done for the Ashtaroth their demands were in one aspect even more vile. Self-mutilation, self-defilement were acts of worship, and in the great festivals men and women gave themselves up to debauchery which cannot be described. No doubt some of the observances of this paganism were mild and simple. Feasts there were at the seasons of reaping and vintage which were of a bright and comparatively harmless character; and it was by taking part in these that Hebrew families began their acquaintance with the heathenism of the country. But the tendency of polytheism is ever downward. It springs from a curious and ignorant dwelling on the mysterious processes of nature, untamed fancy personifying the causes of all that is strange and horrible, constantly wandering therefore into more grotesque and lawless dreams of unseen powers and their claims on man. The imagination of the worshipper, which passes beyond his power of action, attributes to the gods energy more vehement, desires more sweeping, anger more dreadful than he finds in himself. He thinks of beings who are strong in appetite and will and yet under no restraint or responsibility. In the beginning polytheism is not necessarily vile and cruel; but it must become so as it develops. The minds by whose fancies the gods are created and furnished with adventures are able to conceive characters vehemently cruel, wildly capricious and impure. But how can they imagine a character great in wisdom, holiness, and justice? The additions of fable and belief made from age to age may hold in solution some elements that are good, some of man’s yearning for the noble and true beyond him. The better strain, however, is overborne in popular talk and custom by the tendency to fear rather than to hope in presence of unknown powers, the necessity which is felt to avert possible anger of the gods or make sure of their patronage. Sacrifices are multiplied, the offerer exerting himself more and more to gain his main point at whatever expense; while he thinks of the world of gods as a region in

which there is jealousy of man's respect and a multitude of rival claims all of which must be met. Thus the whole moral atmosphere is thrown into confusion.

Into a polytheism of this kind came Israel, to whom had been committed a revelation of the one true God, and in the first moment of homage at heathen altars the people lost the secret of its strength. Certainly Jehovah was not abandoned; He was thought of still as the Lord of Israel. But He was now one among many who had their rights and could repay the fervent worshipper. At one high place it was Jehovah men sought, at another the Baal of the hill and his Ashtoreth. Yet Jehovah was still the special patron of the Hebrew tribes and of no others, and in trouble they turned to Him for relief. So in the midst of mythology Divine faith had to struggle for existence. The stone pillars which the Israelites erected were mostly to the name of God, but Hebrews danced with Hittite and Jebusite around the poles of Astarte, and in revels of nature worship they forgot their holy traditions, lost their vigour of body and soul. The doom of apostasy fulfilled itself. They were unable, to stand before their enemies. "The hand of the Lord was against them for evil, and they were greatly distressed."

And why could not Israel rest in the debasement of idolatry? Why did not the Hebrews abandon their distinct mission as a nation and mingle with the races they came to convert or drive away? They could not rest; they could not mingle and forget. Is there ever peace in the soul of a man who falls from early impressions of good to join the licentious and the profane? He has still his own personality, shot through with recollections of youth and traits inherited from godly ancestors. It is impossible for him to be at one with his new companions in their revelry and vice. He finds that from which his soul revolts, he feels disgust which he has to overcome by a strong effort of perverted will. He despises his associates and knows in his inmost heart that he is of a different race. Worse he may become than they, but he is never the same. So was it in the degradation of the Israelites, both individually and as a nation. From complete absorption among the peoples of Canaan they were preserved by hereditary influences which were part of their very life, by holy thoughts and hopes embodied in their national history, by the rags of that conscience which remained from the law-giving of Moses and the discipline of the wilderness. Moreover, akin as they were to the idolatrous races, they had a feeling of closer kinship with each other, tribe with tribe, family with family; and the worship of God at the little-frequented shrine still maintained the shadow at least of the national consecration. They were a people apart, these Beni-Israel, a people of

higher rank than Amorites or Perizzites, Hittites or Phoenicians. Even when least alive to their destiny they were still held by it, led on secretly by that heavenly hand which never let them go. From time to time souls were born among them aglow with devout eagerness, confident in the faith of God. The tribes were roused out of lethargy by voices that woke many recollections of half-forgotten purpose and hope. Now from Judah in the south, now from Ephraim in the centre, now from Dan or Gilead a cry was raised. For a time at least manhood was quickened, national feeling became keen, the old faith was partly revived, and God had again a witness in His people.

We have found the writer of the Book of Judges consistent and unfaltering in his condemnation of Israel; he is equally consistent and eager in his vindication of God. It is to him no doubtful thing, but an assured fact, that the Holy One came with Israel from Paran and marched with the people from Seir. He has no hesitation in ascribing to Divine providence and grace the deeds of those men who go by the name of judges. It startles and even confounds some to note the plain direct terms in which God is made, so to speak, responsible for those rude warriors whose exploits we are to review, — for Ehud, for Jephthah, for Samson. The men are children of their age, vehement, often reckless, not answering to the Christian ideal of heroism. They do rough work in a rough way. If we found their history elsewhere than in the Bible we should be disposed to class them with the Roman Horatius, the Saxon Hereward, the Jutes Hengest and Horsa, and hardly dare to call them men of God's hand. But here they are presented bearing the stamp of a Divine vocation; and in the New Testament it is emphatically reaffirmed. "What shall I more say? for the time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah;... who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises,... waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens."

There is a crude religious sentimentalism to which the Bible gives no countenance. Where we, mistaking the meaning of providence because we do not rightly believe in immortality, are apt to think with horror of the miseries of men, the vigorous veracity of sacred writers directs our thought to the moral issues of life and the vast movements of God's purifying design. Where we, ignorant of much that goes to the making of a world, lament the seeming confusion and the errors, the Bible seer discerns that the cup of red wine poured out is in the hand of Almighty Justice and Wisdom. It is of a piece with the superficial feeling of modern society to doubt whether God could have any share in the deeds of Jephthah and the

career of Samson, whether these could have any place in the Divine order. Look at Christ and His infinite compassion, it is said; read that God is love, and then reconcile if you can this view of His character with the idea which makes Barak and Gideon His ministers. Out of all such perplexities there is a straight way. You make light of moral evil and individual responsibility when you say that this war or that pestilence has no Divine mission. You deny eternal righteousness when you question whether a man, vindicating it in the time sphere, can have a Divine vocation. The man is but a human instrument. True. He is not perfect, he is not even spiritual. True. Yet if there is in him a gleam of right and earnest purpose, if he stands above his time in virtue of an inward light which shows him but a single truth, and in the spirit of that strikes his blow — is it to be denied that within his limits he is a weapon of the holiest Providence, a helper of eternal grace?

The storm, the pestilence have a providential errand. They urge men to prudence and effort; they prevent communities from settling on their lees. But the hero has a higher range of usefulness. It is not mere prudence he represents, but the passion for justice. For right against might, for liberty against oppression he contends, and in striking his blow he compels his generation to take into account morality and the will of God. He may not see far, but at least he stirs inquiry as to the right way, and though thousands die in the conflict he awakens there is a real gain which the coming age inherits. Such a one, however faulty, however, as we may say, earthly, is yet far above mere earthly levels. His moral concepts may be poor and low compared with ours; but the heat that moves him is not of sense, not of clay. Obstructed it is by the ignorance and sin of our human estate, nevertheless it is a supernatural power, and so far as it works in any degree for righteousness, freedom, the realisation of God, the man is a hero of faith.

We do not affirm here that God approves or inspires all that is done by the leaders of a suffering people in the way of vindicating what they deem their rights. Moreover, there are claims and rights so called for which it is impious to shed a drop of blood. But if the state of humanity is such that the Son of God must die for it, is there any room to wonder that men have to die for it? Given a cause like that of Israel, a need of the whole world which Israel only could meet, and the men who unselfishly, at the risk of death, did their part in the front of the struggle which that cause and that need demanded, though they slew their thousands, were not men of whom the Christian teacher needs be afraid to speak. And there have been many such in all nations, for the principle by which we judge is of the broadest

application, — men who have led the forlorn hopes of nations, driven back the march of tyrants, given law and order to an unsettled land.

Judge after judge was “raised up” — the word is true — and rallied the tribes of Israel, and while each lived there were renewed energy and prosperity. But the moral revival was never in the deeps of life and no deliverance was permanent. It is only a faithful nation that can use freedom. Neither trouble nor release from trouble will certainly make either a man or a people steadily true to the best. Unless there is along with trouble a conviction of spiritual need and failure, men will forget the prayers and vows they made in their extremity. Thus in the history of Israel, as in the history of many a soul, periods of suffering and of prosperity succeed each other and there is no distinct growth of the religious life. All these experiences are meant to throw men back upon the seriousness of duty, and the great purpose God has in their existence. We must repent not because we are in pain or grief, but because we are estranged from the Holy One and have denied the God of Salvation. Until the soul comes to this it only struggles out of one pit to fall into another.

CHAPTER 5

THE ARM OF ARAM AND OF OTHNIEL — <070301> JUDGES 3:1-11

WE come now to a statement of no small importance, which may be the cause of some perplexity. It is emphatically affirmed that God fulfilled His design for Israel by leaving around it in Canaan a circle of vigorous tribes very unlike each other, but alike in this, that each presented to the Hebrews a civilisation from which something might be learned but much had to be dreaded, a seductive form of paganism which ought to have been entirely resisted, an aggressive energy fitted to rouse their national feeling. We learn that Israel was led along a course of development resembling that by which other nations have advanced to unity and strength. As the Divine plan is unfolded, it is seen that not by undivided possession of the Promised Land, not by swift and fierce clearing away of opponents, was Israel to reach its glory and become Jehovah's witness, but in the way of patient fidelity amidst temptations, by long struggle and arduous discipline. And why should this cause perplexity? If moral education did not move on the same line for all peoples in every age, then indeed mankind would be put to intellectual confusion. There was never any other way for Israel than for the rest of the world.

“These are the nations which the Lord left to prove Israel by them, to know whether they would hearken unto the commandments of the Lord.” The first named are the Philistines, whose settlements on the coast plain toward Egypt were growing in power. They were a maritime race, apparently much like the Danish invaders of Saxon England, sea rovers or pirates, ready for any fray that promised spoil. In the great coalition of peoples that fell on Egypt during the reign of Ramses III, about the year 1260 B.C., Philistines were conspicuous, and after the crushing defeat of the expedition they appear in larger numbers on the coast of Canaan. Their cities were military republics skilfully organised, each with a *seren* or war chief, the chiefs of the hundred cities forming a council of federation. Their origin is not known; but we may suppose them to have been a branch of the Amorite family, who after a time of adventure were returning to their early haunts. It may be reckoned certain that in wealth and civilisation they presented a marked contrast to the Israelites, and their equipments of all kinds gave them great advantage in the arts of war and peace. Even in the

period of the Judges there were imposing temples in the Philistine cities and the worship must have been carefully ordered. How they compared with the Hebrews in domestic life we have no means of judging, but there was certainly some barrier of race, language, or custom between the peoples which made intermarriage very rare. We can suppose that they looked upon the Hebrews from their higher worldly level as rude and slavish. Military adventurers not unwilling to sell their services for gold would be apt to despise a race half-nomad, half-rural. It was in war, not in peace, that Philistine and Hebrew met, contempt on either side gradually changing into keenest hatred as century after century the issue of battle was tried with varying success. And it must be said that it was well for the tribes of Jehovah rather to be in occasional subjection to the Philistines, and so learn to dread them, than to mix freely with those by whom the great ideas of Hebrew life were despised.

On the northward seaboard a quite different race, the Zidonians, or Phoenicians, were in one sense better neighbours to the Israelites, in another sense no better friends. While the Philistines were haughty, aristocratic, military, the Phoenicians were the great *bourgeoisie* of the period, clever, enterprising, eminently successful in trade. Like the other Canaanites and the ancestors of the Jews, they were probably immigrants from the lower Euphrates valley; unlike the others, they brought with them habits of commerce and skill in manufacture, for which they became famous along the Mediterranean shores and beyond the pillars of Hercules. Between Philistine and Phoenician the Hebrew was mercifully protected from the absorbing interests of commercial life and the disgrace of prosperous piracy. The conscious superiority of the coast peoples in wealth and influence and the material elements of civilisation was itself a guard to the Jews, who had their own sense of dignity, their own claim to assert. The configuration of the country helped the separateness of Israel, especially so far as Phoenicia was concerned, which lay mainly beyond the rampart of Lebanon and the gorge of the Litany; while with the fortress of Tyre on the hither side of the natural frontier there appears to have been for a long time no intercourse, probably on account of its peculiar position. But the spirit of Phoenicia was the great barrier. Along the crowded wharves of Tyre and Zidon, in warehouses and markets, factories and workshops, a hundred industries were in full play, and in their luxurious dwellings the busy prosperous traders, with their silk-clad wives, enjoyed the pleasures of the age. From all this the Hebrew, rough and unkempt, felt himself shut out, perhaps with a touch of regret, perhaps with scorn equal to that on the other side. He had to live his life apart from that busy race,

apart from its vivacity and enterprise, apart from its lubricity and worldliness. The contempt of the world is ill to bear, and the Jew no doubt found it so. But it was good for him. The tribes had time to consolidate, the religion of Jehovah became established before Phoenicia thought it worth while to court her neighbour. Early indeed the idolatry of the one people infected the other and there were the beginnings of trade, yet on the whole for many centuries they kept apart. Not till a king throned in Jerusalem could enter into alliance with a king of Tyre, crown with crown, did there come to be that intimacy which had so much risk for the Hebrew. The humbleness and poverty of Israel during the early centuries of its history in Canaan was a providential safeguard. God would not lose His people, nor suffer it to forget its mission.

Among the inland races with whom the Israelites are said to have dwelt, the Amorites, though mentioned along with Perizzites and Hivites, had very distinct characteristics. They were a mountain people like the Scottish Highlanders, even in physiognomy much resembling them, a tall, white-skinned, blue-eyed race. Warlike we know they were, and the Egyptian representation of the siege of Dapur by Ramses II shows what is supposed to be the standard of the Amorites on the highest tower, a shield pierced by three arrows surmounted by another arrow fastened across the top of the staff. On the east of Jordan they were defeated by the Israelites and their land between Arnon and Jabbok was allotted to Reuben and Gad. In the west they seem to have held their ground in isolated fortresses or small clans, so energetic and troublesome that it is specially noted in Samuel's time that a great defeat of the Philistines brought peace between Israel and the Amorites. A significant reference in the description of Ahab's idolatry — "he did very abominably in following idols according to all things as did the Amorites" — shows the religion of these people to have been Baal worship of the grossest kind; and we may well suppose that by intermixture with them especially the faith of Israel was debased. Even now, it may be said, the Amorite is still in the land; a blue-eyed, fair-complexioned type survives, representing that ancient stock.

Passing some tribes whose names imply rather geographical than ethnical distinctions, we come to the Hittites, the powerful people of whom in recent years we have learned something. At one time these Hittites were practically masters of the wide region from Ephesus in the west of Asia Minor to Carchemish on the Euphrates, and from the shores of the Black Sea to the south of Palestine. They appear to us in the archives of Thebes and the poem of the Laureate, Pentaur, as the great adversaries of Egypt in

the days of Ramses I and his successors; and one of the most interesting records is of the battle fought about 1383 B.C. at Kadesh on the Orontes, between the immense armies of the two nations, the Egyptians being led by Ramses II. Amazing feats were attributed to Ramses, but he was compelled to treat on equal terms with the “great king of Kheta,” and the war was followed by a marriage between the Pharaoh and the daughter of the Hittite prince. Syria too was given up to the latter as his legitimate possession. The treaty of peace drawn up on the occasion, in the name of the chief gods of Egypt and of the Hittites, included a compact of offensive and defensive alliance and careful provisions for extradition of fugitives and criminals. Throughout it there is evident a great dependence upon the company of gods of either land, who are largely invoked to punish those who break and reward those who keep its terms. “He who shall observe these commandments which the silver tablet contains, whether he be of the people of Kheta or of the people of Egypt, because he has not neglected them, the company of the gods of the land of Kheta and the company of the gods of the land of Egypt shall secure his reward and preserve life for him and his servants.”^{f3} From this time the Amorites of southern Palestine and the minor Canaanite peoples submitted to the Hittite dominion, and it was while this subjection lasted that the Israelites under Joshua appeared on the scene. There can be no doubt that the tremendous conflict with Egypt had exhausted the population of Canaan and wasted the country, and so prepared the way for the success of Israel. The Hittites indeed were strong enough, had they seen fit to oppose with great armies the new comers into Syria. But the centre of their power lay far to the north, perhaps in Cappadocia; and on the frontier towards Nineveh they were engaged with more formidable opponents. We may also surmise that the Hittites, whose alliance with Egypt was by Joshua’s time somewhat decayed, would look upon the Hebrews, to begin with, as fugitives from the misrule of the Pharaoh who might be counted upon to take arms against their former oppressors. This would account, in part at least, for the indifference with which the Israelite settlement in Canaan was regarded; it explains why no vigorous attempt was made to drive back the tribes.

For the characteristics of the Hittites, whose appearance and dress constantly suggest a Mongolian origin, we can now consult their monuments. A vigorous people they must have been, capable of government, of extensive organisation, concerned to perfect their arts as well as to increase their power. Original contributors to civilisation they probably were not, but they had skill to use what they found and spread it widely. Their worship of Sutekh or Soutkhu, and, especially of Astarte

under the name of Ma, who reappears in the Great Diana of Ephesus, must have been very elaborate. A single Cappadocian city is reported to have had at one time six thousand armed priestesses and eunuchs of that goddess. In Palestine there were not many of this distinct and energetic people when the Hebrews crossed the Jordan. A settlement seems to have remained about Hebron, but the armies had withdrawn; Kadesh on the Orontes was the nearest garrison. One peculiar institution of Hittite religion was the holy city, which afforded sanctuary to fugitives; and it is notable that some of these cities in Canaan, such as Kadesh-Naphtali and Hebron, are found among the Hebrew cities of refuge.

It was as a people at once enticed and threatened, invited to peace and constantly provoked to war, that Israel settled in the circle of Syrian nations. After the first conflicts, ending in the defeat of Adoni-bezek and the capture of Hebron and Kiriath-sepher, the Hebrews had an acknowledged place, partly won by their prowess, partly by the terror of Jehovah which accompanied their arms. To Philistines, Phoenicians and Hittites, as we have seen, their coming mattered little, and the other races had to make the best of affairs, sometimes able to hold their ground, sometimes forced to give way. The Hebrew tribes, for their part, were, on the whole, too ready to live at peace and to yield not a little for the sake of peace. Intermarriages made their position safer, and they intermarried with Amorites, Hivites, Perizzites. Interchange of goods was profitable, and they engaged in barter. The observance of frontiers and covenants helped to make things smooth, and they agreed on boundary lines of territory and terms of fraternal intercourse. The acknowledgment of their neighbours' religion was the next thing, and from that they did not shrink. The new neighbours were practically superior to themselves in many ways, well informed as to the soil, the climate, the methods of tillage necessary in the land, well able to teach useful arts and simple manufactures. Little by little the debasing notions and bad customs that infest pagan society entered Hebrew homes. Comfort and prosperity came; but comfort was dearly bought with loss of pureness, and prosperity with loss of faith. The watchwords of unity were forgotten by many. But for the sore oppressions of which the Mesopotamian was the first, the tribes would have gradually lost all coherence and vigour and become like those poor tatters of races that dragged out an inglorious existence between Jordan and the Mediterranean plain.

Yet it is with nations as with men; those that have a reason of existence and the desire to realise it, even at intervals, may fall away into pitiful languor if

corrupted by prosperity, but when the need comes their spirit will be renewed. While Hivites, Perizzites, and even Amorites had practically nothing to live for, but only cared to live, the Hebrews felt oppression and restraint in their inmost marrow. What the faithful servants of God among them urged in vain the iron heel of Cushan-rishathaim made them remember and realise — that they had a God from Whom they were basely departing, a birthright they were selling for pottage. In Doubting Castle, under the chains of Despair, they bethought them of the Almighty and His ancient promises, they cried unto the Lord. And it was not the cry of an afflicted church; Israel was far from deserving that name. Rather was it the cry of a prodigal people scarcely daring to hope that the Father would forgive and save.

Nothing yet found in the records of Babylon or Assyria throws any light on the invasion of Cushan-rishathaim, whose name, which seems to mean Cushan of the Two Evil Deeds, may be taken to represent his character as the Hebrews viewed it. He was a king one of whose predecessors a few centuries before had given a daughter in marriage to the third Amenophis of Egypt, and with her the Aramaean religion to the Nile valley. At that time Mesopotamia, or Aram-Naharaim, was one of the greatest monarchies of western Asia. Stretching along the Euphrates from the Khabour river towards Carchemish and away to the highlands of Armenia, it embraced the district in which Terah and Abram first settled when the family migrated from Ur of the Chaldees. In the days of the judges of Israel, however, the glory of Aram had faded. The Assyrians threatened its eastern frontier, and about 1325 B.C., the date at which we have now arrived, they laid waste the valley of the Khabour. We can suppose that the pressure of this rising empire was one cause of the expedition of Cushan towards the western sea.

It remains a question, however, why the Mesopotamian king should have been allowed to traverse the land of the Hittites, either by way of Damascus or the desert route that led past Tadmor, in order to fall on the Israelites; and there is this other question, What led him to think of attacking Israel especially among the dwellers in Canaan? In pursuing these inquiries we have at least presumption to guide us. Carchemish on the Euphrates was a great Hittite fortress commanding the fords of that deep and treacherous river. Not far from it, within the Mesopotamian country, was Pethor, which was at once a Hittite and an Aramaean town — Pethor the city of Balaam with whom the Hebrews had had to reckon shortly before they entered Canaan. Now Cushan-rishathaim, reigning in this region, occupied the middle ground between the Hittites and Assyria on the

east, also between them and Babylon on the southeast; and it is probable that he was in close alliance with the Hittites. Suppose then that the Hittite king, who at first regarded the Hebrews with indifference, was now beginning to view them with distrust or to fear them as a people bent on their own ends, not to be reckoned on for help against Egypt, and we can easily see that he might be more than ready to assist the Mesopotamians in their attack on the tribes. To this we may add a hint which is derived from Balaam's connection with Pethor, and the kind of advice he was in the way of giving to those who consulted him. Does it not seem probable enough that some counsel of his survived his death and now guided the action of the king of Aram? Balaam, by profession a soothsayer, was evidently a great political personage of his time, foreseeing, crafty, and vindictive. Methods of his for suppressing Israel, the force of whose genius he fully recognised, were perhaps sold to more than one kingly employer. "The land of the children of his people" would almost certainly keep his counsel in mind and seek to avenge his death. Thus against Israel particularly among the dwellers in Canaan the arms of Cushan-rishathaim would be directed, and the Hittites, who scarcely found it needful to attack Israel for their own safety, would facilitate his march.

Here then we may trace the revival of a feud which seemed to have died away fifty years before. Neither nations nor men can easily escape from the enmity they have incurred and the entanglements of their history. When years have elapsed and strifes appear to have been buried in oblivion, suddenly, as if out of the grave, the past is apt to arise and confront us, sternly demanding the payment of its reckoning. We once did another grievous wrong, and now our fondly cherished belief that the man we injured had forgotten our injustice is completely dispelled. The old anxiety, the old terror breaks in afresh upon our lives. Or it was in doing our duty that we braved the enmity of evil-minded men and punished their crimes. But though they have passed away their bitter hatred, bequeathed to others, still survives. Now the battle of justice and fidelity has to be fought over again, and well is it for us if we are found ready in the strength of God.

And, in another aspect, how futile is the dream some indulge of getting rid of their history, passing beyond the memory or resurrection of what has been. Shall Divine forgiveness obliterate those deeds of which we have repented? Then the deeds being forgotten the forgiveness too would pass into oblivion, and all the gain of faith and gratitude it brought would be lost. Do we expect never to retrace in memory the way we have travelled?

As well might we hope, retaining our personality, to become other men than we are. The past, good and evil, remains and will remain, that we may be kept humble and moved to ever-increasing thankfulness and fervour of soul. We rise “on stepping stones of our dead selves to higher things,” and every forgotten incident by which moral education has been provided for must return to light. The heaven we hope for is not to be one of forgetfulness, but a state bright and free through remembrance of the grace that saved us at every stage and the circumstances of our salvation. As yet we do not half know what God has done for us, what His providence has been. There must be a resurrection of old conflicts, strifes, defeats, and victories in order that we may understand the grace which is to keep us safe forever.

Attacked by Cushan of the Two Crimes the Israelites were in evil case. They had not the consciousness of Divine support which sustained them once. They had forsaken Him whose presence in the camp made their arms victorious. Now they must face the consequences of their fathers' deeds without their fathers' heavenly courage. Had they still been a united nation full of faith and hope, the armies of Aram would have assailed them in vain. But they were without the spirit which the crisis required. For eight years the northern tribes had to bear a sore oppression, soldiers quartered in their cities, tribute exacted at the point of the sword, their harvests enjoyed by others. The stern lesson was taught them that Canaan was to be no peaceful habitation for a people that renounced the purpose of its existence. The struggle became more hopeless year by year, the state of affairs more wretched. So at last the tribes were driven by stress of persecution and calamity to call again on the name of God, and some faint hope of succour broke like a misty morning over the land.

It was from the far south that help came in response to the piteous cry of the oppressed in the north; the deliverer was Othniel, who has already appeared in the history. After his marriage with Achsah, daughter of Caleb, we must suppose him living as quietly as possible in his south-lying farm, there increasing in importance year by year till now he is a respected chief of the tribe of Judah. In frequent skirmishes with Arab marauders from the wilderness he has distinguished himself, maintaining the fame of his early exploit. Better still, he is one of those who have kept the great traditions of the nation, a man mindful of the law of God, deriving strength of character from fellowship with the Almighty. “The Spirit of Jehovah came upon him and he judged Israel; and he went out to war, and Jehovah delivered Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand.”

“He judged Israel and went out to war.” Significant is the order of these statements. The judging of Israel by this man, on whom the Spirit of Jehovah was, meant no doubt inquisition into the religious and moral state, condemnation of the idolatry of the tribes, and a restoration to some extent of the worship of God. In no other way could the strength of Israel be revived. The people had to be healed before they could fight, and the needed cure was spiritual. Hopeless invariably have been the efforts of oppressed peoples to deliver themselves unless some trust in a Divine power has given them heart for the struggle. When we see an army bow in prayer as one man before joining battle, as the Swiss did at Morat and the Scots at Bannockburn, we have faith in their spirit and courage, for they are feeling their dependence in the Supernatural. Othniel’s first care was to suppress idolatry, to teach Israelites anew the forgotten name and law of God and their destiny as a nation. Well did he know that this alone would prepare the way for success. Then, having gathered an army fit for his purpose, he was not long in sweeping the garrisons of Cushan out of the land.

Judgment and then deliverance; judgment of the mistakes and sins men have committed, thereby bringing themselves into trouble; conviction of sin and righteousness; thereafter guidance and help that their feet may be set on a rock and their goings established — this is the right sequence. That God should help the proud, the self-sufficient out of their troubles in order that they may go on in pride and vainglory, or that He should save the vicious from the consequences of their vice and leave them to persist in their iniquity, would be no Divine work. The new mind and the right spirit must be put in men, they must hear their condemnation, lay it to heart and repent, there must be a revival of holy purpose and aspiration first. Then the oppressors will be driven from the land, the weight of trouble lifted from the soul.

Othniel, the first of the judges, seems one of the best. He is not a man of mere rude strength and dashing enterprise. Nor is he one who runs the risk of sudden elevation to power, which few can stand. A person of acknowledged honour and sagacity, he sees the problem of the time and does his best to solve it. He is almost unique in this, that he appears without offence, without shame. And his judgeship is honourable to Israel. It points to a higher level of thought and greater seriousness among the tribes than in the century when Jephthah and Samson were the acknowledged heroes. The nation had not lost its reverence for the great

names and hopes of the exodus when it obeyed Othniel and followed him to battle.

In modern times there would seem to be scarcely any understanding of the fact that no man can do real service as a political leader unless he is a fearer of God, one who loves righteousness more than country, and serves the Eternal before any constituency. Sometimes a nation low enough in morality has been so far awake to its need and danger as to give the helm, at least for a time, to a servant of truth and righteousness and to follow where he leads. But more commonly is it the case that political leaders are chosen anywhere rather than from the ranks of the spiritually earnest. It is oratorical dash now, and now the cleverness of the intriguer, or the power of rank and wealth, that catches popular favour and exalts a man in the state. Members of parliament, cabinet ministers, high officials need have no devoutness, no spiritual seriousness or insight. A nation generally seeks no such character in its legislators and is often content with less than decent morality. Is it then any wonder that politics are arid and government a series of errors? We need men who have the true idea of liberty and will set nations nominally Christian on the way of fulfilling their mission to the world. When the people want a spiritual leader he will appear; when they are ready to follow one of high and pure temper he will arise and show the way. But the plain truth is that our chiefs in the state, in society and business must be the men who represent the general opinion, the general aim.

While we are in the main a worldly people, the best guides, those of spiritual mind, will never be allowed to carry their plans. And so we come back to the main lesson of the whole history, that only as each citizen is thoughtful of God and of duty, redeemed from selfishness and the world, can there be a true commonwealth, honourable government, beneficent civilisation.

CHAPTER 6

THE DAGGER AND THE OX-GOAD — ^{<070812>}JUDGES 3:12-31

THE world is served by men of very diverse kinds, and we pass now to one who is in strong contrast to Israel's first deliverer. Othniel the judge without reproach is followed by Ehud the regicide. The long peace which the country enjoyed after the Mesopotamian army was driven out allowed a return of prosperity and with it a relaxing of spiritual tone. Again there was disorganisation; again the Hebrew strength decayed and watchful enemies found an opportunity. The Moabites led the attack, and their king was at the head of a federation including the Ammonites and the Amalekites. It was this coalition the power of which Ehud had to break.

We can only surmise the causes of the assault made on the Hebrews west of Jordan by those peoples on the east. When the Israelites first appeared on the plains of the Jordan under the shadow of the mountains of Moab, before crossing into Palestine proper, Balak king of Moab viewed with alarm this new nation which was advancing to seek a settlement so near his territory. It was then he sent to Pethor for Balaam, in the hope that by a powerful incantation or curse the great diviner would blight the Hebrew armies and make them an easy prey. Notwithstanding this scheme, which even to the Israelites did not appear contemptible, Moses so far respected the relationship between Moab and Israel that he did not attack Balak's kingdom, although at the time it had been weakened by an unsuccessful contest with the Amorites from Gilead. Moab to the south and Ammon to the north were both left unharmed.

But to Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh was allotted the land from which the Amorites had been completely driven, a region extending from the frontier of Moab on the south away towards Hermon and the Argob; and these tribes entering vigorously on their possession could not long remain at peace with the bordering races. We can easily see how their encroachments, their growing strength would vex Moab and Ammon and drive them to plans of retaliation. Balaam had not cursed Israel; he had blessed it, and the blessing was being fulfilled. It seemed to be decreed that all other peoples east of Jordan were to be overborne by the descendants of Abraham; yet one fear wrought against another, and the hour of Israel's security was seized as a fit occasion for a vigorous sally across the river. A

desperate effort was made to strike at the heart of the Hebrew power and assert the claims of Chemosh to be a greater god than He Who was revered at the sanctuary of the ark.

Or Amalek may have instigated the attack. Away in the Sinaitic wilderness there stood an altar which Moses had named Jehovah-Nissi, Jehovah is my banner, and that altar commemorated a great victory gained by Israel over the Amalekites. The greater part of a century had gone by since the battle, but the memory of defeat lingers long with the Arab — and these Amalekites were pure Arabs, savage, vindictive, cherishing their cause of war, waiting their revenge. We know the command in Deuteronomy, “Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt. How he met thee by the way and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee. Thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. Thou shalt not forget it.” We may be sure that Reuben and Gad did not forget the dastardly attack; we may be sure that Amalek did not forget the day of Rephidim. If Moab was not of itself disposed to cross the Jordan and fall on Benjamin and Ephraim, there was the urgency of Amalek, the proffered help of that fiery people to ripen decision. The ferment of war rose. Moab, having walled cities to form a basis of operations, took the lead. The confederates marched northward along the Dead Sea, seized the ford near Gilgal and mastering the plain of Jericho pushed their conquest beyond the hills. Nor was it a temporary advance. They established themselves. Eighteen years afterwards we find Eglon, in his palace or castle near the City of Palm Trees, claiming authority over all Israel.

So the Hebrew tribes, partly by reason of an old strife not forgotten, partly because they have gone on vigorously adding to their territory, again suffer assault and are brought under oppression, and the coalition against them reminds us of confederacies that are in full force today. Ammon and Moab are united against the church of Christ, and Amalek joins in the attack. The parable is one, we shall say, of the opposition the church is constantly provoking, constantly experiencing, not entirely to its own credit. Allowing that, in the main, Christianity is truly and honestly aggressive, that on its march to the heights it does straight battle with the enemies of mankind and thus awakens the hatred of bandit Amaleks, yet this is not a complete account of the assaults which are renewed century after century. Must it not be owned that those who pass for Christians often go beyond the lines and methods of their proper warfare and are found on fields where the weapons are carnal and the fight is not “the good fight of faith”? There is a

strain of modern talk which defends the worldly ambition of Christian men, sounding very hollow and insincere to all excepting those whose interest and illusion it is to think it heavenly. We hear from a thousand tongues the gospel of Christianised commerce, of sanctified success, of making business a religion. In the press and hurry of competition there is a less and a greater conscientiousness. Let men have it in the greater degree, let them be less anxious for speedy success than some they know, not quite so eager to add factory to factory and field to field, more careful to interpret bargains fairly and do good work; let them figure often as benefactors and be free with their money to the church, and the residue of worldly ambition is glorified, being sufficient, perhaps, to develop a merchant prince, a railway king, a “millionaire” of the kind the age adores. Thus it comes to pass that the domain which appeared safe enough from the followers of Him who sought no power in the earthly range is invaded by men who reckon all their business efforts privileged under the laws of heaven, and every advantage they win a Divine plan for wresting money from the hands of the devil.

Now it is upon Christianity as approving all this that the Moabites and Ammonites of our day are falling. They are frankly worshippers of Chemosh and Milcom, not of Jehovah; they believe in wealth, their all is staked on the earthly prosperity and enjoyment for which they strive. It is too bad, they feel, to have their sphere and hopes curtailed by men who profess no respect for the world, no desire for its glory but a constant preference for things unseen; they writhe when they consider the triumphs wrested from them by rivals who count success an answer to prayer and believe themselves favourites of God. Or the frank heathen finds that in business a man professing Christianity in the customary way is as little cumbered as himself by any disdain of tarnished profits and “smart” devices. What else can be expected but that, driven back and back by the energy of Christians so called, the others shall begin to think Christianity itself largely a pretence? Do we wonder to see the revolution in France hurling its forces not only against wealth and rank, but also against the religion identified with wealth and rank? Do we wonder to see in our day socialism, which girds at great fortunes as an insult to humanity, joining hands with agnosticism and secularism to make assault on the church? It is precisely what might be looked for; nay, more, the opposition will go on till Christian profession is purged of hypocrisy and Christian practice is harmonised with the law of Christ. Not the push, not the equivocal success of one person here and there is it that creates doubt of Christianity and provokes antagonism, but the whole systems of society and business in so-

called Christian lands, and even the conduct of affairs within the church, the strain of feeling there. For in the church as without it wealth and rank are important in themselves, and make some important who have little or no other claim to respect. In the church as without it methods are adopted that involve large outlay and a constant need for the support of the wealthy; in the church as without it life depends too much on the abundance of the things that are possessed. And, in the not unfair judgment of those who stand outside, all this proceeds from a secret doubt of Christ's law and authority, which more than excuses their own denial. The strifes of the day, even those that turn on the Godhead of Christ and the inspiration of the Bible, as well as on the divine claim of the church, are not due solely to hatred of truth and the depravity of the human heart. They have more reason than the church has yet confessed. Christianity in its practical and speculative aspects is one; it cannot be a creed unless it is a life. It is essentially a life not conformed to this world, but transformed, redeemed. Our faith will stand secure from all attacks, vindicated as a supernatural revelation and inspiration, when the whole of church life and Christian endeavour shall rise above the earthly and be manifest everywhere as a fervent striving for the spiritual and eternal.

We have been assuming the unfaithfulness of Israel to its duty and vocation. The people of God, instead of commending His faith by their neighbourliness and generosity, were, we fear, too often proud and selfish, seeking their own things, not the well being of others, sending no attractive light into the heathenism around. Moab was akin to the Hebrews and in many respects similar in character. When we come to the Book of Ruth we find a certain intercourse between the two. Ammon, more unsettled and barbarous, was of the same stock. Israel, giving nothing to these peoples, but taking all she could from them, provoked antagonism all the more bitter that they were of kin to her, and they felt no scruple when their opportunity came. Not only had the Israelites to suffer for their failure, but Moab and Ammon also. The wrong beginning of the relations between them was never undone. Moab and Ammon went on worshipping their own gods, enemies of Israel to the last.

Ehud appears a deliverer. He was a Benjamite, a man left-handed; he chose his own method of action, and it was to strike directly at the Moabite king. Eager words regarding the shamefulness of Israel's subjection had perhaps already marked him as a leader, and it may have been with the expectation that he would do a bold deed that he was chosen to bear the periodical tribute on this occasion to Eglon's palace. Girding a long dagger under his

garment on his right thigh, where if found it might appear to be worn without evil intent, he set out with some attendants to the Moabite headquarters. The narrative is so vivid that we seem able to follow Ehud step by step. He has gone from the neighbourhood of Jebus to Jericho, perhaps by the road in which the scene of our Lord's parable of the Good Samaritan was long afterwards laid, Having delivered the tribute into the hands of Eglon he goes southward a few miles to the sculptured stones at Gilgal, where possibly some outpost of the Moabites kept guard. There he leaves his attendants, and swiftly retracing his steps to the palace craves a private interview with the king and announces a message from God, at Whose name Eglon respectfully rises from his seat. One flash of the dagger and the bloody deed is done. Leaving the king's dead body there in the chamber, Ehud bolts the door and boldly passes the attendants, then quickening his pace, is soon beyond Gilgal and away by another route through the steep hills to the mountains of Ephraim. Meanwhile the murder is discovered and there is confusion at the palace. No one being at hand to give orders, the garrison is unprepared to act, and as Ehud loses no time in gathering a band and returning to finish his work, the fords of Jordan are taken before the Moabites can cross to the eastern side. They are caught, and the defeat is so decisive that Israel is free again for fourscore years.

Now this deed of Ehud's was clearly a case of assassination, and as such we have to consider it. The crime is one which stinks in our nostrils because it is associated with treachery and cowardice, the basest revenge or the most undisciplined passion. But if we go back to times of ruder morality and regard the circumstances of such a people as Israel, scattered and oppressed, waiting for a sign of bold energy that may give it new heart, we can easily see that one who chose to act as Ehud did would by no means incur the reprobation we now attach to the assassin. To go no farther back than the French Revolution and the deed of Charlotte Corday, we cannot reckon her among the basest — that woman of "the beautiful still countenance" who believed her task to be the duty of a patriot. Nevertheless, it is not possible to make a complete defence of Ehud. His act was treacherous. The man he slew was a legitimate king, and is not said to have done his ruling ill. Even allowing for the period, there was something peculiarly detestable in striking one to death who stood up reverently expecting a message from God. Yet Ehud may have thoroughly believed himself to be a Divine instrument.

This too we see, that the great just providence of the Almighty is not impeached by such an act. No word in the narrative justifies assassination;

but, being done, place is found for it as a thing overruled for good in the development of Israel's history. Man has no defence for his treachery and violence, yet in the process of events the barbarous deed, the fierce crime, are shown to be under the control of the Wisdom that guides all men and things. And here the issue which justifies Divine providence, though it does not purge the criminal, is clear. For through Ehud a genuine deliverance was wrought for Israel. The nation, curbed by aliens, overborne by an idolatrous power, was free once more to move toward the great spiritual end for which it had been created. We might be disposed to say that on the whole Israel made nothing of freedom, that the faith of God revived and the heart of the people became devout in times of oppression rather than of liberty. In a sense it was so, and the story of this people is the story of all, for men go to sleep over their best, they misuse freedom, they forget why they are free. Yet every eulogy of freedom is true. Man must even have the power of misusing it if he is to arrive at the best. It is in liberty that manhood is nursed, and therefore in liberty that religion matures. Autocratic laws mean tyranny, and tyranny denies the soul its responsibility to justice, truth, and God. Mind and conscience held from their high office, responsibility to the greatest overborne by some tyrant hand that may seem beneficent, the soul has no space, faith no room to breathe; man is kept from the spontaneity and gladness of his proper life. So we have to win liberty in hard struggle and know our selves free in order that we may belong completely to God.

See how life advances! God deals with the human race according to a vast plan of discipline leading to heights which at first appear inaccessible. Freedom is one of the first of these, and only by way of it are the higher summits reached. during the long ages of the dark and weary struggle, which seem to many but a fruitless martyrdom, the Divine idea was interfused with all the strife. Not one blind stroke, not one agony of the craving soul was wasted. In all the wisdom of God wrought for man, through man's pathetic feebleness or most daring achievement. So out of the chaos of the gloomy valleys a highway of order was raised by which the race should mount to Freedom and thence to Faith. We see it in the history of nations, those that have led the way and those that are following. the possessors of clear faith have won it in liberty. In Switzerland, in Scotland, in England, the order has been, first civil freedom, then Christian thought and vigour. Wallace and Bruce prepare the way for Knox; Boadicea, Hereward, the Barons of Magna Charta for Wycliffe and the Reformation; the men of the Swiss Cantons who won Morgarten and routed Charles the Bold were the forerunners of Zwingli and Farel. Israel, too, had its heroes

of freedom; and even those who, like Ehud and Samson, did little or nothing for faith and struck wildly, wrongly for their country, did yet choose consciously to serve their people and were helpers of a righteousness and a holy purpose they did not know. When all has been said against them it remains true that the freedom they brought to Israel was a Divine gift.

It is to be remarked that Ehud did not judge Israel. He was a deliverer, but nowise fitted to exercise high office in the name of God. In some way not made clear in the narrative he had become the centre of the resolute spirits of Benjamin and was looked to by them to find an opportunity of striking at the oppressors. His calling, we may say, was human, not Divine; it was limited, not national; and he was not a man who could rise to any high thought of leadership. The heads of tribes, ingloriously paying tribute to the Moabites, may have scoffed at him as of no account. Yet he did what they supposed impossible. The little rising grew with the rapidity of a thundercloud, and, when it passed, Moab, smitten as by a lightning flash, no longer overshadowed Israel. As for the deliverer, his work having been done apparently in the course of a few days, he is seen no more in the history. While he lived, however, his name was a terror to the enemies of Israel, for what he had effected once he might be depended upon to do again if necessity arose. And the land had rest.

Here is an example of what is possible to the obscure whose qualifications are not great, but who have spirit and firmness, who are not afraid of dangers and privations on the way to an end worth gaining, be it the deliverance of their country, the freedom or purity of their church, or the rousing of society against a flagrant wrong. Do the rich and powerful angrily refuse their patronage? Do they find much to say about the impossibility of doing anything, the evil of disturbing people's minds, the duty of submission to Providence and to the advice of wise and learned persons? Those who see the time and place for acting, who hear the clarion call of duty, will not be deterred. Armed for their task with fit weapons — the two-edged dagger of truth for the corpulent lie, the penetrating stone of a just scorn for the forehead of arrogance, they have the right to go forth, the right to succeed, though probably, when the stroke has told, many will be heard lamenting its untimeliness and proving the dangerous indiscretion of Ehud and all who followed him.

In the same line another type is represented by Shamgar, son of Anath, the man of the ox-goad, who considered not whether he was equipped for

attacking Philistines, but turned on them from the plough, his blood leaping in him with swift indignation. The instrument of his assault was not made for the use to which it was put: the power lay in the arm that wielded the goad and the fearless wilt of the man who struck for his own birthright, freedom, — for Israel's birthright, to be the servant of no other race. Undoubtedly it is well that, in any efforts made for the church or for society, men should consider how they are to act and should furnish themselves in the best manner for the work that is to be done. No outfit of knowledge, skill, experience is to be despised. A man does not serve the world better in ignorance than in learning, in bluntness than in refinement. But the serious danger for such an age as our own is that strength may be frittered away and zeal expended in the mere preparation of weapons, in the mere exercise before the war begins. The important points at issue are apt to be lost sight of, and the vital distinctions on which the whole battle turns to fade away in an atmosphere of compromise. There are those who, to begin, are Israelites indeed, with a keen sense of their nationality, of the urgency of certain great thoughts and the example of heroes. Their nationality becomes less and less to them as they touch the world; the great thoughts begin to seem parochial and antiquated; the heroes are found to have been mistaken, their names cease to thrill. The man now sees nothing to fight for, he cares only to go on perfecting his equipment. Let us do him justice. It is not the toil of the conflict he shrinks from, but the rudeness of it, the dust and heat of warfare. He is no voluntary now, for he values the dignity of a State Church and feels the charm of ancient traditions. He is not a good churchman, for he will not be pledged to any creed or opposed to any school. He is rarely seen on any political platform, for he hates the watchwords of party. And this is the least of it. He is a man without a cause, a believer without a faith, a Christian without a stroke of brave work to do in the world. We love his mildness; we admire his mental possessions, his broad sympathies. But when we are throbbing with indignation he is too calm; when we catch at the ox-goad and fly at the enemy we know that he disdains our weapon and is affronted by our fire. Better, if it must be so, the rustic from the plough, the herdsman from the hillside; better far he of the camel's-hair garment and the keen cry, Repent, repent!

Israel, then, appears in these stories of her iron age as the cradle of the manhood of the modern world; in Israel the true standard was lifted up for the people. It is liberty put to a noble use that is the mark of manhood, and in Israel's history the idea of responsibility to the one living and true God takes form and clearness as that alone which fulfils and justifies liberty. Israel has a God Whose will man must do, and for the doing of it he is free.

If at the outset the vigour which this thought of God infused into the Hebrew struggle for independence was tempestuous; if Jehovah was seen not in the majesty of eternal justice and sublime magnanimity, not as the Friend of all, but as the unseen King of a favoured people, — still, as freedom came, there came with it always, in some prophetic word, some Divine psalm, a more living conception of God as gracious, merciful, holy, unchangeable; and notwithstanding all lapses the Hebrew was a man of higher quality than those about him. You stand by the cradle and see no promise, nothing to attract. But give the faith which is here in infancy time to assert itself, give time for the vision of God to enlarge, and the finest type of human life will arise and establish itself, a type possible in no other way. Egypt with its long and wonderful history gives nothing to the moral life of the new world, for it produces no men. Its kings are despots, tomb builders, its people contented or discontented slaves. Babylon and Nineveh are names that dwarf Israel's into insignificance, but their power passes and leaves only some monuments for the antiquarian, some corroborations of a Hebrew record. Egypt and Chaldea, Assyria and Persia never reached through freedom the idea of man's proper life, never rose to the sense of that sublime calling or bowed in that profound adoration of the Holy One which made the Israelite, rude fanatic as he often was, a man and a father of men. From Egypt, from Babylon, — yea, from Greece and Rome came no redeemer of mankind, for they grew bewildered in the search after the chief end of existence and fell before they found it. In the prepared people it was, the people cramped in the narrow land between the Syrian desert and the sea, that the form of the future Man was seen, and there, where the human spirit felt at least, if it did not realise its dignity and place, the Messiah was born.

CHAPTER 7

THE SIBYL OF MOUNT EPHRAIM — JUDGES 4

THERE arises now in Israel a prophetess, one of those rare women whose souls burn with enthusiasm and holy purpose when the hearts of men are abject and despondent; and to Deborah it is given to make a nation hear her call. Of prophetesses the world has seen but few; generally the woman has her work of teaching and administering justice in the name of God within a domestic circle and finds all her energy needed there. But queens have reigned with firm nerve and clear sagacity in many a land, and now and again a woman's voice has struck the deep note which has roused a nation to its duty. Such in the old Hebrew days was Deborah, wife of Lappidoth.

It was a time of miserable thralldom in Israel when she became aware of her destiny and began the sacred enterprise of her life. From Hazor in the north near the waters of Merom Israel was ruled by Jabin, king of the Canaanites — not the first of the name, for Joshua had before defeated one Jabin king of Hazor, and slain him. During the peace that followed Ehud's triumph over Moab the Hebrews, busy with worldly affairs, failed to estimate a danger which year by year became more definite and pressing — the rise of the ancient strongholds of Canaan and their chiefs to new activity and power. Little by little the cities Joshua destroyed were rebuilt, refortified and made centres of warlike preparation. The old inhabitants of the land recovered spirit, while Israel lapsed into foolish confidence. At Harosheth of the Gentiles, under the shadow of Carmel, near the mouth of the Kishon, armourers were busy forging weapons and building chariots of iron. The Hebrews did not know what was going on, or missed the purpose that should have thrust itself on their nonce. Then came the sudden rush of the chariots and the onset of the Canaanite troops, fierce, irresistible. Israel was subdued and bowed to a yoke all the more galling that it was a people they had conquered and perhaps despised that now rode over them. In the north at least the Hebrews were kept in servitude for twenty years, suffered to remain in the land but compelled to pay heavy tribute, many of them, it is likely, enslaved or allowed but a nominal independence. Deborah's song vividly describes the condition of things in her country. Shamgar had made a clearance on the Philistine border and kept his footing as a leader, but elsewhere the land was so swept by Canaanite spoilers that the highways were unused and Hebrew travellers kept to the tortuous and difficult by

paths down in the glens or among the mountains. There was war in all the gates, but in Israelite dwellings neither shield nor spear. Defenceless and crushed the people lay crying to gods that could not save, turning ever to new gods in strange despair, the national state far worse than when Cushan's army held the land or when Eglon ruled from the City of Palm Trees.

Born before this time of oppression Deborah spent her childhood and youth in some village of Issachar, her home a rude hut covered with brushwood and clay, like those which are still seen by travellers. Her parents, we must believe, had more religious feeling than was common among Hebrews of the time. They would speak to her of the name and law of Jehovah, and she, we doubt not, loved to hear. But with the exception of brief oral traditions fitfully repeated and an example of reverence for sacred times and duties, a mere girl would have no advantages. Even if her father was chief of a village her lot would be hard and monotonous, as she aided in the work of the household and went morning and evening to fetch water from the spring or tended a few sheep on the hillside. While she was yet young the Canaanite oppression began, and she with others felt the tyranny and the shame. The soldiers of Jabin came and lived at free quarters among the villagers, wasting their property. The crops were perhaps assessed, as they are at the present day in Syria, before they were reaped, and sometimes half or even more would be swept away by the remorseless collector of tribute. The people turned thriftless and sullen. They had nothing to gain by exerting themselves when the soldiers and the tax gatherer were ready to exact so much the more, leaving them still in poverty. Now and again there might be a riot. Maddened by insults and extortion the men of the village would make a stand. But without weapons, without a leader, what could they effect? The Canaanite troops were upon them; some were killed, others carried away, and things became worse than before.

There was not much prospect at such a time for a Hebrew maiden whose lot it seemed to be, while yet scarcely out of her childhood, to be married like the rest and sink into a household drudge, toiling for a husband who in his turn laboured for the oppressor. But there was a way then, as there is always a way for the high spirited to save life from bareness and desolation; and Deborah found her path. Her soul went forth to her people, and their sad state moved her to something more than a woman's grief and rebellion. As years went by the traditions of the past revealed their meaning to her, deeper and larger thoughts came, a beginning of hope for the tribes so downcast and weary. Once they had swept victoriously through the land

and smitten that very fortress which again overshadowed all the north. It was in the name of Jehovah and by His help that Israel then triumphed. Clearly the need was for a new covenant with Him; the people must repent and return to the Lord. Did Deborah put this before her parents, her husband? Doubtless they agreed with her, but could see no way of action, no opportunity for such as they. As she spoke more and more eagerly, as she ventured to urge the men of her village to bestir themselves, perhaps a few were moved, but the rest heard carelessly or derided her. We can imagine Deborah in that time of trial growing up into tall and striking womanhood, watching with indignation many a scene in which her people showed a craven fear or joined slavishly in heathen revels. As she spoke and saw her words burn the hearts of some to whom they were spoken, the sense of power and duty came. In vain she looked for a prophet, a leader, a man of Jehovah to rekindle a flame in the nation's heart. A flame! It was in her own soul, she might wake it in other souls; Jehovah helping her, she would.

But when in her native tribe the brave woman began to urge with prophetic eloquence the return to God and to preach a holy war her time of peril came. Issachar lay completely under the survey of Jabin's officers, overawed by his chariots. And one who would deliver a servile people had need to fear treachery. Issachar was "a strong ass couching down between the sheepfolds he had bowed his shoulder to bear" and become "a servant under task work." As her purpose matured she had to seek a place of safety and influence, and passing southward she found it in some retired spot among the hills between Bethel and Ramah, some nook of that valley which, beginning near Ai, curves eastward and narrows at Geba to a rocky gorge with precipices eight hundred feet high, — the Valley of Achor, of which Hosea long afterwards said that it should be a door of hope. Here, under a palm tree, the landmark of her tent, she began to prophesy and judge and grow to spiritual power among the tribes. It was a new thing in Israel for a woman to speak in the name of God. Her utterances had no doubt something of a sibyllic strain, and the deep or wild notes of her voice pleading for Jehovah or raised in passionate warning against idolatry touched the finest chords of the Hebrew soul. In her rapture she saw the Holy One coming in majesty from the southern desert where Horeb reared its sacred peak; or again, looking into the future, foretold His exaltation in proud triumph over the gods of Canaan, His people free once more, their land purged of every heathen taint. So gradually her place of abode became a rendezvous of the tribes, a seat of justice, a shrine of reviving hope. Those who longed for righteous administration came to her; those who

were rearers of Jehovah gathered about her. Gaining wisdom she was able to represent to a rude age the majesty as well as the purity of Divine law, to establish order as well as to communicate enthusiasm. The people felt that sagacity like hers and a spirit so sanguine and fearless must be the gift of Jehovah; it was the inspiration of the Almighty that gave her understanding.

Deborah's prophetic utterances are not to be tried by the standard of the Isaiah age. So tested some of her judgments might fail, some of her visions lose their charm. She had no clear outlook to those great principles which the later prophets more or less fully proclaimed. Her education and circumstances and her intellectual power determined the degree in which she could receive Divine illumination. One woman before her is honoured with the name of prophetess, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who led the refrain of the song of triumph at the Red Sea. Miriam's gift appears limited to the gratitude and ecstasy of one day of deliverance; and when afterwards, on the strength of her share in the enthusiasm of the Exodus, she ventured along with Aaron to claim equality with Moses, a terrible rebuke checked her presumption. Comparing Miriam and Deborah, we find as great an advance from the one to the other as from Deborah to Amos or Hosea. But this only shows that the inspiration of one mind, intense and ample for that mind, may come far short of the inspiration of another. God does not give every prophet the same insight as Moses, for the rare and splendid genius of Moses was capable of an illumination which very few in any following age have been able to receive. Even as among the Apostles of Christ St. Peter shows occasionally a lapse from the highest Christian judgment for which St. Paul has to take him to task, and yet does not cease to be inspired, so Deborah is not to be denied the Divine gift though her song is coloured by an all too human exultation over a fallen enemy.

It is simply impossible to account for this new beginning in Israel's history without a heavenly impulse; and through Deborah unquestionably that impulse came. Others were turning to God, but she broke the dark spell which held the tribes and taught them afresh how to believe and pray. Under her palm tree there were solemn searchings of heart, and when the head men of the clans gathered there, travelling across the mountains of Ephraim or up the wadies from the fords of Jordan, it was first to humble themselves for the sin of idolatry, and then to undertake with sacred oaths and vows the serious work which fell to them in Israel's time of need. Not all came to that solemn rendezvous. When is such a gathering completely representative? Of Judah and Simeon we hear nothing. Perhaps they had

their own troubles with the wandering tribes of the desert; perhaps they did not suffer as the others from Canaanite tyranny and therefore kept aloof. Reuben on the other side Jordan wavered, Manasseh made no sign of sympathy; Asher, held in check by the fortress of Hazor and the garrison of Harosheth, chose the safe part of inaction. Dan was busy trying to establish a maritime trade. But Ephraim and Benjamin, Zebulun and Naphtali were forward in the revival, and proudly the record is made on behalf of her native tribe, "the princes of Issachar were with Deborah." Months passed; the movement grew steadily, there was a stirring among the dry bones, a resurrection of hope and purpose.

And with all the care used this could not be hid from the Canaanites. For doubtless in not a few Israelite homes heathen wives and half-heathen children would be apt to spy and betray. It goes hardly with men if they have bound themselves by any tie to those who will not only fail in sympathy when religion makes demands, but will do their utmost to thwart serious ambitions and resolves. A man is terribly compromised who has pledged himself to a woman of earthly mind, ruled by idolatries of time and sense. He has undertaken duties to her which a quickened sense of Divine law will make him feel the more; she has her claim upon his life, and there is nothing to wonder at if she insists upon her view, to his spiritual disadvantage and peril. In the time of national quickening and renewed, thoughtfulness many a Hebrew discovered the folly of which he had been guilty in joining hands with women who were on the side of the Baalim and resented any sacrifice made for Jehovah. Here we find the explanation of much lukewarmness, indifference to the great enterprises of the church and withholding of service by those who make some profession of being on the Lord's side. The entanglements of domestic relationship have far more to do with failure in religious duty than is commonly supposed.

Amid difficulty and discouragement enough, with slender resources, the hope of Israel resting upon her, Deborah's heart did not fail nor her head for affairs. When the critical point was reached of requiring a general for the war. she had already fixed upon the man. At Kadesh-Naphtali, almost in sight of Jabin's fortress, on a hill overlooking the waters of Merom, ninety miles to the north, dwelt Barak the son of Abin-oaha. The neighbourhood of the Canaanite capital and daily evidence of its growing power made Barak ready for any enterprise which had in it good promise of success, and he had better qualifications than mere resentment against injustice and eager hatred of the Canaanite oppression. Already known in Zebulun and Naphtali as a man of bold temper and sagacity, he was in a

position to gather an army corps out of those tribes — the main strength of the force on which Deborah relied for the approaching struggle. Better still, he was a fearer of God. To Kadesh-Naphtali the prophetess sent for the chosen leader of the troops of Israel, addressing to him the call of Jehovah: “Hath not the Lord commanded thee saying, Go and draw towards Mount Tabor” — that is, Bring by detachments quietly from the different cities towards Mount Tabor — “ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun?” The rendezvous of Sisera’s host was Harosheth of the Gentiles, in the defile at the western extremity of the valley of Megiddo, where Kishon breaks through to the plain of Acre. Tabor overlooked from the northeast the same wide strath which was to be the field where the chariots and the multitude should be delivered into Barak’s hand.

Not doubting the word of God, Barak sees a difficulty. For himself he has no prophetic gift; he is ready to fight, but this is to be a sacred war. From the very first he would have the men gather with the clear understanding that it is for religion as much as for freedom they are taking arms; and how may this be secured? Only if Deborah will go with him through the country proclaiming the Divine summons and promise of victory. He is very decided on the point. “If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, I will not go.” Deborah agrees, though she would fain have left this matter entirely to men. She warns him that the expedition will not be to his honour, since Jehovah will give Sisera into the hand of a woman. Against her will she takes part in the military preparations. There is no need to find in Deborah’s words a prophecy of the deed of Jael. It is a grossly untrue taunt that the murder of Sisera is the central point of the whole narrative. When Deborah says, “The Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman,” the reference plainly is, as Josephus makes it, to the position into which Deborah herself was forced as the chief person in the campaign. With great wisdom and the truest courage she would have limited her own sphere. With equal wisdom and equal courage Barak understood how the zeal of the people was to be maintained. There was a friendly contest, and in the end the right way was found, for unquestionably Deborah was the genius of the movement. Together they went to Kedesh, — not Kadesh-Naphtali in the far north, but Kedesh on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, some twelve miles from Tabor.^{f4} From that as a centre, journeying by secluded ways through the northern districts, often perhaps by night, Deborah and Barak went together rousing the enthusiasm of the people, until the shores of the lake and the valleys running down to it were quietly occupied by thousands of armed men.

The clans are at length gathered; the whole force marches from Kedesh to the foot of Tabor to give battle. And now Sisera, fully equipped, moves out of Harosheth along the course of the Kishon, marching well beneath the ridge of Carmel, his chariots thundering in the van. Near Taanach he orders his front to be formed to the north, crosses the Kishon and advances on the Hebrews, who by this time are visible beyond the slope of Moreh. The tremendous moment has come. "Up," cries Deborah, "for this is the day in which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hand. Is not the Lord gone out before thee?" She has waited till the troops of Sisera are entangled among the streams which here, from various directions, converge to the river Kishon, now swollen with rain and difficult to cross. Barak, the Lightning Chief, leads his men impetuously down into the plain, keeping near the shoulder of Moreh where the ground is not broken by the streams; and with the fall of evening he begins the attack. The chariots have crossed the Kishon but are still struggling in the swamps and marshes. They are assailed with vehemence and forced back, and in the waning light all is confusion. The Kishon sweeps away many of the Canaanite host, the rest make a stand by Taanach and further on by the waters of Megiddo. The Hebrews find a higher ford, and following the south bank of the river are upon the foe again. It is a November night and meteors are flashing through the sky. They are an omen of evil to the disheartened, half-defeated army. Do not the stars in their courses fight against Sisera? The rout becomes complete; Barak pursues the scattered force towards Harosheth, and at the ford near the city there is terrible loss. Only the fragments of a ruined army find shelter within the gates.

Meanwhile Sisera, a coward at heart, more familiar with the parade ground than fit for the stern necessities of war, leaves his chariot and abandons his men to their fate, his own safety all his care. Seeking that, it is not to Harosheth he turns. He takes his way across Gilboa toward the very region which Barak has left. On a little plateau overlooking the Sea of Galilee, near Kedesh, there is a settlement of Kenites whom Sisera thinks he can trust. Like a hunted animal he presses on over ridge and through defile till he reaches the black tents and receives from Jael the treacherous welcome, "Turn in, my lord, turn in to me; fear not." The pitiful tragedy follows. The coward meets at the hand of a woman the death from which he has fled. Jael gives him fermented milk to drink which, exhausted as he is, sends him into a deep sleep. Then, as he lies helpless, she smites the tent pin through his temples.

In her song Deborah describes and glories over the execution of her country's enemy. "Blessed among women shall Jael, the wife of Heber be; with the hammer she smote Sisera; at her feet he curled up, he fell." Exulting in every circumstance of the tragedy, she adds a description of Sisera's mother and her ladies expecting his return as a victor laden with spoil, and listening eagerly for the wheels of that chariot which never again should roll through the streets of Harosheth. As to the whole of this passage, our estimate of Deborah's knowledge and spiritual insight does not require us to regard her praise and her judgment as absolute. She rejoices in a deed which has crowned the great victory over the master of nine hundred chariots, the terror of Israel; she glories in the courage of another woman, who single handed finished that tyrant's career; she does not make God responsible for the deed. Let the outburst of her enthusiastic relief stand as the expression of intense feeling, the rebound from fear and anxiety of the patriotic heart. We need not weight ourselves with the suspicion that the prophetess reckoned Jael's deed the outcome of a Divine thought. No, but we may believe this of Jael, that she is on the side of Israel, her sympathy so far repressed by the league of her people with Jabin, yet prompting her to use every opportunity of serving the Hebrew cause. It is clear that if the Kenite treaty had meant very much and Jael had felt herself bound by it, her tent would have been an asylum for the fugitive. But she is against the enemies of Israel; her heart is with the people of Jehovah in the battle and she is watching eagerly for signs of the victory she desires them to win. Unexpected, startling, the sign appears in the fleeing captain of Jabin's host, alone, looking wildly for shelter. "Turn in, my lord; turn in." Will he enter? Will he hide himself in a woman's tent? Then to her will be committed vengeance. It will be an omen that the hour of Sisera's fate has come. Hospitality itself must yield; she will break even that sacred law to do stern justice on a coward, a tyrant, and an enemy of God.

A line of thought like this is entirely in harmony with the Arab character. The moral ideas of the desert are rigorous, and contempt rapidly becomes cruel. A tent woman has few elements of judgment, and, the balance turning, her conclusion will be quick, remorseless. Jael is no blameless heroine, neither is she a demon. Deborah, who understands her, reads clearly the rapid thoughts, the swift decision, the unscrupulous act and sees, behind all, the purpose of serving Israel. Her praise of Jael is therefore with knowledge; but she herself would not have done the thing she praises. All possible explanations made, it remains a murder, a wild, savage thing for a woman to do, and we may ask whether among the tents of Zaananim

Jael was not looked on from that day as a woman stained and shadowed, — one who had been treacherous to a guest.

Not here can the moral be found that the end justifies the means, or that we may do evil with good intent; which never was a Bible doctrine and never can be. On the contrary, we find it written clear that the end does not justify the means. Sisera must live on and do the worst he may rather than any soul should be soiled with treachery or any hand defiled by murder. There are human vermin, human scorpions and vipers. Is Christian society to regard them, to care for them? The answer is that Providence regards them and cares for them. They are human after all, men whom God has made, for whom there are yet hopes, who are no worse than others would be if Divine grace did not guard and deliver. Rightly does Christian society affirm that a human being in peril, in suffering, in any extremity common to men is to be succoured as a man, without inquiry whether he is good or vile. What then of justice and man's administration of justice? This, that they demand a sacred calm, elevation above the levels of personal feeling, mortal passion, and ignorance. Law is to be of no private, sudden, unconsidered administration. Only in the most solemn and orderly way is the trial of the worst malefactor to be gone about, sentence passed, justice executed. To have reached this understanding of law with regard to all accused and suspected persons and all evildoers is one of the great gains of the Christian period. We need not look for anything like the ideal of justice in the age of the judges; deeds were done then and zealously and honestly praised which we must condemn. They were meant to bring about good, but the sum of human violence was increased by them and more work made for the moral reformer of after times. And going back to Jael's deed, we see that it gave Israel little more than vengeance. In point of fact the crushing defeat of the army left Sisera powerless, discredited, open to the displeasure of his master. He could have done Israel no more harm.

One point remains. Emphatically are we reminded that life continually brings us to sudden moments in which we must act without time for careful reflection, the spirit of our past flashing out in some quick deed or word of fate. Sisera's past drove him in panic over the hills to Zaananim. Jael's past came with her to the door of the tent; and the two as they looked at each other in that tragic moment were at once, without warning, in crisis for which every thought and passion of years had made a way. Here the self-pampering of a vain man had its issue. Here the woman, undisciplined, impetuous, catching sight of the means to do a deed, moves to the fatal stroke like one possessed. It is the sort of thing we often call madness, and

yet such insanity is but the expression of what men and women choose to be capable of. The casual allowance of an impulse here, a craving there, seems to mean little until the occasion comes when their accumulated force is sharply or terribly revealed. The laxity of the past thus declares itself; and on the other hand there is often a gathering of good to a moment of revelation. The soul that has for long years fortified itself in pious courage, in patient well doing, in high and noble thought, leaps one day, to its own surprise, to the height of generous daring or heroic truth. We determine the issue of crises which we cannot foresee.

CHAPTER 8

DEBORAH'S SONG: A DIVINE VISION — JUDGES 5

THE song of Deborah and Barak is twofold, the first portion, ending with the eleventh verse, a chant of rising hope and pious encouragement during the time of preparation and revival, the other a song of battle and victory throbbing with eager patriotism and the hot breath of martial excitement. In the former part God is celebrated as the Helper of Israel from of old and from afar; He is the spring of the movement in which the singer rejoices, and in His praise the strophes culminate. But human nature asserts itself after the great and decisive triumph in the vivid touches of the latter canto. In it more is told of the doings of men, and there is picturesque fiery exultation over the fallen. One might almost think that Deborah, herself childless, glories over the mother of Sisera in the utter desolation which falls on her when she hears the tidings of her son's defeat and death. Yet this mood ceases abruptly, and the song returns to Jehovah, Whose friends are lifted up to joy and strength by His availing help.

The main interest of the twofold song lies in its religious colour, for here the pious ardour of the Israel of the judges comes to finest expression. As a whole it is more patriotic than moral, more warlike than religious, and thus unquestionably reflects the temper of the time. What ideas do we find in it of the relation of Israel to God and of God to Israel, what conceptions of the Divine character? Jehovah is invoked and praised as the God of the Hebrews alone. He seems to have no interest in the Canaanites, nor compassion towards them. Yet the grandeur of the Divine forthgoing is declared in bold and striking imagery, and the high resolves of men are clearly traced to the Spirit of the Almighty. Duty to God is linked with duty to country, and it is at least suggested that Israel without Jehovah is nothing and has no right to a place among the peoples. The nation exists for the glory of its Heavenly King, to make known His power and His righteous acts. A strain like this in a war song belonging to the time of Israel's semi-barbarism bears no uncertain promise. From the well spring out of which it flows clear and sparkling there will come other songs, with tenderer music and holier longing, — songs of spiritual hope and generous desire for Messianic peace.

1. The first religious note is struck in what may be called the opening Hallelujah, although the ejaculation, "Bless the Lord," is not, in Hebrew, that which afterwards became the great refrain of sacred song.

*"For that leaders led in Israel,
For that the people offered themselves willingly:
Bless ye Jehovah."*

Here is more than belief in Providence. It is faith in the spiritual presence and power of God swaying the souls of men. Has Deborah seen at last, after long efforts to rouse the careless people, one and another responding to her appeals and seeking her tent among the hills? Has she witnessed the vows of the chiefs of Issachar and Zebulun that they would not be wanting in the day of battle? Not to herself but to the God of Israel is the new temper ascribed. Jehovah, Who touched her own heart, has now touched many another. For years she had been aware of holier influences than came to her from the people among whom she lived. In secret, in the silence of the heart, she had found herself mastered by thoughts that none around her shared. She has well accounted for them. Jehovah has spoken to her, Jehovah caring still for His people, waiting to redeem them from bondage. And now, when her prophetic cry finds echo in other souls, when men who were asleep rise up and declare their purpose, especially when from this side and that companies of brave youths and resolute elders come to her — from the slopes of Carmel, from the hills of Gilead — the fire of hope in their eyes, how otherwise explain the upspringing of energy and devotion than as the work of the Spirit that has moved her own soul? To Jehovah is all the praise.

Common enough in our day is a profession of belief in God as the source of every good desire and right effort, as inspiring the charity of the generous, the affection of the loving, the fidelity of the true. But if our faith is deep and real it brings us much nearer than we usually feel ourselves to be to Him Who is the Life indeed. The existence and energy of God are assured to those who have this insight. Every kindness done by man to man is a testimony against which denial of the Divine life has no power. Though the intellect searching far afield makes out only as it were some few and indistinct footprints of a Mighty Being Who has passed by, seen at intervals on the plains of history, then lost in the morasses or on the rocky ground, there ought to be found in every human life daily evidence of Divine grace and wisdom. The good, the true, the noble constantly appeal to men, find men; and through these God finds them. When a magnanimous word is spoken, God is heard. When a deed is done in love, in purity, in courage or

pity, God is seen. When out of languor and corruption and self-indulgence men arise and set their faces to the steep of duty, God is revealed. He in Whom we trust for the redemption of the world never leaves Himself without a witness, whether faith perceives or unbelief denies. The human story unfolds a Divine urgency by which the progress, the evolution of all that is good proceed from age to age. Man has never been left to nature alone nor to himself alone. The supernatural has always mingled with his life. He has resisted often, he has rebelled; yet conscience has not ceased, God has not withdrawn. This living energy of Jehovah, not only as belonging to the past but discovered in the new zeal of Israel, Deborah saw, and in virtue of the revelation she was far before her time. For the fresh life of the people, for the willing self-devotion of so many to the great cause, she lifted her voice in praise to Israel's Eternal Friend.

2. The next passage may be called a prologue in the heavens. Partly historical, it is chiefly a vision of Jehovah's age-long work for His people. In words that flash and roll the song describes the glorious advent of the Most High, nature astir with His presence, the mountains shaking under His tread.

The seat of the Divine Majesty appears to the prophetess to be in Seir. She looks across the hills of the south and passes beyond the desert to that place of mystery where God spoke in thunder and proclaimed Himself in the Law. The imagery points to the phenomena of earthquake and a fearful lightning storm accompanied with heavy rain. These, the most striking natural symbols of the supernatural, form the materials of the strophe. Perhaps even as the song is chanted the thunders of Sinai are echoed in a great storm that shakes the sky and rolls among the hills. The outward signs represent the new impressions of Divine power and authority which are startling and rousing the tribes. They have heard no voices, seen no tokens of God for many a year. He Who led their fathers out of bondage, He Who marched with them through the desert, has been forgotten; but He returns, He is with them again. The office of the prophetess is to celebrate God's presence and excite in the dull souls of men some feeling of His majesty. Sinai once trembled and was dismayed before God. The great peak beside which Tabor is but a mound flowed down in volcanic glow and rush. It is He Whose coming Deborah hears in the beating storm, He Whose victorious feet shake the hills of Ephraim. Have the people forsaken their King? Let them seek Him, trust Him now. Under the shadow of His wings there is refuge; before His arrows and the fierce floods He pours from heaven who can stand?

It has been well said that for the Israel of ancient times all natural phenomena — a storm, a hurricane, or a flood — had more than ordinary import. “Forbidden to recognise and, as it were, grasp the God of heaven in any material form, or to adore even in the heavens themselves any constant symbols of His being and His power, yet yearning more in spirit for manifestations of His invisible existence, Israel’s mind was ever on the stretch for any hint in nature of the unseen Celestial Being, for any glimpse of His mysterious ways, and its courage rose to a far higher pitch when Divine encouragement and impulse seemed to come from the material world.”^{f5} From the images of Baal and the Ashtarothe Israel had turned; but where was their Heavenly King? The answer came with marvellous power when Deborah in the midst of the roiling thunder could say, “Lord, when Thou wentest forth out of Seir, when Thou marchedst out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens also dropped. The mountains flowed down at the presence of Jehovah.” If the people bethought themselves of the clear demonstration of Divine majesty made to their fathers, they would realise God once more as the Ruler in heaven and earth. Then would courage revive, and in the faith of the Almighty they would go forth to victory.

Now was there in this faith an element of reason, a correspondence with fact? Is it fancy and nothing else, the poetic flight of an ardent soul eager to rouse a nation? Have we here an arbitrary connection made between striking natural events and a Divine Person throned in the heavens Whose existence the prophetess assumes, Whose supposed claim to obedience haunts her mind? In such a question our age utters its scepticism.

An age it is of science, of positive science. Toiling for centuries at the task of understanding the phenomenal, research has at length assumed the right to tell us what we must believe concerning the world — what we are to *believe*, observe, for it is a new creed and nothing else that confronts us here. “The government of the world,” says one, “must not be considered as determined by an extramundane intelligence, but by one immanent in the cosmical forces and their relations.” Another says: “The world or matter with its properties which we term forces must have existed from eternity and must last forever — in one word, the world cannot have been created... The ever-changing action of the natural forces is the fundamental cause of all that arises and perishes.” Or again, not most recent in time but entirely modern in temper, we have the following: “Science has gradually taken all the positions of the childish belief of the peoples; it has snatched thunder and lightning from the hands of the gods. The stupendous powers

of the Titans of the olden time have been grasped by the fingers of man. That which appeared inexplicable, miraculous, and the work of a supernatural power has by the touch of science proved to be the effect of hitherto unknown natural forces. Everything that happens does so in a natural way, *i. e.*, in a mode determined only by accidental or necessary coalition of existing materials and their immanent natural forces.” Here is dogma forced on faith with fine energy; and what more is to be said when judgment is given — “I have searched the heavens, but have nowhere found the traces of a God”?

We hear the boast that no song of Hebrew seer can withstand this modern wisdom, that the superstition of Bible faith shall vanish like starlight, before the rising sun. To science every opinion shall submit. But wait. It is dogmatism. against belief after all, authority against authority, and the one in a lower region than the other, with vastly inferior sanctions. Natural science declares the present result of its observation of the universe, investigation brief, superficial, and limited to one small corner of the whole. Yet these deliverances are to be set above the science which deals with existence on the highest plane, the spiritual, solving deepest problems of life and conscience, finding perpetual support in the experience of men. The claim is somewhat large; it lacks the proof of service; it lacks verification. Science boasts greatly, as is natural to its adolescence. But at what point can it dare to say, Here is final truth, here is certainty? We do not repel our debt to the discoverer when we maintain that natural science is only watching the surface of a stream for a few miles along its course, while the springs far away among the eternal hills and the outflow into the infinite ocean are never viewed. Are we taunted with believing? Those who taunt us must supply for their part something more than inference ere we trust all to their wisdom. The “Force” that is so much invoked, what is it so far as the definitions of science go? Effects we see; Force never. All statements as to the nature of force are pure dogma. It is declared that there are necessary and eternal laws of matter. What makes them necessary, and who can prove their everlastingness? Using such words men pass infinitely beyond material research — they infer — they assert. In the region of natural science we can affirm nothing to be eternal, and even *necessity* is a word that has no warrant. It is only in the soul, in the region of moral ideas, we come on that which endures, which is necessary, which has constant reality. And it is here that our belief in God as universal Creator, the Source of power and life, the One Agent, the King eternal, immortal, and invisible, finds root and strength.

The battle between materialism and religious faith is not a battle in which facts are arrayed on one side and inferences and dreams on the other. The array is of facts against facts, as we have said, and with an immense difference of value. Is it an established sequence that when the electricity in the clouds is not in equipoise with that of the earth, under certain conditions there is a thunderstorm? It is surely a sequence of higher moment that when the sense of righteousness seizes the minds of men they rise against iniquity and there is a revolution. There natural forces operate, here spiritual. But on which side is the indication of eternity? Which of these sequences can better claim to give a key to the order of the universe? Surely if the evolution of the ages, so far, has culminated in man with his capability of knowing and serving the true, the just, the good, these facts of his mind and life are the highest of which we can take cognisance, and in them, if anywhere, we must find the key to all knowledge, the reason of all phenomena. Evolutionary science itself must agree to this. In the movements of nature we find no advance to fixity and finality. Nature labours, men labour with or against nature; but the flux of things is perpetual; there is no escape from change. In the efforts of the spiritual life it is not so. When we strive for equalness, for verity, for purity, we have glimpses then of the changeless order which we must needs call Divine. Here is the indication of eternity; and as we investigate, as we experience, we come to certitude, we reach larger vision, larger faith. That which endures rises clear above that which appears and passes.

Returning to Deborah's song and her vision of the coming of God in the impetuous storm, we see the practical value of Theism. One great idea, comprehensive and majestic, leads thought beyond symbol and change to the All-righteous Lord. To attribute phenomena to "Nature" is a sterile mode of thought; nothing is done for life. To attribute phenomena to a variety of superhuman persons limits and weakens the religious idea sought after; still one is lost in the changeable. Theism delivers the soul from both evils and sets it on a free upward path, stern yet alluring. By this path the Hebrew prophet rose to the high and fruitful conceptions which draw men together in responsibility and worship. The eternal governs all, rules every change; and that eternal is the holy will of God. The omnipotence nature obeys is the omnipotence of right. Israel returning to God will find Him coming to the help of His people in the awful or kindly movements of the natural world. Our view in one sense extends beyond that of the Hebrew seer. We find the purpose disclosed in natural phenomena to be somewhat different. Not the protection of a favoured race, but the discipline of humanity is what we perceive. Ours is an expansion of the Hebrew faith,

revealing the same Divine goodness engaged in a redeeming work of wider scope and longer duration.

The point is still in doubt among us whether the good, the true, the right, are invincible. Those who go forth in the service of God are often borne down by the graceless multitude. From age to age the problem of God's supremacy seems to remain in suspense, and men are not afraid, in the name of foulest iniquity, to try issues with the best. Be it so. The Divine work is slow. Even the best need discipline that they may have strength, and God is in no haste to carry His argument against atheism. There is abundance of time. Those bent on evil or misled by falsehood, those who are on the wrong side though they consider themselves soldiers of a good cause may gain on many a field, yet their gain will turn out in the long run to be loss, and they who lose and fall are really the victors. There is defeat that is better than success. Other ages than belong to this world's history are yet to dawn, and the discovery will come to every intelligence that he alone triumphs whose life is spent for righteousness and love, in fidelity to God and man.

3. Let it be allowed that we find the latter canto of Deborah's song expressive of faith rather than of clear morality, pointing to a spiritual future rather than exhibiting actual knowledge of the Divine character. We hear of the righteous acts of the Lord, and the note is welcome, yet most likely the thought is of retributive justice and punishment that overtakes the enemies of Israel. When the remnant of the nobles and the people come down — that remnant of brave and faithful men never wanting to Israel — the Lord comes down with them, their Guide and Strength. Meroz is cursed because the inhabitants do not go forth to the help of Jehovah. And finally there is glorying over Sisera because he is an enemy of Israel's Unseen King. There is trust, there is devotion, but no largeness of spiritual view.

We must, however, remember that a song full of the spirit of battle and the gladness of victory cannot be expected to breathe the ideal of religion. The mind of the singer is too excited by the circumstances of the time, the bustle, the triumph, to dwell on higher themes. When fighting has to be done it is the main business of the hour, cannot be aught else to those who are engaged. A woman especially, strung to an unusual pitch of nervous endurance, would be absorbed in the events and her own new and strange position; and she would pass rapidly from the tension of anxiety to a keen passionate exultation in which everything was lost except the sense of

deliverance and of personal vindication. When that is past which was an issue of life or death, freedom or destruction, joy rises in a sudden spring, joy in the prowess of men, the fulness of Divine succour; neither the prophetess nor the fighters are indifferent to justice and mercy, though they do not name them here. Deborah, a woman of intense patriotism and piety, dared greatly for God and her country; of a base thing she was incapable. The men who fought by the waters of Megiddo and slew their enemies ruthlessly in the heat of battle knew in the time of peace the duties of humanity and no doubt showed kindness, when the war was over, to the widows and orphans of the slain. To know and serve Jehovah was a guarantee of moral culture in a rude age; and the Israelites when they returned to Him must have contrasted very favourably in respect of conduct with the devotees of Baal and Astarte.

For a parallel case we may turn to Oliver Cromwell. In his letter after the storming of Bristol, a bloody piece of work in which the mettle of the Parliamentary force was put keenly to proof, Cromwell ascribes the victory to God in these terms: — “They that have been employed in this service know that faith and prayer obtained this city for you. God hath put the sword in the Parliament’s hands for the terror of evil doers and the praise of them that do well.” Of victory after victory which left many a home desolate he speaks as mercies to be acknowledged with all thankfulness. “God exceedingly abounds in His goodness to us, and will not be weary until righteousness and peace meet, and until He hath brought forth a glorious work for the happiness of this poor kingdom.” Read his dispatches and you find that though the man had a generous heart and was a sworn servant of Christ the merciful, yet he breathes no compassion for the royal troops. These are the enemy against whom a pious man is bound to fight; the slaughter of them is a terrible necessity.

Just now it is the fashion to depreciate as much as possible the moral value of the old Hebrew faith. We are assured in a tone of authority that Israel’s Jehovah was only another Chemosh, or, say, a respectable Baal, a being without moral worth, — in fact, a mere name of might worshipped by Israelites as their protector. The history of the people settles this uncritical theory. If the religion of Israel did not sustain a higher morality, if the faith of Jehovah was purely secular, how came Israel to emerge as a nation from the long conflict with Moabites, Canaanites, Midianites, and Philistines? The Hebrews were not superior in point of numbers, unity, or military skill to the nations whose interest it was to subdue or expel them. Some vantage ground the Israelites must have had. What was it? Justice between man and

man, domestic honour, care for human life, a measure of unselfishness, — these at least, as well as the entire purity of their religious rites, were their inheritance; through these the blessing of the Eternal rested upon them. There could never be a return to Him in penitence and hope without a return to the duties and the faith of the sacred covenant. We know therefore that while Deborah sings her song of battle and exults over fallen Sisera there is latent in her mind and the minds of her people a warmth of moral purpose justifying their new liberty. This nation is again a militant church. The hearts of men enlarge that God may dwell in them. Israel's triumph, shall it not be for the good of those who are overcome? Shall not the people of Jehovah, going forth as the sun in his might, shed a kindly radiance over the lands around? So fine a conception of duty is scarcely to be found in Deborah's song, but, realised or not in Old Testament times, it was the revelation of God through Israel to the world.

CHAPTER 9

DEBORAH'S SONG: A CHANT OF PATRIOTISM — JUDGES 5

WE have already considered the song of Deborah as a declaration of God's working more broad and spiritual than might be looked for in that age. We now regard it as exhibiting different relations of men to the Divine purpose. There is a religious spirit in the whole movement here described. It begins in a revival of faith and obedience, prospers despite the coldness and opposition of many, grows in force and enthusiasm as it proceeds, and finally is crowned with success. The church is militant in a literal sense; yet, fighting with carnal weapons, it is really contending for the glory of the Unseen King. There is a close parallel between the enterprise of Deborah and Barak and that which opens before the church of the present time. No forced accommodation is needed to gather from the song lessons of different kinds for our guidance and warning in the campaign of Christianity.

Here are Deborah herself, a mother in Israel, and the leaders who take their places at the head of the armies of God. Here also are the people willingly offering themselves, imperilling their lives for religion and freedom. The history of the past and the vision of Jehovah as sole Ruler of nature and providence encourage the faithful, who rise out of lethargy and leave the byways of life to take the field in battle array. The levies of Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali represent those who are decisively Christian, ready to hazard all for the gospel's sake. But Reuben sits among the sheepfolds and listens to the pipings for the flocks, Dan remains in ships, Asher at the haven of the sea; and these may stand for the self-cultivating, self-serving professors of religion. Jabin and Sisera again are established opponents of the right cause; they are brave in their own defence; their positions look most formidable, their battalions shake the ground. But the stars from heaven, the floods of Kishon, are only a small part of the forces of the King of heaven; and the soul of Israel marches on in strength till the enemy is routed. Meroz practically helps the foe. Those who dwell within its walls are doubtful of the issue and will not risk their lives; the curse of sullen apostasy falls upon them. Jael is a vivid type of the unscrupulous helpers of a good cause, those who, employing the weapons and methods of the world, would fain be servants of that kingdom in which

nothing base, nothing earthly can have place. And there are the children of the hour, the fine ladies of Harosheth whose pleasure and pride are bound up with oppression, who look through the lattices and listen in vain for the returning chariots laden with spoil.

1. The leaders and head men of the tribes under Deborah and Barak, Deborah foremost in the great enterprise, her soul on fire with zeal for Israel and for God.

Deborah and Barak show throughout that spirit of cordial agreement, that frank support of each other which at all times are so much to be desired in religious leaders. There is no jealousy, no striving for preeminence. Barak is a brave man, but he will not stir without the prophetess; he is quite content to give her the place of honour while he does the martial work. Deborah again would commit the task to Barak's hands in complete reliance on his wisdom and valour; yet she is ready to appear along with him, and in her song, while she claims the prophetic office, it is to Barak she renders the honours of victory — "Lead thy thralldom in thrall, thou son of Abinoam."

Rarely, it must be confessed, is there entire harmony among the leaders of affairs. Jealousy is too often with them from the first. Suspicion lurks under the council table, private ambitions and unworthy fears make confusion when each should trust and encourage another. The fine enthusiasm of a great cause does not overcome as it ought the selfishness of human nature. Moreover, varieties in disposition as between the cautious and the impetuous, the more and the less of sagacity or of faith, a failure in sincerity here, in justice there, are separating influences constantly at work. But when the pressing importance of the duties entrusted to men by God governs every will, these elements of division cease; leaders who differ in temperament are loyal to each other then, each jealous of the other's honour as servants of truth. In the Reformation, for example, prosperity was largely due to the fact that two such men as Luther and Melancthon, very different yet thoroughly united, stood side by side in the thick of the conflict, Luther's impetuosity moderated by the calmer spirit of the other, Melancthon's craving for peace kept from dangerous concession by the boldness of his friend. Their mutual love and fidelity showed the nobleness of both, showed also what the Protestant Gospel was. Their differences melted away in enthusiasm for the Word of God, which one thought of as a celestial ambrosia, the other as a sword, a war, a destruction springing upon the children of Ephraim like a lioness in the forest. The Divine work

was the life of each; each in his own way sought with splendid earnestness to forward the truth of Christ.

Church leaders are responsible for not a little which they themselves condemn. Differences do not quickly arise among disciples when the teachers are modest, honourable, and brotherly. Paul cries, "Is Christ divided? Were ye baptised into the name of Paul? What is Apollos? What is Paul? Ministers by whom ye believed." When our leaders speak and feel in like manner there will be peace, not uniformity but something better. God's husbandry, God's building will prosper.

But it is declared to be jealousy for religion that divides — jealousy for the pure doctrine of Christ — jealousy for the true church. We try to believe it. But then why are not all in that spirit of holy jealousy found side by side as comrades, eagerly yet in cordial brotherhood discussing points of difference, determined that they will search together and help each other until they find principles in which they can all rest? The leaders of different Christian bodies do not appear like Deborah and Barak engaged in a common enterprise, but as chiefs of rival or even opposing armies. The reason is that in this church and the other there has been a foreclosing of questions, and the elected leaders are almost all men who are pledged to the tribal decrees. In the decisions of councils and synods, and not less in the deliverances of learned doctors apologising each for his own sect and marking out the path his party must travel, there has been ever since the days of the apostles a hardening and limiting of opinion. Thought has been prematurely crystallised and each church prides itself on its own special deposit. The true church leader should understand that a course which may have been inevitable in the past is not the virtue of today and that those are simply adhering to an antiquated position who affirm one church to be the sole possessor of truth, the only centre of authority. It may seem strange to advise the churches to reconsider many of the ideas built into creed and constitution and to reject all leaders who are such by credit of sitting immovable in the seats of the rabbis, but the progress of Christianity in power and assurance waits upon a new brotherliness which will bring about a new catholicity. Under guides of the right kind the churches will have qualities and distinctions as heretofore, each will be a rendezvous for spirits of a certain order, but frankly confessing each other's right and honour they will press on abreast to scale and possess the uplands of truth.

To be sure something is said of tolerance. But that is a purely political idea. Let it not be so much as named in the assembly of God's people. Does

Barak tolerate Deborah? Does Moses tolerate Aaron? Does St. Peter tolerate St. Paul? The disciples of Christ *tolerate* each other, do they? What marvellous largeness of soul! One or two, it appears, have been made sole keepers of the ark, but are prepared to tolerate the embarrassing help of well meaning auxiliaries. Neither charity of that sort nor flabbiness of belief is asked. Let each be strongly persuaded in his own mind of that which he has learned from Christ. But where Christ has not foreclosed inquiry, and where sincere and thoughtful believers differ, there is no place for what is called tolerance; the demand is for brotherly fellowship in thought and labour.

Deborah was a mother in Israel, a nursing mother of the people in their spiritual childhood, with a mother's warm heart for the oppressed and weary flock. The nation needed a new birth, and that, by the grace of God, Deborah gave it in the sore travail of her soul. For many a year she suffered, prayed, and entreated. Israel had chosen new gods and in serving them was dying to righteousness, dying to Jehovah. Deborah had to pour her own life into the half dead, and compared to this effort the battle with the Canaanites was but a secondary matter. So is it always. The Divine task is that of the mother-like souls that labour for the quickening of faith and holy service. Great victories of Christian valour, patience, and love are never won without that renewal of humanity; and everything is due to those who have guided the ignorant into knowledge, the careless to thought, and the weak to strength through years of patient toil. They are not all prophets, not all known to the tribes: of many such the record waits, hidden with their God, until the day of revealing and rejoicing.

Yet Barak also, the Lightning Chief, has honourable part. When the men are collected, men newborn into life, he can lead them. They are Ironsides under him. He rushes down from Tabor and they at his feet with a vigour nothing can resist. If we have Deborah we shall also have Barak, his army and his victory. The promise is not for women only but for all in the private ways and obscure settlements of life who labour at the making of men. Every Christian has the responsibility and joy of helping to prepare a way for the coming of Jehovah in some great outburst of faith and righteousness.

2. We contrast next the people who offered themselves willingly, who "jeopardied their lives unto the death upon the high places of the field," and those who for one reason or another held aloof.

With united leaders there is a measure of unity among the tribes. Barak and Deborah summon all who are ready to strike for liberty, and there is a great muster. Yet there might be double the number. Those who refuse to take arms have many pretexts, but the real cause is want of heart. The oppression of Jabin does not much affect some Israelites, and so far as it does they would rather go on paying tribute than risk their lives, rather bear the ills they have than hazard anything in joining Barak. These holding back, the work has to be done by a comparatively small number, a remnant of the nobles and the people.

But a remnant is always found; there are men and women who do not bow the knee to the Baal of worldly fashion, who do not content their souls amid the fleshpots of low servitude. They have to venture and sacrifice much in a long and varying war, and oftentimes their flesh and heart may almost fail. But a great reward is theirs. While others are spiritless and hopeless, they know the zest of life, its real power and joy. They know what believing means, how strong it makes the soul. Their all is in the spiritual kingdom which cannot be moved. God is the portion of their souls, their gladness and glory. Those who stand by and look on while the conflict rages may share to a certain extent in the liberty that is won, for the gains of Christian warfare are not limited, they are for all mankind. There is a wider and better ordered life for all when this evil custom and that have been overcome, when one Jabin after another ceases to oppress. Yet what is it after all to touch the border of Christian liberty? To the fighters belongs the inheritance itself, an ever-extending conquest, a land of olives and vineyards and streams of living water.

Different tribes are named that sent contingents to the army of Barak. They are typical of different churches, different orders of society that are forward in the campaign of faith. The Hebrews who came most readily at the battle call appear to have belonged to districts where the Canaanite oppression was heavy, the country that lay between Harosheth, the headquarters of Sisera, and Hazor the city of Jabin. So in the Christian struggle of the ages the strenuous part falls to those who suffer from the tyranny of the temporal and see clearly the hopelessness of life without religion. The gospel of Christ is peculiarly precious to men and women whose lot is hard, whose earthly future is clouded. Sacrifices for God's cause are made as a rule by these. In His great purpose, in His deep knowledge of the facts of life, our Lord joined Himself to the poor and left with them a special blessing. It is not that men who dwell in comfort are independent of the gospel, but they are tempted to think themselves so. In proportion as they

are fenced in amongst possessions and social claims they are apt, though devout, to miss that very call which is the message of the gospel to them. Well meaning but absorbed, they can rarely bestir themselves to hear and do until some personal calamity or public disaster awakens them to the truth of things. The steady support of Christian ordinances and work in our day is largely the honour of people who have their full share in the struggle for earthly necessities or a humble standing in the ranks of the independent. The paradox is real and striking; it claims the attention of those who vainly dream that a comfortable society would certainly become Christian, as effect follows cause. While the religion of Christ makes for justice and temporal well being, blessing even the unbeliever, while it leads the way to a high standard of social order, these things remain of no value in themselves to men unspiritual: it holds true that man can never live by bread alone, but by the words which proceed out of the mouth of God. And there are forces at work among us on behalf of the Divine counsel that shall not fail to maintain the struggle necessary to the discipline and growth of souls.

The real army of faith is largely drawn from the ranks of the toilers and the heavy laden. Yet not entirely. We reckon many and fine exceptions. There are rich who are less worldly than those who have little. Many whose lot lies far from the shadow of tyranny in green and pleasant valleys are first to hear and quickest to answer every call from the Captain of the Lord's host. Their possessions are nothing to them. In the spiritual battle all is spent, knowledge, influence, wealth, life. And if you look for the highest examples of Christianity, a faith pure, keen, and lovely, a generosity that most clearly reveals the Master, a passion for truth consuming all lower regards, you will find them where culture has done its best for the mind and the bounty of providence has kindled a gracious humility and an abounding gentleness of heart. The tawdry vanities of their fellows in rank and wealth seem what they are to these, the gaudy toys of children who have not yet seen the glory and the goal of life. And how can men and women hear the clarion of the Christian war ringing over the valleys of degradation and fear, see the Divine contest surging through the land, and not perceive that here and here only is life? Men play at statecraft and grow cold as they intrigue; they play at financing and become ciphers in a monstrous sum; they toil at pleasure till Satan himself might pity them, for at least he has a purpose to serve. All the while there is offered to them the vigour, the buoyancy, the glow of an ambition and a service in which no spirit tires and no heart withers. Passing strange it is that so few noble, so few mighty, so few wise hear the keen cry from the cross as one of life and power.

Among the tribes that held aloof from the great conflict several are specially named. Messengers have gone to the land of Reuben beyond Jordan, and carried the fiery cross through Bashan. Dan has been summoned and Asher from the haven of the sea. But these have not responded. Reuben indeed has searchings of heart. Some of the people remember the old promise made at Shittim in the plain of Moab, that they would help their brethren who crossed into Canaan, never refusing assistance till the land was fully possessed. Moses had solemnly charged them with that duty, and they had bound themselves in covenant: "As the Lord hath said unto thy servants, so will we do." Could anything have been more seriously, more decisively undertaken? Yet, when this hour of need came, though the duty lay upon the conscience nothing was done. Along the watercourses of Gilead and Bashan there were flocks to tend, to protect from the Amalekites and Midianites of the desert, who would be sure to make a raid in the absence of the fighting men. To Asher and Dan the reference is perhaps somewhat ironical. The "ships" for trade, the "haven of the sea," were never much to these tribes, and their maritime ambition made an unworthy excuse. They had perhaps a little fishing, some small trade on the coast, and petty as the gain was it filled their hearts. Asher "abode by his creeks." It is not to a religious festival that Deborah and Barak have called the tribes. It is to serious and dangerous duty. Yet the call of duty should come with more power than any invitation even to spiritual enjoyment. The great religious gathering has its use, its charm. We know the attraction of the crowded convocation in which Christian hope and enthusiasm are rekindled by stirring words and striking instances, faith rising high as it views the wide mission of gospel truth and hears from eloquent lips the story of a modern day of Pentecost. To many, because their own spiritual life burns dull, the daily and weekly routine of things becomes empty, vain, unsatisfying. In the common round even of valued religious exercise the heat and promise of Christianity seem to be lacking. In the convention they appear to be realised as nowhere else, and the persuasion that God may be felt there in a special manner is laying hold of Christian people. They are right in their eager desire to be borne along with the flood of redeeming grace, but we have need to ask what the life of faith is, how it is best nourished. To have a personal share in God's controversy with evil, to have a place however obscure in the actual struggle of truth with falsehood, — this alone gives confidence in the result and power in believing. Those who are in contact with spiritual reality because they have their own testimony to bear, their own watch to keep at some outpost, find stimulus in the urgency of duty and exultation in the consciousness of

service. Men often seek in public gatherings what they can only find in the private ways of effort and endurance; they seek the joy of harvest when they should be at the labour of sowing; they would fain be cheered by the song of victory when they should be roused by the trumpet of battle. And the result is that where spiritual work waits to be done there are but few to do it. Examine the state of any Christian church, reckon up those who are deeply interested in its efficiency, who make sacrifices of time and means, and set against these the half-hearted, who ignobly accept the religious provision made for them and perhaps complain that it is not so good as they would like, that progress is not so rapid as they think it might be, — the one class far outnumbers the other. As in Israel twice or three times as many might have responded to Barak's call, so in every church the resolute, the energetic, and devoted are few compared with those who are capable of energy and devotion. It is sometimes maintained that the worship of goodness and the Christian ideal command the minds of men more today than ever they did, and proof seems ready to hand. But, after all, is it not religious taste rather than reverence that grows? Self-culture leads many to a certain admiration of Christ and a form of discipleship. Christian worship is enjoyed and Christian philanthropy also, but when the spiritual freedom of mankind calls for some effort of the soul and life, we see what religion means — a wave of the hand instead of enthusiasm, a guinea subscription instead of thoughtful service. Is it a Christian or a selfish culture which is content with fragmentary concessions and complacent patronage where the claims of social "inferiors" are concerned? That there is a wide diffusion of religious feeling is clear enough; but in many respects it is mere dilettantism.

Notice the history of the tribes that lag behind in the day of the Lord's summons. What do we hear of Reuben after this? "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." Along with Gad Reuben possessed a splendid country, but these two faded away into a sort of barbarism, scarcely maintaining their separateness from the wild races of the desert. Asher in like manner suffered from the contact with Phoenicia and lost touch with the more faithful tribes. So it is always. Those who shirk religious duty lose the strength and dignity of religion. Though greatly favoured in place and gifts they fall into that spiritual impotence which means defeat and extinction.

"Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord against the mighty." It is a stern judgment upon those whose active assistance was, humanly speaking, necessary in the day of battle. The men only held back,

held back in doubt, supposing that it was vain for Hebrews to fling themselves against the iron chariots of Sisera. Were they not prudent, looking at the matter all round? Why should a curse so heavy be pronounced on men who only sought to save their lives? The reply is that secular history curses such men, those of Sparta for example to whom Athens sent in vain when the battle of Marathon was impending; and further that Christ has declared the truth which is for all time, "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it." Erasmus was a wise man; yet he made the great blunder. He saw clearly the errors of Romanism and the miserable bondage in which it kept the souls of men, and if he had joined the reformers his judgment and learning would have become part of the world's progressive life. But he held back doubting, criticising, a friend to the Reformation but not an apostle of it. Admire as we may the wit, the reasoner, the philosopher, there must always be severe judgment of one who, professing to love truth, declared that he had no inclination to die for it. There are many who, without the intellect of Erasmus, would fain be thought catholic in his company. Large is the family of Meroz, and little thought have they of any ban lying upon them. Is it a fanciful danger, a mere error of opinion without any peril in it, to which we point here? People think so; young men especially think so and drift on until the day of service is past and they find themselves under the contempt of man and the judgment of Christ. "Lord, when saw we Thee a stranger or in prison and did not minister unto Thee?" "Depart from Me, I never knew you."

3. Jael, a type of the unscrupulous helpers of a good cause.

Long has the error prevailed that religion can be helped by using the world's weapons, by acting in the temper and spirit of the world. Of that mischievous falsehood have been born all the pride and vainglory, the rivalries and persecutions that darken the past of Christendom, surviving in strange and pitiful forms to the present day. If we shudder at the treachery in the deed of Jael, what shall we say of that which through many a year sent victims to inquisition dungeons and to the stake in the name of Christ? And what shall we say now of that moral assassination which in one tent and another is thought no sin against humanity, but a service of God? Among us are too many who suffer wounds keen and festering that have been given in the house of their friends, yea, in the name of the one Lord and Master. The battle of truth is a frank and honourable fight, served at no point by what is false or proud or low. To an enemy a Christian should be chivalrous, and surely no less to a brother. Granting that a man is in error, he needs a physician, not an executioner; he needs an example, not a

dagger. How much farther do we get by the methods of opprobrium and cruelty, the innuendo and the whisper of suspicion? Besides, it is not the Siseras today who are dealt with after this manner. It is the “schismatic” within the camp on whom some Jael falls with a hammer and a nail. If a church cannot stand by itself, approved to the consciences of men, it certainly will not be helped by a return to the temper of barbarism and the craft of the world. “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the casting down of strongholds.”

CHAPTER 10

THE DESERT HORDES; AND THE MAN AT OPHRAH — <070601> JUDGES 6:1-14

JABIN king of Canaan defeated and his nine hundred chariots turned into ploughshares, we might expect Israel to make at last a start in its true career. The tribes have had their third lesson and should know the peril of infidelity. Without God they are weak as water. Will they not bind themselves now in a confederacy of faith, suppress Baal and Astarte worship by stringent laws and turn their hearts to God and duty? Not yet: not for more than a century. The true reformer has yet to come. Deborah's work is certainly not in vain. She passes through the land administering justice, commanding the destruction of heathen altars. The people leave their occupations and gather in crowds to hear her: they shout, in answer to her appeals, Jehovah is our King. The Levites are called to minister at the shrines. For a time there is something like religion along with improving circumstances. But the tide does not rise long nor far.

Some twenty years have passed, and what is to be seen going on throughout the land? The Hebrews have addressed themselves vigorously to their work in field and town. Everywhere they are breaking up new ground, building houses, repairing roads, organising traffic. But they are also falling into the old habit of friendly intercourse with Canaanites, talking with them over the prospects of the crops, joining in their festivals of new moon and harvest. In their own cities the old inhabitants of the land sacrifice to Baal and gather about the Asherim. Earnest Israelites are indignant and call for action, but the mass of the people are so taken up with their prosperity that they cannot be roused. Peace and comfort in the lower region seem better than contention for anything higher. In the centre of Palestine there is a coalition of Hebrew and Canaanite cities, with Shechem at their head, which recognise Baal as their patron and worship him as the master of their league. And in the northern tribes generally Jehovah has scant acknowledgment; the people see no great task He has given them to do. If they live and multiply and inherit the land they reckon their function as His nation to be fulfilled.

It is a temptation common to men to consider their own existence and success a sort of Divine end in serving which they do all that God requires

of them. The business of mere living and making life comfortable absorbs them so that even faith finds its only use in promoting their own happiness. The circle of the year is filled with occupations. When the labour of the field is over there are the houses and cities to enlarge, to improve, and furnish with means of safety and enjoyment. One task done and the advantage of it felt, another presents itself, Industry takes new forms and burdens still more the energies of men. Education, art, science become possible and in turn make their demands. But all may be for self, and God may be thought of merely as the great Patron satisfied with His tithes. In this way the impulses and hopes of faith are made the ministers of egoism, and as a national thing the maintenance of law, goodwill, and a measure of purity may seem to furnish religion with a sufficient object. But this is far from enough. Let worship be refined and elaborated, let great temples be built and thronged, let the arts of music and painting be employed in raising devotion to its highest pitch — still if nothing beyond self is seen as the aim of existence, if national Christianity realises no duty to the world outside, religion must decay. Neither a man nor a people can be truly religious without the missionary spirit, and that spirit must constantly shape individual and collective life. Among ourselves worship would petrify and faith wither were it not for the tasks the church has undertaken at home and abroad. But half-understood, half-discharged, these duties keep us alive. And it is because the great mission of Christians to the world is not even yet comprehended that we have so much practical atheism. When less care and thought are expended on the forms of worship and the churches address themselves to the true ritual of our religion, carrying out the redeeming work of our Saviour, there will be new fervour; unbelief will be swept away.

Israel, losing sight of its mission and its destiny, felt no need of faith and lost it; and with the loss of faith came loss of vigour and alertness as on other occasions. Having no sense of a common purpose great enough to demand their unity the Hebrews were again unable to resist enemies, and this time the Midianites and other wild tribes of the eastern desert found their opportunity. First some bands of them came at the time of harvest and made raids on the cultivated districts. *But* year by year they ventured farther in increasing numbers. Finally they brought their tents and families, their flocks and herds, and took possession.

In the case of all who fall away from the purpose of life the means of bringing failure home to them and restoring the balance of justice are always at hand. Let a man neglect his fields and nature is upon him; weeds

choke his crops, his harvests diminish, poverty comes like an armed man. In trade likewise carelessness brings retribution. So in the case of Israel: although the Canaanites had been subdued other foes were not far away. And the business of this nation was of so sacred a kind that neglect of it meant great moral fault, and every fresh relapse into earthliness and sensuality after a revival of religion implied more serious guilt. We find accordingly a proportionate severity in the punishment. Now the nation is chastised with whips, but next time it is with scorpions. Now the iron chariots of Sisera hold the land in terror; then hosts of marauders spread like locusts over the country, insatiable, all-devouring. Do the Hebrews think that careful tilling of their fields and the making of wine and oil are their chief concern? In that they shall be undeceived. Not mainly to be good husbandmen and vine dressers are they set here, but to be a light in the midst of the nations. If they cease to shine they shall no longer enjoy.

It was by the higher fords of Jordan, perhaps north of the Sea of Galilee, that the Midianites fell on western Canaan. Under their two great emirs Zebah and Zalmunna, who seem to have held a kind of barbaric state, troops of riders on swift horses and dromedaries swept the shore of the lake and burst into the plain of Jezreel. There were no doubt many skirmishes between their squadrons and the men of Naphtali and Manasseh. But one horde of the invaders followed another so quickly and their attacks were so sudden and fierce that at length resistance became impossible, the Hebrews had to betake themselves to the heights and dwell in the caves and rocks. Once in the desert under Moses they had been more than a match for these Arabs. Now, although on vantage ground moral and natural, fighting for their hearths and homes behind the breastwork of lake, river, and mountain, they are completely routed.

Between the circumstances of this oppressed nation and the present state of the church there is a wide interval, and in a sense the contrast is striking. Is not the Christianity of our time strong and able to hold its own? Is not the mood of many churches of the present day properly that of elation? As year after year reports of numerical increase and larger contributions are made, as finer buildings are raised for the purpose of worship, and work at home and abroad is carried on more efficiently, is it not impossible to trace any resemblance between the state of Israel during the Midianite oppression and the state of religion now? Why should there be any fear that Baal worship or other idolatry should weaken the tribes, or that marauders from the desert should settle in their land?

And yet the condition of things today is not quite unlike that of Israel at the time we are considering. There are Canaanites who dwell in the land and carry on their debasing worship. These too are days when guerilla troops of naturalism, nomads of the primaeval desert, are sweeping the region of faith. Reckless and irresponsible talk in periodicals and on platforms; novels, plays, and verses, often as clever as they are unscrupulous, are incidents of the invasion, and it is well advanced. Not for the first time is a raid of this kind made on the territory of faith, but the serious thing now is the readiness to give way, the want of heart and power to resist that we observe in family life and in society as well as in literature. Where resistance ought to be eager and firm it is often ignorant, hesitating, lukewarm. Perhaps the invasion must become more confident and more injurious before it rouses the people of God to earnest and united action. Perhaps those who will not submit may have to betake themselves to the caves of the mountains while the new barbarism establishes itself in the rich plain. It has almost come to this in some countries; and it may be that the pride of those who have been content to cultivate their vineyards for themselves alone, the security of those who have too easily concluded that fighting was over shall yet be startled by some great disaster.

“Israel was brought very low because of Midian.” A traveller’s picture of the present state of things on the eastern frontier of Bashan enables us to understand the misery to which the tribes were reduced by seven years of rapine. “Not only is the country — plain and hillside alike — chequered with fenced fields, but groves of fig trees are here and there seen and terraced vineyards still clothe the sides of some of the hills. These are neglected and wild but not fruitless. They produce great quantities of figs and grapes, which are rifled year after year by the Bedawin in their periodical raids. Nowhere on earth is there such a melancholy example of tyranny, rapacity, and misrule as here. Fields, pastures, vineyards, houses, villages, cities are all alike deserted and waste. Even the few inhabitants that have hid themselves among the rocky fastnesses and mountain defiles drag out a miserable existence, oppressed by robbers of the desert on the one hand and robbers of the government on the other.” The Midianites of Gideon’s time acted the part both of tyrants and depredators. They “left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor ass. They entered into the land for to destroy it.”

“And the children of Israel cried unto the Lord”; the prodigals bethought them of their Father. Having come to the husks they remembered Him who fed His people in the desert. Again the wheel has revolved and from the

lowest point there is an upward movement. The tribes of God look once more towards the hills from whence their help cometh. And here is seen the importance of that faith which had passed into the nation's life. Although it was not of a very spiritual kind, yet it preserved in the heart of the people a recuperative power. The majority knew little more of Jehovah than His name. But the name suggested availing succour. They turned to the Awful Name, repeated it and urged their need. Here and there one saw God as the infinitely righteous and holy and added to the wail of the ignorant a more devout appeal, recognising the evils under which the people groaned as punitive, and knowing that the very God to Whom they cried had brought the Midianites upon them. In the prayer of such a one there was an outlook towards holier and nobler life. But even in the case of the ignorant the cry to One higher than the highest had help in it. For when that bitter cry was raised self-glorifying had ceased and piety begun.

Ignorant indeed is much of the faith that still expresses itself in so-called Christian prayer, almost as ignorant as that of the disconsolate Hebrew tribes. The moral purpose of discipline, the Divine ordinances of defeat and pain and affliction are a mystery unread. The man in extremity does not know why his hour of abject fear has come, nor see that one by one all the stays of his selfish life have been removed by a Divine hand. His cry is that of a foolish child. Yet is it not true that such a prayer revives hope and gives new energy to the languid life? It may be many years since prayer was tried, not perhaps since he who is now past his meridian knelt at a mother's knee. Still as he names the name of God, as he looks upward, there comes with the dim vision of an Omnipotent Helper within reach of his cry the sense of new possibilities, the feeling that amidst the miry clay or the heaving waves there is something firm and friendly on which he may yet stand. It is a striking fact as to any kind of religious belief, even the most meagre, that it does for man what nothing else can do. Prayer must cease, we are told, for it is mere superstition. Without denying that much of what is called prayer is an expression of egotism, we must demand an explanation of the unique value it has in human life and a sufficient substitute for the habit of appeal to God. Those who would deprive us of prayer must first remake man, for to the strong and enlightened prayer is necessary as well as to the weak and ignorant. The Heavenly is the only hope of the earthly. That we understand God is, after all, not the chief thing: but does He know us? Is He there above yet beside us, forever?

The first answer to the cry of Israel came in the message of a prophet, one who would have been despised by the nation in its self-sufficient mood, but

now obtained a hearing. His words brought instruction and made it possible for faith to move and work along a definite line. Through man's struggle God helps him; through man's thought and resolve God speaks to him. He is already converted when he believes enough to pray, and from this point faith saves by animating and guiding the strenuous will. The ignorant abject people of God learns from the prophet that something is to be done. There is a command, repeated from Sinai, against the worship of heathen gods, then a call to love the true God the Deliverer of Israel. Faith is to become life, and life faith. The name of Jehovah which has stood for one power among others is clearly reaffirmed as that of the One Divine Being, the only Object of adoration. Israel is convicted of sin and set on the way of obedience.

The answer to prayer lies very near to him who cries for salvation. He has not to move a step. He has but to hear the inner voice of conscience. Is there a sense of neglect of duty, a sense of disobedience, of faults committed? The first movement towards salvation is set up in that conviction and in the hope that the evil now seen may be remedied. Forgiveness is implied in this hope, and it will become assured as the hope grows strong. The mistake is often made of supposing that answer to prayer does not come till peace is found. In reality the answer begins when the will is bent towards a better life, though that change may be accompanied by the deepest sorrow and self-humiliation. A man who earnestly reproaches himself for despising and disobeying God has already received the grace of the redeeming Spirit.

But to Israel's cry there was another answer. When repentance was well begun and the tribes turned from the heathen rites which separated them from each other and from Divine thoughts, freedom again became possible and God raised up a liberator. Repentance indeed was not thorough; therefore a complete national reformation was not accomplished. Yet as against Midian, a mere horde of marauders, the balance of righteousness and power inclined now in behalf of Israel. The time was ripe and in the providence of God the fit man received his call.

Southwest from Shechem, among the hills of Manasseh, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites, lived a family that had suffered keenly at the hands of Midian. Some members of the family had been slain near Tabor, and the rest had as a cause of war not only the constant robberies from field and homestead but also the duty of blood revenge. The deepest sense of injury, the keenest resentment fell to the share of one Gideon, son of Joash, a young man of

nobler temper than most Hebrews of the time. His father was head of a Thousand; and as he was an idolater the whole clan joined him in sacrificing to the Baal whose altar stood within the boundary of his farm. Already Gideon appears to have turned with loathing from that base worship; and he was pondering earnestly the cause of the pitiful state into which Israel had fallen. But the circumstances perplexed him. He was not able to account for facts in accordance with faith.

In a retired place on the hillside, where a winepress has been fashioned in a hollow of the rocks, we first see the future deliverer of Israel. His task for the day is that of threshing out some wheat so that, as soon as possible, the grain may be hid from the Midianites; and he is busy with the flail, thinking deeply, watching carefully as he plies the instrument with a sense of irksome restraint. Look at him and you are struck with his stalwart proportions and his bearing: he is "like the son of a king." Observe more closely and the fire of a troubled yet resolute soul will be seen in his eye. He represents the best Hebrew blood, the finest spirit and intelligence of the nation; but as yet he is a strong man bound. He would fain do something to deliver Israel he would fain trust Jehovah to sustain him in striking a blow for liberty; but the way is not clear. Indignation and hope are baffled.

In a pause of his work, as he glances across the valley with anxious eye, suddenly he sees under an oak a stranger sitting staff in hand, as if he had sought rest for a little in the shade. Gideon scans the visitor keenly, but finding no cause for alarm bends again to his labour. The next time he looks up the stranger is beside him and words of salutation are falling from his lips — "Jehovah is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." To Gideon the words did not seem so strange as they would have seemed to some. Yet what did they mean? Jehovah with him? Strength and courage he is aware of. Sympathy with his fellow Israelites and the desire to help them he feels. But these do not seem to him proofs of Jehovah's presence. And as for his father's house and the Hebrew people, God seems far from them. Harried and oppressed, they are surely God-forsaken. Gideon can only wonder at the unseasonable greeting and ask what it means.

Unconsciousness of God is not rare. Men do not attribute their regret over wrong, their faint longing for the right to a spiritual presence within them and a Divine working. The Unseen appears so remote, man appears so shut off from intercourse with any supernatural Cause or Source that he fails to link his own strain of thought with the Eternal. The word of God is high

him even in his heart, God is “closer to him than breathing, nearer than hands and feet.” Hope, courage, will, life — these are Divine gifts, but he does not know it. Even in our Christian times the old error which makes God external, remote, entirely aloof from human experience survives and is more common than true faith. We conceive ourselves separated from the Divine, with springs of thought, purpose, and power in our own being, whereas there is in us no absolute origin of power — moral, intellectual, or physical. We live and move in God: He is our Source and our Stay, and our being is shot through and through with rays of the Eternal. The prophetic word spoken in our ear is not more assuredly from God than the pure wish or unselfish hope that frames itself in our minds or the stern voice of conscience heard in the soul. As for the trouble into which we fall, that too, did we understand aright, is a mark of God’s providential care. Would we err without discipline? Would we be ineffective and have no bracing? Would we follow lies and enjoy a false peace? Would we refuse the Divine path to strength, yet never feel the sorrow of the weak? Are these the proofs of God’s presence our ignorance would desire? Then indeed we imagine an unholy one, an unfaithful one upon the throne of the universe. But God has no favourites; He does not rule like a despot of earth for courtiers and an aristocracy. In righteousness and for righteousness, for eternal truth He works, and for that His people must endure.

“Jehovah is with thee:” so ran the salutation. Gideon, thinking of Jehovah, does not wonder to hear His name. But full of doubts natural to one so little instructed he feels himself bound to express them: “Why is all this evil befallen us? Hath not Jehovah cast us off and delivered us into the hand of Midian?” Unconstrainedly, plainly as man to man Gideon speaks, the burdensome thought of his people’s misery overcoming the strangeness of the fact that in a God-forsaken land anyone should care to speak of things like these. Yet momentarily, as the conversation proceeds, there grows in Gideon’s soul a feeling of awe, a new and penetrating idea. The look fastened upon him conveys beside the human strain of will a suggestion of highest authority; the words, “Go in this thy might and save Israel, have not I sent thee?” kindle in his heart a vivid faith. Laid hold of, lifted above himself, the young man is made aware at last of the Living God, His presence, His will. Jehovah’s representative has done his mediatorial work. Gideon desires a sign; but his wish is a note of habitual caution, not of disbelief, and in the sacrifice he finds what he needs.

Now, why insist as some do on that which is not affirmed in the text? The form of the narrative must be interpreted: and it does not require us to

suppose that Jehovah Himself, incarnate, speaking human words, is upon the scene. The call is from Him, and indeed Gideon has already a prepared heart, or he would not listen to the messenger. But seven times in the brief story the word *Malakh* marks a commissioned servant as clearly as the other word Jehovah marks the Divine will and revelation. After the man of God has vanished from the hill swiftly, strangely, in the manner of his coming, Gideon remains alive to Jehovah's immediate presence and voice as he never was before. Humble and shrinking — “forasmuch as I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face” — he yet hears the Divine benediction fall from the sky, and following that a fresh and immediate summons. Whether from the tabernacle at Shiloh an acknowledged prophet came to the brooding Abiezrite, or the visitor was one who concealed his own name and haunt that Jehovah might be the more impressively recognised, it matters not. The angel of the Lord made Gideon thrill with a call to highest duty, opened his ears to heavenly voices, and then left him. After this he felt God to be with himself.

“The Lord looked upon Gideon and said, Go in this thy might and save Israel from the hand of Midian: have not I sent thee?” It was a summons to stern and anxious work, and the young man could not be sanguine. He had considered and reconsidered the state of things so long, he had so often sought a way of liberating his people and found none that he needed a clear indication how the effort was to be made. Would the tribes follow him, the youngest of an obscure family in Manasseh? And how was he to stir, how to gather the people? He builds an altar, Jehovah-shalom; he enters into covenant with the Eternal in high and earnest resolution, and with a sudden flash of prophet sight he sees the first thing to do. Baal's altar in the high place of Ophrah must be overthrown. Thereafter it will be known what faith and courage are to be found in Israel.

It is the call of God that ripens a life into power, resolve, fruitfulness — the call and the response to it. Continually the Bible urges upon us this great truth, that through the keen sense of a close personal relation to God and of duty owing to Him the soul grows and comes to its own. Our human personality is created in that way and in no other. There are indeed lives which are not so inspired and yet appear strong; an ingenious resolute selfishness gives them momentum. But this individuality is akin to that of ape or tiger; it is a part of the earth force in yielding to which a man forfeits his proper being and dignity. Look at Napoleon, the supreme example in history of this failure. A great genius, a striking character? Only in the carnal region, for human personality is moral, spiritual, and the most

triumphant cunning does not make a man; while, on the other hand, from a very moderate endowment put to the glorious usury of God's service will grow a soul clear, brave, and firm, precious in the ranks of life. Let a human being, however ignorant and low, hear and answer the Divine summons and in that place a man appears, one who stands related to the source of strength and light. And when a man roused by such a call feels responsibility for his country, for religion, the hero is astir. Something will be done for which mankind waits.

But heroism is rare. We do not often commune with God nor listen with eager souls for His word. The world is always in need of men, but few appear. The usual is worshipped; the pleasure and profit of the day occupy us; even the sight of the cross does not rouse the heart. Speak, Heavenly Word! and quicken our clay. Let the thunders of Sinai be heard again, and then the still small voice that penetrates the soul. So shall heroism be born and duty done, and the dead shall live.

CHAPTER 11

GIDEON, ICONOCLAST AND REFORMER — <070615> JUDGES 6:15-32

“The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour:” — so has the prophetic salutation come to the young man at the threshing floor of Ophrah. It is a personal greeting and call “with thee” — just what a man needs in the circumstances of Gideon. There is a nation to be saved, and a human leader must act for Jehovah. Is Gideon fit for so great a task? A wise humility, a natural fear have held him under the yoke of daily toil until this hour. Now the needed signs are given; his heart leaps up in the pulses of a longing which God approves and blesses. The criticism of kinsfolk, the suspicious carping of neighbours, the easily affronted pride of greater families no longer crush patriotic desire and overbear yearning faith. The Lord is with thee, Gideon, youngest son of Joash, the toiler in obscure fields. Go in this thy might; be strong in Jehovah.

But the assurance must widen if it is to satisfy. With me — that is a great thing for Gideon; that gives him free air to breathe and strength to use the sword. But can it be true? Can God be with one only in the land? He seems to have forsaken Israel and sold His people to the oppressor. Unless He returns to all in forgiveness and grace nothing can be done; a renewal of the nation is the first thing, and this Gideon desires. Comfort for himself, freedom from Midianite vexation for himself and his father’s house would be no satisfaction if, all around, he saw Israel still crushed under heathen hordes. To have a hand in delivering his people from danger and sorrow is Gideon’s craving. The assurance given to himself personally is welcome because in it there is a sound as of the beginning of Israel’s redemption. Yet “if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us?” God cannot be with the tribes, for they are harassed and spoiled by enemies, they lie prone before the altars of Baal.

There is here an example of largeness in heart and mind which we ought not to miss, especially because it sets before us a principle often unrecognised. It is clear enough that Gideon could not enjoy freedom unless his country was free, for no man can be safe in an enslaved land; but many fail to see that spiritual redemption, in like manner, cannot be enjoyed by one unless others are moving towards the light. Truly salvation is

personal at first and personal at last; but it is never an individual affair only. Each for himself must hear and answer the divine call to repentance; each as a moral unit must enter the strait gate, press along the marrow way of life, agonise and overcome. But the redemption of one soul is part of a vast redeeming purpose, and the fibres of each life are interwoven with those of other lives far and wide. Spiritual brotherhood is a fact but faintly typified by the brotherhood of the Hebrews, and the struggling soul today, like Gideon's long ago, must know God as the Saviour of all men before a personal hope can be enjoyed worth the having. As Gideon showed himself to have the Lord with him by a question charged not with individual anxiety but with keen interest in the nation, so a man now is seen to have the Spirit of God as he exhibits a passion for the regeneration of the world. Salvation is enlargement of soul, devotion to God and to man for the sake of God. If anyone thinks he is saved while he bears no burdens for others, makes no steady effort to liberate souls from the tyranny of the false and the vile, he is in fatal error. The salvation of Christ plants always in men and women His mind, His law of life, Who is the Brother and Friend of all.

And the church of Christ must be filled with His Spirit, animated by His law of life, or be unworthy the name. It exists to unite men in the quest and realisation of highest thought and purest activity. The church truly exists for all men, not simply for those who appear to compose it. Salvation and peace are with the church as with the individual believer, but only as her heart is generous, her spirit simple and unselfish. Doubtful and distressed as Gideon was the church of Christ should never be, for to her has been whispered the secret that the Abiezrite had not read, how the Lord is in the oppression and pain of the people, in the sorrow and the cloud. Nor is a church to suppose that salvation can be hers while she thinks of any outside with the least touch of Pharisaism, denying their share in Christ. Better no visible church than one claiming exclusive possession of truth and grace; better no church at all than one using the name of Christ for privilege and excommunication, restricting the fellowship of life to its own enclosure.

But with utmost generosity and humaneness goes the clear perception that God's service is the sternest of campaigns, beginning with resolute protest and decisive deed, and Gideon must rouse himself to strike for Israel's liberty first against the idol worship of his own village. There stands the altar of Baal, the symbol of Israel's infidelity; there beside it the abominable Asherah, the sign of Israel's degradation. Already he has thought of demolishing these, but has never summoned courage, never seen that the result would justify him. For such a deed there is a time, and before the

time comes the bravest man can only reap discomfiture. Now, with the warrant in his soul, the duty on his conscience, Gideon can make assault on a hateful superstition.

The idolatrous altar and false worship of one's own clan, of one's own family — these need courage to overturn and, more than courage, a ripeness of time and a Divine call. A man must be sure of himself and his motives, for one thing, before he takes upon him to be the corrector of errors that have seemed truth to his fathers and are maintained by his friends. Suppose people are actually worshipping a false god, a world power which has long held rule among them. If one would act the part of iconoclast the question is, By what right? Is he himself clear of illusion and idolatry? Has he a better system to put in place of the old? He may be acting in mere bravado and self-display, flourishing opinions which have less sincerity than those which he assails. There were men in Israel who had no commission and could have claimed no right to throw down Baal's altar, and taking upon them such a deed would have had short shrift at the hands of the people of Ophrah. And so there are plenty among us who if they set up to be judges of their fellow men and of beliefs which they call false, even when these are false, deserve simply to be put down with a strong hand. There are voices, professing to be those of zealous reformers, whose every word and tone are insults. The men need to go and learn the first lessons of truth, modesty, and earnestness. And this principle applies all round — to many who assail modern errors as well as to many who assail established beliefs. On the one hand, are men anxious to uphold the true faith? It is well. But anxiety and the best of motives do not qualify them to attack science, to denounce all rationalism as godless. We want defenders of the faith who have a Divine calling to the task in the way of long study and a heavenly fairness of mind, so that they shall not offend and hurt religion more by their ignorant vehemence than they help it by their zeal. On the other hand, by what authority do they speak who sneer at the ignorance of faith and would fain demolish the altars of the world? It is no slight equipment that is needed. Fluent sarcasm, confident worldliness, even a large acquaintance with the dogmas of science will not suffice. A man needs to prove himself a wise and humane thinker, he needs to know by experience and deep sympathy those perpetual wants of our race which Christ knew and met to the uttermost. Some facile admiration of Jesus of Nazareth does not give the right to free criticism of His life and words, or of the faith based upon them. And if the plea is a rare respect for truth, an unusual fidelity to fact, humanity will still ask of its would be liberator on what fields he has won his rank or what yoke he has borne. Successful men

especially will find it difficult to convince the world that they have a right to strike at the throne of Him who stood alone before the Roman Pilate and died on the Cross.

Gideon was not unfit to render high service. He was a young man tried in humble duty and disciplined in common tasks, shrewd but not arrogant, a person of clear mind and a patriot. The people of the farm and a good many in Ophrah had learned to trust him and were prepared to follow when he struck out a new path. He had God's call and also his own past to help him. Hence when Gideon began his undertaking, although to attempt it in broad day would have been rash and he must act under cover of darkness, he soon found ten men to give their aid. No doubt he could in a manner command them, for they were his servants. Still a business of the kind he proposed was likely to rouse their superstitious fears, and he had to conquer these. It was also sure to involve the men in some risk, and he must have been able to give them confidence in the issue. This he did, however, and they went forth. Very quietly the altar of Baal was demolished and the great wooden mast, hateful symbol of Astarte, was cut down and split in pieces. Such was the first act in the revolution.

We observe, however, that Gideon does not leave Ophrah without an altar and a sacrifice. Destroy one system without laying the foundation of another that shall more than equal it in essential truth and practical power, and what sort of deliverance have you effected? Men will rightly execrate you. It is no reformation that leaves the heart colder, the life barer and darker than before; and those who move in the night against superstition must be able to speak in the day of a Living God who will vindicate His servants. It has been said over and over again and must yet be repeated, to overturn merely is no service. They that break down need some vision at least of a building up, and it is the new edifice that is the chief thing. The world of thought today is infested with critics and destroyers and may well be tired of them. It is too much in need of constructors to have any thanks to spare for new Voltaires and Humes. Let us admit that demolition is the necessity of some hours. We look back on the ruins of Bastilles and temples that served the uses of tyranny, and even in the domain of faith there have been fortresses to throw down and ramparts that made evil separations among men. But destruction is not progress; and if the end of modern thought is to be agnosticism, the denial of all faith and all ideals, then we are simply on the way to something not a whit better than primeval ignorance.

The morning sun showed the gap upon the hill where the symbols had stood of Baal and Astarte, and soon like an angry swarm of bees the people were buzzing round the scattered stones of the old altar and the rough new pile with its smoking sacrifice. Where was he who ventured to rebuke the city? Very indignant, very pious are these false Israelites. They turn on Joash with the fierce demand, "Bring out thy son that he may die." But the father too has come to a decision. We get a hint of the same nature as Gideon's, slow, but firm when once roused; and if anything would rouse a man it would be this brutal passion, this sudden outbreak of cruelty nursed by heathen custom, his own conscience meanwhile testifying that Gideon was right. Tush! says Joash, will you plead for Baal? Will you save him? Is it necessary for you to defend one whom you have worshipped as Lord of heaven? Let him ply his lightnings if he has any. I am tired of this Baal who has no principles and is good only for feast days. He that pleads for Baal, let him be the man to die. Unexpected apology, serious too and unanswerable. Conscience that seemed dead is suddenly awakened and carries all before it. There is a quick conversion of the whole town because one man has acted decisively and another speaks strong words which cannot be gainsaid. To be sure Joash uses a threat — hints something of taking a very short method with those who still protest for Baal; and that helps conversion. But it is force against force, and men cannot object who have themselves talked of killing. By a rapid popular impulse Gideon is justified, and with the new name Jerubbaal he is acknowledged as a leader in Manasseh.

False religion is not always so easily exposed and upset. Truth may be so mixed with the error of a system that the moral sense is confused and faith clings to the follies and lies conjoined with the truth. And when we look at Judaism in contact with Christianity, at Romanism in contact with the Protestant spirit, we see how difficult it may be to liberate faith. The Apostle Paul, wielding the weapon of a singular and keen eloquence, cannot overcome the Pharisaism of his countrymen. At Antioch, at Iconium he does his utmost with scant success. The Protestant reformation did not so swiftly and thoroughly establish itself in every European country as in Scotland. Where there is no pressure of outward circumstances forcing new religious ideas upon men there must be all the more a spirit of independent thought if any salutary change is to be made in creed and worship. Either there must be men of Berea who search the Scriptures daily, men of Zurich and Berne with the energy of free citizens, or reformation must wait on some political emergency. And in effect conscience rarely has free play, since men are seldom manly, but more or

less like sheep. Hence the value, as things go in this world, of leaders like Joash, princes like Luther's Elector, who give the necessary push to the undecided and check forward opponents by a significant warning. It is not the ideal way of reforming the world, but it has often answered well enough within limits. There are also cases in which the threats of the enemy have done good service, as when the appearance of the Spanish Armada on the English coast did more to confirm the Protestantism of the country than many years of peaceful argument. In truth, were there not occasionally something like master strokes in Providence the progress of humanity would be almost imperceptible. Men and nations are urged on although they have no great desire to advance; they are committed to a voyage and cannot return; they are caught in currents and must go where the currents bear them. Certainly in such cases there is not the ardour, and men cannot reap the reward belonging to the thinkers and brave servants of the truth. Practically, whether Protestants or Romanists, they are spiritually inert. Still it is well for them, well for the world, that a strong hand should urge them forward, since otherwise they would not move at all. Of many in all churches it must be said they are not victors in a fight of faith, they do not work out their own salvation. Yet they are guided, warned, persuaded into a certain habit of piety and understanding of truth, and their children have a new platform, somewhat higher than their fathers', on which to begin life.

At Ophrah of the Abiezrites, though we cannot say much for the nature of the faith in God which has replaced idolatry, still the way is prepared for further and decisive action. Men do not cease from worshipping Baal and become true servants of the Most Holy in a single day; that requires time. There are better possibilities, but Gideon cannot teach the way of Jehovah, nor is he in the mood for religious inquiry. The conversion of Abiezer is quite of the same sort as in early Christian times was effected when a king went over to the new faith and ordered his subjects to be baptised. Not even Gideon knows the value of the faith to which the people have returned, in the strength of which they are to fight. They will be bold now, for even a little trust in God goes a long way in sustaining courage. They will face the enemy now to whom they have long submitted. But of the purity and righteousness into which the faith of Jehovah should lead them they have no vision.

Now with this in view many will think it strange to hear of the conversion of Abiezer. It is a great error however to despise the day of small things. God gives it and we ought to understand its use. Conversion cannot possibly mean the same in every period of the world's history; it cannot

even mean the same in any two cases. To recognise this would be to clear the ground of much that hinders the teaching and the success of the gospel. Where there has been long familiarity with the New Testament, the facts of Christianity and the high spiritual ideas it presents, conversion, properly speaking, does not take place till the message of Christ to the soul stirs it to its depths, moves alike the reason and the will, and creates fervent discipleship. But the history of Israel and of humanity moves forward continuously in successive discoveries or revelations of the highest, culminating in the Christian salvation. To view Gideon as a religious reformer of the same kind as Isaiah is quite a mistake. He had scarcely an idea in common with the great prophet of a later day. But the liberty he desired for his people and the association of liberty with the worship of Jehovah made his revolution a step in the march of Israel's redemption. Those who joined him with any clear purpose and sympathy were therefore converted men in a true if very limited sense. There must be first the blade and then the ear before there can be the full corn. We reckon Gideon a hero of faith, and his hope was truly in the same God Whom we worship — the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet his faith could not be on a level with ours, his knowledge being far less. The angel who speaks to him, the altar he builds, the Spirit of the Lord that comes upon him, his daring iconoclasm, the new purpose and power of the man are in a range quite above material life — and that is enough.

There are some circles in which honesty and truth speaking are evidence of a work of grace. To become honest and to speak truth in the fear of God is to be converted, in a sense, where things are at that pass. There are people who are so cold that among them enthusiasm for anything good may be called superhuman. Nobody has it. If it appears it must come from above. But these steps of progress, though we may describe them as supernatural, are elementary. Men have to be converted again and again, ever making one gain a step to another. The great advance comes when the soul believes enthusiastically in Christ, pledging itself to Him in full sight of the cross. This and nothing less is the conversion we need. To love freedom, righteousness, charity only prepares for the supreme love of God in Christ, in which life springs to its highest power and joy.

Now are we to suppose that Gideon alone of all the men of Israel had the needful spirit and faith to lead the revolution? Was there no one but the son of Joash? We do not find him fully equipped, nor as the years go by does he prove altogether worthy to be chief of the tribes of God. Were there not in many Hebrew towns souls perhaps more ardent, more spiritual than his,

needing only the prophetic call, the touch of the Unseen Hand to make them aware of power and opportunity? The leadership of such a one as Moses is complete and unquestionable. He is the man of the age; knowledge, circumstances, genius fit him for the place he has to occupy. We cannot imagine a second Moses in the same period. But in Israel as well as among other peoples it is often a very imperfect hero who is found and followed. The work is done, but not so well done as we might think possible. Revolutions which begin full of promise lose their spirit because the leader reveals his weakness or even folly. We feel sure that there are many who have the power to lead in thought where the world has not dreamt of climbing, to make a clear road where as yet there is no path; and yet to them comes no messenger, the daily task goes on and it is not supposed that a leader, a prophet is passed by. Are there no better men than Ehud, Gideon, Jephthah must stand in the front?

One answer certainly is that the nation at the stage it has reached cannot as a whole esteem a better man, cannot understand finer ideas. A hundred men of more spiritual faith were possibly brooding over Israel's state, ready to act as fearlessly as Gideon and to a higher issue. But it could only have been after a cleansing of the nation's life, a suppression of Baal worship much more rigorous than could at that time be effected. And in every national crisis the thought of which the people generally are capable determines who must lead and what kind of work shall be done. The reformer before his time either remains unknown or ends in eclipse; either he gains no power or it passes rapidly from him because it has no support in popular intelligence or faith.

It may seem well nigh impossible in our day for any man to fail of the work he can do; if he has the will we think he can make the way. The inward call is the necessity, and when that is heard and the man shapes a task for himself the day to begin will come. Is that certain? Perhaps there are many now who find circumstance a web from which they cannot break away without arrogance and unfaithfulness. They could speak, they could do if God called them; but does He call them? On every side ring the fluent praises of the idols men love to worship. One must indeed be deft in speech and many other arts who would hope to turn the crowd from its folly, for it will only listen to what seizes the ear, and the obscure thinker has not the secret of pleasing. While those who see no visions lead their thousands to a trivial victory, many an uncalled Gideon toils on in the threshing floor. The duties of a low and narrow lot may hold a man; the babble all around of popular voices may be so loud that nothing can make way against them. A

certain slowness of the humble and patient spirit may keep one silent who with little encouragement could speak words of quickening truth. But the day of utterance never comes.

To these waiting in the market place it is comparatively a small thing that the world will not hire them. But does the church not want them? Where God is named and professedly honoured, can it be that the smooth message is preferred because it is smooth? Can it be that in the church men shrink from instead of seeking the highest, most real and vital word that can be said to them? This is what oppresses, for it seems to imply that God has no use in His vineyard for a man when He lets him wait long unregarded; it seems to mean that there is no end for the wistful hope and the words that burn unspoken in the breast. The unrecognised thinker has indeed to trust God largely. He has often to be content with the assurance that what he would say but cannot as yet shall be said in good time, that what he would do but may not shall be done by a stronger hand. And further, he may cherish a faith for himself. No life can remain forever unfruitful, or fruitful only in its lower capacities. Purposes broken off here shall find fulfilment. Where the highways of being reach beyond the visible horizon leaders will be needed for the yet advancing host, and the time of every soul shall come to do the utmost that is in it. The day of perfect service for many of God's chosen ones will begin where beyond these shadows there is light and space. Were it not so, some of the best lives would disappear in the darkest cloud.

CHAPTER 12

“THE PEOPLE ARE YET TOO MANY” — <070633> JUDGES 6:33-7:7

ANOTHER day of hope and energy has dawned. One hillside at least rises sunlit out of darkness with the altar of Jehovah on its summit and holier sacrifices smoking there than Israel has offered for many a year. Let us see what elements of promise, what elements of danger or possible error mingle with the, situation. There is a man to take the lead, a young man, thoughtful, bold, energetic, aware of a Divine call and therefore of some endowment for the task to be done. Gideon believes Jehovah to be Israel's God and Friend, Israel to be Jehovah's people. He has faith in the power of the Unseen Helper. Baal is nothing, a mere name — Bosheth, vanity. Jehovah is a certainty; and what He wills shall come about. So far strength, confidence. But of himself and the people Gideon is not sure. His own ability to gather and command an army, the fitness of any army the tribes can supply to contend with Midian, these are as yet unproved. Only one fact stands clear, Jehovah the supreme God with Whom are all powers and influences. The rest is in shadow. For one thing, Gideon cannot trace the connection between the Most High and himself, between the Power that controls the world and the power that dwells in his own will or the hearts of other men. Yet with the first message a sign has been given, and other tokens may be sought as events move on. With that measure of uncertainty which keeps a man humble and makes him ponder his steps Gideon finds himself acknowledged leader in Manasseh and a centre of growing enthusiasm throughout the northern tribes.

For the people generally this at least may be said, that they have wisdom enough to recognise the man of aptitude and courage, though he belongs to one of the humblest families and is the least in his father's household. Drowning men indeed must take the help that is offered, and Israel is at present almost in the condition of a drowning man. A little more and it will sink under the wave of the Midianite invasion. It is not a time to ask of the rank of a man who has character for the emergency. And yet, so often is the hero unacknowledged, especially when he begins, as Gideon did, with a religious stroke, that some credit must be given to the people for their ready faith. As the flame goes up from the altar at Ophrah men feel a flash of hope and promise. They turn to the Abiezrite in trust and through him

begin to trust God again. Yes: there is a reformation of a sort, and an honest man is at the head of it. So far the signs of the time are good.

Then the old enthusiasm is not dead. Almost Israel had submitted, but again its spirit is rising. The traditions of Deborah and Barak, of Joshua, of Moses, of the desert march and victories linger with those who are hiding amongst the caves and rocks. Songs of liberty, promises of power are still theirs; they feel that they should be free. Canaan is Jehovah's gift to them and they will claim it. So far as reviving human energy and confidence avail, there is a germ out of which the proper life of the people of God may spring afresh. And it is this that Gideon as a reformer must nourish, for the leader depends at every stage on the desires that have been kindled in the hearts of men. While he goes before them in thought and plan he can only go prosperously where they intelligently, heartily will follow. Opportunism is the base lagging behind with popular coldness, as moderatism in religion is. The reformer does not wait a moment when he sees an aspiration he can guide, a spark of faith that can be fanned into flame. But neither in church nor state can one man make a conquering movement. And so we see the vast extent of duty and responsibility. That there may be no opportunism every citizen must be alive to the morality of politics. That there may be no moderatism every Christian must be alive to the real duty of the church.

Now have the heads of families and the chief men in Israel been active in rallying the tribes? Or have the people waited on their chiefs and the chiefs coldly held back?

There are good elements in the situation, but others not so encouraging. The secular leaders have failed; and what are the priests and Levites doing? We hear nothing of them. Gideon has to assume the double office of priest and ruler. At Shiloh there is an altar. There too is the ark, and surely some holy observances are kept. Why does Gideon not lead the people to Shiloh and there renew the national covenant through the ministers of the tabernacle? He knows little of the moral law and the sanctities of worship; and he is not at this stage inclined to assume a function that is not properly his. Yet it is unmistakable that Ophrah has to be the religious centre. Ah! clearly there is opportunism among secular leaders and moderatism among the priests. And this suggests that Judah in the south, although the tabernacle is not in her territory, may have an ecclesiastical reason for holding aloof now, as in Deborah's time she kept apart. Simeon and Levi are brethren. Judah, the vanguard in the desert march, the leading tribe in the first assault on Canaan, has taken Simeon into close alliance. Has Levi

also been almost absorbed? There are signs that it may have been so. The later supremacy of Judah in religion requires early and deep root; and we have also to explain the separation between north and south already evident, which was but half overcome by David's kingship and reappeared before the end of Solomon's reign. It is very significant to read in the closing chapter, of Judges of two Levites both of whom were connected with Judah. The Levites were certainly respected through the whole land, but their absence from all the incidents of the period of Deborah, Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah compels the supposition that they had most affinity with Judah and Simeon in the south. We know how people can be divided by ecclesiasticism; and there is at least some reason to suspect that while the northern tribes were suffering and fighting Judah went her own way, enjoying peace and organising worship.

Such then is the state of matters so far as the tribes are concerned at the time when Gideon sounds the trumpet in Abiezer and sends messengers throughout Manasseh, Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali. The tribes are partly prepared for conflict, but they are weak and still disunited. The muster of fighting men who gather at the call of Gideon is considerable and perhaps astonishes him. But the Midianites are in enormous numbers in the plain of Jezreel between Moreh and Gilboa, having drawn together from their marauding expeditions at the first hint of a rising among the Hebrews. And now as the chief reviews his troops his early apprehension returns. It is with something like dismay that he passes from band to band. Ill-disciplined, ill-assorted, these men do not bear the air of coming triumph. Gideon has too keen sight to be misled by tokens of personal popularity; nor can he estimate success by numbers. Looking closely into the faces of the men he sees marks enough of hesitancy, tokens even of fear. Many seem as if they had gathered like sheep to the slaughter, not as lions ready to dash on the prey. Assurance of victory he cannot find in his army; he must seek it elsewhere.

It is well that multitudes gather to the church today for worship and enter themselves as members. But to reckon all such as an army contending with infidelity and wickedness — that would indeed be a mistake. The mere tale of numbers gives no estimation of strength, fighting strength, strength to resist and to suffer. It is needful clearly to distinguish between those who may be called captives of the church or vassals simply, rendering a certain respect, and those others, often a very few and perhaps the least regarded, who really fight the battles. Our reckoning at present is often misleading so that we occupy ground which we cannot defend. We attempt to assail

infidelity with an ill-disciplined host, many of whom have no clear faith, and to overcome worldliness by the cooperation of those who are more than half-absorbed in the pastimes and follies of the world. There is need to look back to Gideon, who knew what it was to fight. While we are thankful to have so many connected with the church for their own good we must not suppose that they represent aggressive strength; on the contrary we must clearly understand that they will require no small part of the available time and energy of the earnest. In short we have to count them not as helpers of the church's forward movement but as those who must be helped.

Gideon for his work will have to make sharp division. Three hundred who can dash fearlessly on the enemy will be more to his purpose than two-and-thirty thousand most of whom grow pale at the thought of battle, and he will separate by and by. But first he seeks another sign of Jehovah. This man knows that to do anything worthy for his fellow men he must be in living touch with God. The idea has no more than elementary form; but it rules. He, Gideon, is only an instrument, and he must be well convinced that God is working through him. How can he be sure? Like other Israelites he is strongly persuaded that God appears and speaks to men through nature; and he craves a sign in the natural world which is of God's making and upholding. Now to us the sign Gideon asked may appear rude, uncouth, and without any moral significance. A fleece which is to be wet one morning while the threshing floor is dry, and dry next morning while the threshing floor is wet, supplies the means of testing the Divine presence and approval. Further it may be alleged that the phenomena admit of natural explanation. But this is the meaning. Gideon, providing the fleece, identifies himself with it. It is his fleece, and if God's dew drenches it that will imply that God's power shall enter Gideon's soul and abide in it even though Israel be dry as the dusty floor. The thought is at once simple and profound, child-like and Hebrew-like, and carefully we must observe that it is a nature sign, not a mere portent, Gideon looks for. It is not whether God can do a certain seemingly impossible thing. That would not help Gideon. But the dew represents to his mind the vigour he needs, the vigour Israel needs if he should fail; and in reversing the sign, "Let the dew be on the ground and the fleece be dry," he seems to provide a hope, even in prospect of his own failure or death. Gideon's appeal is for a revelation of the Divine in the same sphere as the lightning storm and rain in which Deborah found a triumphant proof of Jehovah's presence; yet there is a notable contrast. We are reminded of the "still small voice" Elijah heard as he stood in the cave mouth after the rending wind and the earthquake and the lightning. We remember also the image of Hosea, "I will be as the dew

unto Israel.” There is a question in the Book of Job, “Hath the rain a father? or who hath begotten the drops of dew?” The faith of Gideon makes answer, “Thou, O Most High, dost give the dews of heaven.” The silent distillation of the dew is profoundly symbolic of the spiritual economy and those energies that are “not of this noisy world but silent and Divine.” There is much of interest and meaning that lies thus beneath the surface in the story of the fleece.

Assured that yet another step in advance may be taken, Gideon leads his forces northward and goes into camp beside the spring of Harod on the slope of Gilboa. Then he does what seems a strange thing for a general on the eve of battle. The army is large, but utterly insufficient in discipline and *morale* for a pitched battle with the Midianites. Men who have hastily snatched their fathers’ swords and pikes of which they are half afraid are not to be relied upon in the heat of a terrible struggle. Proclamation is therefore made that those who are fearful and trembling shall return to their homes. From the entrenchment of Israel on the hillside, where the name Jalid or Gilead still survives, the great camp of the desert people could be seen, the black tents darkening all the valley toward the slope of Moreh a few miles away. The sight was enough to appal even the bold. Men thought of their families and homesteads. Those who had anything to lose began to reconsider and by morning only one-third of the Hebrew army was left with the leader. So perhaps it would be with thousands of Christians if the church were again called to share the reproach of Christ and resist unto blood. Under the banner of a popular Christianity many march to stirring music who, if they supposed struggle to be imminent, would be tempted to leave the ranks. Yet the fight is actually going on. Camp is set against camp, army is mingled with army; at the front there is hot work and many are falling. But in the rear it would seem to be a holiday; men are idling, gossiping, chaffering as though they had come out for amusement or trade, not at all like those who have pledged life in a great cause and have everything to win or lose. And again, in the thick of the strife, where courage and energy are strained to the utmost, we look round and ask whether the fearful have indeed withdrawn, for the suspicion is forced upon us that many who call themselves Christ’s are on the other side. Did not some of those who are striking at us lift their hands yesterday in allegiance to the great Captain? Do we not see some who have marched with us holding the very position we are to take, bearing the very standards we must capture? Strangely confused is the field of battle, and hard is it to distinguish friends from foes. If the fearful would retire we should know better how we stand. If the enemy were all of Midian the issue would be

clear. But fearful and faint-hearted Israelites who may be found any time actually contending against the faith are foes of a kind unknown in simpler days. So frequently does something of this sort happen that every Christian has need to ask himself whether he is clear of the offence. Has he ever helped to make the false world strong against the true, the proud world strong against the meek? Many of those who are doubtful and go home may sooner be pardoned than he who strikes only where a certain false *eclat* is to be won.

*“Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a riband to stick in his coat —
Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
Lost all the others she lets us devote...*

*We shall march prospering — not thro’ his presence;
Songs may inspirit us — not from his lyre;
Deeds will be done — while he boasts his quiescence,
Still bidding crouch whom the rest bade aspire.”*

In the same line of thought lies another reflection. The men who had hastily snatched their fathers’ swords and pikes of which they were half afraid represent to us certain modern defenders of Christianity — those who carry edged weapons of inherited doctrine with which they dare not strike home. The great battleaxes of reprobation, of eternal judgment, of Divine severity against sin once wielded by strong hands, how they tremble and swerve in the grasp of many a modern dialectician. The sword of the old creed, that once like Excalibur cleft helmets and breastplates through, how often it maims the hands that try to use it but want alike the strength and the cunning. Too often we see a wavering blow struck that draws not a drop of blood nor even dints a shield, and the next thing is that the knight has run to cover behind some old bulwark long riddled and dilapidated. In the hands of these unskilled fighters too well armed for their strength the battle is worse than lost. They become a laughing stock to the enemy, an irritation to their own side. It is time there was a sifting among the defenders of the faith and twenty and two thousand went back from Gilead. Is the truth of God become mere tin or lead that no new sword can be fashioned from it, no blade of Damascus firm and keen? Are there no gospel armourers fit for the task? Where the doctrinal contest is maintained by men who are not to the depth of their souls sure of the creeds they found on, by men who have no vision of the severity of God and the meaning of redemption, it ends only in confusion to themselves and those who are with them.

Ten thousand Israelites remain who according to their own judgment are brave enough and prepared for the fight; but the purpose of the commander is not answered yet. He is resolved to have yet another winnowing that shall leave only the men of temper like his own, men of quick intelligence no less than zeal. At the foot of the hill there flows a stream of water, and towards it Gideon leads his diminished army as if at once to cross and attack the enemy in camp. Will they seize his plan and like one man act upon it? Only on those who do can he depend. It is an effective trial. With the hot work of fighting before them the water is needful to all, but in the way of drinking men show their spirit. The most kneel or lie down by the edge of the brook, that by putting their lips to the water they may take a long and leisurely draught. A few supply themselves in quite another way. As a dog whose master is passing on with rapid strides, coming to a pool or stream by the way, stops a moment to lap a few mouthfuls of water and then is off again to his master's side, so do these — three hundred of the ten thousand — bending swiftly down carry water to their mouths in the hollow of the hand. Full of the day's business they move on again before the nine thousand seven hundred have well begun to drink. They separate themselves and are by Gideon's side, beyond the stream, a chosen band proved fit for the work that is to be done. It is no haphazard division that is made by the test of the stream. There is wisdom in it, inspiration. "And the Lord said unto Gideon, By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you and deliver the Midianites into thine hand."

Many are the commonplace incidents, the seemingly small points in life that test the quality of men. Every day we are led to the stream side to show what we are, whether eager in the Divine enterprise of faith or slack and self-considering. Take any company of men and women who claim to be on the side of Christ, engaged and bound in all seriousness to His service. But how many have it clearly before them that they must not entangle themselves more than is absolutely needful with bodily and sensuous cravings, that they must not lie down to drink from the stream of pleasure and amusement? We show our spiritual state by the way in which we spend our leisure, our Saturday afternoons, our Sabbaths. We show whether we are fit for God's business by our use of the flowing stream of literature, which to some is an opiate, to others a pure and strengthening draught. The question simply is whether we are so engaged with God's plan for our life, in comprehending it, fulfilling it, that we have no time to dawdle and no disposition for the merely casual and trifling. Are we in the responsible use of our powers occupied as that Athenian was in the service of his country of whom it is recorded: "There was in the whole city but one street

in which Pericles was ever seen, the street which led to the marketplace and the council house. During the whole period of his administration he never dined at the table of a friend"? Let no one say there is not time in a world like this for social intercourse, for literary and scientific pursuits, or the practice of the arts. The plan of God for men means life in all possible fulness and entrance into every field in which power can be gained. His will for us is that we should give to the world as Christ gave in free and uplifting ministry, and as a man can only give what he has first made his own the Christian is called to self-culture as full as the other duties of life will permit. He cannot explore too much, he cannot be too well versed in the thoughts and doings of men and the revelations of nature, for all he learns is to find high use. But the aim of personal enlargement and efficiency must never be forgotten, that aim which alone makes the self of value and gives it real life — the service and glory of God. Only in view of this aim is culture worth anything. And when in the providence of God there comes a call which requires us to pass with resolute step beyond every stream at which the mind and taste are stimulated that we may throw ourselves into the hard fight against evil there is to be no hesitation. Everything must yield now. The comparatively small handful who press on with concentrated purpose, making God's call and His work first and all else, even their own needs, a secondary affair — to these will be the honour and the joy of victory.

We live in a time when people are piling up object after object that needs attention and entering into engagement after engagement that comes between them and the supreme duty of existence. They form so many acquaintances that every spare hour goes in visiting and receiving visits: yet the end of life is not talk. They are members of so many societies that they scarcely get at the work for which the societies exist: yet the end of life is not organising. They see so many books, hear so much news and criticism that truth escapes them altogether: yet the end of life is to know and do the Truth. Civilisation defeats its own use when it keeps us drinking so long at this and the other spring that we forget the battle. We mean to fight, we mean to do our part, but night falls while we are still occupied on the way. Yet our Master is one who restricted the earthly life to its simplest elements because only so could spiritual energy move freely to its mark.

In the incidents we have been reviewing voluntary churches may find hints at least towards the justification of their principle. The idea of a national church is on more than one side intelligible and valid. Christianity stands related to the whole body of the people, bountiful even to those who scorn

its laws, pleading on their behalf with God, keeping an open door and sending forth a perpetual call of love to the weak, the erring, the depraved. The ideal of a national church is to represent this universal office and realise this inclusiveness of the Christian religion; and the charm is great. On the other hand a voluntary church is the recognition of the fact that while Christ stands related to all men it is those only who engage at expense to themselves in the labour of the gospel who can be called believers, and that these properly constitute the church. The Hebrew people under the theocracy may represent the one ideal; Gideon's sifting of his army points to the other; neither, it must be frankly confessed, has ever been realised. Large numbers may join with some intelligence in worship and avail themselves of the sacraments who have no sense of obligation as members of the kingdom and are scarcely touched by the teaching of Christianity as to sin and salvation. A separated community again, depending on an enthusiasm which too often fails, rarely if ever accomplishes its hope. It aims at exhibiting an active and daring faith, the militancy, the urgency of the gospel, and in this mission what is counted success may be a hindrance and a snare. Numbers grow, wealth is acquired, but the intensity of belief is less than it was and the sacrifices still required are not freely made. Nevertheless is it not plain that a society which would represent the imperative claim of Christ to the undivided faith and loyalty of His followers must found upon a personal sense of obligation and personal eagerness? Is it not plain that a society which would represent the purity, the unearthliness, the rigour, we may even say, of Christ's doctrine, His life of renunciation and His cross must show a separateness from the careless world and move distinctly in advance of popular religious sentiment? Israel was God's people, yet when a leader went forth to a work of deliverance he had to sift out the few keen and devoted spirits. In truth every reformation implies a winnowing, and he does little as a teacher or a guide who does not make division among men.

CHAPTER 13

“MIDIAN’S EVIL DAY” — ~~070708~~ JUDGES 7:8-8-21

THERE is now with Gideon a select band of three hundred, ready for a night attack on the Midianites. The leader has been guided to a singular and striking plan of action. It is, however, as he well knows, a daring thing to begin assault upon the immense camp of Midian with so small a band, even though reserves of nearly ten thousand wait to join in the struggle; and we can easily see that the temper and spirit of the enemy were important considerations on the eve of so hazardous a battle. If the Midianites, Amalekites, and Children of the East formed a united army, if they were prepared to resist, if they had posted sentinels on every side and were bold in prospect of the fight, it was necessary for Gideon to be well aware of the facts. On the other hand if there were symptoms of division in the tents of the enemy, if there were no adequate preparations, and especially if the spirit of doubt or fear had begun to show itself, these would be indications that Jehovah was preparing victory for the Hebrews.

Gideon is led to inquire for himself into the condition of the Midianitish host. To learn that already his name kindles terror in the ranks of the enemy will dispel his lingering anxiety. “Jehovah said unto him... Go thou with Purah thy servant down to the camp; and thou shalt hear what they say; and afterward shall thine hands be strengthened.” The principle is that for those who are on God’s side it is always best to know fully the nature of the opposition. The temper of the enemies of religion, those irregular troops of infidelity and unrighteousness with whom we have to contend, is an element of great importance in shaping the course of our Christian warfare. We hear of organised vice, of combinations great and resolute against which we have to do battle. Language is used which implies that the condition of the churches of Christ contrasts pitifully with the activity and agreement of those who follow the black banners of evil. A vague terror possesses many that in the conflict with vice they must face immense resources and a powerful confederacy. The far-stretching encampment of the Midianites is to all appearance organised for defence at every point, and while the servants of God are resolved to attack they are oppressed by the vastness of the enterprise. Impiety, sensuality, injustice may seem to be in close alliance with each other, on the best understanding, fortified by superhuman craft and malice, with their gods in their midst to help them.

But let us go down to the host and listen, the state of things may be other than we have thought.

Under cover of the night which made Midian seem more awful the Hebrew chief and his servant left the outpost on the slope of Gilboa and crept from shadow to shadow across the space which separated them from the enemy, vaguely seeking what quickly came. Lying in breathless silence behind some bush or wall the Hebrews heard one relating a dream to his fellow. "I dreamed," he said, "and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and came unto a tent and smote it that it fell, and overturned it that it lay along." The thoughts of the day are reproduced in the visions of the night. Evidently this man has had his mind directed to the likelihood of attack, the possibility of defeat. It is well known that the Hebrews are gathering to try the issue of battle. They are indeed like a barley cake such as poor Arabs bake among ashes — a defeated famished people whose life has been almost drained away. But tidings have come of their return to Jehovah and traditions of His marvellous power are current among the desert tribes. A confused sense of all this has shaped the dream in which the tent of the chief appears prostrate and despoiled. Gideon and Purah listen intently, and what they hear further is even more unexpected and reassuring. The dream is interpreted: "This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; for into his hand God hath delivered Midian and all the host." He who reads the dream knows more than the other. He has the name of the Hebrew captain. He has heard of the Divine messenger who called Gideon to his task and assured him of victory. As for the apparent strength of the host of Midian, he has no confidence in it, for he has felt the tremor that passes through the great camp. So, lying concealed, Gideon hears from his enemies themselves as from God the promise of victory, and full of worshipping joy hastens back to prepare for an immediate attack.

Now in every combination of godless men there is a like feeling of insecurity, a like presage of disaster. Those who are in revolt against justice, truth, and the religion of God have nothing on which to rest, no enduring bond of union. What do they conceive as the issue of their attempts and schemes? Have they anything in view that can give heart and courage; an end worth toil and hazard? It is impossible, for their efforts are all in the region of the false, where the seeming realities are but shadows that perpetually change. Let it be allowed that to a certain extent common interests draw together men of no principle so that they can cooperate for a time. Yet each individual is secretly bent on his own pleasure or profit and

there is nothing that can unite them constantly. One selfish and unjust person may be depended upon to conceive a lively antipathy to every other selfish and unjust person. Midian and Amalek have their differences with one another, and each has its own rival chiefs, rival families, full of the bitterest jealousy, which at any moment may burst into flame. The whole combination is weak from the beginning, a mere horde of clashing desires incapable of harmony, incapable of a sustaining hope.

In the course of our Lord's brief ministry the insecurity of those who opposed Him was often shown. The chief priests and scribes and lawyers whispered to each other the fears and anxieties He aroused. In the Sanhedrin the discussion about Him comes to the point, "What do we? For this man doeth many signs. If we let Him thus alone, all men will believe on Him: and the Romans will come and take away both our peace and our nation." The Pharisees say among themselves, "Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? Behold the world is gone after Him." And what was the reason, what was the cause of this weakness? Intense devotion to the law and the institutions of religion animated those Israelites, yet sufficed not to bind them together. Rival schools and claims honeycombed the whole social and ecclesiastical fabric. The pride of religious ancestry and a keenly cherished ambition could not maintain peace or hope; they were of no use against the calm authority of the Nazarene. Judaism was full of the bitterness of falsehood. The seeds of despair were in the minds of those who accused Christ, and the terrible harvest was reaped within a generation. Passing from this supreme evidence that the wrong can never be the strong, look at those ignorant and unhappy persons who combine against the laws of society. Their suspicions of each other are proverbial, and ever with them is the feeling that sooner or later they will be overtaken by the law. They dream of that and tell each other their dreams. The game of crime is played against well known odds. Those who carry it on are aware that their haunts will be discovered, their gang broken up. A bribe will tempt one of their number, and the rest will have to go their way to the cell or the gallows. Yet with the presage of defeat wrought into the very constitution of the mind and with innumerable proofs that it is no delusion, there are always those amongst us who attempt what even in this world is so hazardous and in the larger sweep of moral economy is impossible. In selfishness, in oppression and injustice, in every kind of sensuality men adventure as if they could ensure their safety and defy the day of reckoning. Gideon is now well persuaded that the fear of disaster is not for Israel. He returns to the camp and forthwith prepares to strike. It seems to him now the easiest thing possible to throw into confusion that great encampment of Midian.

One bold device rapidly executed will set in operation the suspicions and fears of the different desert tribes and they will melt away in defeat. The stratagem has already shaped itself. The three hundred are provided with the earthenware jars or pitchers in which their simple food has been carried. They soon procure firebrands and from among the ten thousand in the camp enough rams' horns are collected to supply one to each of the attacking party. Then three bands are formed of equal strength and ordered to advance from different sides upon the enemy, holding themselves ready at a given signal to break the pitchers, flash the torches in the air and make as much noise as they can with their rude mountain horns. The scheme is simple, quaint, ingenious. It reveals skill in making use of the most ordinary materials which is of the very essence of generalship. The harsh cornets especially filling the valley with barbaric tumult are well adapted to create terror and confusion. We hear nothing of ordinary weapons, but it must not be supposed that the three hundred were unarmed.

It was not long after midnight, the middle watch had been newly set, when the three companies reached their stations. The orders had been well seized and all went precisely as Gideon had conceived. With crash and tumult and flare of torches there came the battle shout — “Sword of Jehovah and of Gideon.” The Israelites had no need to press forward; they stood every man in his place, while fear and suspicion did the work. The host ran and cried and fled. To and fro among the tents, seeing, now on this side now on that, the menacing flames, turning from the battlecry here to be met in an opposite quarter by the wild dissonance of the horns, the surprised army was thrown into utter confusion. Every one thought of treachery and turned his sword against his fellow. Escape was the common impulse, and the flight of the disorganised host took a southeasterly direction by the road that led to the Jordan valley and across it to the Hauran and the desert. It was a complete rout and the Hebrews had only to follow up their advantage. Those who had not shared the attack joined in the pursuit. Every village that the flying Midianites passed sent out its men, brave enough now that the arm of the tyrant was broken. Down to the ghor of Jordan the terror-stricken Arabs fled and along the bank for many a mile, harassed in the difficult ground by the Hebrews who know every yard of it. At the fords there is dreadful work. Those who cross at the highest point near Succoth are not the main body, but the two chiefs Zebah and Zalmunna are among them and Gideon takes them in hand. Away to the south Ephraim has its opportunity and gains a victory where the road, along the valley of Jordan diverges to Beth-barah. For days and nights the retreat goes oft till the strange swift triumph of Israel is assured.

1. There is in this narrative a lesson as to equipment for the battle of life and the service: of God somewhat like that which we found in the story of Shamgar, yet with points of difference. We are reminded here of what may be done without wealth, without the material apparatus that is often counted necessary. The modern habit is to make much of tools and outfit. The study and applications of science have brought in a fashion of demanding everything possible in the way of furniture, means, implements. Everywhere this fashion prevails, in the struggle of commerce and manufacture, in literature and art, in teaching and household economy, worst of all in church life and work. Michael Angelo wrought the frescoes of the Sistine chapel with the ochres he dug with his own hands from the garden of the Vatican. Mr. Darwin's great experiments were conducted with the rudest and cheapest furniture, anything a country house could supply. But in the common view it is on perfect tools and material almost everything depends; and we seem in the way of being absolutely mastered by them. What, for example, is the ecclesiasticism which covers an increasing area of religious life? And what is the parish or congregation fully organised in the modern sense? Must we not call them elaborate machinery expected to produce spiritual life? There must be an extensive building with every convenience for making worship agreeable; there must be guilds and guild rooms, societies and committees, each with an array of officials; there must be due assignment of observances to fit days and seasons; there must be architecture, music, and much else. The ardent soul desiring to serve God and man has to find a place in conjunction with all this and order his work so that it may appear well in a report. To some these things may appear ludicrous, but they are too significant of the drift from that simplicity and personal energy in which the Church of Christ began. We seem to have forgotten that the great strokes have been made by men who like Gideon delayed not for elaborate preparation nor went back on rule and precedent, but took the firebrands, pitchers, and horns that could be got together on a hillside. The great thing both in the secular and in the spiritual region is that men should go straight at the work which has to be done and do it with sagacity, intelligence, and fervour of their own.

We look back to those few plain men with whom lay the new life of the world, going forth with the strong certain word of a belief for which they could die, a truth by which the dead could be revived. Their equipment was of the soul. Of outward means and material advantages they were, one may say, destitute. Our methods are very different. No doubt in these days there is a work of defence which requires the finest weapons and most careful

preparation. Yet even here no weight of polished armour is so good for David's use as the familiar sling and stone. And in the general task of the church, teaching, guiding, setting forth the gospel of Christ, whatever keeps soul from honest and hearty touch with soul is bad. We want above all things men who have sanctified common sense, mother wit, courage and frank simplicity, men who can find their own means and gain their own victories. The churches that do not breed such are doomed.

2. We have been reading a story of panic and defeat, and we may be advised to find in it a hint of the fate that is to overtake Christianity when modern criticism has finally ordered its companies and provided them with terrifying horns and torches. Or certain Christians may feel that the illustration fits the state of alarm in which they are obliged to live. Is not the church like that encampment in the valley, exposed to the most terrible and startling attacks on all sides, and in peril constantly of being routed by unforeseen audacities, here of Ingersoll, Bakunin, Bebel, there of Huxley or Renan? Not seldom still, though after many a false alarm, the cry is raised, "The church, the faith — in danger!"

Once for all — the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is never in danger, though enemies buzz on every side like furious hornets. A confederation of men, a human organisation may be in deadly peril and may know that the harsh tumult around it means annihilation. But no institution is identical with the Catholic Church, much less with the kingdom of God. Christians need not dread the honest criticism which has a right to speak, nor even the malice, envy, which have no right yet dare to utter themselves. Whether it be sheer atheism or scientific dogma or political change or criticism of the Bible that makes the religious world tremble and cry out for fear, in every case panic is unchristian and unworthy. For one thing, do we not frame numerous thoughts and opinions of our own and devise many forms of service which in the course of time we come to regard as having a sacredness equal to the doctrine and ordinances of Christ? And do we not frequently fall into the error of thinking that the symbols, traditions, outward forms of a Christian society are essential and as much to be contended for as the substance of the gospel? Criticism of these is dreaded as criticism of Christ, decay of them is regarded, often quite wrongly, as decay of the work of God on earth. We forget that forms, as such, are on perpetual trial, and we forget also that no revolution or seeming disaster can touch the facts on which Christianity rests. The Divine gospel is eternal. Indeed, assailants of the right sort are needed, and even those of the bad sort have their use. The encampment of the unseeing and

unthinking, of the self-loving and arrogant needs to be startled; and he is no emissary of Satan who honestly leads an attack where men lie in false peace, though he may be for his own part but a rude fighter. The panic indeed sometimes takes a singular and pathetic form. The unexpected enemy breaks in on the camp with blare of ignorant rebuke and noisy demonstration of strength and authority. Him the church hails as a new apostle, at his feet she takes her place with a strange unprofitable humility; and this is the worst kind of disaster. Better far a serious battle than such submission.

3. Without pursuing this suggestion we pass to another raised by the conduct of the men of Ephraim. They obeyed the call of Gideon when he hastily summoned them to take the lower fords of Jordan within their own territory and prevent the escape of the Midianites. To them it fell to gain a great victory, and especially to slay two subordinate chiefs, Oreb and Zeeb, the Crow and the Wolf. But afterwards they complained that they had not been called at first when the commander was gathering his army. We are informed that they chode with him sharply on this score, and it was only by his soft answer which implied a little flattery that they were appeased. “What have I now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaming of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?”

The men of Ephraim were not called at first along with Manasseh, Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali. True. But why? Was not Gideon aware of their selfish indifference? Did he not read their character? Did he not perceive that they would have sullenly refused to be led by a man of Manasseh, the youngest son of Joash of Abiezer? Only too well did the young chief know with whom he had to deal. There had been fighting already between Israel and the Midianites. Did Ephraim help then? Nay: but secure in her mountains that tribe sullenly and selfishly held aloof. And now the complaint is made when Gideon, once unknown, is a victorious hero, the deliverer of the Hebrew nation.

Do we not often see something like this? There are people who will not hazard position or profit in identifying themselves with an enterprise while the issue is doubtful, but desire to have the credit of connection with it if it should succeed. They have not the humanity to associate themselves with those who are fighting in a good cause because it is good. In fact they do not know what is good, their only test of value being success. They lie by, looking with half-concealed scorn on the attempts of the earnest, sneering at their heat either in secret or openly, and when one day it becomes clear

that the world is applauding they conceive a sudden respect for those at whom they scoffed. Now they will do what they can to help, — with pleasure, with liberality. Why were they not sooner invited? They will almost make a quarrel of that, and they have to be soothed with fair speeches. And people who are worldly at heart push forward in this fashion when Christian affairs have success or *eclat* attached to them, especially where religion wears least of its proper air and has somewhat of the earthly in tone and look. Christ pursued by the Sanhedrin, despised by the Roman, is no person for them to know. Let Him have the patronage of Constantine or a de Medici and they are then assured that He has claims which they will admit — in theory. More than that needs not be expected from men and women “of the world.” “*Messieurs, surtout, pas de zele.*” Above all, no zeal: that is the motto of every Ephraim since time began. Wait till zeal is cooling before you join the righteous cause.

4. But while there are the carnal who like to share the success of religion after it has cooled down to their temperature, another class must not be forgotten, those who in their selfishness show the worst kind of hostility to the cause they should aid. Look at the men of Succoth and Penuel. Gideon and his band leading the pursuit of the Midianites have had no food all night and are faint with hunger. At Succoth they ask bread in vain. Instead of help they get the taunt — “Are Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand that we should give bread unto thine army?” Onward they press another stage up the hills to Penuel, and there also their request is refused. Gideon, savage with the need of his men, threatens dire punishment to those who are so callous and cruel; and when he returns victorious his threat is made good. With thorns and briars of the wilderness he scourges the elders of Succoth. The pride of Penuel is its watchtower, and that he demolishes, at the same time decimating the men of the city.

Penuel and Succoth lay in the way between the wilderness in which the Midianites dwelt and the valleys of western Palestine. The men of these cities feared that if they aided Gideon they would bring on themselves the vengeance of the desert tribes. Yet where do we see the lowest point of unfaith and meanness, in Ephraim or Succoth? It is perhaps hard to say which are the least manly: those contrive to join the conquering host and snatch the credit of victory; these are not so clever, and while they are as eager to make things smooth for themselves the thorns and briars are more visibly their portion. To share the honour of a cause for which you have done very little is an easy thing in this world, though an honest man cannot wear that kind of laurel; but as for Succoth and Penuel, the poor creatures,

who will not pity them? It is so inconvenient often to have to decide. They would temporise if it were possible — supply the famished army with mouldy corn and raisins at a high price, and do as much next time for the Midianites. Yet the opportunity for this kind of salvation does not always come. There are times when people have to choose definitely whom they will serve, and discover to their horror that judgment follows swiftly upon base and cowardly choice. And God is faithful in making the recusants feel the urgency of moral choice and the grip He has of them. They would fain let the battle of truth sweep by and not meddle with it. But something is forced upon them. They cannot let the whole affair of salvation alone, but are driven to refuse heaven in the very act of trying to escape hell. And although judgment lingers, ever and anon demonstration is made among the ranks of the would be prudent that One on high judges for His warriors. It is not the Gideon leading the little band of faint but eager champions of faith who punishes the callous heathenism and low scorn of a Succoth and Penuel. The Lord of Hosts Himself will vindicate and chasten. “Whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe in Me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea.”

5. Yet another word of instruction is found in the appeal of Gideon: “Give, I pray you, loaves of bread unto the people that follow me, for they be faint and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna.” Well has the expression “Faint yet pursuing” found its place as a proverb of the religious life. We are called to run with patience a race that needs long ardour and strenuous exertion. The goal is far away, the ground is difficult. As day after day and year after year demands are made upon our faith, our resolution, our thought, our devotion to One who remains unseen and on our confidence in the future life, it is no wonder that many feel faint and weary. Often have we to pass through a region inhabited by those who are indifferent or hostile, careless or derisive. At many a door we knock and find no sympathy. We ask for bread and receive a stone; and still the fight slackens not, still have we to reach forth to the things that are before. But the faintness is not death. In the most terrible hours there is new life for our spiritual nature. Refreshment comes from an unseen hand when earth refuses help. We turn to Christ; we consider Him who endured great contradiction of sinners against Himself; we realise afresh that we are ensured of the fulness of His redemption. The body grows faint, but the soul presses on; the body dies and has to be left behind as a worn-out garment, but the spirit ascends into immortal youth.

*“On, chariot! on, soul!
Ye are all the more fleet.
Be alone at the goal
Of the strange and the sweet!”*

6. Finally let us glance at the fate of Zebah and Zalmunna, not without a feeling of admiration and of pity for the rude ending of these stately lives.

The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon has slain its thousands. The vast desert army has been scattered like chaff, in the flight, at the fords, by the rock Oreb and the wine press Zeeb, all along the way by Nobah and Jogbehah, and finally at Karkor, where having encamped in fancied security the residue is smitten. Now the two defeated chiefs are in the hand of Gideon, their military renown completely wrecked, their career destroyed. To them the expedition into Canaan was part of the common business of leadership. As emirs of nomadic tribes they had to find pasture and prey for their people. No special antagonism to Jehovah, no ill-will against Israel more than other nations, led them to cross the Jordan and scour the plains of Palestine. It was quite in the natural course of things that Midianites and Amalekites should migrate and move towards the west. And now the defeat is crushing. What remains therefore but to die?

We hear Gideon command his son Jether to fall upon the captive chiefs, who, brilliant and stately once, lie disarmed, bound and helpless. The indignity is not to our mind. We would have thought more of Gideon had he offered freedom to these captives “fallen on evil days,” men to be admired, not hated. But probably they do not desire a life which has in it no more of honour. Only let the Hebrew leader not insult them by the stroke of a young man’s sword. The great chiefs would die by a warrior’s blow. And Jether cannot slay them; his hand falters as he draws the sword. These men who have ruled their tens of thousands have still the lion look that quails. “Rise thou and fall upon us,” they say to Gideon: “for as the man is, so is his strength.” And so they die, types of the greatest earthly powers that resist the march of Divine Providence, overthrown by a sword which even in faulty, weak human hands has indefeasible sureness and edge.

“As the man is, so is his strength.” It is another of the pregnant sayings which meet us here and there even in the least meditative parts of Scripture. Yes: as a man is in character, in faith, in harmony with the will of God, so is his strength; as he is in falseness, injustice, egotism, and ignorance, so is his weakness. And there is but one real perennial kind of strength. The demonstration made by selfish and godless persons, though it

shake continents and devastate nations, is not Force. It has no nerve, no continuance, but is mere fury which decays and perishes. Strength is the property of truth and truth only; it belongs to those who are in union with eternal reality and to no others in the universe. Would you be invincible? You must move with the eternal powers of righteousness and love. To be showy in appearance or terrible in sound on the wrong side with the futilities of the world is but incipient death.

On all sides the application may be seen. In the home and its varied incidents of education, sickness, discipline; in society high and low; in politics, in literature. As the man or woman is in simple allegiance to God and clear resolution there is strength to endure, to govern, to think, and every way to live. Otherwise there can only be instability, foolishness, blundering selfishness, a sad passage to inanition and decay.

CHAPTER 14

GIDEON THE ECCLESIASTIC — ~~070822~~ JUDGES 8:22-28

THE great victory of Gideon had this special significance, that it ended the incursions of the wandering races of the desert. Canaan offered a continual lure to the nomads of the Arabian wilderness, as indeed the eastern and southern parts of Syria do at the present time. The hazard was that wave after wave of Midianites and Bedawin sweeping over the land should destroy agriculture and make settled national life and civilisation impossible. And when Gideon undertook his work the risk of this was acute. But the defeat inflicted on the wild tribes proved decisive. "Midian was subdued before the children of Israel, and they lifted up their heads no more." The slaughter that accompanied the overthrow of Zebah and Zalmunna, Oreb and Zeeb became in the literature of Israel a symbol of the destruction which must overtake the foes of God. "Do thou to thine enemies as unto Midian" — so runs the cry of a psalm — "Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb: yea, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, who said, Let us take to ourselves in possession the habitations of God." In Isaiah the remembrance gives a touch of vivid colour to the oracle of the coming Wonderful, Prince of Peace. "The yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor shall be broken as in the day of Midian." Regarding the Assyrian also the same prophet testifies, "The Lord of Hosts shall stir up against him a scourge as in the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb." We have no song like that of Deborah celebrating the victory, but a sense of its immense importance held the mind of the people, and by reason of it Gideon found a place among the heroes of faith. Doubtless he had, to begin with, a special reason for taking up arms against the Midianitish chiefs that they had slain his two brothers: the duty of an avenger of blood fell to him. But this private vengeance merged in the desire to give his people freedom, religious as well as political, and it was Jehovah's victory that he won, as he himself gladly acknowledged. We may see, therefore, in the whole enterprise, a distinct step of religious development. Once again the name of the Most High was exalted; once again the folly of idol worship was contrasted with the wisdom of serving the God of Abraham and Moses. The tribes moved in the direction of national unity and also of common devotion to their unseen King. If Gideon had been a man of larger intellect and knowledge he might have led

Israel far on the way towards fitness for the mission it had never yet endeavoured to fulfil. But his powers and inspiration were limited.

On his return from the campaign the wish of the people was expressed to Gideon that he should assume the title of king. The nation needed a settled government, a centre of authority which would bind the tribes together, and the Abiezrite chief was now clearly marked as a man fit for royalty. He was able to persuade as well as to fight; he was bold, firm, and prudent. But to the request that he should become king and found a dynasty Gideon gave an absolute refusal: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; Jehovah shall rule over you." We always admire a man who refuses one of the great posts of human authority or distinction. The throne of Israel was even at that time a flattering offer. But should it have been made? There are few who will pause in a moment of high personal success to think of the point of morality involved; yet we may credit Gideon with the belief that it was not for him or any man to be called king in Israel. As a judge he had partly proved himself, as a judge he had a Divine call and a marvellous vindication: that name he would accept, not the other.

One of the chief elements of Gideon's character was a strong but not very spiritual religiousness. He attributed his success entirely to God, and God alone he desired the nation to acknowledge as its Head. He would not even in appearance stand between the people and their Divine Sovereign, nor with his will should any son of his take a place so unlawful and dangerous.

Along with his devotion to God it is quite likely that the caution of Gideon had much to do with his resolve. He had already found some difficulty in dealing with the Ephraimites, and he could easily foresee that if he became king the pride of that large clan would rise strongly against him. If the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim was better than the whole vintage of Abiezer, as Gideon had declared, did it not follow that any elder of the great central tribe would better deserve the position of king than the youngest son of Joash of Abiezer? The men of Succoth and Penuel too had to be reckoned with before Gideon could establish himself in a royal seat he would have to fight a great coalition in the centre and south and also beyond Jordan. To the pains of oppression would succeed the agony of civil war. Unwilling to kindle a fire which might burn for years and perhaps consume himself, he refused to look at the proposal, flattering and honourable as it was.

But there was another reason for his decision which may have had even more weight. Like many men who have distinguished themselves in one

way, his real ambition lay in a different direction. We think of him as a military genius. He for his part looked to the priestly office and the transmission of Divine oracles as his proper calling. The enthusiasm with which he overthrew the altar of Baal, built the new altar of Jehovah and offered his first sacrifice upon it, survived when the wild delights of victory had passed away. The thrill of awe and the strange excitement he had felt when Divine messages came to him and signs were given in answer to his prayer affected him far more deeply and permanently than the sight of a flying enemy and the pride of knowing himself victor in a great campaign. Neither did kingship appear much in comparison with access to God, converse with Him, and declaration of His will to men. Gideon appears already tired of war, with no appetite certainly for more, however successful, and impatient to return to the mysterious rites and sacred privileges of the altar. He had good reason to acknowledge the power over Israel's destiny of the Great Being Whose spirit had come upon him, Whose promises had been fulfilled. He desired to cultivate that intercourse with Heaven which more than anything else gave him the sense of dignity and strength. From the offer of a crown he turned as if eager to don the robe of a priest and listen for the holy oracles that none beside himself seemed able to receive.

It is notable that in the history of the Jewish kings the tendency shown by Gideon frequently reappeared. According to the law of later times the kingly duties should have been entirely separated from those of the priesthood. It came to be a dangerous and sacrilegious thing for the chief magistrate of the tribes, their leader in war, to touch the sacred implements or offer a sacrifice. But just because the ideas of sacrifice and priestly service were so fully in the Jewish mind the kings, either when especially pious or especially strong, felt it hard to refrain from the forbidden privilege. On the eve of a great battle with the Philistines Saul, expecting Samuel to offer the preparatory sacrifice and inquire of Jehovah, waited seven days and then, impatient of delay, undertook the priestly part and offered a burnt sacrifice. His act was, properly speaking, a confession of the sovereignty of God; but when Samuel came he expressed great indignation against the king, denounced his interference with sacred things, and in effect removed him then and there from the kingdom. David for his part appears to have been scrupulous in employing the priests for every religious function; but at the bringing up of the ark from the house of Obed-Edom he is reported to have led a sacred dance before the Lord and to have worn a linen ephod, that is, a garment specially reserved for the priests. He also took to himself the privilege of blessing the people in the

name of the Lord. On the division of the kingdom Jeroboam promptly assumed the ordering of religion, set up shrines and appointed priests to minister at them; and in one scene we find him standing by an altar to offer incense. The great sin of Uzziah, on account of which he had to go forth from the temple a hopeless leper, is stated in the second book of Chronicles to have been an attempt to burn incense on the altar. These are cases in point; but the most remarkable is that of Solomon. To be king, to build and equip the temple and set in operation the whole ritual of the house of God, did not content that magnificent prince. His ambition led him to assume a part far loftier and more impressive than fell to the chief priest himself. It was Solomon who offered the prayer when the temple was consecrated, who pronounced the blessing of God on the worshipping multitude; and at his invocation it was that "fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices." This crowning act of his life in which the great monarch rose to the very highest pitch of his ambition, actually claiming and taking precedence over all the house of Aaron, will serve to explain the strange turn of the Abiezrite's history at which we have now arrived.

"He made an ephod and put it in his city, even in Ophrah." A strong but not spiritual religiousness, we have said, is the chief note of Gideon's character. It may be objected that such a one, if he seeks ecclesiastical office, does so unworthily; but to say so is an uncharitable error. It is not the devout temper alone that finds attraction in the ministry of sacred things; nor should a love of place and power be named as the only other leading motive. One who is not devout may in all sincerity covet the honour of standing for God before the congregation, leading the people in worship, and interpreting the sacred oracles. A vulgar explanation of human desire is often a false one; it is so here. The ecclesiastic may show few tokens of the spiritual temper, the other worldliness, the glowing and simple truth we rightly account to be the proper marks of a Christian ministry; yet he may by his own reckoning have obeyed a clear call. His function in this case is to maintain order and administer outward rites with dignity and care — a limited range of duty indeed, but not without utility, especially when there are inferior and less conscientious men in office not far away. He does not advance faith, but according to his power he maintains it.

But the ecclesiastic must have the ephod. The man who feels the dignity of religion more than its humane simplicity, realising it as a great movement of absorbing interest, will naturally have regard to the means of increasing

dignity and making the movement impressive. Gideon calls upon the people for the golden spoils taken from the Midianites, nose rings, earrings and the like, and they willingly respond. It is easy to obtain gifts for the outward glory of religion, and a golden image is soon to be seen within a house of Jehovah on the hill at Ophrah. Whatever form it had, this figure was to Gideon no idol, but a symbol or sign of Jehovah's presence among the people, and by means of it, in one or other of the ways used at the time, as for example by casting lots from within it, appeal was made to God with the utmost respect and confidence. When it is supposed that Gideon fell away from his first faith in making this image, the error lies in overestimating his spirituality at the earlier stage. We must not think that at any time the use of a symbolic image would have seemed wrong to him. It was not against images, but against worship of false and impure gods, that his zeal was at first directed. The sacred pole was an object of detestation because it was a symbol of Astarte.

In some way we cannot explain the whole life of Gideon appears as quite separate from the religious ordinances maintained before the ark, and at the same time quite apart from that Divine rule which forbade the making and worship of graven images. Either he did not know the second commandment, or he understood it only as forbidding the use of an image of any creature and the worship of a creature by means of an image. We know that the cherubim in the Holy of Holies were symbolic of the perfections of creation, and through them the greatness of the Unseen God was realised. So it was with Gideon's ephod or image, which was however used in seeking oracles. He acted at Ophrah as priest of the true God. The sacrifices he offered were to Jehovah. People came from all the northern tribes to bow at his altar and receive divine intimations through him. The southern tribes had Gilgal and Shiloh. Here at Ophrah was a service of the God of Israel, not perhaps intended to compete with the other shrines, yet virtually depriving them of their fame. For the expression is used that all Israel went a whoring after the ephod.

But while we try to understand we are not to miss the warning which comes home to us through this chapter of religious history. Pure and, for the time, even elevated in the motive, Gideon's attempt at priestcraft led to his fall. For a while we see the hero acting as judge at Ophrah and presiding with dignity at the altar. His best wisdom is at the service of the people, and he is ready to offer for them at new moon or harvest the animals they desire to consecrate and consume in the sacred feast. In a spirit of real faith and no doubt with much sagacity he submits their inquiries to the test of

the ephod. But “the thing became a snare to Gideon and his house,” perhaps in the way of bringing in riches and creating the desire for more. Those who applied to him as a revealer brought gifts with them. Gradually as wealth increased among the people the value of the donations would increase, and he who began as a disinterested patriot may have degenerated into a somewhat avaricious man who made a trade of religion. On this point we have, however, no information. It is mere surmise, depending upon observation of the way things are apt to go amongst ourselves.

Reviewing the story of Gideon’s life we find this clear lesson, that within certain limits he who trusts and obeys God has a quite irresistible efficiency. This man had, as we have seen, his limitations, very considerable. As a religious leader, prophet or priest, he was far from competent; there is no indication that he was able to teach Israel a single Divine doctrine, and as to the purity and mercy, the righteousness and love of God, his knowledge was rudimentary. In the remote villages of the Abiezrites the tradition of Jehovah’s name and power remained, but in the confusion of the times there was no education of children in the will of God: the Law was practically unknown. From Shechem where Baal-Berith was worshipped the influence of a degrading idolatry had spread, obliterating every religious idea except the barest elements of the old faith. Doing his very best to understand God, Gideon never saw what religion in our sense means. His sacrifices were appeals to a Power dimly felt through nature and in the greater epochs of the national history, chastising now, and now friendly and beneficent.

Yet, seriously limited as he was, Gideon, when he had once laid hold of the fact that he was called by the unseen God to deliver Israel, went on step by step to the great victory which made the tribes free. His responsibility to his fellow Israelites became clear along with his sense of the demand made upon him by God. He felt himself like the wind, like the lightning, like the dew, an agent or instrument of the Most High, bound to do His part in the course of things. His will was enlisted in the Divine purpose. This work, this deliverance of Israel, was to be effected by him and no other. He had the elemental powers with him, in him. The immense armies of Midian could not stand in his way. He was, as it were, a storm that must hurl them back into the wilderness defeated and broken.

Now this is the very conception of life which we in our far wider knowledge are apt to miss, which nevertheless it is our chief business to grasp and carry into practice. You stand there, a man instructed in a

thousand things of which Gideon was ignorant, instructed especially in the nature and will of God Whom Christ has revealed. It is your privilege to take a broad survey of human life, of duty, to look beyond the present to the eternal future with its infinite possibilities of gain and loss. But the danger is that year after year all thought and effort shall be on your own account, that with each changing wind of circumstance you change your purpose, that you never understand God's demand nor find the true use of knowledge, will, and life in fulfilling that. Have you a divine task to effect? You doubt it. Where is anything that can be called a commission of God? You look this way and that for a little, then give up the quest. This year finds you without enthusiasm, without devotion even as you have been in other years. So life ebbs away and is lost in the wide flat sands of the secular and trivial, and the soul never becomes part of the strong ocean current of Divine purpose. We pity or deride some who, with little knowledge and in many errors alike of heart and head, were yet men as many of us may not claim to be, alive to the fact of God and their own share in Him. But they were so limited, those Hebrews, you say, a mere horde of shepherds and husbandmen; their story is too poor, too chaotic to have any lesson for us. And in sheer incapacity to read the meaning of the tale you turn from this Book of Judges, as from a barbarian myth, less interesting than Homer, of no more application to yourself than the legends of the Round Table. Yet, all the while, the one supreme lesson for a man to read and take home to himself is written throughout the book in bold and living characters — that only when life is realised as a vocation is it worth living. God may be faintly known, His will but rudely interpreted; yet the mere understanding that He gives life and rewards effort is an inspiration. And when His life-giving call ceases to stir and guide there can be for the man, the nation, only irresolution and weakness.

A century ago Englishmen were as little devout as they are today; they were even less spiritual, less moved to fine issues. They had their scepticisms too, their rough ignorant prejudices, their giant errors and perversities. "We have gained vastly," as Professor Seeley says, "in breadth of view, intelligence, and refinement. Probably what we threw aside could not be retained; what we adopted was forced upon us by the age. Nevertheless, we had formerly what I may call a national discipline, which formed a firm, strongly-marked national character. We have now only materials, which may be of the first quality, but have not been worked up. We have everything except decided views and steadfast purpose — everything in short except character." Yes: the sense of the nation's calling has decayed, and with it the nation's strength. In leaders and followers

alike purpose fades as faith evaporates, and we are faithless because we attempt nothing noble under the eye and sceptre of the King.

You live, let us say, among those who doubt God, doubt whether there is any redemption, whether the whole Christian gospel and hope are not in the air, dreams, possibilities, rather than facts of the Eternal Will. The storm wind blows and you hear its roaring: that is palpable fact, divine or cosmic. Its errand will be accomplished. Great rivers flow, great currents sweep through the ocean. Their mighty urgency who can doubt? But the spiritual who can believe? You do not feel in the sphere of the moral, of the spiritual the wind that makes no sound, the current that rolls silently charged with sublime energies, effecting a vast and wonderful purpose. Yet here are the great facts; and we must find our part in that spiritual urgency, do our duty there, or lose all. We must launch out on the mighty stream of redemption or never reach eternal light, for all else moves down to death. Christ Himself is to be victorious in us. The glory of our life is that we can be irresistible in the region of our duty, irresistible in conflict with the evil, the selfishness, the falsehood given us to overthrow. To realise that is to live. The rest is all mere experiment, getting ready for the task of existence, making armour, preparing food, otherwise, at the worst, a winter's morning before inglorious death.

One other thing observe, that underlying Gideon's desire to fill the office of priest there was a dull perception of the highest function of one man in relation to others. It appears to the common mind a great thing to rule, to direct secular affairs, to have the command of armies and the power of filling offices and conferring dignities; and no doubt to one who desires to serve his generation well, royalty, political power, even municipal office offer many excellent opportunities. But set kingship on this side, kingship concerned with the temporal and earthly, or at best humane aspects of life, and on the other side priesthood of the true kind which has to do with the spiritual, by which God is revealed to man and the holy ardour and divine aspirations of the human will are sustained — and there can be no question which is the more important. A clever strong man may be a ruler. It needs a good man, a pious man, a man of heavenly power and insight to be in any right sense a priest. I speak not of the kind of priest Gideon turned out, nor of a Jewish priest, nor of any who in modern times professes to be in that succession, but of one who really stands between God and men, bearing the sorrows of his kind, their trials, doubts, cries, and prayers on his heart and presenting them to God, interpreting to the weary and sad and troubled the messages of heaven. In this sense Christ is the one True Priest, the eternal

and only sufficient High Priest. And in this sense it is possible for every Christian to hold towards those less enlightened and less decided in their faith the priestly part.

Now in a dim way the priestly function presented itself to Gideon and allured him. Sufficient for it he was not, and his ephod became a snare. Neither could he grasp the wisdom of heaven nor understand the needs of men. In his hands the sacred art did not prosper, he became content with the appearance and the gain. It is so with many who take the name of priests. In truth, on one side the term and all it stands for must be confessed full of danger to him set apart and those who separate him. Here as pointedly as anywhere must it be affirmed, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." There must be a mastering sense of God's calling on the side of him who ministers, and on the side of the people recognition of a message, an example coming to them through this brother of theirs who speaks what he has received of the Holy Spirit, who offers a personal living word, a personal testimony. Here, be it called what it may, is priesthood after the pattern of Christ's, true and beneficent; and apart from this priesthood may too easily become, as many have affirmed, a horrible imposture and baleful lie. Christianity brings the whole to a point in every life. God's calling, spiritual, complete, comes to each soul in its place, and the holy oil is for every head. The father, mother, the employer and the workman, the surgeon, writer, lawyer — everywhere and in all posts, just as men and women are living out God's demand upon them — these are His priests, ministrants of the hearth and the shop, the factory and the office, by the cradle and the sick bed, wherever the multitudinous epic of life goes forward. Here is the common and withal the holiest calling and office. That one dwelling with God in righteousness and love introduce others into the sanctuary, declare as a thing he knows the will of the Eternal, uplift the feebleness of faith and revive the heart of love — this is the highest task on earth, the grandest of heaven.

Of such it may be said, "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people that ye should show forth the praises of Him Who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."

CHAPTER 15

ABIMELECH AND JOTHAM — ~~070829~~ JUDGES 8:29-9:57

THE history we are tracing moves from man to man; the personal influence of the hero is everything while it lasts and confusion follows on his death. Gideon appears as one of the most successful Hebrew judges in maintaining order. While he was there in Ophrah religion and government had a centre “and the country was in quietness forty years.” A man far from perfect but capable of mastery held the reins and gave forth judgment with an authority none could challenge. His burial in the family sepulchre in Ophrah is specially recorded, as if it had been a great national tribute to his heroic power and skilful administration.

The funeral over, discord began. A rightful ruler there was not. Among the claimants of power there was no man of power. Gideon left many sons, but not one of them could take his place. The confederation of cities half Hebrew, half Canaanite, with Shechem at their head, of which we have already heard, held in check while Gideon lived, now began to control the politics of the tribes. By using the influence of this league a usurper who had no title whatever to the confidence of the people succeeded in exalting himself.

The old town of Shechem situated in the beautiful valley between Ebal and Gerizim had long been a centre of Baal worship and of Canaanite intrigue, though nominally one of the cities of refuge and therefore specially sacred. Very likely the mixed population of this important town, jealous of the position gained by the hill village of Ophrah, were ready to receive with favour any proposals that seemed to offer them distinction. And when Abimelech, son of Gideon by a slave woman of their town, went among them with ambitious and crafty suggestions they were easily persuaded to help him. The desire for a king which Gideon had promptly set aside lingered in the minds of the people, and by means of it Abimelech was able to compass his personal ends. First, however, he had to discredit others who stood in his way. There at Ophrah were the sons and grandsons of Gideon, threescore and ten of them according to the tradition, who were supposed to be bent on lording it over the tribes. Was it a thing to be thought of that the land should have seventy kings? Surely one would be better, less of an incubus at least, more likely to do the ruling well. Men of

Shechem too would not be governed from Ophrah if they had any spirit. He, Abimelech, was their townsman, their bone and flesh. He confidently looked for their support.

We cannot tell how far there was reason for saying that the family of Gideon were aiming at an aristocracy. They may have had some vague purpose of the kind. The suggestion, at all events, was cunning and had its effect. The people of Shechem had stored considerable treasure in the sanctuary of Baal, and by public vote seventy pieces of silver were paid out of it to Abimelech. The money was at once used by him in hiring a band of men like himself, unscrupulous, ready for any desperate or bloody deed. With these he marched on Ophrah, and surprising his brothers in the house or palace of Jerub-baal speedily put out of his way their dangerous rivalry. With the exception of Jotham, who had observed the band approaching and concealed himself, the whole house of Gideon was dragged to execution. On one stone, perhaps the very rock on which the altar of Baal once stood, the threescore and nine were barbarously slain.

A villainous *coup d'etat* this. From Gideon overthrowing Baal and proclaiming Jehovah to Abimelech bringing up Baal again with hideous fratricide — it is a wretched turn of things. Gideon had to some extent prepared the way for a man far inferior to himself, as all do who are not utterly faithful to their light and calling; but he never imagined there could be so quick and shocking a revival of barbarism. Yet the ephod dealing, the polygamy, the immorality into which he lapsed were bound to come to fruit. The man who once was a pure Hebrew patriot begat a half-heathen son to undo his own work. As for the Shechemites, they knew quite well to what end they had voted those seventy pieces of silver; and the general opinion seems to have been that the town had its money's worth, a life for each piece and, to boot, a king reeking with blood and shame. Surely it was a well spent grant. Their confederation, their god had triumphed. They made Abimelech king by the oak of the pillar that was in Shechem.

It is the success of the adventurer we have here, that common event. Abimelech is the Oriental adventurer and uses the methods of another age than ours; yet we have our examples, and if they are less scandalous in some ways, if they are apart from bloodshed and savagery, they are still sufficiently trying to those who cherish the faith of divine justice and providence. How many have to see with amazement the adventurer triumph by means of seventy pieces of silver from the house of Baal or even from a holier treasury. He in a selfish and cruel game seems to have

speedy and complete success denied to the best and purest cause. Fighting for his own hand in wicked or contemptuous hardness and arrogant conceit, he finds support, applause, an open way. Being no prophet he has honour in his own town. He knows the art of the stealthy insinuation, the lying promise and the flattering murmur; he has skill to make the favour of one leading person a step to securing another. When a few important people have been hoodwinked, he too becomes important and "success" is assured.

The Bible, most entirely honest of books, frankly sets before us this adventurer, Abimelech, in the midst of the judges of Israel, as low a specimen of "success" as need be looked for; and we trace the well known means by which such a person is promoted. "His mother's brethren spake of him in the ears of all the men of Shechem." That there was little to say, that he was a man of no character mattered not the least. The thing was to create an impression so that Abimelech's scheme might be introduced and forced. So far he could intrigue and then, the first steps gained, he could mount. But there was in him none of the mental power that afterwards marked Jehu, none of the charm that survives with the name of Absalom. It was on jealousy, pride, ambition he played as the most jealous, proud, and ambitious; yet for three years the Hebrews of the league, blinded by the desire to have their nation like others, suffered him to bear the name of king.

And by this sovereignty the Israelites who acknowledged it were doubly and trebly compromised. Not only did they accept a man without a record, they believed in one who was an enemy to his country's religion, one therefore quite ready to trample upon its liberty. This is really the beginning of a worse oppression than that of Midian or of Jabin. It shows on the part of Hebrews generally as well as those who tamely submitted to Abimelech's lordship a most abject state of mind. After the bloody work at Ophrah the tribes should have rejected the fratricide with loathing and risen like one man to suppress him. If the Baal worshippers of Shechem would make him king there ought to have been a cause of war against them in which every good man and true should have taken the field. We look in vain for any such opposition to the usurper. Now that he is crowned, Manasseh, Ephraim, and the North regard him complacently. It is the world all over. How can we wonder at this when we know with what acclamations kings scarcely more reputable than he have been greeted in modern times? Crowds gather and shout, fires of welcome blaze; there is

joy as if the millennium had come. It is a king crowned, restored, his country's head, defender of the faith. Vain is the hope, pathetic the joy.

There is no man of spirit to oppose Abimelech in the field. The duped nation must drink its cup of misrule and blood. But one appears of keen wit, apt and trenchant in speech. At least the tribes shall hear what one sound mind thinks of this coronation. Jotham, as we saw, escaped the slaughter at Ophrah. In the rear of the murderer he has crossed the hills and he will now utter his warning, whether men hear or whether they forbear. There is a crowd assembled for worship or deliberation at the oak of the pillar. Suddenly a voice is heard ringing clearly out between hill and hill, and the people looking up recognise Jotham, who from a spur of rock on the side of Gerizim demands their audience. "Hearken unto me," he cries, "ye men of Shechem, that God may hearken unto you." Then in his parable of the olive, the fig tree, the vine, and the bramble, he pronounces judgment and prophecy. The bramble is exalted to be king, but on these terms, that the trees come and put their trust under its shadow; "but if not, then let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon."

It is a piece of satire of the first order, brief, stinging, true. The craving for a king is lashed and then the wonderful choice of a ruler. Jotham speaks as an anarchist, one might say, but with God understood as the centre of law and order. It is a vision of the Theocracy, taking shape from a keen and original mind. He figures men as trees growing independently, dutifully. And do trees need a king? Are they not set in their natural freedom, each to yield fruit as best it can after its kind? Men of Shechem, Hebrews all, if they will only attend to their proper duties and do quiet work as God wills, appear to Jotham to need a king no more than the trees. Under the benign course of nature, sunshine and rain, wind and dew, the trees have all the restraint they need, all the liberty that is good for them. So men under the providence of God, adoring and obeying Him, have the best control, the only needful control, and with it liberty. Are they not fools then to go about seeking a tyrant to rule them, they who should be as cedars of Lebanon, willows by the watercourses, they who are made for simple freedom and spontaneous duty? It is something new in Israel, this keen intellectualising; but the fable, pointed as it is, teaches nothing for the occasion. Jotham is a man full of wit and of intelligence, but he has no practicable scheme of government, nothing definite to oppose to the mistake of the horn'. He is all for the ideal, but the time and the people are unripe for the ideal. We see the same contrast in our own day; both in politics and the church the incisive critic discrediting subordination altogether fails to secure his age.

Men are not trees. They are made to obey and trust. A hero or one who seems a hero is ever welcome, and he who skilfully imitates the roar of the lion may easily have a following, while Jotham, intensely sincere, highly gifted, a true-sighted man, finds none to mind him.

Again the fable is directed against Abimelech. What was this man to whom Shechem had sworn fealty? An olive, a fig tree, fruitful and therefore to be sought after? Was he a vine capable of rising on popular support to useful and honourable service? Not he. It was the bramble they had chosen, the poor grovelling jagged thorn bush that tears the flesh, whose end is to feed the fire of the oven. Who ever heard of a good or heroic deed Abimelech had done? He was simply a contemptible upstart, without moral principle, as ready to wound as to flatter, and they who chose him for king would too soon find their error. Now that he had done something, what was it? There were Israelites among the crowd that shouted in his honour. Had they already forgotten the services of Gideon so completely as to fall down before a wretch red handed from the murder of their hero's sons? Such a beginning showed the character of the man they trusted, and the same fire which had issued from the bramble at Ophrah would flame out upon themselves. This was but the beginning; soon there would be war to the knife between Abimelech and Shechem.

We find instruction in the parable by regarding the answers put into the mouth of this tree and that, when they are invited to wave to and fro over the others. There are honours which are dearly purchased, high positions which cannot be assumed without renouncing the true end and fruition of life. One, for example, who is quietly and with increasing efficiency doing his part in a sphere to which he is adapted must set aside the gains of long discipline if he is to become a social leader. He can do good where he is. Not so certain is it that he will be able to serve his fellows well in public office. It is one thing to enjoy the deference paid to a leader while the first enthusiasm on his behalf continues, but it is quite another thing to satisfy all the demands made as years go on and new needs arise. When anyone is invited to take a position of authority he is bound to consider carefully his own aptitudes. He needs also to consider those who are to be subjects or constituents and make sure that they are of the kind his rule will fit. The olive looks at the cedar and the terebinth and the palm. Will they admit his sovereignty by and by though now they vote for it? Men are taken with the candidate who makes a good impression by emphasising what will please and suppressing opinions that may provoke dissent. When they know him,

how will it be? When criticism begins, will the olive not be despised for its gnarled stem, its crooked branches and dusky foliage?

The fable does not make the refusal of olive and fig tree and vine rest on the comfort they enjoy in the humbler place. That would be a mean and dishonourable reason for refusing to serve. Men who decline public office because they love an easy life find here no countenance. It is for the sake of its fatness, the oil it yields, grateful to God and man in sacrifice and anointing, that the olive tree declines. The fig tree has its sweetness and the vine its grapes to yield. And so men despising self-indulgence and comfort may be justified in putting aside a call to office. The fruit of personal character developed in humble unobtrusive natural life is seen to be better than the more showy clusters forced by public demands. Yet, on the other hand, if one will not leave his books, another his scientific hobbies, a third his fireside, a fourth his manufactory, in order to take his place among the magistrates of a city or the legislators of a land the danger of bramble supremacy is near. Next a wretched Abimelech will appear; and what can be done but set him on high and put the reins in his hand? Unquestionably the claims of church or country deserve most careful weighing, and even if there is a risk that character may lose its tender bloom the sacrifice must be made in obedience to an urgent call. For a time, at least, the need of society at large must rule the loyal life.

The fable of Jotham, in so far as it flings sarcasm at the persons who desire eminence for the sake of it and not for the good they will be able to do, is an example of that wisdom which is as unpopular now as ever it has been in human history, and the moral needs every day to be kept full in view. It is desire for distinction and power, the opportunity of waving to and fro over the trees, the right to use this handle and that to their names that will be found to make many eager, not the distinct wish to accomplish something which the times and the country need. Those who solicit public office are far too often selfish, not self-denying, and even in the church there is much vain ambition. But people will have it so. The crowd follows him who is eager for the suffrages of the crowd and showers flattery and promises as he goes. Men are lifted into places they cannot fill, and after keeping their seats unsteadily for a time they have to disappear into ignominy.

We pass here, however, beyond the meaning Jotham desired to convey, for, as we have seen, he would have justified every one in refusing to reign. And certainly if society could be held together and guided without the exaltation of one over another, by the fidelity of each to his own task and

brotherly feeling between man and man, there would be a far better state of things. But while the fable expounds a God-impelled anarchy, the ideal state of mankind, our modern schemes, omitting God, repudiating the least notion of a supernatural fount of life, turn upon themselves in hopeless confusion. When the divine law rules every life we shall not need organised governments; until then entire freedom in the world is but a name for unchaining every lust that degrades and darkens the life of man. Far away, as a hope of the redeemed and Christ-led race, there shines the ideal Theocracy revealed to the greater minds of the Hebrew people, often restated, never realised. But at present men need a visible centre of authority. There must be administrators and executors of law, there must be government and legislation till Christ reigns in every heart. The movement which resulted in Abimelech's sovereignty was the blundering start in a series of experiments the Hebrew tribes were bound to make, as other nations had to make them. We are still engaged in the search for a right system of social order, and while rearers of God acknowledge the ideal towards which they labour, they must endeavour to secure by personal toil and devotion, by unwearying interest in affairs the most effective form of liberal yet firm government.

Abimelech maintained himself in power for three years, no doubt amid growing dissatisfaction. Then came the outburst which Jotham had predicted. An evil spirit, really present from the first, rose between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. The bramble began to tear themselves, a thing they were not prepared to endure. Once rooted, however, it was not easily got rid of. One who knows the evil arts of betrayal is quick to suspect treachery, the false person knows the ways of the false and how to fight them with their own weapons. A man of high character may be made powerless by the disclosure of some true words he has spoken; but when Shechem would be rid of Abimelech it has to employ brigands and organise robbery. "They set liars in wait for him in the mountains who robbed all that came along that way," the merchants no doubt to whom Abimelech had given a safe conduct. Shechem in fact became the headquarters of a band of highwaymen, whose crimes were condoned or even approved in the hope that one day the despot would be taken and an end put to his misrule.

It may appear strange that our attention is directed to these vulgar incidents, as they may be called, which were taking place in and about Shechem. Why has the historian not chosen to tell us of other regions where some fear of God survived and guided the lives of men, instead of

giving in detail the intrigues and treacheries of Abimelech and his rebellious subjects? Would we not much rather hear of the sanctuary and the worship, of the tribe of Judah and its development, of men and women who in the obscurity of private life were maintaining the true faith and serving God in sincerity? The answer must be partly that the contents of the history are determined by the traditions which survived when it was compiled. Doings like these at Shechem keep their place in the memory of men not because they are important but because they impress themselves on popular feeling. This was the beginning of the experiments which finally in Samuel's time issued in the kingship of Saul, and although Abimelech was, properly speaking, not a Hebrew and certainly was no worshipper of Jehovah, yet the fact that he was king for a time gave importance to everything about him. Hence we have the full account of his rise and fall.

And yet the narrative before us has its value from the religious point of view. It shows the disastrous result of that coalition with idolaters into which the Hebrews about Shechem entered, it illustrates the danger of copartnery with the worldly on worldly terms. The confederacy of which Shechem was the centre is a type of many in which people who should be guided always by religion bind themselves for business or political ends with those who have no fear of God before their eyes. Constantly it happens in such cases that the interests of the commercial enterprise or of the party are considered before the law of righteousness. The business affair must be made to succeed at all hazards. Christian people as partners of companies are committed to schemes which imply Sabbath work, sharp practices in buying and selling, hollow promises in prospectuses and advertisements, grinding of the faces of the poor, miserable squabbles about wages that should never occur. In politics the like is frequently seen. Things are done against the true instincts of many members of a party; but they, for the sake of the party, must be silent or even take their places on platforms and write in periodicals defending what in their souls and consciences they know to be wrong. The modern Baal-Berith is a tyrannical god, ruins the morals of many a worshipper and destroys the peace of many a circle. Perhaps Christian people will by and by become careful in regard to the schemes they join and the zeal with which they fling themselves into party strife. It is high time they did. Even distinguished and pious leaders are unsafe guides when popular cries have to be gratified; and if the principles of Christianity are set aside by a government every Christian church and every Christian voice should protest, come of parties what may. Or rather, the party of Christ, which is always in the van, ought to have our complete allegiance. Conservatism is sometimes right.

Liberalism is sometimes right. But to bow down to any Baal of the League is a shameful thing for a professed servant of the King of kings.

Against Abimelech the adventurer there arose another of the same stamp, Gaul son of Ebed, that is the *Abhorred*, son of a slave. In him the men of Shechem put their confidence, such as it was. At the festival of vintage there was a demonstration of a truly barbarous sort. High carousal was held in the temple of Baal. There were loud curses of Abimelech and Gaul made a speech. His argument was that this Abimelech, though his mother belonged to Shechem, was yet also the son of Baal's adversary, far too much of a Hebrew to govern Canaanites and good servants of Baal. Shechemites should have a true Shechemite to rule them. Would to Baal, he cried, this people were under my hand, then would I remove Abimelech. His speech, no doubt, was received with great applause, and there and then he challenged the absent king.

Zebul, prefect of the city, who was present, heard all this with anger. He was of Abimelech's party still and immediately informed his chief, who lost no time in marching on Shechem to suppress the revolt. According to a common plan of warfare he divided his troops into four companies and in the early morning these crept towards the city, one by a track across the mountains, another down the valley from the west, the third by way of the Diviners' Oak, the fourth perhaps marching from the plain of Mamre by way of Jacob's well. The first engagement drove the Shechemites into their city, and on the following day the place was taken, sacked, and destroyed. Some distance from Shechem, probably up the valley to the west, stood a tower or sanctuary of Baal around which a considerable village had gathered. The people there seeing the fate of the lower town, betook themselves to the tower and shut themselves up within it. But Abimelech ordered his men to provide themselves with branches of trees, which were piled against the door of the temple and set on fire, and all within were smothered or burned to the number of a thousand.

At Thebez, another of the confederate cities, the pretender met his death. In the siege of the tower which stood within the walls of Thebez the horrible expedient of burning was again attempted. Abimelech, directing the operations, had pressed close to the door when a woman cast an upper millstone from the parapet with so true an aim as to break his skull. So ended the first experiment in the direction of monarchy; so also God requited the wickedness of Abimelech.

One turns from these scenes of bloodshed and cruelty with loathing. Yet they show what human nature is, and how human history would shape itself apart from the faith and obedience of God. We are met by obvious warnings; but so often does the evidence of divine judgment seem to fail, so often do the wicked prosper, that it is from another source than observation of the order of things in this world we must obtain the necessary impulse to higher life. It is only as we wait on the guidance and obey the impulses of the Spirit of God that we shall move towards the justice and brotherhood of a better age. And those who have received the light and found the will of the Spirit must not slacken their efforts on behalf of religion. Gideon did good service in his day, yet failing in faithfulness he left the nation scarcely more earnest, his own family scarcely instructed. Let us not think that religion can take care of itself. Heavenly justice and truth are committed to us. The Christ life, generous, pure, holy, must be commended by us if it is to rule the world. The persuasion that mankind is to be saved in and by the earthly survives, and against that most obstinate of all delusions we are to stand in constant resolute protest, counting every needful sacrifice our simple duty, our highest glory. The task of the faithful is no easier today than it was a thousand years ago. Men and women can be treacherous still with heathen cruelty and falseness; they can be vile still with heathen vileness, though wearing the air of the highest civilisation. If ever the people of God had a work to do in the world they have it now.

CHAPTER 16

GILEAD AND ITS CHIEF — ^{<071001>}JUDGES 10:1-11:11

THE scene of the history shifts now to the east of Jordan, and we learn first of the influence which the region called Gilead was coming to have in Hebrew development from the brief notice of a chief named Jair, who held the position of judge for twenty-two years. Tola, a man of Issachar, succeeded Abimelech, and Jair followed Tola. In the Book of Numbers we are informed that the children of Machir son of Manasseh went to Gilead and took it and dispossessed the Amorites which were therein; and Moses gave Gilead unto Machir the son of Manasseh. It is added that Jair, the son or descendant of Manasseh, went and took the towns of Gilead and called them Havvoth-jair; and in this statement the Book of Numbers anticipates the history of the judges.

Gilead is described by modern travellers as one of the most varied districts of Palestine. The region is mountainous and its peaks rise to three and even four thousand feet above the trough of the Jordan. The southern part is beautiful and fertile, watered by the Jabbok and other streams that flow westward from the hills. "The valleys green Kith corn, the streams fringed with oleander, the magnificent screens of yellow-green and russet foliage which cover the steep slopes present a scene of quiet beauty, of chequered light and shade of uneastern aspect which makes Mount Gilead a veritable land of promise." "No one," says another writer, "can fairly judge of Israel's heritage who has not seen the exuberance of Gilead as well as the hard rocks of Judaea, which only yield their abundance to reward constant toil and care." In Gilead the rivers flow in summer as well as in winter, and they are filled with fishes and fresh-water shells. While in Western Palestine the soil is insufficient now to support a large population, beyond Jordan improved cultivation alone is needed to make the whole district a garden.

To the north and east of Gilead lie Bashan and that extraordinary volcanic region called the Argob or the Lejah, where the Havvoth-jair or towns of Jair were situated. The traveller who approaches this singular district from the north sees it rising abruptly from the plain, the edge of it like a rampart about twenty feet high. It is of a rude oval shape, some twenty miles long from north to south, and fifteen in breadth, and is simply a mass of dark jagged rocks, with clefts between in which were built not a few cities and

villages. The whole of this Argob or Stony Land, Jephthah's land of Tob, is a natural fortification, a sanctuary open only to those who have the secret of the perilous paths that wind along savage cliff and deep defile. One who established himself here might soon acquire the fame and authority of a chief, and Jair, acknowledged by the Manassites as their judge, extended his power and influence among the Gadites and Reubenites farther south.

But plenty of corn and wine and oil and the advantage of a natural fortress which might have been held against any foe did not avail the Hebrews when they were corrupted by idolatry. In the land of Gilead and Bashan they became a hardy and vigorous race, and yet when they gave themselves up to the influence of the Syrians, Sidonians, Ammonites, and Moabites, forsaking the Lord and serving the gods of these peoples, disaster overtook them. The Ammonites were ever on the watch, and now, stronger than for centuries in consequence of the defeat of Midian and Amalek by Gideon, they fell on the Hebrews of the east, subdued them and even crossed Jordan and fought with the southern tribes, so that Israel was sore distressed.

We have found reason to suppose that during the many turmoils of the north the tribes of Judah and Simeon and to some extent Ephraim were pleased to dwell secure in their own domains, giving little help to their kinsfolk. Deborah and Barak got no troops from the south, and it was with a grudge Ephraim joined in the pursuit of Midian. Now the time has come for the harvest of selfish content. Supposing the people of Judah to have been specially engaged with religion and the arranging of worship that did not justify their neglect of the political troubles of the north. It was a poor religion then, as it is a poor religion now, that could exist apart from national well being and patriotic duty. Brotherhood must be realised in the nation as well as in the church, and piety must fulfil itself through patriotism as well as in other ways.

No doubt the duties we owe to each other and to the nation of which we form a part are imposed by natural conditions which have arisen in the course of history, and some may think that the natural should give way to the spiritual. They may see the interests of a kingdom of this world as actually opposed to the interests of the kingdom of God. The apostles of Christ, however, did not set the human and divine in contrast, as if God in His providence had nothing to do with the making of a nation. "The powers that be are ordained of God," says St. Paul in writing to the Romans; and again in his First Epistle to Timothy, "I exhort that

supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings be made for all men: for kings and all that are in high place, that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity.” To the same effect St. Peter says, “Be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.” Natural and secular enough were the authorities to which submission was thus enjoined. The policy of Rome was of the earth earthy. The wars it waged, the intrigues that went on for power savoured of the most carnal ambition. Yet as members of the commonwealth Christians were to submit to the Roman magistrates and intercede with God on their behalf, observing closely and intelligently all that went on, taking due part in affairs. No room was to be given for the notion that the Christian society meant a new political centre. In our own times there is a duty which many never understand, or which they easily imagine is being fulfilled for them. Let religious people be assured that generous and intelligent patriotism is demanded of them and attention to the political business of the time. Those who are careless will find, as did the people of Judah, that in neglecting the purity of government and turning a deaf ear to cries for justice, they are exposing their country to disaster and their religion to reproach.

We are told that the Israelites of Gilead worshipped the gods of the Phoenicians and Syrians, of the Moabites and of the Ammonites. Whatever religious rites took their fancy they were ready to adopt. This will be to their credit in some quarters as a mark of openness of mind, intelligence, and taste. They were not bigoted; other men’s ways in religion and civilisation were not rejected as beneath their regard. The argument is too familiar to be traced more fully. Briefly it may be said that if catholicity could save a race Israel should rarely have been in trouble, and certainly not at this time. One name by which the Hebrews knew God was *El* or *Elohim*. When they found among the gods of the Sidonians one called El, the careless minded supposed that there could be no harm in joining in his worship. Then came the notion that the other divinities of the Phoenician Pantheon, such as Melcarth, Dagon, Derketo, might be adored as well. Very likely they found zeal and excitement in the alien religious gatherings which their own had lost. So they slipped into practical heathenism.

And the process goes on among ourselves. Through the principles that culture means artistic freedom and that worship is a form of art we arrive at taste or liking as the chief test. Intensity of feeling is craved and religion must satisfy that or be despised. It is the very error that led Hebrews to the feasts of Astarte and Adonis, and whither it tends we can see in the old history. Turning from the strong earnest gospel which grasps intellect and

will to shows and ceremonies that please the eye, or even to music refined and devotional that stirs and thrills the feelings, we decline from the reality of religion. Moreover a serious danger threatens us in the far too common teaching which makes little of truth, everything of charity. Christ was most charitable, but it is through the knowledge and practice of truth He offers freedom. He is our King by His witness bearing not to charity but to truth. Those who are anxious to keep us from bigotry and tell us that meekness, gentleness, and love are more than doctrine mislead the mind of the ago. Truth in regard to God and His covenant is the only foundation on which life can be securely built, and without right thinking there cannot be right living. A man may be amiable, humble, patient, and kind though he has no doctrinal belief and his religion is of the purely emotional sort; but it is the truth believed by previous generations, fought and suffered for by stronger men, not his own gratification of taste, that keeps him in the right way. And when the influence of that truth decays there will remain no anchorage, neither compass nor chart for the voyage. He will be like a wave of the sea driven of the wind and tossed.

Again, the religious so far as they have wisdom and strength are required to be pioneers, which they can never be in following fancy or taste, Here nothing but strenuous thought, patient faithful obedience can avail. Hebrew history is the story of a pioneer people and every lapse from fidelity was serious, the future of humanity being at stake. Each Christian society and believer has work of the same kind not less important, and failures due to intellectual sloth and moral levity are as dishonourable as they are hurtful to the human race. Some of our heretics now are more serious than Christians, and they give thought and will more earnestly to the opinions they try to propagate. While the professed servants of Christ, who should be marching in the van, are amusing themselves with the accessories of religion, the resolute socialist or nihilist, reasoning and speaking with the heat of conviction, leads the masses where he will.

The Ammonite oppression made the Hebrews feel keenly the uselessness of heathenism. Baal and Melcarth had been thought of as real divinities, exercising power in some region or other of earth or heaven, and Israel's had been an easy backsliding. Idolatry did not appear as darkness to people who had never been fully in the light. But when trouble came and help was sorely needed they began to see that the Baalim were nothing. What could these idols do for men oppressed and at their wits' end? Religion was of no avail unless it brought an assurance of One Whose strong hand could reach from land to land, Whose grace and favour could revive sad and troubled

souls. Heathenism was found utterly barren, and Israel turned to Jehovah the God of its fathers. "We have sinned against Thee even because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baalim."

Those who now fall away from faith are in worse case by far than Israel. They have no thought of a real power that can befriend them. It is to mere abstractions they have given the Divine name. In sin and sorrow alike they remain with ideas only, with bare terms of speculation in which there is no life, no strength, no hope for the moral nature. They are men and have to live; but with the living God they have entirely broken. In trouble they can only call on the Abyss or the Immensities, and there is no way of repentance though they seek it carefully with tears. At heart therefore they are pessimists without resource. Sadness deep and deadly ever waits upon such unbelief, and our religion today suffers from gloom because it is infected by the uncertainties and denials of an agnosticism at once positive and confused.

Another paganism, that of gathering and doing in the world sphere, is constantly beside us, drawing multitudes from fidelity to Christ as Baal worship drew Israel from Jehovah, and it is equally barren in the sharp experiences of humanity. Earthly things venerated in the ardour of business and the pursuit of social distinction appear as impressive realities only while the soul sleeps. Let it be aroused by some overturn of the usual, one of those floods that sweep suddenly down on the cities which fill the valley of life, and there is a quick pathetic confession of the truth. The soul needs help now, and its help must come from the Eternal Spirit. We must have done with mere saying of prayers and begin to pray. We must find access, if access is to be had, to the secret place of the Most High on Whose mercy we depend to redeem us from bondage and fear. Sad therefore is it for those who having never learned to seek the throne of divine succour are swept by the wild deluge from their temples and their gods. It is a cry of despair they raise amid the swelling torrent. You who now by the sacred oracles and the mediation of Christ can come into the fellowship of eternal life, be earnest and eager in the cultivation of your faith. The true religion of God which avails the soul in its extremity is not to be had in a moment, when suddenly its help is needed. That confidence which has been established in the mind by serious thought, by the habit of prayer and reliance on divine wisdom can alone bring help when the foundations of the earthly are destroyed.

To Israel troubled and contrite came as on previous occasions a prophetic message; and it was spoken by one of those incisive ironic preachers who were born from time to time among this strangely heathen, strangely believing people. It is in terms of earnest remonstrance he speaks, at first almost going the length of declaring that there is no hope for the rebellious and ungrateful tribes. They found it an easy thing to turn from their Divine King to the gods they chose to worship. Now they perhaps expect as easy a recovery of His favour. But healing must begin with deeper wounding, and salvation with much keener anxiety. This prophet knows the need for utter seriousness of soul. As he loves and yearns over his country folk he must so deal with them; it is God's way, the only way to save. Most irrationally, against all sound principles of judgment they had abandoned the Living One, the Eternal to worship hideous idols like Moloch and Dagon. It was wicked because it was wilfully stupid and perverse. And Jehovah says, "I will save you no more, Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them save you in the day of your distress." The rebuke is stinging. The preacher makes the people feel the wretched insufficiency of their hope in the false, and the great strong pressure upon them of the Almighty, Whom, even in neglect, they cannot escape. We are pointed forward to the terrible pathos of Jeremiah: — "Who shall have pity upon thee, O Jerusalem? or who shall bemoan thee? or who shall turn aside to ask of thy welfare? Thou hast rejected me, saith the Lord, thou art gone backward: therefore have I stretched out my hand against thee, and destroyed thee: I am weary with repenting."

And notice to what state of mind the Hebrews were brought. Renewing their confession they said, "Do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto Thee." They would be content to suffer now at the hand of God whatever He chose to inflict on them. They themselves would have exacted heavy tribute of a subject people that had rebelled and came suing for pardon. Perhaps they would have slain every tenth man. Jehovah might appoint retribution of the same kind; He might afflict them with pestilence; He might require them to offer a multitude of sacrifices. Men who traffic with idolatry and adopt gross notions of revengeful gods are certain to carry back with them when they return to the better faith many of the false ideas they have gathered. And it is just possible that a demand for human sacrifices was at this time attributed to God, the general feeling that they might be necessary connecting itself with Jephthah's vow.

It is idle to suppose that Israelites who persistently lapsed into paganism could at any time, because they repented, find the spiritual thoughts they

had lost. True those thoughts were at the heart of the national life, there always even when least felt. But thousands of Hebrews even in a generation of reviving faith died with but a faint and shadowy personal understanding of Jehovah. Everything in the Book of Judges goes to show that the mass of the people were nearer the level of their neighbours the Moabites and Ammonites than the piety of the Psalms. A remarkable ebb and flow are observable in the history of the race. Look at some facts and there seems to be decline. Samson is below Gideon, and Gideon below Deborah; no man of leading until Isaiah can be named with Moses. Yet ever and anon there are prophetic calls and voices out of a spiritual region into which the people as a whole do not enter, voices to which they listen only when distressed and overborne. Worldliness increases, for the world opens to the Hebrew; but it often disappoints, and still there are some to whom the heavenly secret is told. The race as a whole is not becoming more devout and holy, but the few are gaining a clearer vision as one experience after another is recorded. The antithesis is the same we see in the Christian centuries. Is the multitude more pious now than in the ago when a king had to do penance for rash words spoken against an ecclesiastic? Are the churches less worldly than they were a hundred years ago? Scarcely may we affirm it. Yet there never was an age so rich as ours in the finest spirituality, the noblest Christian thought. Our van presses up to the Simplon height and is in constant touch with those who follow; but the rear is still chaffering and idling in the streets of Milan. It is in truth always by the fidelity of the remnant that humanity is saved for God.

We cannot say that when Israel repented it was in the love of holiness so much as in the desire for liberty. The ways of the heathen were followed readily, but the supremacy of the heathen was ever abominable to the vigorous Israelite. By this national spirit however God could find the tribes, and a special feature of the deliverance from Ammon is marked where we read: "The people, the princes of Gilead said one to the other, What man is he that will begin to fight against the children of Ammon? he shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." Looking around for the fit leader they found Jephthah and agreed to invite him.

Now this shows distinct progress in the growth of the nation. There is, if nothing more, a growth in practical power. Abimelech had thrust himself upon the men of Shechem. Jephthah is chosen apart from any ambition of his own. The movement which made him judge arose out of the consciousness of the Gileadites that they could act for themselves and were bound to act for themselves. Providence indicated the chief, but they had to

be instruments of providence in making him chief. The vigour and robust intelligence of the men of Eastern Palestine come out here. They lead in the direction of true national life. While on the west of Jordan there is a fatalistic disposition, these men move. Gilead, the separated country, with the still ruder Bashan behind it and the Argob a resort of outlaws, is beneath some other regions in manners and in thought, but ahead of them in point of energy. We need not look for refinement, but we shall see power; and the chosen leader, while he is something of the barbarian, will be a man to leave his mark on history.

At the start we are not prepossessed in favour of Jephthah. There is some confusion in the narrative which has led to the supposition that he was a foundling of the clan. But taking Gilead as the actual name of his father, he appears as the son of a harlot, brought up in the paternal home and banished from it when there were legitimate sons able to contend with him. We get thus a brief glance at a certain rough standard of morals and see that even polygamy made sharp exclusions. Jephthah, cast out, betakes himself to the land of Tob and getting about him a band of vain fellows or freebooter, becomes the Robin Hood or Rob Roy of his time. There are natural suspicions of a man who takes to a life of this kind, and yet the progress of events shows that though Jephthah was a sort of outlaw his character as well as his courage must have commended him. He and his men might occasionally seize for their own use the cattle and corn of Israelites when they were hard pressed for food. But it was generally against the Ammonites and other enemies their raids were directed, and the modern instances already cited show that no little magnanimity and even patriotism may go along with a life of lawless adventure. If this robber chief, as some might call him, now and again levied contributions from a wealthy flock master, the poorer Hebrews were no doubt indebted to him for timely help when bands of Ammonites swept through the land. Something of this we must read into the narrative, otherwise the elders of Gilead would not so unanimously and urgently have invited him to become their head.

Jephthah was not at first disposed to believe in the good faith of those who gave him the invitation. Among the heads of households who came he saw his own brothers who had driven him to the hills. He must have more than suspected that they only wished to make use of him in their emergency and, the fighting over, would set him aside. He therefore required an oath of the men that they would really accept him as chief and obey him. That given, he assumed the command.

And here the religious character of the man begins to appear. At Mizpah on the verge of the wilderness where the Israelites, driven northward by the victories of Ammon, had their camp there stood an ancient cairn or heap of stones which preserved the tradition of a sacred covenant and still retained the savour of sanctity. There it was that Jacob, fleeing from Padanaram on his way back to Canaan, was overtaken by Laban, and there raising the Cairn of Witness they swore in the sight of Jehovah to be faithful to each other. The belief still lingered that the old monument was a place of meeting between man and God. To it Jephthah repaired at this new point in his life. No more an adventurer, no more an outlaw, but the chosen leader of eastern Israel, "he spake all his words before Jehovah in Mizpah." He had his life to review there, and that could not be done without serious thought. He had a new and strenuous future opened to him. Jephthah the outcast, the unnamed, was to be leader in a tremendous national struggle. The bold Gileadite feels the burden of the task. He has to question himself, to think of Jehovah. Hitherto he has been doing his own business and to that he has felt quite equal; now with large responsibility comes a sense of need. For a fight with society he has been strong enough; but can he be sure of himself as Gods man, fighting against Ammon? Not a few words but many would he have to utter as on the hilltop in the silence he lifted up his soul to God and girt himself in holy resolution, as a father and a Hebrew, to do his duty in the day of battle. Thus we pass from doubt of Jephthah to the hope that the banished man, the freebooter, will yet prove to be an Israelite indeed, of sterling character, whose religion, very rude perhaps, has a deep strain of reality and power. Jephthah at the cairn of Mizpah lifting up his hands in solemn invocation of the God of Jacob reminds us that there are great traditions of the past of our nation and of our most holy faith to which we are bound to be true, that there is a God, our witness and our judge, in Whose strength alone we can live and do nobly. For the service of humanity and the maintenance of faith we need to be in close touch with the brave and good of other days and in the story of their lives find quickening, for our own. Along the same line and succession we are to bear our testimony, and no link of connection with the Divine Power is to be missed which the history of the men of faith supplies. Yet as our personal Helper especially we must know God. Hearing His call to ourselves we must lift the standard and go forth to the battle of life. Who can serve his family and friends, who can advance the well being of the world, unless he has entered into that covenant with the Living God which raises mortal insufficiency to power and makes weak and ignorant men instruments of a divine redemption?

CHAPTER 17

THE TERRIBLE VOW — ^{<071112>}JUDGES 11:12-40

AT every stage of their history the Hebrews were capable of producing men of passionate religiousness. And this appears as a distinction of the group of nations to which they belong. The Arab of the present time has the same quality. He can be excited to a holy war in which thousands perish. With the battle cry of Allah and his Prophet he forgets fear. He presents a different mingling of character from the Saxon, — turbulence and reverence, sometimes apart, then blending — magnanimity and a tremendous want of magnanimity; he is fierce and generous, now rising to vivid faith, then breaking into earthly passion. We have seen the type in Deborah. David is the same and Elijah; and Jephthah is the Gileadite, the border Arab. In each of these there is quick leaping at life and beneath hot impulse a strain of brooding thought with moments of intense inward trouble. As we follow the history we must remember the kind of man it presents to us. There is humanity as it is in every race, daring in effort, tender in affection, struggling with ignorance yet thoughtful of God and duty, triumphing here, defeated there. And there is the Syrian with the heat of the sun in his blood and the shadow of Moloch on his heart, a son of the rude hills and of barbaric times, yet with a dignity, a sense of justice, a keen upward look, the Israelite never lost in the outlaw.

So soon as Jephthah begins to act for his people, marks of a strong character are seen. He is no ordinary leader, not the mere fighter the elders of Gilead may have taken him to be. His first act is to send messengers to the king of Ammon saying, What hast thou to do with me that thou art come to fight against my land? He is a chief who desires to avert bloodshed — a new figure in the history.

Natural in those times was the appeal to arms, so natural, so customary that we must not lightly pass this trait in the character of the Gileadite judge. If we compare his policy with that of Gideon or Barak we see of course that he had different circumstances to deal with. Between Jordan and the Mediterranean the Israelites required the whole of the land in order to establish a free nationality. There was no room for Canaanite or Midianite rule side by side with their own. The dominance of Israel had to be complete and undisturbed. Hence there was no alternative to war when

Jabin or Zebah and Zalmunna attacked the tribes. Might had to be invoked on behalf of right. On the other side Jordan the position was different. Away towards the desert behind the mountains of Bashan the Ammonites might find pasture for their flocks, and Moab had its territory on the slopes of the lower Jordan and the Dead Sea. It was not necessary to crush Ammon in order to give Manasseh, Gad, and Reuben space enough and to spare. Yet there was a rare quality of judgment shown by the man who, although called to lead in war, began with negotiation and aimed at a peaceful settlement. No doubt there was danger that the Ammonites might unite with Midian or Moab against Israel. But Jephthah hazards such a coalition. He knows the bitterness kindled by strife. He desires that Ammon, a kindred people, shall be won over to friendliness with Israel, henceforth to be an ally instead of a foe.

Now in one aspect this may appear an error in policy, and the Hebrew chief will seem especially to blame when he makes the admission that the Ammonites hold their land from Chemosh their god. Jephthah has no sense of Israel's mission to the world, no wish to convert Ammon to a higher faith, nor does Jehovah appear to him as sole King, sole object of human worship. Yet, on the other hand, if the Hebrews were to fight idolatry everywhere it is plain their swords would never have been sheathed. Phoenicia was close beside; Aram was not far away; northward the Hittites maintained their elaborate ritual. A line had to be drawn somewhere and, on the whole, we cannot but regard Jephthah as an enlightened and humane chief who wished to stir against his people and his God no hostility that could possibly be avoided. Why should not Israel conquer Ammon by justice and magnanimity, by showing the higher principles which the true religion taught? He began at all events by endeavouring to stay the quarrel, and the attempt was wise.

The king of Ammon refused Jephthah's offer to negotiate. He claimed the land bounded by the Arnon, the Jabbok, and Jordan as his own and demanded that it should be peaceably given up to him. In reply Jephthah denied the claim. It was the Amorites, he said, who originally held that part of Syria. Sihon who was defeated in the time of Moses was not an Ammonite king, but chief of the Amorites. Israel had by conquest obtained the district in dispute, and Ammon must give place.

The full account given of these messages sent by Jephthah shows a strong desire on the part of the narrator to vindicate Israel from any charge of unnecessary warfare. And it is very important that this should be

understood, for the inspiration of the historian is involved. We know of nations that in sheer lust of conquest have attacked tribes whose land they did not need, and we have read histories in which wars unprovoked and cruel have been glorified. In after times the Hebrew kings brought trouble and disaster on themselves by their ambition. It would have been well if David and Solomon had followed a policy like Jephthah's rather than attempted to rival Assyria and Egypt. We see an error rather than a cause of boasting when David put garrisons in Syria of Damascus: strife was thereby provoked which issued in many a sanguinary war. The Hebrews should never have earned the character of an aggressive and ambitious people that required to be kept in check by the kingdoms around. To this nation, a worldly nation on the whole, was committed a spiritual inheritance, a spiritual task. Is it asked why, being worldly, the Hebrews ought to have fulfilled a spiritual calling? The answer is that their best men understood and declared the Divine will, and they should have listened to their best men. Their fatal mistake was, as Christ showed, to deride their prophets, to crush and kill the messengers of God. And many other nations likewise have missed their true vocation, being deluded by dreams of vast empire and earthly glory. To combat idolatry was indeed the business of Israel and especially to drive back the heathenism that would have overwhelmed its faith: and often this had to be done with an earthly sword because liberty no less than faith was at stake. But a policy of aggression was never the duty of this people.

The temperate messages of the Hebrew chief to the king of Ammon proved to be of no avail: war alone was to settle the rival claims. And this once clear Jephthah lost no time in preparing for battle. As one who felt that without God no man can do anything, he sought assurance of divine aid; and we have now to consider the vow which he made, ever interesting on account of the moral problem it involves and the very pathetic circumstances which accompanied its fulfilment.

The terms of the solemn engagement under which Jephthah came were these: — “If Thou wilt indeed deliver the children of Ammon into mine hand, then it shall be that whatsoever” (Septuagint and Vulgate, “*whosoever*”) “cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the children of Ammon shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it (otherwise, *him*) for a burnt offering.” And here two questions arise; the first, what he could have meant by the promise; the second, whether we can justify him in making it. As to the first, the explicit designation to God of whatever came forth of the doors of his house points

unmistakably to a human life as the devoted thing. It would have been idle in an emergency like that in which Jephthah found himself, with a hazardous conflict impending that was to decide the fate of the eastern tribes at least, to anticipate the appearance of an animal, — bullock, goat, or sheep, — and promise that in sacrifice. The form of words used in the vow cannot be held to refer to an animal. The chief is thinking of some one who will express joy at his success and greet him as a victor. In the fulness of his heart he leaps to a wild savage mark of devotion. It is a crisis alike for him and for the people and what can he do to secure the favour and help of Jehovah? Too ready from his acquaintance with heathen sacrifices and ideas to believe that the God of Israel will be pleased with the kind of offerings by which the gods of Sidon and Aram were honoured, feeling himself as the chief of the Hebrews bound to make some great and unusual sacrifice, he does not promise that the captives taken in war shall be devoted to Jehovah, but some one of his own people is to be the victim. The dedication shall be all the more impressive that the life given up is one of which he himself shall feel the loss. A conqueror returning from war would, in ordinary circumstances, have loaded with gifts the first member of his household who came forth to welcome him. Jephthah vows to give that very person to God. The insufficient religious intelligence of the man, whose life had been far removed from elevating influences, this once perceived — and we cannot escape from the facts of the case — the vow is parallel to others of which ancient history tells. Jephthah expects some servant, some favourite slave to be the first. There is a touch of barbaric grandeur and at the same time of Roman sternness in his vow. As a chief he has the lives of all his household entirely at his disposal. To sacrifice one will be hard, for he is a humane man; but he expects that the offering will be all the more acceptable to the Most High. Such are the ideas moral and religious from which his vow springs.

Now we should like to find more knowledge and a higher vision in a leader of Israel. We would fain escape from the conclusion that a Hebrew could be so ignorant of the divine character as Jephthah appears; and moved by such feelings many have taken a very different view of the matter. The Gileadite has, for example, been represented as fully aware of the Mosaic regulations concerning sacrifice and the method for redeeming the life of a firstborn child; that is to say, he is supposed to have made his vow under cover of the Levitical provision by which in case his daughter should first meet him he would escape the necessity of sacrificing her. The rule in question could not, however, be stretched to a case like this. But, supposing it could, is it likely that a man whose whole soul had gone out in

a vow of life and death to God would reserve such a door of escape? In that case the story would lose its terror indeed, but also its power: human history would be the poorer by one of the great tragic experiences, wild and supernatural, that show man struggling with thoughts above himself.

What did the Gileadite know? What ought he to have known? We see in his vow a fatalistic strain; he leaves it to chance or fate to determine who shall meet him. There is also an assumption of the right to take into his own lands the disposal of a human life; and this, though most confidently claimed, was entirely a factitious right. It is one which mankind has ceased to allow. Further, the purpose of offering a human being in sacrifice is unspeakably horrible to us. But how differently these things must have appeared in the dim light which alone guided this man of lawless life in his attempt to make sure of God and honour Him! We have but to consider things that are done at the present day in the name of religion, the lifelong “devotion” of young women in a nunnery, for example, and all the ceremonies which accompany that outrage on the divine order to see that centuries of Christianity have not yet put an end to practices which under colour of piety are barbaric and revolting. In the modern case a nun secluded from the world, dead to the world, is considered to be an offering to God. The old conception of sacrifice was that the life must pass out of the world by way of death in order to become God’s. Or again, when the priest describing the devotion of his body says: “The essential, the sacerdotal purpose to which it should be used is to die. Such death must be begun in chastity, continued in mortification, consummated in that actual death which is the priest’s final oblation, his last sacrifice,”^{f6} — the same superstition appears in a refined and mystical form.

His vow made, the chief went forth to battle, leaving in his home one child only, a daughter beautiful, high spirited, the joy of her father’s heart. She was a true Hebrew girl and all her thought was that he, her sire, should deliver Israel. For this she longed and prayed. And it was so. The enthusiasm of Jephthah’s devotion to God was caught by his troops and bore them on irresistibly. Marching from Mizpah in the land of Bashan they crossed Manasseh, and south from Mizpeh of Gilead, which was not far from the Jabbok, they found the Ammonites encamped. The first battle practically decided the campaign. From Aroer to Minnith, from the Jabbok to the springs of Arnon, the course of flight and bloodshed extended, until the invaders were swept from the territory of the tribes. Then came the triumphant return.

We imagine the chief as he approached his home among the hills of Gilead, his eagerness and exultation mingled with some vague alarm. The vow he has made cannot but weigh upon his mind now that the performance of it comes so near. He has had time to think what it implies. When he uttered the words that involved a life the issue of war appeared doubtful. Perhaps the campaign would be long and indecisive. He might have returned not altogether discredited, yet not triumphant. But he has succeeded beyond his expectation. There can be no doubt that the offering is due to Jehovah. Who then shall appear? The secret of his vow is hid in his own breast. To no man has he revealed his solemn promise; nor has he dared in any way to interfere with the course of events. As he passes up the valley with his attendants there is a stir in his rude castle. The tidings of his coming have preceded him and she, that dear girl who is the very apple of his eye, his daughter, his only child, having, already rehearsed her part, goes forth eagerly to welcome him. She is clad in her gayest dress. Her eyes are bright with the keenest excitement. The timbrel her father once gave her, on which she has often played to delight him, is tuned to a chant of triumph. She dances as she passes from the gate. Her father, her father, chief, and victor!

And he? A sudden horror checks his heart. He stands arrested, cold as stone, with eyes of strange dark trouble fixed upon the gay young figure that welcomes him to home and rest and fame. She flies to his arms, but they do not open to her. She looks at him, for he has never repulsed her — and why now? He puts forth his hands as if to thrust away a dreadful sight, and what does she hear? Amid the sobs of a strong man's agony, "Alas, my daughter, thou hast brought me very low... and thou art one of them that trouble me." To startled ears the truth is slowly told. She is vowed to the Lord in sacrifice. He cannot go back. Jehovah who gave the victory now claims the fulfilment of the oath.

We are dealing with the facts of life. For a time let us put aside the reflections that are so easy to make about rash vows and the iniquity of keeping them. Before this anguish of the loving heart, this awful issue of a sincere but Superstitious devotion we stand in reverence. It is one of the supreme hours of humanity. Will the father not seek relief from his obligation? Will the daughter not rebel? Surely a sacrifice so awful will not be completed. Yet we remember Abraham and Isaac journeying together to Moriah, and how with the father's resignation of his great hope there must have gone the willingness of the son to face death if that last proof of piety and faith is required. We look at the father and daughter of a later date and

find the same spirit of submission to what is regarded as the will of God. Is the thing horrible — too horrible to be dwelt upon? Are we inclined to say,

*“... ‘Heaven heads the count of crimes
With that wild oath?’ She renders answer high,
Not so; nor once alone, a thousand times
I would be born and die.”*

It has been affirmed that “Jephthah’s rash act, springing from a culpable ignorance of the character of God, directed by heathen superstition and cruelty poured an ingredient of extreme bitterness into his cup of joy and poisoned his whole life.” Suffering indeed there must have been for both the actors in that pitiful tragedy of devotion and ignorance, who knew not the God to Whom they offered the sacrifice. But it is one of the marks of a rude erring man that he does take upon himself such burdens of pain in the service of the invisible Lord. A shallow scepticism entirely misreads the strange dark deeds often done for religion; yet one who has uttered many a foolish thing in the way of “explaining” piety can at last confess that the renouncing mortifying spirit is, with all its errors, one of man’s noble and distinguishing qualities. To Jephthah, as to his heroic daughter, religion was another thing than it is to many, just because of their extraordinary renunciation. Very ignorant they were surely, but they were not so ignorant as those who make no great offering to God, who would not resign a single pleasure, nor deprive a son or daughter of a single comfort or delight, for the sake of religion and the higher life. To what purpose is this waste? said the disciples, when the pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, was poured on the head of Jesus and the house was filled with the odour. To many now it seems waste to expend thought, time, or money upon a sacred cause, much more to hazard or to give life itself. We see the evils of enthusiastic self-devotion to the work of God very clearly; its power we do not feel. We are saving life so diligently, many of us, that we may well fear to lose it irremediably. There is no strain and therefore no strength, no joy. A weary pessimism dogs our unfaith.

To Jephthah and his daughter the vow was sacred, irrevocable. The deliverance of Israel by so signal and complete a victory left no alternative. It would have been well if they had known God differently; yet better this darkly impressive issue which went to the making of Hebrew faith and strength than easy unfruitful evasion of duty. We are shocked by the expenditure of fine feeling and heroism in upholding a false idea of God and obligation to Him; but are we outraged and distressed by the constant effort to escape from God which characterises our age? And have we for

our own part come yet to the right idea of self and its relations? Our century, beclouded on many points, is nowhere less informed than in matters of self-sacrifice; Christ's doctrine is still uncomprehended. Jephthah was wrong, for God did not need to be bribed to support a man who was bent on doing his duty. And many fail now to perceive that personal development and service of God are in the same line. Life is made for generosity, not mortification; for giving in glad ministry, not for giving up in hideous sacrifice. It is to be devoted to God by the free and holy use of body, mind, and soul in the daily tasks which Providence appoints.

The wailing of Jephthah's daughter rings in our ears, bearing with it the anguish of many a soul tormented in the name of that which is most sacred, tormented by mistakes concerning God, the awful theory that He is pleased with human suffering. The relics of that hideous Moloch worship which polluted Jephthah's faith, not even yet purged away by the Spirit of Christ, continue and make religion an anxiety and life a kind of torture. I do not speak of that devotion of thought and time, eloquence and talent to some worthless cause which here and there amazes the student of history and human life, the passionate ardour, for example, with which Flora Macdonald gave herself up to the service of a Stuart. But religion is made to demand sacrifices compared to which the offering of Jephthah's daughter was easy. The imagination of women especially, fired by false representations of the death of Christ in which there was a clear divine assertion of self, while it is made to appear as complete suppression of self, bears many on in a hopeless and essentially immoral endeavour. Has God given us minds, feelings, right ambitions that we may crush them? Does He purify our desires and aspirations by the fire of his own Spirit and still require us to crush them? Are we to find our end in being nothing, absolutely nothing, devoid of will, of purpose, of personality? Is this what Christianity demands? Then our religion is but refined suicide, and the God who desires us to annihilate ourselves is but the Supreme Being of the Buddhists, if those may be said to have a god who regard the suppression of individuality as salvation.

Christ was made a sacrifice for us. Yes: He sacrificed everything except His own eternal life and power; He sacrificed ease and favour and immediate, success for the manifestation of God. So He achieved the fulness of personal might and royalty. And every sacrifice His religion calls us to make is designed to secure that enlargement and fulness of spiritual individuality in the exercise of which we shall truly serve God and our fellows. Does God require sacrifice? Yes, unquestionably — the sacrifice

which every reasonable being must make in order that the mind, the soul may be strong and free, sacrifice of the lower for the higher, sacrifice of pleasure for truth, of comfort for duty, of the life that is earthly and temporal for the life that is heavenly and eternal. And the distinction of Christianity is that it makes this sacrifice supremely reasonable because it reveals the higher life, the heavenly hope, the eternal rewards for which the sacrifice is to be made; that it enables us in making it to feel ourselves united to Christ in a divine work which is to issue in the redemption of mankind.

There are not a few popularly accepted guides in religion who fatally misconceive the doctrine of sacrifice. They take man-made conditions for Divine opportunities and calls. Their arguments come home not to the selfish and overbearing, but to the unselfish and long-suffering members of society, and too often they are more anxious to praise renunciation — any kind of it, for any purpose, so it involve acute feeling — than to magnify truth and insist on righteousness. It is women chiefly these arguments affect, and the neglect of pure truth and justice with which women are charged is in no small degree the result of false moral and religious teaching. They are told that it is good to renounce and suffer even when at every step advantage is taken of their submission and untruth triumphs over generosity. They are urged to school themselves to humiliation and loss not because God appoints these but because human selfishness imposes them. The one clear and damning objection to the false doctrine of self-suppression is here: it makes sin. Those who yield where they should protest, who submit where they should argue and reprove, make a path for selfishness and injustice and increase evil instead of lessening it. They persuade themselves that they are bearing the cross after Christ; but what in effect are they doing? The missionary amongst ignorant heathen has to bear to the uttermost as Christ bore. But to give so-called Christians a power of oppression and exaction is to turn the principles of religion upside down and hasten the doom of those for whom the sacrifice is made. When we meddle with truth and righteousness even in the name of piety we simply commit sacrilege, we range ourselves with the wrong and unreal; there is no foundation under our faith and no moral result of our endurance and self-denial. We are selling Christ, not following Him.

CHAPTER 18

SHIBBOLETHS — ~~071201~~ JUDGES 12:1-7

WHILE Jephthah and his Gileadites were engaged in the struggle with Ammon jealous watch was kept over all their movements by the men of Ephraim. As the head tribe of the house of Joseph occupying the centre of Palestine Ephraim was suspicious of all attempts and still more of every success that threatened its pride and preeminence. We have seen Gideon in the hour of his victory challenged by this watchful tribe, and now a quarrel is made with Jephthah who has dared to win a battle without its help. What were the Gileadites that they should presume to elect a chief and form an army? Fugitives from Ephraim who had gathered in the shaggy forests of Bashan and among the cliffs of the Argob, mere adventurers in fact, what right had they to set up as the protectors of Israel? The Ephraimites found the position intolerable. The vigour and confidence of Gilead were insulting. If a check were not put on the energy of the new leader might he not cross the Jordan and establish a tyranny over the whole land? There was a call to arms, and a large force was soon marching against Jephthah's camp to demand satisfaction and submission.

The pretext that Jephthah had fought against Ammon without asking the Ephraimites to join him was shallow enough. The invitation appears to have been given; and even without an invitation Ephraim might well have taken the field.

But the savage threat, "We will burn thine house upon thee with fire," showed the temper of the leaders in this expedition. The menace was so violent that the Gileadites were roused at once and, fresh from their victory over Ammon, they were not long in humbling the pride of the great western clan.

One may well ask, Where is Ephraim's fear of God? Why has there been no consultation of the priests at Shiloh by the tribe under whose care the sanctuary is placed? The great Jewish commentary affirms that the priests were to blame, and we cannot but agree. If religious influences and arguments were not used to prevent the expedition against Gilead they should have been used. The servants of the oracle might have understood the duty of the tribes to each other and of the whole nation to God and done their utmost to avert civil war. Unhappily, however, professed

interpreters of the divine will are too often forward in urging the claims of a tribe or favouring the arrogance of a class by which their own position is upheld. As on the former occasion when Ephraim interfered, so in this we scarcely go beyond what is probable in supposing that the priests declared it to be the duty of faithful Israelites to check the career of the eastern chief and so. prevent his rude and ignorant religion from gaining dangerous popularity. Bishop Wordsworth has seen a fanciful resemblance between Jephthah's campaign against Ammon and the revival under the Wesleys and Whitefield which as a movement against ungodliness put to shame the sloth of the Church of England. He has remarked on the scorn and disdain — and he might have used stronger terms — with which the established clergy assailed those who apart from them were successfully doing the work of God. This was an example of far more flagrant tribal jealousy than that of Ephraim and her priests; and have there not been cases of religious leaders urging retaliation upon enemies or calling for war in order to punish what was absurdly deemed an outrage on national honour? With facts of this kind in view we can easily believe that from Shiloh no word of peace, but on the other hand words of encouragement were heard when the chiefs of Ephraim began to hold councils of war and to gather their men for the expedition that was to make an end of Jephthah.

Let it be allowed that Ephraim, a strong tribe, the guardian of the ark of Jehovah, much better instructed than the Gileadites in the divine law, had a right to maintain its place. But the security of high position lies in high purpose and noble service; and an Ephraim ambitious of leading should have been forward on every occasion when the other tribes were in confusion and trouble. When a political party or a church claims to be first in regard for righteousness and national well being it should not think of its own credit or continuance in power but of its duty in the war against injustice and ungodliness. The favour of the great, the admiration of the multitude, should be nothing to either church or party. To rail at those who are more generous, more patriotic, more eager in the service of truth, to profess a fear of some ulterior design against the constitution or the faith, to turn all the force of influence and eloquence and even of slander and menace against the disliked neighbour instead of the real enemy, this is the nadir of baseness. There are Ephraims still, strong tribes in the land, that are too much exercised in putting down claims, too little in finding principles of unity and forms of practical brotherhood. We see in this bit of history an example of the humiliation that sooner or later falls on the jealous and the arrogant; and every age is adding instances of a like kind.

Civil war, at all times lamentable, appears peculiarly so when the cause of it lies in haughtiness and distrust. We have found however that, beneath the surface, there may have been elements of division and ill will serious enough to require this painful remedy. The campaign may have prevented a lasting rupture between the eastern and western tribes, a separation of the stream of Israel's religion and nationality into rival currents. It may also have arrested a tendency to ecclesiastical narrowness, which at this early stage would have done immense harm. It is quite true that Gilead was rude and uninstructed, as Galilee had the reputation of being in the time of our Lord. But the leading tribes or classes of a nation are not entitled to overbear the less enlightened, nor by attempts at tyranny to drive them into separation. Jephthah's victory had the effect of making Ephraim and the other western tribes understand that Gilead had to be reckoned with, whether for weal or woe, as an integral and important part of the body politic. In Scottish history, the despotic attempt to thrust Episcopacy on the nation was the cause of a distressing civil war; a people who would not fall in with the forms of religion that were in favour at headquarters had to fight for liberty. Despised or esteemed they resolved to keep and use their rights, and the religion of the world owes a debt to the Covenanters. Then in our own times, lament as we may the varied forms of antagonism to settled faith and government, that enmity of which communism and anarchism are the delirium, it would be simply disastrous to suppress it by sheer force even if the thing were possible. Surely those who are certain they have right on their side need not be arrogant. The overbearing temper is always a sign of hollow principle as well as of moral infirmity. Was any Gilead ever put down by a mere assertion of superiority, even on the field of battle? Let the truth be acknowledged that only in freedom lies the hope of progress in intelligence, in constitutional order and purity of faith. The great problems of national life and development can never be settled as Ephraim tried to settle the movement beyond Jordan. The idea of life expands and room must be left for its enlargement. The many lines of thought, of personal activity, of religious and social experiment leading to better ways or else proving by and by that the old are best — all these must have place in a free state. The threats of revolution that trouble nations would die away if this were clearly understood; and we read history in vain if we think that the old autocracies or aristocracies will ever approve themselves again, unless indeed they take far wiser and more Christian forms than they had in past ages. The thought of individual liberty once firmly tooted in the minds of men, there is no going back to the restraints that were possible before it was familiar. Government finds another basis

and other duties. A new kind of order arises which attempts no suppression of any idea or sincere belief and allows all possible room for experiments in living. Unquestionably this altered condition of things increases the weight of moral responsibility. In ordering our own lives as well as in regulating custom and law we need to exercise the most serious care, the most earnest thought. Life is not easier because it has greater breadth and freedom. Each is thrown back more upon conscience, has more to do for his fellow men and for God.

We pass now to the end of the campaign and the scene at the fords of Jordan, when the Gileadites, avenging themselves on Ephraim, used the notable expedient of asking a certain word to be pronounced in order to distinguish friend from foe. To begin with, the slaughter was quite unnecessary. If bloodshed there had to be, that on the field of battle was certainly enough. The wholesale murder of the "fugitives of Ephraim," so called with reference to their own taunt, was a passionate and barbarous deed. Those who began the strife could not complain; but it was the leaders of the tribe who rushed on war, and now the rank and file must suffer. Had Ephraim triumphed the defeated Gileadites would have found no quarter; victorious they gave none. We may trust, however, that the number forty-two thousand represents the total strength of the army that was dispersed and not those left dead on the field.

The expedient used at the fords turned on a defect or peculiarity of speech. Shibboleth perhaps meant *stream*. Of each man who came to the stream of Jordan wishing to pass to the other side it was required that he should say *Shibboleth*. The Ephraimites tried, but said *Sibboleth* instead, and so betraying their west-country birth they pronounced their own doom. The incident has become proverbial and the proverbial use of it is widely suggestive. First, however, we may note a more direct application.

Do we not at times observe how words used in common speech, phrases or turns of expression, betray a man's upbringing or character, his strain of thought and desire? It is not necessary to lay traps for men, to put it to them how they think on this point or that, in order to discover where they stand and what they are. Listen and you will hear sooner or later the *Sibboleth* that declares the son of Ephraim. In religious circles, for example, men are found who appear to be quite enthusiastic in the service of Christianity, eager for the success of the church, and yet on some occasion a word, an inflexion or turn of the voice will reveal to the attentive listener a constant worldliness of mind, a worship of self mingling

with all they think and do. You notice that and you can prophesy what will come of it. In a few months, or even weeks, the show of interest will pass. There is not enough praise or deference to suit the egotist, he turns elsewhere to find the applause which he values above everything.

Again, there are words somewhat rude, somewhat coarse, which in carefully ordered speech a man may not use; but they fall from his lips in moments of unguarded freedom or excitement. The man does not speak "half in the language of Ashdod"; he particularly avoids it. Yet now and again a lapse into the Philistine dialect, a something muttered rather than spoken, betrays the secret of his nature. It would be harsh to condemn anyone as inherently bad on such evidence. The early habits, the sins of past years thus unveiled, may be those against which he is fighting and praying. Yet, on the other hand, the hypocrisy of a life may terribly show itself in these little things; and every one will allow that in choosing our companions and friends we ought to be keenly alive to the slightest indications of character. There are fords of Jordan to which we come unexpectedly, and without being censorious we are bound to observe those with whom we purpose to travel further.

Here, however, one of the most interesting and, for our time, most important points of application is to be found in the self-disclosure of writers — those who produce our newspapers, magazines, novels, and the like. Touching on religion and on morals certain of these writers contrive to keep on good terms with the kind of belief that is popular and pays. But now and again, despite efforts to the contrary, they come on the *Shibboleth* which they forget to pronounce aright. Some among them who really care nothing for Christianity, and have no belief whatever in revealed religion, would yet pass for interpreters of religion and guides of conduct. Christian morality and worship they barely endure; but they cautiously adjust every phrase and reference so as to drive away no reader and offend no devout critic; that is, they aim at doing so; now and again they forget themselves. We catch a word, a touch of flippancy, a suggestion of license, a covert sneer which goes too far by a hairsbreadth. The evil lies in this, that they are teaching multitudes to say *Sibboleth* along with them. What they say is so pleasant, so deftly said, with such an air of respect for moral authority that suspicion is averted, the very elect are for a time deceived. Indeed we are almost driven to think that Christians not a few are quite ready to accept the unbelieving *Sibboleth* from sufficiently distinguished lips. A little more of this lubricity and there will have to be a new and resolute sifting at the fords. The propaganda is villainously active, and without intelligent and

vigorous opposition it will proceed to further audacity. It is not a few but scores of this sect who have the ear of the public and even in religious publications are allowed to convey hints of earthliness and atheism. A covert worship of Mammon and of Venus goes on in the temple professedly dedicated to Christ, and one cannot be sure that a seemingly pious work will not vend some doctrine of devils. It is time for a slaughter in God's name of many a false reputation.

But there are *Shibboleths* of party, and we must be careful lest in trying others we use some catchword of our own Gilead by which to judge their religion or their virtue. The danger of the earnest, alike in religion, politics, and philanthropy, is to make their own favourite plans or doctrines the test of all worth and belief. Within our churches and in the ranks of social reformers distinctions are made where there should be none and old strifes are deepened. There are of course certain great principles of judgment. Christianity is founded on historical fact and revealed truth. "Every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God." In such a saying lies a test which is no tribal *Shibboleth*. And on the same level are others by which we are constrained at all hazards to try ourselves and those who speak and write. Certain points of morality are vital and must be pressed. When a writer says, "In mediaeval times the recognition that every natural impulse in a healthy and mature being has a claim to gratification was a victory of unsophisticated nature over the asceticism of Christianity" — we use no *Shibboleth* test in condemning him. He is judged and found wanting by principles on which the very existence of human society depends. It is in no spirit of bigotry, but in faithfulness to the essentials of life and the hope of mankind, that the sternest denunciation is hurled at such a man. In plain terms he is an enemy of the race.

Passing from cases like this, observe others in which a measure of dogmatism must be allowed to the ardent. Where there are no strong opinions strenuously held and expressed little impression will be made. The prophets in every age have spoken dogmatically; and vehemence of speech is not to be denied to the temperance reformer, the apostle of purity, the enemy of luxurious self-indulgence and cant. Moral indignation must express itself strongly; and in the dearth of moral conviction we can bear with those who would even drag us to the ford and make us utter their *Shibboleth*. They go too far, people say: perhaps they do; but there are so many who will not move at all except in the way of pleasure.

Now all this is clear. But we must return to the danger of making one aspect of morality the sole test of morals, one religious idea the sole test of religion and so framing a formula by which men separate themselves from their friends and pass narrow bitter judgments on their kinsfolk. Let sincere belief and strong feeling rise to the prophetic strain; let there be ardour, let there be dogmatism and vehemence. But beyond urgent words and strenuous example, beyond the effort to persuade and convert there lie arrogance and the usurpation of a judgment which belongs to God alone. In proportion as a Christian is living the life of Christ he will repel the claim of any other man, however devout, to force his opinion or his action. All attempts at terrorism betray a lack of spirituality. The Inquisition was in reality the world oppressing spiritual life. And so in less degree, with less truculence, the unspiritual element may show itself even in company with a fervent desire to serve the gospel. There need be no surprise that attempts to dictate to Christendom or any part of Christendom are warmly resented by those who know that religion and liberty cannot be separated. The true church of Christ has a firm grasp of what it believes and is aiming at, and by its resoluteness it bears on human society. It is also gracious and persuasive, reasonable and open, and so gathers men into a free and frank brotherhood, revealing to them the loftiest duty, leading them towards it in the way of liberty. Let men who understand this try each other and it will never be by limited and suspicious formulae.

Amidst pedants, critics, hot and bitter partisans, we see Christ moving in divine freedom. Fine is the subtlety of His thought in which the ideas of spiritual liberty and of duty blend to form one luminous strain. Fine are the clearness and simplicity of that daily life in which He becomes the way and the truth to men. It is the ideal life, beyond all mere rules, disclosing the law of the kingdom of heaven; it is free and powerful because upheld by the purpose that underlies all activity and development. Are we endeavouring to realise it? Scarcely at all: the bonds are multiplying, not falling away; no man is bold to claim his right, nor generous to give others their room. In this age of Christ we seem neither to behold nor desire His manhood. Shall this always be? Shall there not arise a race fit for liberty because obedient, ardent, true? Shall we not come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ?

For a little we must return to Jephthah, who after his great victory and his strange dark act of faith judged Israel but six years. He appears in striking contrast to other chiefs of his time, and even of far later times, in the purity

of his home life, the more notable that his father set no example of good. Perhaps the legacy of dispeace and exile bequeathed to him with a tainted birth had taught the Gileadite, rude mountaineer as he was, the value of that order which his people too often despised. The silence of the history which is elsewhere careful to speak of wives and children sets Jephthah before us as a kind of puritan, with another and perhaps greater distinction than the desire to avoid war. The yearly lament for his daughter kept alive the memory not only of the heroine but of one judge in Israel who set a high example of family life. A sad and lonely man he went those few years of his rule in Gilead, but we may be sure that the character and will of the Holy One became more clear to him after he had passed the dreadful hill of sacrifice. The story is of the old world, terrible; yet we have found in Jephthah a sublime sincerity, and we may believe that such a man, though he never repented of his vow, would come to see that the God of Israel demanded another and a nobler sacrifice, that of life devoted to His righteousness and truth.

CHAPTER 19

THE ANGEL IN THE FIELD — <071301> JUDGES 13:1-18

IN our ignorance not in our knowledge, in our blindness not in our light, we call nature secular and think of the ordinary course of events as a series of cold operations, governed by law and force, having nothing to do with divine purpose and love. Oftentimes we think so, and suffer because we do not understand. It is a pitiful error. The natural could not exist, there could be neither substance nor order without the overnature which is at once law and grace. Vitality, movement are not an efflorescence heralding decay as to the atheist; they are not the activity of an evil spirit — as sometimes to confused and falsely instructed faith. They are the outward and visible action of God, the hem of the vesture on which we lay hold and feel Him. In the seen and temporal there is a constant presence maintaining order, giving purpose and end. Were it otherwise man could not live an hour; even in selfishness and vileness he is a creature of two worlds which yet are one, so closely are they interwoven. At every point natural and supernatural are blended, the higher shaping the development of the lower, accomplishing in and through the lower a great spiritual plan. This it is which gives depth and weight to our experience, communicating the dignity of the greatest moral and spiritual issues to the meanest, darkest human life. Everywhere, always, man touches God though he know Him not.

No surprise, therefore, is excited by the modes of speech and thought we come upon as we read Scripture. The surprise would be in not coming upon them. If we found the inspired writers divorcing God from the world and thinking of “nature” as a dark chamber of sin and torture echoing with His curse, there would be no profit in studying this old volume. Then indeed we might turn from it in discontent and scorn, even as some cast it aside just because it is the revelation of God dwelling with men upon the earth.

But what do the writers of faith mean when they tell of divine messengers coming to peasants at labour in the fields, speaking to them of events common to the race — the birth of some child, the defeat of a rival tribe — as affairs of the spiritual even more than of the temporal region? The narratives, simple yet daring, which affirm the mingling, of divine purpose and action with human life give us the deepest science, the one real

philosophy. Why do we have to care and suffer for each other? What are our sin and sorrow? These are not material facts; they are of quite another range. Always man as more than dust, better or worse than clay. Human lives are linked together in a gracious and awful order the course of which is now clearly marked, now obscurely traceable; and if it were in our power to revive the history of past ages, to mark the operation of faith and unbelief among men, issuing in virtue and nobleness on the one hand, in vice and lethargy on the other, we should see how near heaven is to earth, how rational a thing is prophecy, not only as relating to masses of men but to particular lives. It is our stupidity not our wisdom that starts back from revelations of the overworld as if they confused what would otherwise be clear.

In more than one story of the Bible the motherhood of a simple peasant woman is a cause of divine communications and supernatural hopes. Is this amazing, incredible? What then is motherhood itself? In the coming and care of frail existences, the strange blending in one great necessity of the glad and the severe, the honourable and the humiliating, with so many possibilities of failure in duty, of error and misunderstanding ere the needful task is finished, death ever waiting on life, and agony on joy — in all this do we not find such a manifestation of the higher purpose as might well be heralded by words and signs? Only the order of God and His redemption can explain this “nature.” Right in the path of atheistic reasoners, and of others not atheists, lie facts of human life which on their theory of naturalism are simply confounding, too great at once for the causes they admit and the ends they foresee. And if reason denies the possibility of prediction relating to these facts we need not wonder. Without philosophy or faith the range of denial is unlimited.

From the quaint and simple narrative before us the imaginative rationalist turns away with the one word — “myth.” His criticism is of a sort which for all its ease and freedom gives the world nothing. We desire to know why the human mind harbours thoughts of the kind, why it has ideas of God and of a supernatural order, and how these work in developing the race.

Have they been of service? Have they given strength and largeness to poor rude lives and so proved a great reality? If so, the word myth is inadmissible. It sets falsehood at the source of progress and of good.

Here are two Hebrew peasants, in a period of Philistine domination more than a thousand years before the Christian era. Of their condition we know

only what a few brief sentences can tell in a history concerned chiefly with the facts of a divine order in which men's lives have an appointed place and use. It is certain that a thorough knowledge of this Danite family, its own history and its part in the history of Israel, would leave no difficulty for faith. Belief in the foreordination of all human existence and the constant presence of God with men and women in their endurance, their hope and yearning would be forced upon the most sceptical mind. The insignificance of the occasion marked by a prediction given in the name of God may astonish some. But what is insignificant? Wherever divine predestination and authority extend, and that is throughout the whole universe, nothing can properly be called insignificant. The laws according to which material things and forces are controlled by God touch the minutest particles of matter, determine the shape of a dew drop as certainly as the form of a world. At every point in human life, the birth of a child in the poorest cottage as well as of the heir to an empire, the same principles of heredity, the same disposition of affairs to leave room for that life and to work out its destiny underlie the economy of the world.

A life is to appear. It is not an interposition or interpolation. No event, no life is ever thrust into an age without relation to the past; no purpose is formed in the hour of a certain prophecy. For Samson as for every actor distinguished or obscure upon the stage of the world the stars and the seasons have cooperated, and all that has been done under the sun has gone to make a place for him. One who knows this can speak strongly and clearly. One who knows what hinders and what is sure to aid the fulfilment of a great destiny can counsel wisely. And so the angel of Jehovah, a messenger of the spiritual covenant, is no mere vehicle of a prediction he does not understand. Without hesitation he speaks to the woman in the field of what her son shall do. By the story of God's dealings with Israel, by the experiences of tribe and family and individual soul since the primitive age, by the simple faith of these parents that are to be and the honest energy of their humble lives he is prepared to announce to them their honour and their duty. "Thou shalt bear a son and he shall begin to deliver Israel." The messenger has had his preparation of thought, inquiry deep, devout, and pondering, ere he became fit to announce the word of God. No seer serves the age to which he is sent with that which costs him nothing, and here as elsewhere the law of all ministry to God and man must apply to the preparation and work of the revealer.

The personality of the messenger was carefully concealed. "A man of God whose countenance was like that of an angel of God very terrible" — so

runs the pathetic, suggestive description; but the hour was too intense for mere curiosity. The honest mind does not ask the name and social standing of a messenger but only — Does he speak God's truth? Does he open life? There are few perhaps, today, who are simple and intelligent enough for this; few, therefore, to whom divine messages come. It is the credentials we are anxious about, and the prophet waits unheard while people are demanding his family and tribe, his college and reputation. Are these satisfactory? Then they will listen. But let no prophet come to them unnamed. Yet of all importance to us as to Manoah and his wife are the message, the revelation, the announcement of privilege and duty. Where that divine order is disclosed which lies too deep for our own discovery, but once revealed stirs and kindles our nature, the prophet needs no certification.

The child that was to be born, a gift of God, a divine charge, was promised to these parents. And in the case of every child born into the world there is a divine predestination, which whether it has been recognised by the parents or not gives dignity to his existence from the first. There are natural laws and spiritual laws, the gathering together of energies and needs and duties which make the life unique, the care of it sacred. It is a new force in the world — a new vessel, frail as yet, launched on the sea of time. In it some stories of the divine goodness, some treasures of heavenly force are embarked. As it holds its way across the ocean in sunshine or shadow, this life will be watched by the divine eye, breathed gently upon by the summer airs or buffeted by the storms of God. Does heaven mind the children? "In heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father."

In the marvellous ordering of divine providence nothing is more calculated than fatherhood and motherhood to lift human life into the high ranges of experience and feeling. Apart from any special message or revelation, assuming only an ordinary measure of thoughtfulness and interest in the unfolding of life, there is here a new dignity the sense of which connects the task of those who have it with the creative energy of God. Everywhere throughout the world we can trace a more or less clear understanding of this. The tide of life is felt to rise as the new office, the new responsibility are grasped. The mother is become —

*"A link among the days to knit
The generations each to each."*

The father has a sacred trust, a new and nobler duty to which his manhood is entirely pledged in the sight of that great God who is the Father of all

spirits, doubly and trebly pledged to truth and purity and courage. It is the coronation of life; and the child, drawing father and mother to itself, is rightly the object of keenest interest and most assiduous care.

The interest lies greatly in this, that to the father and mother first, then to the world, there may be untold possibilities of good in the existence which has begun. Apart from any prophecy like that given regarding Samson we have truly what may be called a special promise from God in the dawning energy of every child life. By the cradle surely, if anywhere, hope sacred and heavenly may be indulged. With what earnest glances will the young eyes look by and by from face to face. With what new and keen love will the child heart beat. Enlarging its grasp from year to year, the mind will lay hold on duty and the will address itself to the tasks of existence. This child will be a heroine of home, a helper of society, a soldier of the truth, a servant of God. Does the mother dream long dreams as she bends over the cradle? Does the father, one indeed amongst millions, yet with his special distinction and calling, imagine for the child a future better than his own? It is well. By the highest laws and instincts of our humanity it is right and good. Here men and women, the rudest and least taught, live in the immaterial world of love, faith, duty.

We observe the anxiety of Manoah and his wife to learn the special method of training which should fit their child for his task. The father's prayer so soon as he heard of the divine annunciation was, "O Lord, let the man of God whom Thou didst send come again unto us and teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born." Conscious of ignorance and inexperience, feeling the weight of responsibility, the parents desired to have authoritative direction in their duty, and their anxiety was the deeper because their child was to be a deliverer in Israel. In their home on the hillside, where the cottages of Zorah clustered overlooking the Philistine plain, they were frequently disturbed by the raiders who swept up the valley of Sorek from Ashdod and Ekron. They had often wondered when God would raise up a deliverer as of old, some Deborah or Gideon to end the galling oppression. Now the answer to many a prayer and hope was coming, and in their own home the hero was to be cradled. We cannot doubt that this made them feel the pressure of duty and the need of wisdom. Yet the prayer of Manoah was one which every father has need to present, though the circumstances of a child's birth have nothing out of the most ordinary course.

To each human mind are given powers which require special fostering, peculiarities of temperament and feeling which ought to be specially considered. One way will not serve in the upbringing of two children. Even the most approved method of the time, whether that of private tutelage or public instruction, may thwart individuality; and if the way be ignorant and rough the original faculty will at its very springing be distorted. It is but the barest common place, yet with what frequency it needs to be urged, that of all tasks in the world that of the guide and instructor of youth is hardest to do well, best worth doing, therefore most difficult. There is no need to deny that for the earliest years of a child's life the instincts of a loving faithful mother may be trusted to guide her efforts. Yet even in those first years tendencies declare themselves that require to be wisely checked or on the other hand wisely encouraged; and the wisdom does not come by instinct. A spiritual view of life, its limitations and possibilities, its high calling and heavenly destiny is absolutely necessary — that vision of the highest things which religion alone can give. The prophet comes and directs; yet the parents must be prophets too. "The child is not to be educated for the present — for this is done without our aid unceasingly and powerfully — but for the remote future and often in opposition to the immediate future... The child must be armed against the close-pressing present with a counter-balancing weight of three powers against the three weaknesses of the will, of love and of religion... The girl and the boy must learn that there is something in the ocean higher than its waves — namely, a Christ who calls upon them."¹⁷ On the religious teaching especially which is given to children much depends, and those who guide them should often begin by searching and reconsidering their own beliefs. Many a promising life is marred because youth in its wonder and sincerity was taught no living faith in God, or was thrust into the mould of some narrow creed which had more in it of human bigotry than of divine reason and love.

"What shall be the ordering of the child?" is Manoah's prayer, and it is well if simply expressed. The child's way needs ordering. Circumstances must be understood that discipline may fit the young life for its part. In our own time this represents a serious difficulty. What to do with children, how to order their lives is the pressing question in thousands of homes. The scheme of education in favour shows little insight, little esteem for the individuality of children, which is of as much value in the case of the backward as of those who are lured and goaded into distinction. To broaden life, to give it many points of interest is well. Yet on the other hand how much depends on discipline, on limitation and concentration, the

need of which we are apt to forget. Narrow and limited was the life of Israel when Samson was born into it. The boy had to be what the nation was, what Zorah was, what Manoah and his wife were. The limitations of the time held him and the secluded life of Dan knowing but one article of patriotic faith, hatred of the Philistines. Was there so much of restriction here as to make greatness impossible? Not so. To be an Israelite was to have a certain moral advantage and superiority. It was not a barren solidarity, a dry ground in which this new life was planted; the sprout grew out of a living tree; traditions, laws full of spiritual power made an environment for the Hebrew child. Through the limitations, fenced and guided by them, a soul might break forth to the upper air. It was not the narrowness of Israel nor of his own home and upbringing but the license of Philistia that weakened the strong arm and darkened the eager soul of the young Danite. Are we now to be afraid of limitations, bent on giving to youth multiform experience and the freest possible access to the world? Do we dream that strength will come as the stream of life is allowed to wander over a whole valley, turning hither and thither in a shallow and shifty bed? The natural parallel here will instruct us, for it is an image of the spiritual fact. Strength, not breadth, is the mark at which education should be directed. The intellectually and morally strong will find culture waiting them at every turn of the way and will know how to select, what to appropriate. In truth there must be first the moral power gained by concentration, otherwise all culture — art, science, literature, travel — Drove but a Barmecide feast at which the soul starves.

The special method of training for the child Samson is described in the words, "He shall be a Nazirite unto God." The mother was to drink no strong drink nor eat any unclean thing. Her son was to be trained in the same rigid abstinence; and always the sense of obligation to Jehovah was to accompany the austerity. The hair, neither cut nor shaven but allowed to grow in natural luxuriance, was to be the sign of the separated life. For the hero that was to be, this ascetic purity, this sacrament of unshorn hair were the only things prescribed. Perhaps there was in the command a reference to the godless life of the Israelites, a protest against their self-indulgence and half-heathen freedom. One in the tribe of Dan would be clear of the sins of drunkenness and gluttony at least, and so far ready for spiritual work.

Now it is notable enough to find thus early in history the example of a rule which even yet is not half understood to be the best as well as the safest for the guidance of appetite and the development of bodily strength. The

absurdities commonly accepted by mothers and by those who only desire some cover for the indulgence of taste are here set aside. A hero is to be born, one who in physical vigour will distinguish himself above all, the Hercules of sacred history. His mother rigidly abstains, and he in his turn is to abstain from strong drink. The plainest dieting is to serve both her and him — the kind of food and drink on which Daniel and his companions thrived in the Chaldean palace. Surely the lesson is plain. Those who desire to excel in feats of strength speak of their training. It embraces a vow like the Nazarites', wanting indeed the sacred purpose and therefore of no use in the development of character. But let a covenant be made with God, let simple food and drink be used under a sense of obligation to Him to keep the mind clear and the body clean, and soon with appetites better disciplined we should have a better and stronger race.

It is not of course to be supposed that there was nothing out of the common in Samson's bodily vigour. Restraint of unhealthy and injurious appetite was not the only cause to which his strength was due. Yet as the accompaniment of his giant energy the vow has great significance. And to young men who incline to glory in their strength, and all who care to be fit for the tasks of life, the significance will be clear. As for the rest whose appetites master them, who must have this and that because they crave it, their weakness places them low as men, nowhere as examples and guides. One would as soon take the type of manly vigour from a paralytic as from one whose will is in subjection to the cravings of the flesh.

It soon becomes clear in the course of the history that while some forms of evil were fenced off by Nazaritism others as perilous were not. The main part of the devotion lay in abstinence, and that is not spiritual life. Here is one who from his birth set apart to God is trained in manly control of his appetites. The locks that wave in wild luxuriance about his neck are the sign of robust physical vigour as well as of consecration. But, strangely, his spiritual education is not cared for as we might expect. He is disciplined and yet undisciplined. He fears the Lord and yet fears Him not. He is an Israelite but not a true Israelite. Jehovah is to him a God who gives strength and courage and blessing in return for a certain measure of obedience. As the Holy God, the true God, the God of purity, Samson knows Him not, does not worship Him. Within a certain limited range he hears a divine voice saying, "Thou shalt not," and there he obeys. But beyond is a great region in which he reckons himself free. And what is the result? He is strong, brave, sunny in temper as his name implies. But a

helper of society, a servant of divine religion, a man in the highest sense, one of God's free men Samson does not become.

So is it always. One kind of exercise, discipline, obedience, virtue will not suffice. We need to be temperate and also pure, we need to keep from self-indulgence but also from niggardliness if we are to be men. We have to think of the discipline of mind and soul as well as soundness of body. He is only half a man, however free from glaring faults and vices, who has not learned the unselfishness, the love, the ardour in holy and generous tasks which Christ imparts. To abstain is a negative thing; the positive should command us — the highest manhood, holy, aspiring, patient, divine.

CHAPTER 20

SAMSON PLUNGING INTO LIFE — <071324> JUDGES 13:24-14:20

Or all who move before us in the Book of Judges Samson is preeminently the popular hero. In rude giant strength and wild daring he stands alone against the enemies of Israel, contemptuous of their power and their plots. It is just such a man who catches the public eye and lives in the traditions of a country. Most Hebrews of the time minded piety and culture as little as did the Norsemen when they first professed Christianity. Both races liked manliness and feats of daring and could pardon much to one who flung his enemies and theirs to the ground with god-like strength of arm, and in the narrative of Samson's exploits we trace this note of popular estimation. He is a singular hero of faith, quite akin to those half-converted, half-savage chiefs of the north who thought the best they could do for God was to kill His enemies and bound themselves by fierce oaths in the name of Christ to hack and slaughter. For the separateness from others, the isolation which marked Samson's whole career the reasons are evident. His vow of Nazaritism, for one thing, kept him apart. Others were their own men, he was Jehovah's. His radiant health and uncommon physical energy even in boyhood were to himself and others the sign of a divine blessing which maintained his sense of consecration. While he looked on at the riot and drunkenness of the feasts of his people he felt a growing revulsion, nor was he pleased with other indications of their temper. The frequent raids of Philistines from their walled cities by the coast struck terror far and wide — up the valleys of Dan into the heart of Judah and Ephraim. Samson as he grew up marked the supineness of his people with wonder and disgust. If he did anything for them it was not because he honoured them but in fulfilment of his destiny. At the same time we must note that the hero, though a man of wit, was not wise. He did the most injudicious things. He had nothing in him of the diplomatist, not much of the leader of men. It was only now and again when the mood took him that he cared to exert himself. So he went his own way an admired hero, a lonely giant among smaller beings. Worst of all he was an easy prey to some kinds of temptation. Restrained on one side, he gave himself license on others; his strength was always undisciplined, and early in his career we can almost predict how it will end. He ventures into one snare after another. The time

is sure to come when he will fall into a pit out of which there is no way of escape.

Of the early life of the great Danite judge there is no record save that he grew and the Lord blessed him. The parents whose home on the hillside he filled with boisterous glee must have looked on the lad with something like awe — so different was he from others, so great were the hopes based on his future. Doubtless they did their best for him. The consecration of his life to God they deeply impressed on his mind and taught him as well as they could the worship of the Unseen Jehovah in the sacrifice of lamb or kid at the altar, in prayers for protection and prosperity. But nothing is said of instruction in the righteousness, the purity, the mercifulness which the law of God required. Manoah and his wife seem to have made the mistake of thinking that outside the vow moral education and discipline would come naturally, so far as they were needed. There was great strictness on certain points and elsewhere such laxity that he must have soon become wilful and headstrong and somewhat of a terror to the father and mother. Lads of his own age would of course adore him; as their leader in every bold pastime he would command their deference and loyalty, and many a wild thing was done, we can fancy, at which the people of the valley laughed uneasily or shook their heads in dismay. He who afterwards tied the jackals' tails together and set fire brands between each pair to burn the Philistines' corn must have served an apprenticeship to that kind of savage sport. Hebrew or alien for miles round who roused the anger of Samson would soon learn how dangerous it was to provoke him. Yet a dash of generosity always took the edge from fiery temper and rash revenge, and the people of Dan, for their part, would allow much to one who was expected to bring deliverance to Israel. The wild and dangerous youth was the only champion they could see.

But even before manhood Samson had times of deeper feeling than people in general would have looked for. Boisterous, hot-blooded, impetuous natures grievously wanting in decorum and sagacity are not always superficial; and there were occasions when the Spirit of the Lord began to move Samson. He felt the purpose of his vow, saw the serious work to which his destiny was urging him, looked down on the plain of the Philistines with a kindling eye, spoke in strains that even rose to prophetic intensity. At Mahaneh-Dan, the camp of Dan, where the more resolute spirits of the tribe came together for military exercise or to repel some raid of the enemy, Samson began to speak of his purpose and to make schemes for Israel's liberation. Into these the fiery vehemence of the young man

flowed, and the enthusiasm of his nature bore others along. Can we be wrong in supposing that in various ways, by plans often ill-considered, he sought to harass the Philistines, and that failure as a leader in these left him somewhat discredited? Samson was just of that sanguine venturesome disposition which makes light of difficulties and is always courting defeat. It was easy for him with his immense bodily strength to break through where other men were entrapped. A frequent result of the frays into which he hurried must have been, we imagine, to make his own friends doubt him rather than to injure the enemy. At all events he became no commander like Gideon or Jephthah, and the men of Judah, if not of Dan, while they acknowledged his calling and his power, began to think of him as a dangerous champion.

So far we have the merest hints by which to go, but the narrative becomes more detailed when it approaches the time of Samson's marriage. A strange union it is for a hero of Israel. What made him think of going down among the Philistines for a wife? How can the sacred writer say that the thing was of the Lord? Let us try to understand the circumstances. Between the people of Zorah and the villagers of Timnah a few miles down the valley on the other side who, though Philistines, were presumably not of the fighting sort, there was a kind of enforced neighbourliness. They could not have lived at all unless they had been content, Philistines for their part, Hebrews for theirs, to let the general enmity sleep. Samson by observing certain precautions and keeping his Hebrew tongue quiet was safe enough in Timnah, an object of fear rather than himself in danger. At the same time there may have been a touch of bravado in his rambles to the Philistine settlement, and the young woman of whom he caught a passing glance, perhaps at the spring, had very likely all the more charm for him that she was of the strong hostile race. History as well as fiction supplies instances in which this fascination does its work, family feuds, oppositions of caste and religion directing the eye and the fancy instead of repelling. In his sudden wilful way Samson resolved, and his mind once made up no one in Zorah could induce him to alter it. "The thing was of the Lord; for he sought an occasion against the Philistines." Perhaps Samson thought the woman would be denied to him, a straight way to a quarrel. But more probably it is the outcome of the whole pitiful business that is in the mind of the historian. After the event he traces the hand of Providence.

As we pass with Samson and his parents down to Timnah we cannot but agree with Manoah in his objection, "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?" It was emphatically one of those cases in which liking should not have led. An impetuous man is not to be excused; much less those who claim to be exceedingly rational and yet go against reason because of what they call love — or, worse, apart from love. General rules are with difficulty laid down in matters of this sort, and to deny the right of love would be the worst error of all. So far as our popular writers are concerned, we must allow that they wonderfully balance the claims of "arrangement" and honest affection, declaring strongly for the latter. But yet such a difference as between faith and idolatry, between piety and godlessness, is a barrier that only the blindest folly can overleap when marriage is in view. Daughters of the Philistines may be "most divinely fair," most graceful and plausible; men who worship Moloch or Mammon, or nothing but themselves, may have most persuasive tongues and a large share of this world's goods. But to mate with these, whatever liking there may be, is an experiment too rash for venturing. In Christian society now, is there not much need to repeat old warnings and revive a sense of peril that seems to have decayed? The conscience of piously bred young people was alive once to the danger and sin of the unequal yoke. In the rush for position and means marriage is being made by both sexes, even in most religious circles, an instrument and opportunity of earthly ambition, and it must be said that foolish romance is less to be feared than this carefulness in which conscience and heart alike submit to the imperious cravings of sheer worldliness. Novels have much to answer for; yet they can make one claim — they have done something for simple humanity. We want more than nature, however. Christian teaching must be heard and the Christian conscience must be rekindled. The hope of the world waits on that devout simplicity of life which exalts spiritual aims and spiritual comradeship and by its beauty shames all meaner choice. In marriage not only should heart go out to heart, but mind to mind and soul to soul; and the spirit of one who knows Christ can never unite with a self worshipper or a servant of Mammon.

Returning to Samson's case, he would possibly have said that he wished an adventurous marriage, that to wed a Danite woman would have in it too little risk, would be too dull, too commonplace a business for him, that he wanted a plunge into new waters. It is in this way, one must believe, many decide the great affair. So far from thinking they put thought away; a liking seizes them and in they leap. Yet in the best considered marriage that can be made is there not quite enough of adventure for any sane man or woman? Always there remain points of character unknown, unsuspected, possibilities of sickness, trouble, privation that fill the future with

uncertainty, so far as human vision goes. It is, in truth, a serious undertaking for men and women, and to be entered upon only with the distinct assurance that divine providence clears the way and invites our advance. Yet again we are not to be suspicious of each other, probing every trait and habit to the quick. Marriage is the great example and expression of the trust which it is the glory of men and women to exercise and to deserve, the great symbol on earth of the confidences and unions of immortality. Matter of deep thankfulness it is that so many who begin the married life and end it on a low level, having scarcely a glimpse of the ideal, though they fail of much do not fail of all, but in some patience, some courage and fidelity show that God has not left them to nature and to earth. And happy are they who adventure together on no way of worldly policy or desire but in the pure love and heavenly faith which link their lives forever in binding them to God.

Samson, reasoned with by his parents, waved their objection royally aside and ordered them to aid his design. It was necessary, according to the custom of the country, that they should conduct the negotiations for the marriage, and his wilfulness imposed on them a task that went against their consciences. So they found themselves with the common reward of worshipping parents. They had toiled for him, made much of him, boasted about him no doubt; and now their boy-god turns round and commands them in a thing they cannot believe to be right. They must choose between Jehovah and Samson and they have to give up Jehovah and serve their own lad. So David's pride in Absalom ended with the rebellion that drove the aged father from Jerusalem and exposed him to the contempt of Israel. It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth, the yoke even of parents who are not so wise as they might be and do not command much reverence. The order of family life among us, involving no absolute bondage, is recognised as a wholesome discipline by all who attain to any understanding of life. In Israel, as we know, filial respect and obedience were virtues sacredly commended, and it is one mark of Samson's ill-regulated self-esteeming disposition that he neglected the obvious duty of deference to the judgment of his parents.

On the way to Timnah the young man had an adventure which was to play an important part in his life. Turning aside out of the road he found himself suddenly confronted by a lion which, doubtless as much surprised as he was by the encounter, roared against him. The moment was not without its peril; but Samson was equal to the emergency and springing on the beast "rent it as he would have rent a kid."

The affair however did not seem worth referring to when he joined his parents, and they went on their way. It was as when a man of strong moral principle and force meets a temptation dangerous to the weak, to him an enemy easily overcome. His vigorous truth or honour or chastity makes short work of it. He lays hold of it and in a moment it is torn in pieces. The great talk made about temptations, the ready excuses many find for themselves when they yield, are signs of a feebleness of will which in other ranges of life the same persons would be ashamed to own. It is to be feared that we often encourage moral weakness and unfaithfulness to duty by exaggerating the force of evil influences, Why should it be reckoned a feat to be honest, to be generous, to swear to one's own hurt? Under the dispensation of the Spirit of God, with Christ as our guide and stay, every one of us should act boldly in the encounter with the lions of temptation. Tenderness to the weak is a Christian duty, but there is danger that young and old alike, hearing much of the seductions of sin, little of the ready help of the Almighty, submit easily where they should conquer and reckon on divine forbearance when they ought to expect reproach and contempt. Our generation needs to hear the words of St. Paul: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able." Is there a tremendous pressure constantly urging us towards that which is evil? In our large cities especially is the power of iniquity almost despotic? True enough. Yet men and women should be braced and strengthened by insistence on the other side. In Christian lands at least it is unquestionable that for every enticement to evil there is a stronger allurements to good, that against every argument for immorality ten are set more potent in behalf of virtue, that where sin abounds grace does much more abound. Young persons are indeed tempted; but nothing will be gained by speaking to them or about them as if they were children incapable of decision, of whom it can only be expected that they will fail. By the Spirit of God, indeed, all moral victories are gained; the natural virtue of the best is uncertain and cannot be trusted in the trying hour, and he only who has a full inward life and earnest Christian purpose is ready for the test. But the Spirit of God is given. His sustaining, purifying, strengthening power is with us. We do not breathe deep, and then we complain that our hearts cease to beat with holy courage and resolve.

At Timnah, where life was perhaps freer than in a Hebrew town, Samson appears to have seen the woman who had caught his fancy; and he now found her, Philistine as she was, quite to his mind. It must have been by a low standard he judged, and many possible topics of conversation must

have been carefully avoided. Under the circumstances, indeed, the difficulty of understanding each other's language may have been their safety. Certainly one who professed to be a fearer of God, a patriotic Israelite, had to shut his eyes to many facts or thrust them from sight when he determined to wed this daughter of the enemy. But when we choose we can do much in the way of keeping things out of view which we do not wish to see. Persons who are at daggers drawn on fifty points show the greatest possible affability when it is their interest to be at one. Love gets over difficulties and so does policy. Occasions are found when the anxiously orthodox can join in some comfortable compact with the agnostic, and the vehement state churchman with the avowed secularist and revolutionary. And it seems to be only when two are nearly of the same creed, with just some hairsbreadth of divergence on a few articles of belief, that the obstacles to happy union are apt to become insurmountable. Then every word is watched, each tone noted with suspicion. It is not between Hebrew and Philistine but between Ephraim and Judah that alliances are difficult to form. We hope for the time when the long and bitter disputes of Christendom shall be overcome by love of truth and God. Yet first there must be an end to the strange reconcilings and unions which like Samson's marriage often confuse and obstruct the way of Christian people.

There is an interval of some months after the marriage has been arranged and the bridegroom is on his way once more down the valley to Timnah. As he passes the scene of his encounter with the lion he turns aside to see the carcase and finds that bees have made it their home. Vultures and ants have first found it and devoured the flesh, then the sun has thoroughly dried the skin and in the hollow of the ribs the bees have settled. At considerable risk Samson possesses himself of some of the combs and goes on eating the honey, giving a portion also to his father and mother. It is again a type, and this time of the sweetness to be found in the recollection of virtuous energy and overcoming. Not that we are to be always dwelling on our faithfulness even for the purpose of thanking God Who gave us moral strength. But when circumstances recall a trial and victory it is surely matter of proper joy to remember that here we were strong enough to be true, and there to be honest and pure when the odds seemed to be against us. The memories of a good man or good woman are sweeter than the honeycomb, though tempered often by sorrow over the human instruments of evil who had to be struggled with and thrust aside in the sharp conflict with sin and wrong. Very few in youth or middle life seem to think of this joy, which makes beautiful many a worn and aged face on earth and will not be the least element in the felicity of heaven. Too often we bear

burdens because we must; we are dragged through trim and distress to comparative quiet; we do not comprehend what is at stake, what we may do and gain, what we are kept from losing; and so the look across our past has none of the glow of triumph, little of the joy of harvest. For man's blessedness is not to be separated from personal striving. In fidelity he must sow that he may reap in strength, in courage that he may reap in gladness. He is made not for mere success, not for mere safety, but for overcoming.

We are not finished with the lion; he next appears covertly, in a riddle. Samson has shown himself a strong man; now we hear him speak and he proves a wit. It is the wedding festival, and thirty young men have been gathered — to honour the bridegroom, shall we say? — or to watch him? Perhaps from the first there has been suspicion in the Philistine mind, and it seems necessary to have as many as thirty to one in order to overawe Samson. In the course of the feast there might be quarrels, and without a strong guard on the Hebrew youth Timnah might be in danger. As the days went by the company fell to proposing riddles and Samson, probably annoyed by the Philistines who watched every movement, gave them his, on terms quite fair, yet leaving more than a loophole for discontent and strife. In the conditions we see the man perfectly self-reliant, full of easy superiority, courting danger and defying envy. The thirty may win — if they can. In that case he knows how he will pay the forfeit. "Put forth thy riddle," they said, "that we may hear it;" and the strong mellow Hebrew voice chanted the puzzling verse:

*"Out of the eater came forth meat
Out of the strong came forth sweetness."*

Now in itself this is simply a curiosity of old-world table talk. It is preserved here mainly because of its bearing on following events; and certainly the statement which has been made that it contained a gospel for the Philistines is one we cannot endorse. Yet like many witty sayings the riddle has a range of meaning far wider than Samson intended. Adverse influences conquered, temptation mastered, difficulties overcome, the struggle of faithfulness will supply us not only with happy recollections but also with arguments against infidelity, with questions that confound the unbeliever. One who can glory in tribulations that have brought experience and hope, in bonds and imprisonments that have issued in a keener sense of liberty, who having nothing yet possesses all things — such a man questioning the denier of divine providence cannot be answered. Invigoration has come out of that which threatened life and joy out of that which made for sorrow. The man who is in covenant with God is helped by

nature; its forces serve him; he is fed with honey from the rock and with the finest of the wheat. When out of the mire of trouble and the deep waters of despondency he comes forth braver, more hopeful, strongly confident in the love of God, sure of the eternal foundation of life, what can be said in denial of the power that has filled him with strength and peace? Here is an argument that can be used by every Christian, and ought to be in every Christian's hand. Out of his personal experience each should be able to state problems and put inquiries unanswerable by unbelief. For unless there is a living God Whose favour is life, Whose fellowship inspires and ennobles the soul, the strength which has come through weakness, the hope that sprang up in the depth of sorrow cannot be accounted for. There are natural sequences in which no mystery lies. When one who has been defamed and injured turns on his enemy and pursues him in revenge, when one who has been defeated sinks back in languor and waits in pitiful inaction for death, these are results easily traced to their cause. But the man of faith bears witness to sequences of a different kind. His fellows have persecuted him, and he cares for them still. Death has bereaved him, and he can smile in its face. Afflictions have been multiplied and he glories in them. The darkness has fallen and he rejoices more than in the noontide of prosperity. Out of the eater has come forth meat, out of the strong has come forth sweetness. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." The paradox of the life of Christ thus stated by Himself is the supreme instance of that demonstration of divine power which the history of every Christian should clearly and constantly support.

CHAPTER 21

DAUNTLESS IN BATTLE, IGNORANTLY BRAVE — JUDGES 15

GIVEN a man of strong passions and uninstructed conscience, wild courage and giant energy, with the sense of a mission which he has to accomplish against his country's enemies, so that he reckons himself justified in doing them injury or killing them in the name of God, and you have no complete hero, but a real and interesting man. Such a character, however, does not command our admiration. The enthusiasm we feel in tracing the career of Deborah or Gideon fails us in reviewing these stories of revenge in which the Hebrew champion appears as cruel and reckless as an uncircumcised Philistine. When we see Samson leaving the feast by which his marriage has been celebrated and marching down to Ashkelon where in cold blood he puts thirty men to death for the sake of their clothing, when we see a countryside ablaze with the standing corn which he has kindled, we are as indignant with him as with the Philistines when they burn his wife and her father with fire. Nor can we find anything like excuse for Samson on the ground of zeal in the service of pure religion. Had he been a fanatical Hebrew mad against idolatry, his conduct might find some apology; but no such clue offers. The Danite is moved chiefly by selfish and vain passions, and his sense of official duty is all too weak and vague. We see little patriotism and not a trace of religious fervour. He is serving a great purpose with some sincerity, but not wisely, not generously nor greatly. Samson is a creature of impulse working out his life in blind almost animal fashion, perceiving the next thing that is to be done not in the light of religion or duty, but of opportunity and revenge. The first of his acts against the Philistines was no promising start in a heroic career, and almost at every point in the story of his life there is something that takes away our respect and sympathy. But the life is full of moral suggestion and warning. He is a real and striking example of the wild Berserker type.

1. For one thing this stands out as a clear principle that a man has his life to live, his work to do, alone if others will not help, imperfectly if not in the best fashion, half-wrongly if the right cannot be clearly seen. This world is not for sleep, is not for inaction and sloth. "Whatsoever thy hand finds to do, do it with thy might." A thousand men in Dan, ten thousand in Judah did nothing that became men, sat at home while their grapes and olives

grew, abjectly sowed and reaped their fields in dread of the Philistines, making no attempt to free their country from the hated yoke. Samson, not knowing rightly how to act, did go to work and, at any rate, lived. Among the dull spiritless Israelites of the day, three thousand of whom actually came on one occasion to beseech him to give himself up and bound him with ropes that he might be safely passed over to the enemy, Samson with all his faults looks like a man. Those men of Dan and Judah would slay the Philistines if they dared. It is not because they are better than Samson that they do not go down to Ashkelon and kill. Their consciences do not keep them back; it is their cowardice. One who with some vision of a duty owing to his people goes forth and acts, contrasts well with these chicken hearted thousands.

We are not at present stating the complete motive of human activity nor setting forth the ideal of life. To that we shall come afterwards. But before you can have ideal action you must have action. Before you can have life of a fine and noble type you must have life. Here is an absolute primal necessity; and it is the key to both evolutions, the natural and the spiritual. First the human creature must find its power and capability and must use these to some end, be it even a wrong end, rather than none; after this the ideal is caught and proper moral activity becomes possible. We need not look for the full corn in the ear till the seed has sprouted and grown and sent its roots well into the soil. With this light the roll of Hebrew fame is cleared and we can trace freely the growth of life. The heroes are not perfect; they have perhaps barely caught the light of the ideal; but they have strength to will and to do, they have faith that this power is a divine gift, and they having it are God's pioneers.

The need is that men should in the first instance live so that they may be faithful to their calling. Deborah looking round beheld her country under the sore oppression of Jabin, saw the need and answered to it. Others only vegetated; she rose up in human stature resolute to live. That also was what Gideon began to do when at the divine call he demolished the altar on the height of Ophrah; and Jephthah fought and endured by the same law. So soon as men begin to live there is hope of them.

Now the hindrances to life are these — first, slothfulness, the disposition to drift, to let things go; second, fear, the restriction imposed on effort of body or of mind by some opposing force ingloriously submitted to; third, ignoble dependence on others. The proper life of man is never reached by many because they are too indolent to win it. To forecast and devise, to try

experiments, pushing out in this direction and that is too much for them. Some opportunity for doing more and better lies but a mile away or a few yards; they see but will not venture upon it. Their country is sinking under a despot or a weak and foolish government; they do nothing to avert ruin, things will last their time. Or again, their church is stirred with throbs of a new duty, a new and keen anxiety; but they refuse to feel any thrill, or feeling it a moment they repress the disturbing influence. They will not be troubled with moral and spiritual questions, calls to action that make life severe, high, heroic. Often this is due to want of physical or mental vigour. Men and women are overborne by the labour required of them, the weary tale of bricks. Even from youth they have had burdens to bear so heavy that hope is never kindled. But there are many who have no such excuse. Let us alone, they say, we have no appetite for exertion, for strife, for the duties that set life in a fever. The old ways suit us, we will go on as our fathers have gone. The tide of opportunity ebbs away and are left stranded.

Next, and akin, there is fear, the mood of those who hear the calls of life but hear more clearly the threatenings of sense and time. Often it comes in the form of a dread of change, apprehension as regards the unknown seas on which effort or thought would launch forth. Let us be still, say the prudent; better to bear the ills we have than fly to others that we know not of. Are we ground down by the Philistines? Better suffer than be killed. Are our laws unjust and oppressive? Better rest content than risk revolution and the upturning of everything. Are we not altogether sure of the basis of our belief? Better leave it unexamined than begin with inquiries the end of which cannot be foreseen. Besides, they argue, God means us to be content. Our lot in the world however hard is of His giving; the faith we hold is of His bestowing. Shall we not provoke Him to anger if we move in revolution or in inquiry. Still it is life they lose. A man who does not think about the truths he rests on has an impotent mind. One who does not feel it laid on him to go forward, to be brave, to make the world better has an impotent soul. Life is a constant reaching after the unattained for ourselves and for the world.

And lastly there is ignoble dependence on others. So many will not exert themselves because they wait for some one to come and lift them up. They do not think, nor do they understand that instruction brought to them is not life. No doubt it is the plan of God to help, the many by the instrumentality of the few, a whole nation or world by one. Again and again we have seen this illustrated in Hebrew history, and elsewhere the fact constantly meets us. There is one Luther for Europe, one Cromwell for England, one Knox

for Scotland, one Paul for early Christianity. But at the same time it is because life is wanting, because men have the deadly habit of dependence that the hero must be brave for them and the reformer must break their bonds. The true law of life on all levels, from that of bodily effort upwards, is self-help; without it there is only an infancy of being. He who is in a pit must exert himself if he is to be delivered. He who is in spiritual darkness must come to the light if he is to be saved.

Now we see in Samson a man who in his degree lived. He had strength like the strength of ten; he had also the consecration of his vow and the sense of a divine constraint and mandate. These things urged him to life and made activity necessary to him. He might have reclined in careless ease like many around. But sloth did not hold him nor fear. He wanted no man's countenance nor help. He lived. His mere exertion of power was the sign of higher possibilities.

Live at all hazards, imperfectly if perfection is not attainable, half-wrongly if the right cannot be seen. Is this perilous advice? From one point of view it may seem very dangerous. For many are energetic in so imperfect a way, in so blundering and false a way that it might appear better for them to remain quiet, practically dead than degrade and darken the life of the race by their mistaken or immoral vehemence. You read of those traders among the islands of the Pacific who, afraid that their nefarious traffic should suffer if missionary work succeeded, urged the natives to kill the missionaries or drive them away, and when they had gained their end quickly appeared on the scene to exchange for the pillaged stores of the mission house muskets and gunpowder and villainous strong drink. May it not be said that these traders were living out their lives as much as the devoted teachers who had risked everything for the sake of doing good? Napoleon I, when the scheme of the empire presented itself to him and all his energies were bent on climbing to the summit of affairs in France and in Europe — was not he living according to a conception of what was greatest and best? Would it not have been better if those traders and the ambitious Corsican alike had been content to vegetate — inert and harmless through their days? And there are multitudes of examples. The poet Byron for one — could the world not well spare even his finest verse to be rid of his unlawful energy in personal vice and in coarse profane word?

One has to confess the difficulty of the problem, the danger of praising mere vigour. Yet if there is risk on the one side the risk on the other is

greater: and truth demands risk, defies peril. It is unquestionable that any family of men when it ceases to be enterprising and energetic is of no more use in the economy of things. Its land is a necropolis. The dead cannot praise God. The choice is between activity that takes many a wrong direction, hurrying men often towards perdition, yet at every point capable of redemption, and on the other hand inglorious death, that existence which has no prospect but to be swallowed up of the darkness. And while such is the common choice there is also this to be noted that inertness is not certainly purer than activity, though it may appear so merely by contrast. The active life compels us to judge of it; the other, a mere negation, calls for no judgment, yet is in itself a moral want, an evil and injury. Conscience being unexercised decay and death rule all.

Men cannot be saved by their own effort and vigour. Most true. But if they make no attempt to advance towards strength, dominion, and fulness of existence, they are the prey of force and evil. Nor will it suffice that they simply exert themselves to keep body and soul together. The life is more than meat. We must toil not only that we may continue to subsist, but for personal distinctness and freedom. Where there are strong men, resolute minds, earnestness of some kind, there is soil in which spiritual seed may strike root. The dead tree can produce neither leaf nor flower. In short, if there is to be a human race at all for the divine glory it can only be in the divine way, by the laws that govern existence of every degree.

2. We come, however, to the compensating principle of responsibility — the law of Duty which stands over energy in the range of our life. No man, no race is justified by force or as we sometimes say by doing. It is faith that saves. Samson has the rude material of life; but though his action were far purer and nobler it could not make him a spiritual man: his heart is not purged of sin nor set on God.

Granted that the time was rough, chaotic, cloudy, that the idea of injuring the Philistines in every possible way was imposed on the Danite by his nation's abject state, that he had to take what means lay in his power for accomplishing the end. But possessed of energy he was deficient in conscience, and so failed of noble life. This may be said for him that he did not turn against the men of Judah who came to bind him and give him up. Within a certain range he understood his responsibility. But surely a higher life than he lived, better plans than he followed were possible to one who could have learned the will of God at Shiloh, who was bound to God by a vow of purity and had that constant reminder of the Holy Lord of Israel. It

is no uncommon thing for men to content themselves with one sacrament, one observance which is reckoned enough for salvation — honesty in business, abstinence from strong drink, attendance on church ordinances. This they do and keep the rest of existence for unrestrained self-pleasing, as though salvation lay in a restraint or a form. But whoever can think is bound to criticise life, to try his own life, to seek the way of salvation, and that means being true to the best he knows and can know; it means believing in the will of God. Something higher than his own impulse is to guide him. He is free, yet responsible. His activity, however great, has no real power, no vindication unless it falls in with the course of divine law and purpose. He lives by faith.

Generally there is one clear principle which, if a man held to it, would keep him right in the main. It may not be of a very high order, yet it will prepare the way for something better and meanwhile serve his need. And for Samson one simple law of duty was to keep clear of all private relations and entanglements with the Philistines. There was nothing to hinder him from seeing that to be safe and right as a rule of life. They were Israel's enemies and his own. He should have been free to act against them: and when he married a daughter of the race he forfeited as an honourable man the freedom he ought to have had as a son of Israel. Doubtless he did not understand fully the evil of idolatry nor the divine law that Hebrews were to keep themselves separate from the worshippers of false gods. Yet the instincts of the race to which he belonged, fidelity to his forefathers and compatriots made their claim upon him. There was a duty too which he owed to himself. As a brave strong man he was discredited by the line of action which he followed. His honour lay in being an open enemy to the Philistines, his dishonour in making underhand excuses for attacking them. It was base to seek occasion against them when he married the woman at Timnah, and from one act of baseness he went on to others because of that first error. And chiefly Samson failed in his fidelity to God. Scarcely ever was the name of Jehovah dragged through the mire as it was by him. The God of truth, the divine Guardian of faithfulness, the God who is light, in Whom is no darkness at all, was made by Samson's deeds to appear as the patron of murder and treachery. We can hardly allow that an Israelite was so ignorant of the ordinary laws of morality as to suppose that faith need not be kept with idolaters; there were traditions of his people which prevented such a notion. One who knew of Abraham's dealings with the Hittite Ephron and his rebuke in Egypt could not imagine that the Hebrew lay under no debt of human equity and honor to the Philistine. Are there men among ourselves who think no faithfulness is due by the civilised to

the savage? Are there professed servants of Christ who dare to suggest that no faith need be kept with heretics? They reveal their own dishonour as men, their own falseness and meanness. The primal duty of intelligent and moral beings cannot be so dismissed. And even Samson should have been openly the Philistines' enemy or not at all. If they were cruel, rapacious, mean, he ought to have shown that Jehovah's servant was of a different stamp. We cannot believe morality to have been at so low an ebb among the Hebrews that the popular leader did not know better than he acted. He became a judge in Israel, and his judgeship would have been a pretence unless he had some of the justice, truth, and honour which God demanded of men. Beginning in a very mistaken way he must have risen to a higher conception of duty, otherwise his rule would have been a disaster to the tribes he governed.

Conscience has originated in fear and is to decay with ignorance, say some. Already that extraordinary piece of folly has been answered. Conscience is the correlative of power, the guide of energy. If the one decays, so must the other. Living strongly, energetically, making experiments, seeking liberty and dominion, pressing towards the higher, we are ever to acknowledge the responsibility which governs life. By what we know of the divine will we are to order every purpose and scheme and advance to further knowledge. There are victories we might win, there are methods by which we might harass those who do us wrong. One voice says, Snatch the victories, go down by night and injure the foe, insinuate what you cannot prove, while the sentinels sleep plunge your spear through the heart of a persecuting Saul. But another voice asks, Is this the way to assert moral life? Is this the line for a man to take? The true man swears to his own hurt, suffers and is strong, does in the face of day what he has it in him to do and, if he fails, dies a true man still. He is not responsible for obeying commands of which he is ignorant, nor for mistakes which he cannot avoid. One like Samson is clean handed in what it would be unutterably base for us to do. But close beside every man are such guiding ideas as straightforwardness, sincerity, honesty. Each of us knows his duty so far and cannot deceive himself by supposing that God will excuse him in acting, even for what he counts a good end, as a cheat and a hypocrite. In politics the rule is as clear as in companionship, in war as in love.

It has not been asserted that Samson was without a sense of responsibility. He had it, and kept his vow. He had it, and fought against the Philistines. He did some brave things, openly and like a man. He had a vision of Israel's need and God's will. Had this not been true he could have done no

good; the whole strength of the hero would have been wasted. But he came short of effecting what he might have effected just because he was not wise and serious. His strokes missed their aim. In truth Samson never went earnestly about the task of delivering Israel. In his fulness of power he was always half in sport, making random shots, indulging his own humour. And we may find in his career no inapt illustration of the careless way in which the conflict with the evils of our time is carried on. With all the rage for societies and organisations there is much haphazard activity, and the fanatic for rule has his contrast in the freelance who hates the thought of responsibility. A curious charitableness too confuses the air. There are men who are full of ardour today and strike in with some hot scheme against social wrongs, and the next day are to be seen sitting at a feast with the very persons most to blame, under some pretext of finding occasion against them or showing that there is “nothing personal.” This perplexes the whole campaign. It is usually mere bravado rather than charity, a mischief, not a virtue.

Israel must be firm and coherent if it is to win liberty from the Philistines. Christians must stand by each other steadily if they are to overcome infidelity and rescue the slaves of sin. The feats of a man who holds aloof from the church because he is not willing to be bound by its rules count for little in the great warfare of the age. Many there are among our literary men, politicians, and even philanthropists who strike in now and again in a Christian way and with unquestionably Christian purpose against the bad institutions and social evils of our time, but have no proper basis or aim of action and maintain towards Christian organisations and churches a constant attitude of criticism. Samson-like they make showy random attacks on “bigotry,” “inconsistency” and the like. It is not they who will deliver man from hardness and worldliness of soul; not they who will bring in the reign of love and truth.

3. Looking at Samson’s efforts during the first part of his career and observing the want of seriousness and wisdom that marred them, we may say that all he did was to make clear and deep the cleft between Philistines and Hebrews. When he appears on the scene there are signs of a dangerous intermixture of the two races, and his own marriage is one. The Hebrews were apparently inclined to settle down in partial subjection to the Philistines and make the best they could of the situation, hoping perhaps that by and by they might reach a state of comfortable alliance and equality. Samson may have intended to end that movement or he may not. But he certainly did much to end it. After the first series of his exploits, crowned

by the slaughter at Lehi, there was an open rupture with the Philistines which had the best effect on Hebrew morals and religion. It was clear that one Israelite had to be reckoned with whose strong arm dealt deadly blows. The Philistines drew away in defeat. The Hebrews learned that they needed not to remain in any respect dependent or afraid. This kind of division grows into hatred; but, as things were, dislike was Israel's safety. The Philistines did harm as masters; as friends they would have done even more. Enmity meant revulsion from Dagon worship and all the social customs of the opposed race. For this the Hebrews were indebted to Samson; and although he was not himself true all along to the principle of separation, yet in his final act he emphasised it so by destroying the temple of Gaza that the lesson was driven home beyond the possibility of being forgotten.

It is no slight service those do who as critics of parties and churches show them clearly where they stand, who are to be reckoned as enemies, what alliances are perilous. There are many who are exceedingly easy in their beliefs, too ready to yield to the *Zeit Geist* that would obliterate definite belief and with it the vigour and hope of mankind. Alliance with Philistines is thought of as a good, not a risk, and the whole of a party or church may be so comfortably settling in the new breadth and freedom of this association that the certain end of it is not seen. Then is the time for the resolute stroke that divides party from party, creed from creed. A reconciler is the best helper of religion at one juncture; at another it is the Samson who standing alone perhaps, frowned on equally by the leaders and the multitude, makes occasion to kindle controversy and set sharp variance between this side and that. Luther struck in so. His great act was one that "rent Christendom in twain." Upon the Israel which looked on afraid or suspicious he forced the division which had been for centuries latent. Does not our age need a new divider? You set forth to testify against Philistines and soon find that half your acquaintances are on terms of the most cordial friendship with them, and that attacks upon them which have any point are reckoned too hot and eager to be tolerated in society. To the few who are resolute duty is made difficult and protest painful: the reformer has to bear the sins and even the scorn of many who should appear with him.

CHAPTER 22

PLEASURE AND PERIL IN GAZA — ~~071601~~ JUDGES 16:1-3

By courage and energy Samson so distinguished himself in his own tribe and on the Philistine border that he was recognised as judge. Government of any kind was a boon, and he kept rude order, as much perhaps by overawing the restless enemy as by administering justice in Israel. Whether the period of twenty years assigned to Samson's judgeship intervened between the fight at Lehi and the visit to Gaza we cannot tell. The chronology is vague, as might be expected in a narrative based on popular tradition. Most likely the twenty years cover the whole time during which Samson was before the public as hero and acknowledged chief.

Samson went down to Gaza, which was the principal Philistine city situated near the Mediterranean coast some forty miles from Zorah. For what reason did he venture into that hostile place? It may, of course, have been that he desired to learn by personal inspection what was its strength, to consider whether it might be attacked with any hope of success; and if that was so we would be disposed to justify him. As the champion and judge of Israel he could not but feel the danger to which his people were constantly exposed from the Philistine power so near to them and in those days always becoming more formidable. He had to a certain extent secured deliverance for his country as he was expected to do; but deliverance was far from complete, could not be complete till the strength of the enemy was broken. At great risk to himself he may have gone to play the spy and devise, if possible, some plan of attack. In this case he would be an example of those who with the best and purest motives, seeking to carry the war of truth and purity into the enemy's country, go down into the haunts of vice to see what men do and how best the evils that injure society may be overcome. There is risk in such adventure; but it is nobly undertaken, and even if we do not feel disposed to imitate we must admire. Bold servants of Christ may feel constrained to visit Gaza and learn for themselves what is done there. Beyond this too is a kind of adventure which the whole church justifies in proportion to its own faith and zeal. We see St. Paul and his companions in Ephesus, in Philippi, in Athens and other heathen towns, braving the perils which threaten them there, often attacked, sometimes in the jaws of death, heroic in the highest sense. And we see the modern missionary with like heroism landing on savage coasts and at the constant

risk of life teaching the will of God in a sublime confidence that it shall awaken the most sunken nature; a confidence never at fault.

But we are obliged to doubt whether Samson had in view any scheme against the Philistine power; and we may be sure that he was on no mission for the good of Gaza. Of a patriotic or generous purpose there is no trace; the motive is unquestionably of a different kind. From his youth this man was restless, adventurous, ever craving some new excitement good or bad. He could do anything but quietly pursue a path of duty; and in the small towns of Dan and the valleys of Judah he had little to excite and interest him. There life went on in a dull way from year to year, without gaiety, bustle, enterprise. Had the chief been deeply interested in religion, had he been a reformer of the right kind, he would have found opportunity enough for exertion and a task into which he might have thrown all his force. There were heathen images to break in pieces, altars and high places to demolish. To banish Baal worship and the rites of Ashtoreth from the land, to bring the customs of the people under the law of Jehovah would have occupied him fully. But Samson did not incline to any such doings; he had no passion for reform. We never see in his life one such moment as Gideon and Jephthah knew of high religious daring. Dark hours he had, sombre enough, as at Lehi after the slaughter. But his was the melancholy of a life without aim sufficient to its strength, without a vision matching its energy. To suffer for God's cause is the rarest of joys, and that Samson never knew though he was judged in Israel.

We imagine then that in default of any excitement such as he craved in the towns of his own land he turned his eyes to the Philistine cities which presented a marked contrast. There life was energetic and gay, there many pleasures were to be had. New colonists were coming in their swift ships, and the streets presented a scene of constant animation. The strong eager man, full of animal passion, found the life he craved in Gaza, where he mingled with the crowds and heard tales of strange existence. Nor was there wanting the opportunity for enjoyment which at home he could not indulge. Beyond the critical observation of the elders of Dan he could take his fill of sensual pleasure. Not without danger of course. In some brawl the Philistines might close upon him. But he trusted to his strength to escape from their hands, and the risk increased the excitement. We must suppose that, having seen the nearer and less important towns such as Ekron, Gath, and Ashkelon he now ventured to Gaza in quest of amusement, in order, as people say, to see the world.

A constant peril this of seeking excitement, especially in an age of high civilisation. The means of variety and stimulus are multiplied, and ever the craving outruns them, a craving yielded to, with little or no resistance, by many who should know better. The moral teacher must recognise the desire for variety and excitement as perhaps the chief of all the hindrances he has now to overcome. For one who desires duty there are scores who find it dull and tame and turn from it; without sense of fault, to the gaieties of civilised society in which there is "nothing wrong," as they say, or at least so little of the positively wrong that conscience is easily appeased. The religious teacher finds the demand for "brightness" and variety before him at every turn; he is indeed often touched by it himself and follows with more or less of doubt a path that leads straight from his professed goal. "Is amusement devilish?" asks one. Most people reply with a smile that life must be lively or it is not worth having. And the Philistinism that attracts them with its dash and gaudiness is not far away nor hard to reach. It is not necessary to go across to the Continent where the brilliance of Vienna or Paris offers a contrast to the grey dulness of a country village; nor even to London where amid the lures of the midnight streets there is peril of the gravest kind. Those who are restless and foolhardy can find a Gaza and a valley of Sorek nearer home, in the next market town. Philistine life, lax in morals, full of rattle and glitter, heat and change, in gambling, in debauchery, in sheer audacity of movement and talk, presents its allurements in our streets, has its acknowledged haunts in our midst. Young people brought up to fear God in quiet homes whether of town or country are enticed by the whispered counsels of comrades half ashamed of the things they say, yet eager for more companionship in what they secretly know to be folly or worse. Young women are the prey of those who disgrace manhood and womanhood by the offers they make, the insidious lies they tell. The attraction once felt is apt to master. As the current that rushes swiftly bears them with it they exult in the rapid motion even while life is nearing the fatal cataract. Subtle is the progress of infidelity. From the persuasion that enjoyment is lawful and has no peril in it the mind quickly passes to a doubt of the old laws and warnings. Is it so certain that there is a reward for purity and unworldliness? Is not all the talk about a life to come a jangle of vain words? The present is a reality, death a certainty, life a swiftly passing possession. They who enjoy know what they are getting. The rest is dismissed as altogether in the air.

With Samson, as there was less of faith and law to fling aside, there was less hardening of heart. He was half a heathen always, more conscious of bodily than of moral strength, reliant on that which he had, indisposed to

seek from God the holy vigour which he valued little. At Gaza, where moral weakness endangered life, his well knit muscles released him. We see him among the Philistines entrapped, apparently in a position from which there is no escape: The gate is closed and guarded. In the morning he is to be seized and killed. But aware of his danger, his mind not put completely off its balance as yet by the seductions of the place, he arises at midnight and, plucking the doors of the city gate from their sockets, carries them to the top of a hill which fronts Hebron.

Here is represented what may at first be quite possible to one who has gone into a place of temptation and danger. There is for a time a power of resolution and action which when the peril of the hour is felt may be brought into use. Out of the house which is like the gate of hell, out of the hands of vile tempters it is possible to burst in quick decision and regain liberty. In the valley of Sorek it may be otherwise, but here the danger is pressing and rouses the will. Yet the power of rising suddenly against temptation, of breaking from the company of the impure is not to be reckoned on. It is not of ourselves we can be strong and resolute enough, but of grace. And can a man expect divine succour in a harlot's den? He thinks he may depend upon a certain self-respect, a certain disgust at vile things and dishonourable life. But vice can be made to seem beautiful, it can overcome the aversion springing from self-respect and the best education. In the history of one and another of the famous and brilliant, from the god-like youth of Macedon to the genius of yesterday, the same unutterably sad lesson is taught us; we trace the quick descent of vice. Self-respect? Surely to Goethe, to George Sand, to Musset, to Burns that should have remained, a saving salt. But it is clear that man has not the power of preserving himself. While he says in his heart, That is beneath me; I have better taste; I shall never be guilty of such a low, false, and sickening thing — he has already committed himself.

Samson heard the trampling of feet in the streets and was warned of physical danger. When midnight came he lost no time. But he was too late. The liberty he regained was not the liberty he had lost. Before he entered that house in Gaza, before he sat down in it, before he spoke to the woman there he should have fled. He did not; and in the valley of Sorek his strength of will is not equal to the need. Delilah beguiles him, tempts him, presses him with her wiles. He is infatuated; his secret is told and ruin comes.

Moral strength, needful decision in duty to self and society and God — few possess these because few have the high ideal before them, and the sense of an obligation which gathers force from the view of eternity. We live, most of us, in a very limited range of time. We think of tomorrow or the day beyond; we think of years of health and joy in this world, rarely of the boundless after life. To have a stain upon the character, a blunted moral sense, a scar that disfigures the mind seems of little account because we anticipate but a temporary reproach or inconvenience. To be defiled, blinded, maimed forever, to be incapacitated for the labour and joy of the higher world does not enter into our thought. And many who are nervously anxious to appear well in the sight of men are shameless when God only can see. Moral strength does not spring out of such imperfect views of obligation. What availed Samson's fidelity to the Nazarite vow when by another gate he let in the foe?

The common kind of religion is a vow which covers two or three points of duty only. The value and glory of the religion of the Bible are that it sets us on our guard and strengthens us against everything that is dangerous to the soul and to society. Suppose it were asked wherein our strength lies, what would be the answer? Say that one after another stood aside conscious of being without strength until one was found willing to be tested. Assume that he could say, I am temperate, I am pure; passion never masters me: so far the account is good. You hail him as a man of moral power, capable of serving society. But you have to inquire further before you can be satisfied. You have to say, Some have had too great liking for money. Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England, notable in the first rank of philosophers, took bribes and was convicted upon twenty-three charges of corruption. Are you proof against covetousness? because if you can be tempted by the glitter of gold reliance cannot be placed upon you. And again it must be asked of the man — Is there any temptress who can wind you about her fingers, overcome your conscientious scruples, wrest from you the secret you ought to keep and make you break your covenant with God, even as Delilah overcame Samson? Because, if there is, you are weaker than a vile woman and no dependence can be placed upon you. We learn from history what this kind of temptation does. We see one after another, kings, statesmen, warriors who figure bravely upon the scene for a time, their country proud of them, the best hopes of the good centred in them, suddenly in the midst of their career falling into pitiable weakness and covering themselves with disgrace. Like Samson they have loved some woman in the valley of Sorek. In the life of today instances of the same pitiable kind occur in every rank and class. The shadow falls on men who

held high places in society or stood for a time as pillars in the house of God.

Or, taking another case, one may be able to say, I am not avaricious, I have fidelity, I would not desert a friend nor speak a falsehood for any bribe; I am pure; for courage and patriotism you may rely upon me: — here are surely signs of real strength. Yet that man may be wanting, in the divine faithfulness on which every virtue ultimately depends. With all his good qualities he may have no root in the heavenly, no spiritual faith, ardour, decision. Let him have great opposition to encounter, long patience to maintain, generosity and self-denial to exercise without prospect of quick reward — and will he stand? In the final test nothing but fidelity to the Highest, tried and sure fidelity to God can give a man any right to the confidence of others. That chain alone which is welded with the fire of holy consecration, devotion of heart and strength and mind to the will of God is able to bear the strain. If we are to fight the battles of life and resist the urgency of its temptations the whole divine law as Christ has set it forth must be our Nazarite vow and we must count ourselves in respect of every obligation the bondmen of God. Duty must not be a matter of self-respect but of ardent aspiration. The way of our life may lead us into some Gaza full of enticements, into the midst of those who make light of the names we revere and the truths we count most sacred. Prosperity may come with its strong temptations to pride and vainglory. If we would be safe it must be in the constant gratitude to God of those who feel the responsibility and the hope that are kindled at the cross, as those who have died with Christ and now live with Him unto God. In this redeemed life it may be almost said there is no temptation; the earthly ceases to lure, gay shows and gauds cease to charm the soul. There still are comforts and pleasures in God's world, but they do not enchain. A vision of the highest duty and reality overshines all that is trivial and passing. And this is life — the fulness, the charm, the infinite variety and strength of being. "How can he that is dead to the world live any longer therein?" Yet he lives as he never did before.

In the experience of Samson in the valley of Sorek we find another warning. We learn the persistence with which spiritual enemies pursue those whom they mark for their prey. It has been said that the adversaries of good are always most active in following the best men with their persecutions. This we take leave to deny. It is when a man shows some weakness, gives an opportunity for assault that he is pressed and hunted as a wounded lion by a tribe of savages. The occasion was given to the Philistines by Samson's infatuation. Had he been a man of stern purity they

would have had no point of attack. But Delilah could be bribed. The lords of the Philistines offered her a large sum to further their ends, and she, a willing instrument, pressed Samson with her entreaties. Baffled again and again, she did not rest till the reward was won.

We can easily see the madness of the man in treating lightly, as if it were a game he was sure to win, the solicitations of the adventuress. "The Philistines be upon thee, Samson" — again and again he heard that threat and laughed at it. The green withes, the new ropes with which he was bound were snapped at will. Even when his hair was woven into the web he could go away with web and beam and the pin with which they had been fixed to the ground. But if he had been aware of what he was doing how could he have failed to see that he was approaching the fatal capitulation, that wiles and blandishments were gaining upon him? When he allowed her to tamper with the sign of his vow it was the presage of the end.

So it often is. The wiles of the spirit of this world are woven very cunningly. First the "overscrupulous" observance of religious ordinances is assailed. The tempter succeeds so far that the Sabbath is made a day of pleasure: then the cry is raised, "The Philistines be upon thee." But the man only laughs. He feels himself quite strong as yet, able for any moral task. Another lure is framed — gambling, drinking. It is yielded to moderately, a single bet by way of sport, one deep draught on some extraordinary occasion. He who is the object of persecution is still selfconfident. He scorns the thought of danger. A prey to gambling, to debauchery? He is far enough from that. But his weakness is discovered. Satanic profit is to be made out of his fall; and he shall not escape.

It is true as ever it was that the friendship of the world is a snare. When the meshes of time and sense close upon us we may be sure that the end aimed at is our death. The whole world is a valley of Sorek to weak man, and at every turn he needs a higher than himself to guard and guide him. He is indeed a Samson, a child in morals, though full grown in muscle. There are some it is true who are able to help, who, if they were beside in the hour of peril, would interpose with counsel and warning and protection. But a time comes to each of us when he has to go alone through the dangerous streets. Then unless he holds straight forward, looking neither to right hand nor left, pressing towards the mark, his weakness will be quickly detected, that secret tendency scarcely known to himself by which he can be most easily assailed. Nor will it be forgotten if once it has been discovered. It is now the property of a legion. Be it vanity or avarice, ambition or

sensuousness, the Philistines know how to gain their end by means of it. There is strength indeed to be had. The weakest may become strong, able to face all the tempters in the world and to pass unscathed through the streets of Gaza or the crowds of Vanity Fair. Nor is the succour far away. Yet to persuade men of their need and then to bring them to the feet of God are the most difficult of tasks in an age of self-sufficiency and spiritual unreason. Harder than ever is the struggle to rescue the victims of worldly fashion, enticement, and folly: for the false word has gone forth that here and here only is the life of man and that renouncing the temporal is renouncing all.

CHAPTER 23

THE VALLEY OF SOREK AND OF DEATH — <07160> JUDGES 16:4-31

THE strong bold man who has blindly fought his battles and sold himself to the traitress and to the enemy, “Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves,” the sport and scorn of those who once feared him, is a mournful object. As we look upon him there in his humiliation, his temper and power wasted, his life withered in its prime, we almost forget the folly and the sin, so much are we moved to pity and regret. For Samson is a picture, vigorous in outline and colour, of what in a less striking way many are and many more would be if it were not for restraints of divine grace. A fallen hero is this. But the career of multitudes without the dash and energy ends in the like misery of defeat; nothing done, not much attempted, their existence fades into the sere and yellow leaf. There has been no ardour to make death glorious.

Every man has his defects, his besetting sins, his dangers. It is in the consciousness of our own that we approach with sorrow the last scenes of the eventful history of Samson. Who dares cast a stone at him? Who can fling a taunt as he is seen groping about in his blindness?

*“A little onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on.
For yonder bank hath choice of sun or shade;
There I am wont to sit when any chance
Relieves me from my task of servile toil.
O dark, dark, dark amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark total eclipse
Without all hope of day:”*

so we hear him bewail his lot. And we, perchance, feeling weakness creep over us while bonds of circumstance still hold us from what we see to be our divine calling, — we compassionate ourselves in pitying him; or, if we are as yet strong and buoyant, our history before us, plans for useful service of our time clearly in view, have we not already felt the symptoms of moral infirmity which make it doubtful whether we shall reach our goal? There are many hindrances, and even the brave unselfish man who never loiters in Gaza or in the treacherous valley may find his way barred by obstacles he cannot remove. But in the case of most the hindrances within

are the most numerous and powerful. This man who should effect much for his age is held by love which blinds him, that other by hatred which masters him. Now covetousness, now pride is the deterrent. Many begin to know themselves and the difficulty of doing great tasks for God and man when noontide is past and the day has begun to decline. Great numbers have only dreamed of attempting something and have never bestirred themselves to act. So it is that Samson's defeat appears a symbol of the pathetic human failure. To many his character is full of sad interest, for in it they see what they have fears of becoming or what they have already become.

What has Samson lost when he has revealed his secret to Delilah? Observe him when he goes forth from the woman's house and stands in the sunlight. Apart from the want of his waving locks he seems the same and is physically the same; muscle and sinew, bone and nerve, stout-beating heart and strong arm, Samson is there. And his human will is as eager as ever; he is a bold daring man this morning as he was last evening, with the same dream of "breaking through all" and bearing himself as king. But he is more lonely than ever before; something has gone from his soul. A heavy sense of faithlessness to one prized distinction and known duty oppresses him. Shake thyself as at other times, poor rash Samson, but know in thy heart that at last thou art powerless: the audacity of faith is no longer thine. Thou art the natural man still, but that is not enough, the spiritual sanction gone. The Philistines, half afraid, gather about thee ten to one; they can bind now and lead captive, for thou hast lost the girdle which knit thy powers together and made thee invincible. The consciousness of being God's man is gone — the consciousness of being true to that which united thee in a rude but very real bond to the Almighty. Thou hast scorned the vow which kept thee from the abyss and with the knowledge of utter moral baseness comes physical prostration, despair, feebleness, ruin. Samson at last knows himself to be no king at all, no hero nor judge.

It is common to think the spiritual of little account, faith in God of little account. Suppose men give that up; suppose they no longer hold themselves bound by duty to the Almighty; they expect nevertheless to continue the same. They will still have their reason, their strength of body and of mind; they believe that all they once did they shall still be able to do and now more freely in their own way, therefore even more successfully. Is that so? Hope is a spiritual thing. It is apart from bodily strength, distinct from energy and manual skill. Take hope away from a man, the strongest, the bravest, the most intelligent, and will he be the same? Nay. His eye loses its lustre; the vigour of his will decays; he lies powerless and

defeated. Or take love away — love which is again a spiritual thing. Let the ardour, the reason for exertion which love inspired pass away. Let the man who loved and would have dared all for love be deprived of that source of vital power, and he will dare no longer. Sad and weary and dispirited he will cast himself down, careless of life.

But hope and love are not so necessary to the full tide of human vigour, are not so potent in stirring the powers of manhood as the friendship of God, the consciousness that made by God for ends of His we have Him as our stay. Indeed without this consciousness manhood never finds its strength. This gives a hope far higher and more sustaining than any of a personal or temporal kind. It makes us strong by virtue of the finest and deepest affection which can possibly move us; and more than that it gives to life full meaning, proper aim and justification. A man without the sense of a divine origin and election has no standing ground; he is so to speak without the right of existence, he has no claim to be heard in speaking and to have a place among those who act. But he who feels himself to be in the world on God's business, to be God's servant, has his assured place and claim as a man, and can see reason and purpose for every sharp trial to which he is put. Here then is the secret of strength, the only source of power and steadfastness for any man or woman. And he who has had it and lost it, breaking with God for the sake of gain or pleasure or some earthly affection, must like Samson feel his vigour sapped, his confidence forfeited. Now his power to command, to advise, to contend for any worthy result has passed away. He is a tree whose root ceases to feed in the soil though still the leaves are green.

The spiritual loss, the loss of living faith, is the great one: but is it for that we generally pity ourselves or any person known to us? Life and freedom are dear, the ability to put forth energy at our wilt, the sense of capacity; and it is the loss of these in outward and visible ranges that most moves us to grief. We commiserate the strong man whose exploits in the world seem to be over, as we pity the orator whose power of speech is gone, the artist who can no more handle the brush, the eager merchant whose bargaining is done. We give our sympathy to Samson, because in the midst of his days he has fallen overcome by treachery, because the cruelty of enemies has afflicted him. Yet, looking at the truth of things, the real cause of pity is deeper than any of these and different. A man who is still in living touch with God can suffer the saddest deprivations and retain a cheerful heart, unbroken courage and hope. Suppose that Samson, surprised by his enemies while he was about some worthy task, had been seized, deprived

of his sight, bound with fetters of iron and consigned to prison. Should we then have had to pity him as we must when he is taken, a traitor to himself, the dupe of a deceiver, with the badge of his vow and the sense of his fidelity gone? We feel with Jeremiah in his affliction; we feel with John the Baptist confined in the prison into which Herod has cast him, with St. Paul in the Philippian dungeon, and with St. Peter lying bound with chains in the castle of Jerusalem. But we do not commiserate, we admire and exult. Here are men who endure for the right. They are martyrs, fellow sufferers with Christ: they are marching with the cohorts of God to the deliverances of eternity. Ah! It is the men who are “martyrs by the pang without the palm,” the men who have lost not only liberty but nobleness, who dragged after false lures have sold their prudence and their strength — these it is for whom we need to weep. He who doing his duty has been mastered by enemies, he who fighting a brave battle has been overcome — let us not dare to pity him. But the man who has given up the battle of faith, who has lost his glory, him the heavens look upon with the profound sorrow that is called for by a wasted life.

And how pathetic the touch: “He wist not that the Lord had departed from him.” For a little time he failed to realise the spiritual disaster he had brought on himself. For a little time only; soon the dark conviction seized him. But worse still would have been his ease if he had remained unconscious of loss. This sense of weakness is the last boon to the sinner. God still does this for him, poor headstrong child of nature as he would fain be, living by and for himself: he is not permitted. Whether he will own it or not he shall be weak and useless until he returns to God and to himself. Often indeed we find the enslaved Samson refusing to allow that anything is wrong with him. Out of sight of the world, in some very secret place he has broken the obligations of faith, temperance, chastity, and yet thinks no special result has followed. He can meet the demands of society and that is enough, supposing the matter should come to light. Of the subtle poisoning of his own soul he has no thought. Is the thing hidden then? The law which determines that as a man is so his strength shall be follows every one into the most secret place. It keeps watch over our veracity, our sobriety, our purity, our faithfulness. Whenever in one point our covenant with God is broken a part of strength is taken away. Do we not perceive the loss? Do we flatter ourselves that all is as before? That is only our spiritual blindness; the fact remains.

What a pitiful thing it is to see men in this plight trying in vain to go about as if nothing had happened and they were as fit as ever for their places in

society and in the church! We do not speak solely of sins like those into which Samson and David fell. There are others, scarcely reckoned sins, which as surely result in moral weakness perceived or unperceived, in the loss of God's countenance and support. Our covenant is to be pure and also merciful; let one fail in mercifulness, let there be a harsh pitiless temper cherished in secret, and this as well as impurity will make him morally weak. Our covenant is to be generous as well as honest; let a man keep from the poor and from the church what he ought to give, and he will lose his strength of soul as surely as if he cheated another in trade, or took what was not his own. But we distinguish between sin and default and think of the latter as a mere infirmity which has no ill effect. There is no acknowledgment of loss even when it has become almost complete. The man who is not generous nor merciful, nor a defender of faith goes on thinking all is well with him, imagining that his futile religious exercises or gifts to this and that keep him on good terms with God and that he is helping the world, while in truth he has not the moral strength of a child. He acts the part of a Christian teacher or servant of the church, he leads in prayer, he joins in deliberations that have to do with the success of Christian work. To himself all seems satisfactory and he expects that good shall result from his efforts. But it cannot be. There is the strain of exertion, but no power.

Do we wonder that more is not effected by our organisations, religious and other, which seem so powerful, quite capable of Christianising and reforming the world? The reason is that many of the professed religious and benevolent, who appear zealous and strenuous, are dying at heart. The Lord may not have departed from them utterly; they are not dead; there is still a rootlet of spiritual being. But they cannot fight; they cannot help others; they cannot run in the way of God's commandments. Are we not bound to ask ourselves how we stand, whether any failure in our covenant keeping has made us spiritually weak. If we are paltering with eternal facts, if between us and the one Source of Life there is a widening distance surely the need is urgent for a return to Christian honour and fidelity which will make us strong and useful.

And there is something here in the story of Samson that bids us think hopefully of a new way and a new life. In the misery to which he was reduced there came to him with renewed acceptance of his vow a fresh endowment of vigour. It is the divine healing, the grace of the long-suffering Father which are thus represented. No human soul needs to be utterly disconsolate, for grace waits ever on discomfiture. Return to me,

says the Lord, and I will return to you; I will heal your backslidings and love you freely. Out of the deepest depths there is a way to the heights of spiritual privilege and power. To confess our faults and sins, to resume the fidelity, the uprightness, the generosity and mercifulness we renounced, to take again the straight upward path of self-denial and duty — this is always reserved for the soul that has not utterly perished. The man, young or old, who has become weaker than a child for any good work may hear the call that speaks of hope. He who in self-indulgence or hard worldliness has abandoned God may turn again to the Father's entreaty, "Remember from what thou hast fallen and repent."

We pass now to consider a point suggested by the terms in which the Philistines triumphed over their captured foe. When the people saw him they praised their god: for they said, Our god hath delivered into our hand our enemy, and the destroyer of our country which hath slain many of us. Here the ignorant religiousness and gratitude of Philistines to a god which was no God might provoke a smile were it not for the consideration that under the clear light of Christianity equal ignorance is often shown by those who profess to be piously grateful. You say it was the bribe which the Philistine lords offered to Delilah and her treachery and Samson's sin that put him in the enemy's hand. You say, Surely the most ignorant man in Gaza must have seen that Dagon had nothing whatever to do with the result. And yet it is very common to ascribe to God what is nowise His doing. There are indeed times when we almost shudder to hear God thanked for that which could only be attributed to a Dagon or a Moloch.

We are told of the tribal gods of those old Syrians — Baal, Melcarth, Sutekh, Milcom and the rest — each adored as master and protector by some people or race. Piously the devotees of each god acknowledged his hand in every victory and every fortunate circumstance, at the same time tracing to his anger and their own neglect of duty to him all calamities and defeats. May it not be said that the belief of many still is in a tribal god, falsely called by the name of Jehovah, a god whose chief function is to look after their interests whoever may suffer, and take their side in all quarrels whoever may be in the right? Men make for themselves the rude outline of a divinity who is supposed to be indifferent or hostile to every circle but their own, suspicious of every church but their own, careless of the sufferings of all but themselves. In two countries that are at war prayers for success will ascend in almost the same terms to one who is thought of as a national protector, not to the Father of all; each side is utterly regardless of the other, makes no allowance in prayer for the possibility that the other

may be in the right. The thanksgivings of the victors too will be mixed with glorying almost fiendish over the defeated, whose blood, it may be, dyed in pathetic martyrdom their own hillsides and valleys. In less flagrant cases, where it is only a question of gain or loss in trade, of getting some object of desire, the same spirit is shown. God is thanked for bestowing that of which another, perhaps more worthy, is deprived. It is not to the kindness of Heaven, but rather to the proving severity of God, we may say, that the result is due. Looking on with clear eyes we see something very different from divine approval in the prosperous efforts of unscrupulous push and wire pulling. Those who have much success in the world have need to justify their comforts and the praise they enjoy. They need to show cause to the ranks of the obscure and ill paid for their superior fortune. Success like theirs cannot be admitted as a special mark of the favour of that God Whose ways are equal, Whose name is the Holy and Just.

Next look at the ignoble task to which Samson is put by the Philistines, a type of the ignominious uses to which the hero may be doomed by the crowd. The multitude cannot be trusted with a great man.

In the prison at Gaza the fallen chief was set to grind corn, to do the work of slaves. To him, indeed, work was a blessing. From the bitter thoughts that would have eaten out his heart he was somewhat delivered by the irksome labour. In reality, as we now perceive, no work degrades; but a man of Samson's type and period thought differently. The Philistine purpose was to degrade him; and the Hebrew captive would feel in the depths of his hot brooding nature the humiliating doom. Look then at the parallels. Think of a great statesman placed at the head of a nation to guide its policy in the line of righteousness, to bring its laws into harmony with the principles of human freedom and divine justice — think of such a one, while labouring at his sacred task with all the ardour of a noble heart, called to account by those whose only desire is for better trade, the means of beating their rivals in some market or bolstering up their failing speculations. Or see him at another time pursued by the cry of a class that feels its prescriptive rights invaded or its position threatened. Take again a poet, an artist, a writer, a preacher intent on great themes, eagerly following after the ideal to which he has devoted himself, but exposed every moment to the criticism of men who have no soul — held up to ridicule and reprobation because he does not accept vulgar models and repeat the catchwords of this or that party. Philistinism is always in this way asserting its claim, and ever and anon it succeeds in dragging some ardent soul into the dungeon to grind thenceforth at the mill.

With the very highest too it is not afraid to intermeddle. Christ Himself is not safe. The Philistines of today are doing their utmost to make His name inglorious. For what else is the modern cry that Christianity should be chiefly about the business of making life comfortable in this world and providing not only bread but amusement for the crowd? The ideas of the church are not practical enough for this generation. To get rid of sin — that is a dream; to make men fearers of God, soldiers of truth, doers of righteousness at all hazards — that is in the air. Let it be given up; let us seek what we can reach; bind the name of Christ and the Spirit of Christ in chains to the work of a practical secularism, and let us turn churches into pleasant lounging places and picture galleries. Why should the soul have the benefit of so great a name as that of the Son of God? Is not the body more? Is not the main business to have houses and railways, news and enjoyment? The policy of undeifying Christ is having too much success. If it make way there will soon be need for a fresh departure into the wilderness.

The last scene of Samson's history awaits us — the gigantic effort, the awful revenge in which the Hebrew champion ended his days. In one sense it aptly crowns the man's career. The sacred historian is not composing a romance, yet the end could not have been more fit. Strangely enough it has given occasion for preaching the doctrine of self-sacrifice as the only means of highest achievement, and we are asked to see here an example of the finest heroism, the most sublime devotion. Samson dying for his country is likened to Christ dying for His people.

It is impossible to allow this for a moment. Not Milton's apology for Samson, not the authority of all the illustrious men who have drawn the parallel can keep us from deciding that this was a case of vengeance and self-murder, not of noble devotion. We have no sense of vindicated principle when we see that temple fall in terrible ruin, but a thrill of disappointment and keen sorrow that a servant of Jehovah should have done this in His name. The lords of the Philistines, all the *serens* or chiefs of the hundred cities are gathered in the ample porch of the building. True, they are assembled at an idolatrous feast; but this idolatry is their religion which they cannot choose but exercise, for they know of no better, nor has Samson ever done one deed or spoken one word that could convince them of error. True, they are met to rejoice over their enemy and they call for him in cruel vainglory to make them sport. Yet this is the man who for his sport and in his revenge once burned the standing corn of a whole valley and more than once went on slaying Philistines till he was weary. True,

Samson as a patriotic Israelite views these people as enemies. Yet it was among them he first sought a wife and afterwards pleasure. And now, if he decides to die that he may kill a thousand enemies at once, is the self-chosen death less an act of suicide?

If this was truly a fine act of self-sacrifice what good came of it? The sacrifice that is to be praised does distinct and clearly purposed service to some worthy cause or high moral end. We do not find that this dreadful deed reconciled the Philistines to Israel or moved them to belief in Jehovah. We observe, on the contrary, that it went to increase the hatred between race and race, so that when Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, Midianites no longer vex Israel these Philistines show more deadly antagonism — antagonism of which Israel knew the heat when on the red field of Gilboa the kingly Saul and the well beloved Jonathan were together stricken down in death. If there was in Samson's mind any thought of vindicating a principle it was that of Israel's dignity as the people of Jehovah. But here his testimony was worthless.

As we have already said, much is written about self-sacrifice which is sheer mockery of truth, most falsely sentimental. Men and women are urged to the notion that if they can only find some pretext for renouncing freedom, for curbing and endangering life, for stepping aside from the way of common service that they may give up something in an uncommon way for the sake of any person or cause, good will come of it. The doctrine is a lie. The sacrifice of Christ was not of that kind. It was under the influence of no blind desire to give up His life, but first under the pressure of a supreme providential necessity, then in renunciation of the earthly life for a dearly seen and personally embraced divine end, the reconciliation of man to God, the setting forth of a propitiation for the sin of the world — for this it was He died. He willed to be our Saviour; having so chosen He bowed to the burden that was laid upon Him. "It pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief." To the end He foresaw and desired there was but one way — and the way was that of death because of man's wickedness and ruin.

Suffering for itself is no end and never can be to God or to Christ or to a good man. It is a necessity on the way to the ends of righteousness and love. If personality is not a delusion and salvation a dream there must be in every case of Christian renunciation some distinct moral aim in view for every one concerned, and there must be at each step, as in the action of our Lord, the most distinct and unwavering sincerity, the most direct

truthfulness. Anything else is a sin against God and humanity. We entreat would be moralists of the day to comprehend before they write of “self-sacrifice.” The sacrifice of the moral judgment is always a crime, and to preach needless suffering for the sake of covering up sin or as a means of atoning for past defects is to utter most unchristian falsehood.

Samson threw away a life of which he was weary and ashamed. He threw it away in avenging a cruelty; but it was a cruelty he had no reason to call a wrong. “O God, that I might be avenged!” — that was no prayer of a faithful heart. It was the prayer of envenomed hatred, of a soul still unregenerate after trial. His death was indeed *self*-sacrifice — the sacrifice of the higher self, the true self, to the lower. Samson should have endured patiently, magnifying God. Or we can imagine something not perfect yet heroic. Had he said to those Philistines, My people and you have been too long at enmity. Let there be an end of it. Avenge yourselves, on me, then cease from harassing Israel, — that would have been like a brave man. But it is not this we find. And we close the story of Samson more sad than ever that Israel’s history has not: taught a great man to be a good man, that the hero has not achieved the morally heroic, that adversity has not begotten in him a wise patience and magnanimity. Yet he had a place under Divine Providence. The dim troubled faith that was in his soul was not altogether fruitless. No Jehovah worshipper would ever think of bowing before that god whose temple fell in ruins on the captive Israelite and his thousand victims.

CHAPTER 24

THE STOLEN GODS — JUDGES 17, 18

THE portion of the Book of Judges which begins with the seventeenth chapter and extends to the close is not in immediate connection with that which has gone before. We read (~~071830~~-Judges 18:30) that “Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land.” But the proper reading is, “Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses.” It would seem that the renegade Levite of the narrative was a near descendant of the great lawgiver. So rapidly did the zeal of the priestly house decline that in the third or fourth generation after Moses one of his own line became minister of an idol temple for the sake of a living. It is evident, then, that in the opening of the seventeenth chapter, we are carried back to the time immediately following the conquest of Canaan by Joshua, when Othniel was settling in the south and the tribes were endeavouring to establish themselves in the districts allotted to them. The note of time is of course far from precise, but the incidents are certainly to be placed early in the period.

We are introduced first to a family living in Mount Ephraim consisting of a widow and: her son Micah, who is married and has sons of his own. It appears that on the death of the father of Micah a sum of eleven hundred shekels of silver, about a hundred and twenty pounds of our money — a large amount for the time — was missed by the widow, who after vain search for it spoke in strong terms about the matter to her son. He had taken the money to use in stocking his farm or in trade and at once acknowledged that he had done so and restored it to his mother, who hastened to undo any evil her words had caused by invoking upon him the blessing of God. Further she dedicated two hundred of her shekels to make graven and molten images in token of piety and gratitude.

We have here a very significant revelation of the state of religion. The indignation of Moses had burned against the people when at Sinai they made a rude image of gold, sacrificed to it and danced about it in heathen revel. We are reading of what took place say a century after that scene at the foot of Sinai, and already those who desire to show their devotion to the Eternal, very imperfectly known as Jehovah, make teraphim and molten images to represent Him. Micah has a sort of private chapel or temple

among the buildings in his courtyard: He consecrates one of his sons to be priest of this little sanctuary. And the historian adds in explanation of this, as one keenly aware of the benefits of good government under a God-fearing monarch — “in those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”

We need not take for granted that the worship in this hill chapel was of the heathen sort. There was probably no Baal, no Astarte among the images; or, if there was, it may have been merely as representing a Syrian power prudently recognised but not adored. No hint occurs in the whole story of a licentious or a cruel cult, although there must have been something dangerously like the superstitious practices of Canaan. Micah's chapel, whatever the observances were, gave direct introduction to the pagan forms and notions which prevailed among the people of the land. There already Jehovah was degraded to the rank of a nature divinity, and represented by figures.

In one of the highland valleys towards the north of Ephraim's territory Micah had his castle and his ecclesiastical establishment — state and church in germ. The Israelites of the neighbourhood, who looked up to the well to do farmer for protection, regarded him all the more that he showed respect for religion, that he had this house of gods and a private priest. They came to worship in his sanctuary and to inquire of the ecclesiastic, who in some way endeavoured to discover the will of God by means of the teraphim and ephod. The ark of the covenant was not far away, for Bethel and Gilgal were both within a day's journey. But the people did not care to be at the trouble of going so far. They liked better their own local shrine and its homelier ways; and when at length Micah secured the services of a Levite the worship seemed to have all the sanction that could possibly be desired.

It need hardly be said that God is not confined to a locality, that in those days as in our own the true worshipper could find the Almighty on any hill top, in any dwelling or private place, as well as at the accredited shrine. It is quite true, also, that God makes large allowance for the ignorance of men and their need of visible signs and symbols of what is unseen and eternal. We must not therefore assume at once that in Micah's house of idols, before the widow's graven and molten figures, there could be no acceptable worship, no prayers that reached the ear of the Lord of Hosts. And one might even go the length of saying that, perhaps, in this schismatic sanctuary, this chapel of images, devotion could be quite as sincere as

before the ark itself. Little good came of the religious ordinances maintained there during the whole period of the judges, and even in Eli's latter days the vileness and covetousness practised at Shiloh more than countervailed any pious influence. Local and family altars therefore must have been of real use. But this was the danger, that leaving the appointed centre of Jehovah worship, where symbolism was confined within safe limits, the people should in ignorant piety multiply objects of adoration and run into polytheism. Hence the importance of the decree, afterwards recognised, that one place of sacrifice should gather to it all the tribes and that there the ark of the covenant with its altar should alone speak of the will and holiness of God. And the story of the Danite migration connected with this of Micah and his Levite well illustrates the wisdom of such a law, for it shows how, in the far north, a sanctuary and a worship were set up which, existing long for tribal devotion, became a national centre of impure worship.

The wandering Levite from Bethlehem-Judah is one, we must believe, of many Levites, who having found no inheritance because the cities allotted to them were as yet unconquered spread themselves over the land seeking a livelihood, ready to fall in with any local customs of religion that offered them position and employment. The Levites were esteemed as men acquainted with the way of Jehovah, able to maintain that communication with Him without which no business could be hopefully undertaken. Something of the dignity that was attached to the names of Moses and Aaron ensured them honourable treatment everywhere unless among the lowest of the people; and when this Levite reached the dwelling of Micah beside which there seems to have been a khan or lodging place for travellers, the chance of securing him was at once seized. For ten pieces of silver, say twenty-five shillings a year, with a suit of clothes and his food, he agreed to become Micah's private chaplain. At this very cheap rate the whole household expected a time of prosperity and divine favour. "Now know I," said the head of the family, "that the Lord will do me good seeing I have a Levite to my priest," We must fear that he took some advantage of the man's need, that he did not much consider the honour of Jehovah yet reckoned on getting a blessing all; the same. It was a case of seeking the best religious privileges as cheaply as possible, a very common thing in all ages.

But the coming of the Levite was to have results Micah did not foresee. Jonathan had lived in Bethlehem, and some ten or twelve miles westward down the valley one came to Zorah and Eshtaol, two little towns of the

tribe of Dan of which we have heard. The Levite had apparently become pretty well known in the district: and especially in those villages to which he went to offer sacrifice or perform some other religious rite. And now a series of incidents brought certain old acquaintances to his new place of abode.

Even in Samson's time the tribe of Dan, whose territory was to be along the coast west from Judah, was still obliged to content itself with the slopes of the hills, not having got possession of the plain. In the earlier period with which we are now dealing the Danites were in yet greater difficulty, for not only had they Philistines on the one side but Amorites on the other. The Amorites "would dwell," we are told, "in Mount Heres, in Aijalon and in Shaalbim." It was this pressure which determined the people about Zorah and Eshtaol to find if possible another place of settlement, and five men were sent out in search. Travelling north they took the same way as the Levite had taken, heard of the same khan in the hill country of Ephraim, and made it their resting place for a night. The discovery of the Levite Jonathan followed and of the chapel in which he ministered with its wonderful array of images. We can suppose the deputation had thoughts they did not express, but for the present they merely sought the help of the priest, begging him to consult the oracle on their behalf and learn whether their mission would be successful. The five went on their journey with the encouragement, "Go in peace; before the Lord is your way wherein ye go."

Months pass without any more tidings of the Danites until one day a great company is seen following the hill road near Micah's farm. "There are six hundred men girt with weapons of war with their wives and children and cattle, a whole clan on the march, filling the road for miles and moving slowly northward. The five men have indeed succeeded after a fashion. Away between Lebanon and Hermon, in the region of the sources of Jordan, they have found the sort of district they went to seek. Its chief town Laish stood in the midst of fertile fields with plenty of wood and water. It was a place, according to their large report, where was no want of anything that is in the earth." Moreover the inhabitants, who seem to have been a Phoenician colony, dwelt by themselves quiet and secure, having no dealings or treaty with the powerful Zidonians. They were the very kind of people whom a sudden attack would be likely to subdue. There was an immediate migration of Danites to this fresh field, and in prospect of bloody work the men of Zorah and Eshtaol seem to have had no doubt as to the rightness of their expedition; it was enough that they had felt themselves straitened. The same reason appears to suffice many in modern

times. Were the aboriginal inhabitants of America and Australia considered by those who coveted their land? Even the pretence of buying has not always been maintained. Murder and rapine have been the methods used by men of our own blood, our own name, and no nation under the sun has a record darker than the tale of British conquest.

Men who go forth to steal land are quite fit to attempt the strange business of stealing gods that is appropriating to themselves the favour of divine powers and leaving other men destitute. The Danites as they pass Micah's house hear from their spies of the priest and the images that are in his charge. "Do you know that that there is in these houses an ephod and teraphim and a graven image and a molten image? Now therefore consider what ye have to do." The hint is enough. Soon the court of the farmstead is invaded, the images are brought out and the Levite Jonathan, tempted by the offer of being made priest to a clan, is fain to accompany the marauders. Here is confusion on confusion. The Danites are thieves, brigands, and yet they are pious; so pious that they steal images to assist them in worship. The Levite agrees to the theft and accepts the offer of priesthood under them. He will be the minister of a set of thieves to forward their evil designs, and they, knowing him to be no better than themselves, expect that his sacrifices and prayers will do them good. It is surely a capital instance of perverted religious ideas.

As we have said, these circumstances are no doubt recounted in order to show how dangerous it was to separate from the pure order of worship at the sanctuary. In after times this lesson was needed, especially when the first king of the northern tribes set his golden calves the one at Bethel, the other at Dan. Was Israel to separate from Judah in religion as well as in government? Let there be a backward look to the beginning of schism in those extraordinary doings of the Danites. It was in the city founded by the six hundred that one of Jeroboam's temples was built. Could any blessing rest upon a shrine and upon devotions which had such an origin, such an history?

May we find a parallel now? Is there a constituted religious authority with which soundness of belief and acceptable worship are so bound up that to renounce the authority is to be in the way of confusion and error, schism and eternal loss? The Romanist says so. Those who speak for the Papal church never cease to cry to the world that within their communion alone are truth and safety to be found. Renounce, they say, the apostolic and divine authority which we conserve and all is gone. Is there anarchy in a

country? Are the forces that make for political disruption and national decay showing themselves in many lands? Are monarchies overthrown? Are the people lawless and wretched? It all comes of giving up the Catholic order and creed. Return to the one fold under the one Shepherd if you would find prosperity. And there are others who repeat the same injunction, not indeed denying that there may be saving faith apart from their ritual, but insisting still that it is an error and a sin to seek God elsewhere than at the accredited shrine.

With Jewish ordinances we Christians have nothing to do when we are judging as to religious order and worship now. There is no central shrine, no exclusive human authority. Where Christ is, there is the temple; where He speaks, the individual conscience must respond. The work of salvation is His alone, and the humblest believer is His consecrated priest. When our Lord said, "The hour cometh and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth"; and again, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name there am I in the midst of them"; when He as the Son of God held out His hands directly to every sinner needing pardon and every seeker after truth, when He offered the one sacrifice upon the cross by which a living way is opened into the holiest place, He broke down the walls of partition and with the responsibility declared the freedom of the soul.

And here we reach the point to which our narrative applies as an illustration. Micah and his household worshipping the images of silver, the Levite officiating at the altar, seeking counsel of Jehovah by ephod and teraphim, the Danites who steal the gods, carry off the priest and set up a new worship in the city they build — all these represent to us types and stages of what is really schism pitiful and disastrous — that is, separation from the truth of things and from the sacred realities of divine faith. Selfish untruth and infidelity are schism, the wilderness and outlawry of the soul.

1. Micah and his household, with their chapel of images, their ephod and teraphim, represent those who fall into the superstition that religion is good as insuring temporal success and prosperity, that God will see to the worldly comfort of those who pay respect to Him. Even among Christians this is a very common and very debasing superstition. The sacraments are often observed as signs of a covenant which secures for men divine favour through social arrangements and human law. The spiritual nature and power of religion are not denied, but they are uncomprehended. The national custom and the worldly hope have to do with the observance of

devout forms rather than any movement of the soul heavenward. A church may in this way become like Micah's household, and prayer may mean seeking good terms with Him who can fill the land with plenty or send famine and cleanness of teeth. Unhappily many worthy and most devout persons still hold the creed of an early and ignorant time. The secret of nature and providence is hid from them. The severities of life seem to them to be charged with anger, and the valleys of human reprobation appear darkened by the curse of God. Instead of finding in pain and loss a marvellous divine discipline they perceive only the penalty of sin, a sign of God's aversion, not of His Fatherly grace. It is a sad, a terrible blindness of soul. We can but note it here and pass on, for there, are other applications of the old story.

2. The Levite represents an unworthy worldly ministry. With sadness must confession be made that there are in every church pastors unspiritual, worldlings in heart, whose desire is mainly for superiority of rank or of wealth, who have no vision of Christ's cross and battle except as objective and historical. Here, most happily, the cases of complete worldliness are rare. It is rather a tendency we observe than a developed and acknowledged state of things. Very few of those in the ranks of the Christian ministry are entirely concerned with the respect paid to them in society and the number of shekels to be got in a year. That he keeps pace with the crowd instead of going before it is perhaps the hardest thing that can be said of the worldly pastor. He is humane, active, intelligent; but it is for the church as a great institution, or the church as his temporal hope and stay. So his ministry becomes at the best a matter of serving tables and providing alms — we shall not say amusement. Here indeed is schism; for what is farther from the truth of things, what is farther from Christ?

3. Once more we have with us today, very much with us, certain Danites of science, politics, and the press who, if they could, would take away our God and our Bible, our Eternal Father and spiritual hope, not from a desire to possess but because they hate to see us believing, hate to see any weight of silver given to religious uses. Not a few of these are marching, as they think triumphantly, to commanding and opulent positions whence they will rule the thought of the world. And on the way, even while they deride and detest the supernatural, they will have the priest go with them. They care nothing for what he says; to listen to the voice of a spiritual teacher is an absurdity of which they would not be guilty; for to their own vague prophesying all mankind is to give heed, and their interpretations of human life are to be received as the bible of the age. Of the same order is the

socialist who would make use of a faith he intends to destroy, and a priesthood whose claim is offensive to him, on his way to what he calls the organisation of society. In his view the uses of Christianity and the Bible are temporal and earthly. He will not have Christ the Redeemer of the soul, yet he attempts to conjure with Christ's words and appropriate the power of His name. The audacity of these would be robbers is matched only by their ignorance of the needs and ends of human life.

We might here refer to the injustice practised by one and another band of our modern Israel who do not scruple to take from obscure and weak households of faith the sacraments and Christian ministry, the marks and rights of brotherhood. We can well believe that those who do this have never looked at their action from the other side, and may not have the least idea of the soreness they leave in the hearts of humble and sincere believers.

In fine, the Danites with the images of Micah went their way and he and his neighbours had to suffer the loss and make the best of their empty chapel, where no oracle thenceforth spoke to them. It is no parable, but a very real example of the loss that comes to all who have trusted in forms and symbols, the outward signs instead of the living power of religion. While we repel the arrogance that takes from faith its symbolic props and stays we must not let ourselves deny that the very rudeness of an enemy may be an excellent discipline for the Christian. Agnosticism and science and other Danite companies sweep with them a good deal that is dear to the religious mind and may leave it very distressed and anxious — the chapel empty, the oracle as it may appear lost forever. With the symbol the authority, the hope, the power seem to be lost irrecoverably. What now has faith to rest upon? But the modern spirit with its resolution to sweep away every unfact and mere form is no destroyer. Rather does it drive the Christian to a science, a virtue far beyond its own. It forces we may say on faith that severe truthfulness and intellectual courage which are the proper qualities of Christianity, the necessary counterpart of its trust and love and grace. In short, when enemies have carried off the poor teraphim and fetishes which are their proper capture they have but compelled religion to be itself, compelled it to find its spiritual God, its eternal creed and to understand its Bible. This, though done with evil intent, is surely no cruelty, no outrage. Shall a man or a church that has been so roused and thrown back on reality sit wailing in the empty chapel for the images of silver and the deliverances of the hollow ephod? Everything remains, the soul and the spiritual world, the law of God, the redemption of Christ, the Spirit of eternal life.

CHAPTER 25

FROM JUSTICE TO WILD REVENGE — JUDGES 19-21

THESE last chapters describe a general and vehement outburst of moral indignation throughout Israel, recorded for various reasons. A vile thing is done in one of the towns of Benjamin and the fact is published in all the tribes. The doers of it are defended by their clan and fearful punishment is wrought upon them, not without suffering to the entire people. Like the incidents narrated in the chapters immediately preceding, these must have occurred at an early stage in the period of the judges, and they afford another illustration of the peril of imperfect government, the need for a vigorous administration of justice over the land. The crime and the volcanic vengeance belong to a time when there was “no king in Israel” and, despite occasional appeals to the oracle, “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” In this we have one clue to the purpose of the history.

The crime of Gibeah brought under our notice here connects itself with that of Sodom and represents a phase of immorality which, indigenous to Canaan, mixed its putrid current with Hebrew life. There are traces of the same horrible impurity in the Judah of Rehoboam and Asa; and in the story of Josiah’s reign we are horrified to read of “houses of Sodomites that were in the house of the Lord, where the women, wove hangings for the Asherah.” With such lurid historical light on the subject we can easily understand the revival of this warning lesson from the past of Israel and the fulness of detail with which the incidents are recorded. A crime originally that of the off-scourings of Gibeah became practically the sin of a whole tribe, and the war that ensued sets in a clear light the zeal for domestic purity which was a feature in every religious revival and, at length, in the life of the Hebrew people.

It may be asked how, while polygamy was practised among the Israelites, the sin of Gibeah could rouse such indignation and awaken the signal vengeance of the united tribes. The answer is to be found partly in the singular and dreadful device which the indignant husband used in making the deed known. The ghastly symbols of outrage told the tale in a way that was fitted to stir the blood of the whole country. Everywhere the hideous thing was made vivid and a sense of utmost atrocity was kindled as the dissevered members were borne from town to town. It is easy to see that

womanhood must have been stirred to the fieriest indignation, and manhood was bound to follow. What woman could be safe in Gibeah where such things were done? And was Gibeah to go unpunished? If so, every Hebrew city might become the haunt of miscreants. Further there is the fact that the woman so foully murdered, though a concubine, was the concubine of a Levite. The measure of sacredness with which the Levites were invested gave to this crime, frightful enough in any view, the colour of sacrilege. How degenerate were the people of Gibeah when a servant of the altar could be treated with such foul indignity and driven to so extraordinary an appeal for justice? There could be no blessing on the tribes if they allowed the doers or condoners of this thing to go unpunished. Every Levite throughout the land must have taken up the cry. From Bethel and other sanctuaries the call for vengeance would spread and echo till the nation was roused. Thus, in part at least, we can explain the vehemence of feeling which drew together the whole fighting force of the tribes.

The doubt will yet remain whether there could have been so much purity of life or respect for purity as to sustain the public indignation. Some may say, Is there not here a sufficient reason for questioning the veracity of the narrative? First, however, let it be remembered that often where morals are far from reaching the level of pure monogamic life distinctions between right and wrong are sharply drawn. Acquaintance with phases of modern life that are most painful to the mind sensitively pure reveals a fixed code which none may infringe without bringing upon themselves reprobation, perhaps more vehement than in a higher social grade visits the breach of a higher law. It is the fact that concubinage has its unwritten acknowledgment and protecting customs. There is marriage that is only a name; there is concubinage that gives the woman more rights than one who is married. Against the immorality and the gross evils of cohabitation is to be set this unwritten law. And arguing from popular feeling in our great cities we reach the conclusion that in ancient Israel where concubinage prevailed there was a wide and keen feeling as to the rights of concubines and the necessity of upholding them. Many women must have been in this relation, below those who could count themselves legally married, and all the more that the concubine occupied a place inferior to that of the lawful wife would popular opinion take up her cause and demand the punishment of those who did her wrong.

And here we are led to a point which demands clear statement and recognition. It has been too readily supposed that polygamy is always a

result of moral decline and indicates a low state of domestic purity. It may, in truth, be a rude step of progress. Has it been sufficiently noted that in those countries in which the name of the mother, not of the father, descended to the children the reason may be found in universal or almost universal unchastity? In Egypt at one time the law gave to women, especially to mothers, peculiar rights; but to praise Egyptian civilisation for this reason and hold up its treatment of women as an example to the nineteenth century is an extraordinary venture. The Israelites, however lax, were doubtless in advance of the society of Thebes. Among the Canaanites the moral degradation of women, whatever freedom may have gone with it, was so terrible that the Hebrew with his two or three wives and concubines but with a morality otherwise severe, must have represented a new and holier social order as well as a new and holier religion. It is therefore not incredible, but appears simply in accordance with the instincts and customs proper to the Hebrew people, that the sin of Gibeah should provoke overwhelming indignation. There is no pretence of purity, no hypocritical anger. The feeling is sound and real. Perhaps in no other matter of a moral kind would there have been such intense and unanimous exasperation. A point of justice or of belief would not have so moved the tribes. The better self of Israel appears, asserting its claim and power. And the miscreants of Gibeah representing the lower self, verily an unclean spirit, are detested and denounced on every hand.

The time was that of fresh feeling, unwarped by those customs which in the guise of civilisation and refinement afterwards corrupted the nation. And we may see the prophetic or hortatory use of the narrative for an after age in which doings as vile as those at Gibeah were sanctioned by the court and protected even by religious leaders. It would be hoped by the sacred historian that this tale of the fierce indignation of the tribes might rouse afresh the same moral feeling. He would fain stir a careless people and their priests by the exhibition of this tumultuous vengeance. Nor can we say that the necessity for the impressive lesson has ceased. In the heart of our large cities vices as vile as those of Gibeah are heard muttering in the nightfall, life as abandoned lurks and festers, creating a social gangrene.

Recognise, then, in these chapters a truth for all time boldly drawn out — the great truth as to moral reform and national purity. Law will not cure moral evils; a statute book the purest and noblest will not save. Those who by the impulse of the Spirit gathered the various traditions of Israel's life knew well that on a living conscience in men everything depended, and they at least indicate the further truth which many of ourselves have not

grasped, that the early and rude workings of conscience, producing stormy and terrible results, are a necessary stage of development. As there must be energy before there can be noble energy, so there must be moral vigour, it may be rude, violent, ignorant, a stream rushing out of barbarian hills, sweeping with most appalling vehemence, before there can be spiritual life patient, calm, and holy. Law is a product, not a cause; it is not the code we make that will preserve us but the God-given conscience that informs the code and ever goes before it a pillar of fire, at times flashing vivid lightning. Even Christian law cannot save a people if it be merely a series of injunctions. Nothing will do but the mind of Christ in every man and woman continually inspiring and directing life. The reformer who thinks that a statute or regulation will end some sin or evil custom is in sad error. Say the decree he contends for is enacted; but have the consciences of those against whom it is made been quickened? If not, the law merely expresses a popular mood, and the life of the whole community will not be permanently raised in tone.

The church finds here a perpetual mission of influence. Her doctrine is but half her message. From the doctrine as from an eternal fount must go life-giving moral heat in every range, and the Spirit is ever with her to make the world like a fire. Her duty is wide as righteousness, great as man's destiny; it is never ended, for each generation comes in a new hour with new needs. The church, say some, is finishing its work; it is doomed to be one of the broken moulds of life. But the church that is the instructor of conscience and kindles the flame of righteousness has a mission to the ages. We are far yet from that day of the Lord when all the people shall be prophets; and until then how can the world live without the church? It would be a body without a soul.

Conscience the oracle of life, conscience working badly rather than held in chains of mere rule without spontaneity and inspiration, moral energy widespread, personal, and keen, however rude — here is one of the notes of the sacred writer; and another note, no less distinct, is the assertion of moral intolerance. It has not occurred to this prophetic annalist that endurance of evil has any curative power. He is a Hebrew, full of indignation against the vile and false, and he demands a heat of moral force in his people. Foul things are done at the court and even in the temple; there is a depraving indifference to purity, a loose notion (very similar to the idea of our day), that all the sides of life should have free play and that the heathen had much to teach Israel. The whole of the narrative before us is infused with a righteous protest against evil, a holy plea for intolerance

of sin. Will men refuse instruction and persist in making themselves one with bestiality and outrage? Then judgment must deal with them on the ground they have chosen to occupy, and until they repent the conscience of the race must repudiate them together with their sin. Along with a keenly burning conscience there goes this necessity of moral intolerance. Charity is good, but not always in place; and brotherhood itself demands at times strong uncompromising judgment of the evildoer. How else among men of weak wills and wavering hearts can righteousness vindicate and enforce itself as the eternal reality of life? Compassion is strong only when it is linked to unflinching declarations; mercy is divine only when it turns a front of mail to wickedness and flashes lightning at proud wrong. Any other kind of charity is but a new offence — the sinner pardoning sin.

Now the people of Gibeah were not all vile. The wretches whose crime called for judgment were but the rabble of the town. And we can see that the tribes when they gathered in indignation were made serious by the thought that the righteous might be punished with the wicked. We are told that they went up to the sanctuary and asked counsel of the Lord whether they should attack the convicted city. There was a full muster of the fighting men, their blood at fever heat, yet they would not advance without an oracle. It was an appeal to heavenly justice and demands notice as a striking feature of the whole terrible series of events. For an hour there is silence in the camp till a higher voice shall speak.

But what is the issue? The oracle decrees an immediate attack on Gibeah in the face of all Benjamin, which has shown the temper of heathenism by refusing to give up the criminals. Once and again there is trial of battle which ends in defeat of the allied tribes. The wrong triumphs; the people have to return humbled and weeping to the Sacred Presence and sit fasting and disconsolate before the Lord.

Not without the suffering of the entire community is a great evil to be purged from a land. It is easy to execute a murderer, to imprison a felon. But the spirit of the murderer, of the felon, is widely diffused, and that has to be cast out. In the great moral struggle year after year the better have not only the openly vile but all who are tainted, all who are weak in soul, loose in habit, secretly sympathetic with the vile, arrayed against them. There is a sacrifice of the good before the evil are overcome. In vicarious suffering many must pay the penalty of crimes not their own ere the wide-reaching wickedness can be seen in its demonic power and struck down as the cruel enemy of the people.

When an assault is made on some vile custom the sardonic laugh is heard of those who find their profit and their pleasure in it. They feel their power. They know the wide sympathy with them spread secretly through the land. Once and again the feeble attempt of the good is repelled. With sad hearts, with impoverished means, those who led the crusade retire baffled and weary. Has their method been unintelligent? There very possibly lies the cause of its failure. Or, perhaps, it has been, though nominally inspired by an oracle, all too human, weak through human pride. Not till they gain with new and deeper devotion to the glory of God, with more humility and faith, a clearer view of the battleground and a better ordering of the war shall defeat be changed into victory. And may it not be that the assault on moral evils of our day, in which multitudes are professedly engaged, in which also many have spent substance and life, shall fail till there is a true humiliation of the armies of God before Him, a new consecration to higher and more spiritual ends? Human virtue has ever to be jealous of itself, the reformer may so easily become a Pharisee.

The tide turned and there came another danger, that which waits on ebullitions of popular feeling. A crowd roused to anger is hard to control, and the tribes having once tasted vengeance did not cease till Benjamin was almost exterminated. The slaughter extended not only to the fighting men, but to women and children. The six hundred who fled to the rock fort of Rimmon appear as the only survivors of the clan. Justice overshot its mark and for one evil made another. Those who had most fiercely used the sword viewed the result with horror and amazement, for a tribe was lacking in Israel. Nor was this the end of slaughter. Next for the sake of Benjamin the sword was drawn and the men of Jabesh-gilead were butchered. It has to be noticed that the oracle is not made responsible for this horrible process of evil. The people came of their own accord to the decision which annihilated Jabesh-gilead. But they gave it a pious colour; religion and cruelty went together, sacrifices to Jehovah and this frightful outbreak of demonism. It is one of the dark chapters of human history. For the sake of an oath and an idea death was dealt remorselessly. No voice suggested that the people of Jabesh may have been more cautious than the rest, not less faithful to the law of God. The others were resolved to appear to themselves to have been right in almost annihilating Benjamin; and the town which had not joined in the work of destruction must be punished.

The warning conveyed here is intensely keen. It is that men, made doubtful by the issue of their actions whether they have done wisely, may fly to the resolution to justify themselves and may do so even at the expense of

justice; that a nation may pass from the right way to the wrong and then, having sunk to extraordinary baseness and malignity, may turn writhing and self-condemned to add cruelty to cruelty in the attempt to still the upbraidings of conscience. It is that men in the heat of passion which began with resentment against evil may strike at those who have not joined in their errors as well as those who truly deserve reprobation. We stand, nations and individuals, in constant danger of dreadful extremes, a kind of insanity hurrying us on when the blood is heated by strong emotion. Blindly attempting to do right we do evil, and again having done the evil, we blindly strive to remedy it by doing more. In times of moral darkness and chaotic social conditions, when men are guided by a few rude principles, things are done that afterwards appal themselves, and yet may become an example for future outbreaks. During the fury of their Revolution the French people, with some watchwords of the true ring as liberty, fraternity, turned hither and thither, now in terror, now panting after dimly seen justice or hope, and it was always from blood to blood. We understand the juncture in ancient Israel and realise the excitement and the rage of a self-jealous people, when we read the modern tales of surging ferocity in which men appear now hounding the shouting crowd to vengeance, then shuddering on the scaffold.

In private life the story has an application against wild and violent methods of self-vindication. Many a man, hurried on by a just anger against one who has done him wrong, sees to his horror after a sharp blow is struck that he has broken a life and thrown a brother bleeding to the dust. One wrong thing has been done perhaps more in haste than vileness of purpose, and retribution, hasty, ill-considered, leaves the moral question tenfold more confused. When all is reckoned we find it impossible to say where the right is, where the wrong.

Passing to the final expedient adopted by the chiefs of Israel to rectify their error — the rape of the women at Shiloh — we see only to how pitiful a pass moral blundering brings those who fall into it: other moral teaching there is none. We might at first be disposed to say that there was extraordinary want of reverence for religious order and engagements when the men of Benjamin were invited to make a sacred festival the occasion of taking what the other tribes had solemnly vowed not to give. But the festival at Shiloh must have been far more of a merry making than of a sacred assembly. It needs to be recognised that many gatherings even in honour of Jehovah were mainly, like those of Canaanite worship, for

hilarity and feasting. There was probably no great incongruity between the occasion and the plot.

But the scenes certainly change in the course of this narrative with extraordinary swiftness. Fierce indignation is followed by pity, weeping for defeat by tears for too complete a victory. Horrible bloodshed wastes the cities and in a month there is dancing in the plain of Shiloh not ten miles from the field of battle. Chaotic indeed are the morality and the history; but it is the disorder of social life in its early stages, with the vehemence and tenderness, the ferocity and laughter of a nation's youth. And, all along, the Book of Judges bears the stamp of veracity as a series of records because these very features are to be seen — this tumult, this undisciplined vehemence in feeling and act. Were we told here of decorous solemn progress at slow march, every army going forth with some stereotyped invocation of the Lord of Hosts, every leader a man of conventional piety supported by a blameless priesthood and orderly sacrifices, we should have had no evidence of truth. The traditions preserved here, whoever collected them, are singularly free from that idyllic colour which an imaginative writer would have endeavoured to give.

At the last, accordingly, the book we have been reading stands a real piece of history, proving itself over every kind of suspicion a true record of a people chosen and guided to a destiny greater than any other race of man has known. A people understanding its call and responding with eagerness at every point? Nay. The worm is in the heart of Israel as of every other nation, The carnal attracts, and malignant cries overbear the divine still voice; the air of Canaan breathes in every page, and we need to recollect that we are viewing the turbulent upper waters of the nation and the faith. But the working of God is plain; the divine thoughts we believed Israel to have in trust for the world are truly with it from the first, though darkened by altars of Baal and of Ashtoreth. The Word and Covenant of Jehovah are vital facts of the supernatural which surrounds that poor struggling erring Hebrew flock. Theocracy is a divine fact in a larger sense than has ever been attached to the word. Inspiration too is no dream, for the history is charged with intimations of the spiritual order. The light of the unrealised end flashes on spear and altar, and in the frequent roll of the storm the voice of the Eternal is heard declaring righteousness and truth. No story this to praise a dynasty or magnify a conquering nation or support a priesthood. Nothing so faithful, so true to heaven and to human nature could be done from that motive. We have here an imperishable chapter in the Book of God.

THE BOOK OF RUTH

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CHAPTER 1

NAOMI'S BURDEN — ~~080101~~ RUTH 1:1-13

LEAVING the Book of Judges and opening the story of Ruth we pass from vehement outdoor life, from tempest and trouble into quiet domestic scenes. After an exhibition of the greater movements of a people we are brought, as it were, to a cottage interior in the soft light of an autumn evening, to obscure lives passing through the cycles of loss and comfort, affection and sorrow. We have seen the ebb and flow of a nation's fidelity and fortune, a few leaders appearing clearly on the stage and behind them a multitude indefinite, indiscriminate, the thousands who form the ranks of battle and die on the field, who sway together from Jehovah to Baal and back to Jehovah again. What the Hebrews were at home, how they lived in the villages of Judah or on the slopes of Tabor, the narrative has not paused to speak of with detail. Now there is leisure after the strife and the historian can describe old customs and family events, can show us the toiling flockmaster, the busy reapers, the women with their cares and uncertainties, the love and labour of simple life. Thunderclouds of sin and judgment have rolled over the scene; but they have cleared away and we see human nature in examples that become familiar to us, no longer in weird shadow or vivid lightning flash, but as we commonly know it, homely, erring, enduring, imperfect, not unblest.

Bethlehem is the scene, quiet and lonely on its high ridge overlooking the Judaeian wilderness. The little city never had much part in the eager life of the Hebrew people, yet age after age some event notable in history, some death or birth or some prophetic word drew the eyes of Israel to it in affection or in hope; and to us the Saviour's birth there has so distinguished it as one of the most sacred spots on earth that each incident in the fields or at the gate appears charged with predictive meaning, each reference in psalm or prophecy has tender significance. We see the company of Jacob on the journey through Canaan halt by the way near Ephrath, which is Bethlehem, and from the tents there comes a sound of wailing. The beloved Rachel is dead. Yet she lives in a child new born, the mother's Son of Sorrow, who becomes to the father Benjamin, Son of the Right Hand. The sword pierces a loving heart, but hope springs out of pain and life out of death. Generations pass and in these fields of Bethlehem we see Ruth gleaning, Ruth the Moabitess, a stranger and foreigner who has sought

refuge under the shadow of Jehovah's wings; and at yonder gate she is saved from want and widowhood, finding in Boaz her *goel* and *menuchah*, her redeemer and rest. Later, another birth, this time within the walls, the birth of one long despised by his brethren, gives to Israel a poet and a king, the sweet singer of divine psalms, the hero of a hundred fights. And here again we see the three mighty men of David's troop breaking through the Philistine host to fetch for their chief a draught from the cool spring by the gate. Prophecy, too, leaves Israel looking to the city on the hill. Micah seems to grasp the secret of the ages when he exclaims, "But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, which art little to be among the thousands of Judah, out of thee shall one come forth unto Me that is to be the ruler in Israel; whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." For centuries there is suspense, and then over the quiet plain below the hill is heard the evangel: "Be not afraid: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Remembering this glory of Bethlehem we turn to the story of humble, life there in the days when the judges ruled, with deep interest in the people of the ancient city, the race from which David sprang, of which Mary was born.

Jephthah had scattered Ammon behind the hills and the Hebrews dwelt in comparative peace and security. The sanctuary at Shiloh was at length recognised as the centre of religious influence; Eli was in the beginning of his priesthood, and orderly worship was maintained before the ark. People could live quietly about Bethlehem, although Samson, fitfully acting the part of champion on the Philistine border, had his work in restraining the enemy from an advance. Yet all was not well in the homesteads of Judah, for drought is as terrible a foe to the flockmaster as the Arab hordes, and all the south lands were parched and unfruitful.

We are to follow the story of Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their sons Mahlon and Chilion whose home at Bethlehem is about to be broken up. The sheep are dying in the bare glens, the cattle in the fields. From the soil usually so fertile little corn has been reaped. Elimelech, seeing his possessions melt away, has decided to leave Judah for a time so as to save what remains to him till the famine is over, and he chooses the nearest refuge, the watered Field of Moab beyond the Salt Sea. It was not far; he could imagine himself returning soon to resume the accustomed life in the old home. True Hebrews, these Ephrathites were not seeking an opportunity to cast off pious duty and break with Jehovah in leaving His land. Doubtless they hoped that God would bless their going, prosper them

in Moab, and bring them back in good time. It was a trial to go, but what else could they do, life itself, as they believed, being at hazard?

With thoughts like these men often leave the land of their birth, the scenes of early faith, and oftener still without any pressure of necessity of any purpose of returning. Emigration appears to be forced upon many in these times, the compulsion coming not from Providence but from man and man's law. It is also an outlet for the spirit of adventure which characterises some races and has made them the heirs of continents.

Against emigration it would be folly to speak, but great is the responsibility of those by whose action or want of action it is forced upon others. May it not be said that in every European land there are persons in power whose existence is like a famine to a whole countryside? Emigration is talked of glibly as if it were no loss but always gain, as if to the mass of men the traditions and customs of their native land were mere rags well parted with. But it is clear from innumerable examples that many lose what they never find again, of honour, seriousness, and faith.

The last thing thought of by those who compel emigration and many who undertake it of their own accord is the moral result. That which should be first considered is often not considered at all. Granting the advantages of going from a land that is over populated to some fertile region as yet lying waste, allowing what cannot be denied that material progress and personal freedom result from these movements of population, yet the risk to individuals is just in proportion to the worldly attraction. It is certain that in many regions to which the stream of migration is flowing the conditions of life are better and the natural environment purer than they are in the heart of large European cities. But this does not satisfy the religious thinker. Modern colonies have indeed done marvels for political independence, for education and comfort. Their success here is splendid. But do they see the danger? So much achieved in short time for the secular life tends to withdraw attention from the root of spiritual growth — simplicity and moral earnestness. The pious emigrant has to ask himself whether his children will have the same thought for religion beyond the sea as they would have at home, whether he himself is strong enough to maintain his testimony while he seeks his fortune.

We may believe that the Bethlehemite, if he made a mistake in removing to Moab, acted in good faith and did not lose his hope of the divine blessing. Probably he would have said that Moab was just like home. The people spoke a language similar to Hebrew, and like the tribes of Israel they were

partly husbandmen, partly keepers of cattle. In the "Field of Moab," that is the upland canton bounded by the Arnon on the north, the mountains on the east, and the Dead Sea precipices on the west, people lived very much as they did about Bethlehem, only more safely and in greater comfort. But the worship was of Chemosh, and Elimelech must soon have discovered how great a difference that made in thought and social custom and in the feeling of men toward himself and his family. The rites of the god of Moab included festivals in which humanity was disgraced. Standing apart from these he must have found his prosperity hindered, for Chemosh was lord in everything. An alien who had come for his own advantage, yet refused the national customs, would be scorned at least, if not persecuted. Life in Moab became an exile, the Bethlehemites saw that hardship in their own land would have been as easy to endure as the disdain of the heathen and constant temptations to vile conformity. The family had a hard struggle, not holding their own and yet ashamed to return to Judah.

Already we have a picture of wayworn human lives, tried on one side by the rigour of nature, on the other by unsympathetic fellow creatures, and the picture becomes more pathetic as new touches are added to it. Elimelech died; the young men married women of Moab; and in ten years only Naomi was left, a widow with her widowed daughters-in-law. The narrative adds shadow to shadow. The Hebrew woman in her bereavement, with the care of two lads who were somewhat indifferent to the religion she cherished, touches our sympathies. We feel for her when she has to consent to the marriage of her sons with heathen women, for it seems to close all hope of return to her own land and, sore as this trial is, there is a deeper trouble. She is left childless in the country of exile. Yet all is not shadow. Life never is entirely dark unless with those who have ceased to trust in God and care for man. While we have compassion on Naomi we must also admire her. An Israelite among heathen she keeps her Hebrew ways, not in bitterness but in gentle fidelity. Loving her native place more warmly than ever, she so speaks of it and praises it as to make her daughters-in-law think of settling there with her. The influence of her religion is upon them both, and one at least is inspired with faith and tenderness equal to her own. Naomi has her compensations, we see. Instead of proving a trouble to her as she feared, the foreign women in her house have become her friends. She finds occupation and reward in teaching them the religion of Jehovah, and thus, so far as usefulness of the highest kind is concerned, Naomi is more blessed in Moab than she might have been in Bethlehem.

Far better the service of others in spiritual things than a life of mere personal ease and comfort. We count up our pleasures, our possessions and gains and think that in these we have the evidence of the divine favour. Do we as often reckon the opportunities given us of helping our neighbours to believe in God, of showing patience and fidelity, of having a place among those who labour and wait for the eternal kingdom? It is here that we ought to trace the gracious hand of God preparing our way, opening for us the gates of life. When shall we understand that circumstances which remove us from the experience of poverty and pain remove us also from precious means of spiritual service and profit? To be in close personal touch with the poor, the ignorant and burdened is to have simple every day openings into the region of highest power and gladness. We do something enduring, something that engages and increases our best powers when we guide, enlighten, and comfort even a few souls and plant but a few flowers in some dull corner of the world. Naomi did not know how blest she had been in Moab. She said afterwards that she had gone out full and the Lord had brought her home again empty. She even imagined that Jehovah had testified against her and cast her from Him in rejection. Yet she had been finding the true power, winning the true riches. Did she return empty when the convert Ruth, the devoted Ruth went back with her?

Her two sons taken away, Naomi felt no tie binding her to Moab. Moreover in Judah the fields were green again and life was prosperous. She might hope to dispose of her land and realise something for her old age. It seemed therefore her interest and duty to return to her own country; and the next picture of the poem shows Naomi and her daughters-in-law travelling along the northward highway towards the ford of Jordan, she on her way home, they accompanying her. The two young widows are almost decided when they leave the desolate dwelling in Moab to go all the way to Bethlehem. Naomi's account of the life there, the purer faith and better customs attract them, and they love her well. But the matter is not settled; on the bank of Jordan the final choice will be made.

There are hours which bring a heavy burden of responsibility to those who advise and guide, and such an hour came now to Naomi. It was in poverty she was returning to the home of her youth. She could promise to her daughters-in-law no comfortable easy life there, for, as she well knew, the enmity of Hebrews against Moabites was apt to be bitter and they might be scorned as aliens from Jehovah. So far as she was concerned nothing could have been more desirable than their company. A woman in poverty and past middle life could not wish to separate herself from young and

affectionate companions who would be a help to her in her old age. To throw off the thought of personal comfort natural to one in her circumstances and look at things from an unselfish point of view was very difficult. In reading her story let us remember how apt we are to colour advice half unconsciously with our own wishes, our own seeming needs.

Naomi's advantage lay in securing the companionship of Ruth and Orpah, and religious considerations added their weight to her own desire. Her very regard and care for these young women seemed to urge as the highest service she could do them to draw them out of the paganism of Moab and settle them in the country of Jehovah. So while she herself would find reward for her patient efforts these two would be rescued from the darkness, bound in the bundle of life. Here, perhaps, was her strongest temptation; and to some it may appear that it was her duty to use every argument to this end, that she was bound as one who watched for the souls of Ruth and Orpah to set every fear, every doubt aside and to persuade them that their salvation depended on going with her to Bethlehem. Was this not her sacred opportunity, her last opportunity of making sure that the teaching she had given them should have its fruit?

Strange it may seem that the author of the Book of Ruth is not chiefly concerned with this aspect of the case, that he does not blame Naomi for failing to set spiritual considerations in the front. The narrative indeed afterwards makes it clear that Ruth chose the good part and prospered by choosing it, but here the writer calmly states without any question the very temporal and secular reasons which Naomi pressed on the two widows. He seems to allow that home and country — though they were under the shadow of heathenism — home and country and worldly prospects were rightly taken account of even as compared with a place in Hebrew life and faith. But the underlying fact is a social pressure clearly before the Oriental mind. The customs of the time were overmastering, and women had no resource but to submit to them. Naomi accepts the facts and ordinances of the age; the inspired author has nothing to say against her.

“The Lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.” That the two young widows should return each to her mother's house and marry again in Moab is Naomi's urgent advice to them. The times were rude and wild. A woman could be safe and respected only under the protection of a husband. Not only was there the old-world contempt for unmarried women, but, we may say, they were an impossibility; there was no place for them in the social life. People did not

see how there could be a home without some man at the head of it, the house-band in whom all family arrangements centred. It had not been strange that in Moab Hebrew men should marry women of the land; but was it likely Ruth and Orpah would find favour at Bethlehem? Their speech and manners would be despised and, dislike once incurred, prove hard to overcome. Besides, they had no property to commend them.

Evidently the two were very inexperienced. They had little thought of the difficulties, and Naomi, therefore, had to speak very strongly. In the grief of bereavement and the desire for a change of scene they had formed the hope of going where there were good men and women like the Hebrews they knew, and placing themselves under the protection of the gracious God of Israel. Unless they did so life seemed practically at an end. But Naomi could not take upon herself the responsibility of letting them drift into a hazardous position, and she forced a decision of their own in full view of the facts. It was true kindness no less than wisdom. The age had not dawned in which women could attempt to shape or dare to defy the customs of society, nor was any advantage to be sought at the risk of moral compromise. These things Naomi understood, though afterwards, in extremity, she made Ruth venture unwisely to obtain a prize.

Looking around us now we see multitudes of women for whom there appears to be no room, no vocation. Up to a certain point, while they were young, they had no thought of failure. Then came a time when Providence appointed a task; there were parents to care for, daily occupations in the house. But calls for their service have ceased and they feel no responsibility sufficient to give interest and strength. The world has moved on and the movement has done much for women, yet all do not find themselves supplied with a task and a place. Around the occupied and the distinguished circles perpetually a crowd of the helpless, the aimless, the disappointed, to whom life is a blank, offering no path to a ford of Jordan and a new future. Yet half the needful work is done for these when they are made to feel that among the possible ways they must choose one for themselves and follow it; and all is done when they are shown that in the service of God, which is the service also of mankind, a task waits them fitted to engage their highest powers. Across into the region of religious faith and energy they may decide to pass, there is room in it for every life. Disappointment will end when selfish thoughts are forgotten; helplessness will cease when the heart is resolved to help. Even to the very poor and ignorant deliverance would come with a religious thought of life and the first step in personal duty.

CHAPTER 2

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS — ~~080114~~ RUTH 1:14-19

WE journey along with others for a time, enjoying their fellowship and sharing their hopes, yet with thoughts and dreams of our own that must sooner or later send us on a separate path. But decision is so difficult to many that they are glad of an excuse for self-surrender and are only too willing to be led by some authority, deferring personal choice as long as possible. Let an ecclesiastic or a strong-minded companion lay down for them the law of right and wrong and point the path of duty and they will obey, welcoming the relief from moral effort. Not seeing clearly, not disciplined in judgment, they crave external human guidance. The teachers of submission find many disciples not because they speak truth but because they meet the indolence of the human will with a crutch instead of a stimulus; they succeed by pampering weakness and making ignorance a virtue. A time comes, however, when the method will not serve. There are moments when the will must be exercised in choosing between one path and another, advance and retreat; and the alternative is too sharp to allow any escape. If the person is to live at all as a human being he has to decide whether he will go on in such a company or turn back; he has to declare what or who has the strongest hold upon his mind. Such an occasion came to Ruth and Orpah when they reached the border of Moab.

To Orpah the arguments of Naomi were persuasive. Her mother lived in Moab, and to her mother's house she could return. There the customs prevailed which from childhood she had followed. She would have liked to go with Naomi, but her interest in the Hebrew woman and the land and law of Jehovah did not suffice to draw her forward. Orpah saw the future as Naomi painted it, not indeed very attractive if she returned to her native place, but with far more uncertainty and possible humiliation if she crossed the dividing river. She kissed Naomi and Ruth and took the southward road alone, weeping as she went, often turning for yet another sight of her friends, passing at every step into an existence that could never be the old life simply taken up again, but would be coloured in all its experience by what she had learned from Naomi and that parting which was her own choice.

The others did not greatly blame her, and we, for our part, may not reproach her. It is unnecessary to suppose that in returning to her kinsfolk and settling down to the tasks that offered in her mother's house she was guilty of despising truth and love and renouncing the best. We may reasonably imagine her henceforth bearing witness for a higher morality and affirming the goodness of the Hebrew religion among her friends and acquaintances. Ruth goes where affection and duty lead her; but for Orpah too it may be claimed that in love and duty she goes back. She is not one who says, Moab has done nothing for me; Moab has no claim upon me, I am free to leave my country; I am under no debt to my people. We shall not take her as a type of selfishness, worldliness, or backsliding, this Moabite woman. Let us rather believe that she knew of those at home who needed the help she could give, and that with the thought of least hazard to herself mingled one of the duty she owed to others.

And Ruth: — memorable forever is her decision, charming forever the words in which it is expressed. "Behold," said Naomi, "thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people, and unto her god: return thou after thy sister-in-law." But Ruth replied, "Intreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." Like David's lament over Jonathan these words have sunk deep into the human heart. As an expression of the tenderest and most faithful friendship they are unrivalled. The simple dignity of the iteration in varying phrase till the climax is reached beyond which no promise could go, the quiet fervour of the feeling, the thought which seems to have almost a Christian depth — all are beautiful, pathetic, noble. From this moment a charm lingers about Ruth and she becomes dearer to us than any woman of whom the Hebrew records tell.

Dignified and warm affection is the first characteristic of Ruth and close beside it we find the strength of a firm conclusion as to duty. It is good to be capable of clear resolve, parting between this and that of opposing considerations and differing claims. Not to rush at decisions and act in mere wilfulness, for wilfulness is the extreme of weakness, but to judge soundly and on this side or that to say, Here I see the path for me to follow: along this and no other I conclude to go. Unreason decides by taste, by momentary feeling, often out of mere spite or antipathy. But the resolve of a wise thoughtful person, even though it bring temporal

disadvantage, is a moral gain, a step towards salvation. It is the exercise of individuality, of the soul.

One may act in error, as perhaps Elimelech and Orpah acted, yet the life be the stronger for the mistaken decision; only there must be no repentance for having exercised the power of judgment and of choice. Women are particularly prone to go back on themselves in false repentance. They did what they could not but think to be duty; they carefully decided on a path in loyalty to conscience; yet too often they will reproach themselves because what they desired and hoped has not come about. We cannot imagine Ruth in after years, even though her lot had remained that of the poor gleaner and labourer, returning upon her decision and weeping in secret as if the event had proved her high choice a foolish one. Her mind was too firm and clear for that. Yet this is what numbers of women are doing., burdening their souls, making that a crime in which they should rather practise themselves. Our decisions, even when they are made with all the wisdom and information we can command in thorough sanity and sincerity, maybe, often are, very faulty; and do we expect that Providence will perpetually interfere to bring a perfect result out of the imperfect? Only in the perfect order of God, through the perfect work of Christ and the perfect operation of the Holy Spirit is the glorious consummation of human history and divine purpose to come. As for us, we are to learn of God in Christ, to judge and act our best; thereafter, leaving the result to Providence, never go back on that of which the Spirit of the Almighty made us capable in the hour of trial.

*“Then welcome each rebuff
That turns earth’s smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joys three parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never
grudge the throe!”^{f8}*

In religion there is no escape from personal decision; no one can drift to salvation with companions or with a church. In art, in literature, in ordinary morality it is possible to possess something without any special effort. The atmosphere of cultured society, for instance, holds in solution the knowledge and taste which have been gained by a few and may pass in some measure to those who associate with them, though personally these have studied and acquired very little. Anyone who observes how a new book is talked of will see the process. But the supreme nature of religion

and its unique part in human development are seen here, that it demands high and sustained personal effort, the constant action of the will; that indeed every spiritual gain must result from the vital activity of the individual mind choosing to enter and enter yet farther the kingdom of divine revelation and grace. As it is expressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "We desire that every one of you do show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: that ye be not slothful but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises." The training in resoluteness, therefore, finds highest value and significance in view of the religious life. Those who live by habit and dependence in other matters are not prepared for the strenuous calling of faith, and many a one is kept from the freedom and joy of Christianity not because they are undesired, not because the call of Christ is unheeded, but for want of the power of decision, strength to go forward on a personal quest. Thousands are in the way of saying, Will you go to an evangelistic meeting? Then I will go. Will you take the Sacrament? Then I will. Will you teach in the Sunday school? Then I will. So far something is gained; there is a half decision. But the spiritual life is sure at some point to demand more than this. Even Naomi's advice must not deter Ruth from taking the way to Bethlehem.

Like many women Ruth was moved greatly by love. Was her love justified? Did it rightly govern her to the extent her words imply? "Whither thou goest, I will go: thy people shall be my people: where thou diest I will die, and there will I be buried." It is beautiful to see such love: but how was it earned?

Surely by years of patient faithful help; not by a few cheap words and caresses, a few facile promises; not by beauty of face, gaiety of temper. The love that has nothing but these to found upon is not enough for a life companionship. But if there is honour, clear sincerity of soul, generosity of nature; if there is brave devotion to duty, there love can rest without fear, reproach, or hazard. When these cast their light on your way, love then, love freely and strongly; you are safe. It is indeed called love where these are not — but only in ignorance and lightness: the heart has been caught by a word, ensnared by a look. How pathetic are the errors into which we see our friends and neighbours fall, errors that call for a life-long repentance because reason and serious purpose had nothing to do with the loving. No law of God is written against human affection, nor has He any jealousy of the devotion we show to worthy fellow creatures; but there are divine laws of love to restrain our weak fancy and uplift our emotions; and if we

disdain or cast aside these laws we must suffer, however ardent and self-sacrificing affection may be. Egotistical wilfulness in serving some one who engages our admiration and passionate devotion is not, properly speaking, love. It is rather an offence against that divine grace which bears the noble name. Of course we are not here speaking of Christian charity towards our neighbours, interest in them, and care for their well being, which are always our duty and must not be limited. The story we are following is one of an intimate and personal affection.

Lastly and chiefly, the answer of Ruth implies a religious change — conversion. She renounces Chemosh and turns in faith and hope to the God of Israel, and this is the striking feature of her choice. Dimly seen, the grace and righteousness of the Most High touched her soul, commanded her reverence, drew her to follow one who was His servant and could recount the wonderful story of His people. Surely it is a supreme event in any life when this vision of the Best allures the mind and engages the will, even though knowledge of God be as yet very imperfect. And the reliance of Ruth upon the little she felt and knew of God, her clear resolution to seek rest under His wings appear in striking contrast with the reluctance, the unconcern, the hard unfaith of many today. How is it that they to whom the Word speaks and the life is revealed, whose portion is at every moment enriched by that Word and that life are so blind to the grace that encompasses and deaf to the love that entreats? Again and again we see them on the banks of some Jordan, with the land of God clear in view, with the promise of devotion trembling on their tips; but they turn back to Moab and Chemosh, to paganism, unrest, and despair.

Ruth's life properly began when at Naomi's side she passed through the waters, the very waters of baptism to her. There, with the purple mountains of Moab and the precipices of the Dead Sea shore behind, she sent her last look to Orpah and the past, and saw before her the steep narrow ascent through the Judaeian hills. With rising faith, with growing love she moved to the fulfilment of womanhood in realising the soul's highest power and privilege. The upward path was hard to weary feet and all was not to be easy for Ruth in the Bethlehem of which she had dreamed; but fully committed and pledged to the new life she went forward. How much is missed when the choice to serve God is not unreservedly made, and there is not that full consecration of which Ruth's decision may be a type.

Of this loss we see examples on every side. To remain in the low ground by the river, still within reach of some paganism that fascinates even after

profession and baptism — this is the end of religious feeling with many. Where the narrow way of discipleship leads they will not adventure; it is too bare, confining, and severe. They will not believe that freedom for the human soul is found by that path alone; they refuse to be bound and therefore never discover the inheritance of God's children to which they are called. When He who alone can guide, quicken, redeem is accepted solemnly and finally as the Lord of life, then at last the weak and entangled spirit knows the beginning of liberty and strength. Sad is the reckoning in our time of those who refuse to pledge themselves to the Saviour Whose claim they do feel to be divine and urgent. Not yet may the preacher cease to speak of conversion as the necessity in every life. Rather because it is easy to be in touch with Christianity at some point, because gospel influences are widely diffused, and church connection can be lightly held, the personal pledge to Christ must be insisted upon in the pulpit and kept in view as the end to which all the work of the church is directed.

Life has many partings, and we have all had our experience of some which without fault on either side separate those well fitted to serve and bless each other. Over matters of faith, questions of political order and even social morality separations will occur. There may be no lack of faithfulness on either side when at a certain point widely divergent views of duty are taken by two who have been friends. One standing only a little apart from the other sees the same light reflected from a different facet of the crystal, streaming out in a different direction. As it would be altogether a mistake to say that Orpah took the way of worldly selfishness, Ruth only going in the way of duty, so it is entirely a mistake to accuse those who part with us on some question of faith or conduct and think of them as finally estranged. A little more knowledge and we would see with them or they with us. Some day they and we shall reach the truth and agree in our conclusions. Separations there must be for a time, for as the character leans to love or justice, the mind to reasoning or emotion, there is a difference in the vision of the good for which a man should strive. And if it comes to this that the paths chosen by those who were once dear friends divide them to the end of earthly days, they should retain the recollection not so much of the single point that separated, as of the many on which there was agreement. Even though they have to fight on opposite sides, it should be as those who were brothers once and shall be brothers again. Indeed, are they not brothers still, if they fight for the same Master?

Yet one difference between men reaches to the roots of life. The company of those who keep the straight way and press on towards the light have the

most sorrowful recollection of some partings. They have had to leave comrades and brethren behind who despised the quest of holiness and immortality and had nothing but mockery for the Friend and Saviour of man. The shadows of estrangement falling between those who are of Christ's company are nothing compared with the dense cloud which divides them from men pledged to what is earthly and ignoble; and so the reproach of sectarian division coming from irreligious persons needs not trouble those who have as Christians an eternal brotherhood.

There are divisions sharp and dreadful, not always at some river which clearly separates land from land. They may be made in the street where parting seems temporary and casual. They may be made in the very house of God. While some members of a family are responding with joy to a divine appeal, one may be resolutely turning from it to a base idolatry. Of three who went together to a place of prayer two may from that hour keep company in the heavenward journey, while the third moves every day towards the shadow of self-chosen reprobation. Christ has spoken of tremendous separations which men make by their acceptance or rejection of Him. "These shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into life eternal."

CHAPTER 3

IN THE FIELD OF BOAZ — ~~080119~~ RUTH 1:19-2:23

WEARY and footsore the two travellers reached Bethlehem at length, and “all the city was moved about them.” Though ten years had elapsed, many yet remembered as if it had been yesterday the season of terrible famine and the departure of the emigrants. Now the women lingering at the well, when they see the strangers approaching, say as they look in the face of the elder one, “Is this Naomi?” What a change is here! With husband and sons, hoping for anew life across in Moab, she went away. Her return has about it no sign of success; she comes on foot, in the company of one who is evidently of an alien race, and the two have all the marks of poverty. The women who recognise the widow of Elimelech are somewhat pitiful, perhaps also a little scornful. They had not left their native land nor doubted the promise of Jehovah. Through the famine they had waited, and now their position contrasts very favourably with hers. Surely Naomi is far down in the world since she has made a companion of a woman of Moab. Her poverty is against the wayfarer, and to those who know not the story of her life that which shows her goodness and faithfulness appears a cause of reproach and reason of suspicion.

Is it too harsh to interpret thus the question with which Naomi is met? We are only using a key which common experience of life supplies. Do people give sincere and hearty sympathy to those who went away full and return empty, who were once in good standing and repute and come back years after to their old haunts impoverished and with strange associates? Are we not more ready to judge unfavourably in such a case than to exercise charity? The trick of hasty interpretation is common because every one desires to be on good terms with himself, and nothing is so soothing to vanity as the discovery of mistakes into which others have fallen. “All the brethren of the poor do hate him,” says one who knew the Hebrews and human nature well; “how much more do his friends go far from him. He pursueth them with words, yet they are wanting to him.” Naomi finds it so when she throws herself on the compassion of her old neighbours. They are not uninterested, they are not altogether unkind, but they feel their superiority.

And Naomi appears to accept the judgment they have formed. Very touching is the lament in which she takes her position as one whom God has rebuked, whom it is no wonder, therefore, that old friends despise. She almost makes excuse for those who look down upon her from the high ground of their imaginary virtue and wisdom. Indeed she has the same belief as they that poverty, the loss of land, bereavement, and every kind of affliction are marks of God's displeasure. For, what does she say? "Call me not Naomi, Pleasant, call me Mara, Bitter, for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me... The Lord hath testified against me and the Almighty hath afflicted me." Such was the Hebrew thought, the purpose of God in His dealings with men not being apprehended. Under the shadow of toss and sorrow it seemed that no heat of the Divine Presence could be felt. To have a husband and, children appeared to Naomi evidence of Gods favour; to lose them was a proof that He had turned against her. Heavy as her losses had been, the terrible thing was that they implied the displeasure of God.

It is perhaps difficult for us to realise even by an imaginative effort this condition of soul — the sense of banishment, darkness, outlawry which came to the Hebrew whenever he fell into distress or penury. And yet we ourselves retain the same standard of judgment in our common estimate of life; we still interpret things by an ignorant unbelief which causes many worthy souls to bow in a humiliation Christians should never feel. Do not the loneliness, the poverty, the testimony of Christ teach us something altogether different? Can we still cherish the notion that prosperity is an evidence of worth and that the man who can found a family must be a favourite of the heavenly powers? Judge thus and the providence of God is a tangle, a perplexing darkening problem which, believe as you may, must still overwhelm. Wealth has its conditions; money comes through some one's cleverness in work and trading, some one's inventiveness or thrift, and these qualities are reputable. But nothing is proved regarding the spiritual tone and nature of a life either by wealth or by the want of it. And surely we have learned that toss of friends and loneliness are not to be reckoned the punishment of sin. Often enough we hear the warning that wealth and worldly position are not to be sought for themselves, and yet, side by side with this warning, the implication that a high place and a prosperous life are proofs of divine blessing.

On the whole subject Christian thought is far from clear, and we have need to go anew to the Master and inquire of Him Who had no place where to lay His head. The Hebrew belief in the prosperity of God's servants must

fulfil itself in a larger better faith or the man of tomorrow will have no faith at all. One who bewails the loss of wealth or friends is doing nothing that has spiritual meaning or value. When he takes himself to task for that despondency he begins to touch the spiritual.

In Bethlehem Naomi found the half-ruined cottage still belonging to her, and there she and Ruth took up their abode. But for a living what was to be done? The answer came in the proposal of Ruth to go into the fields where the barley harvest was proceeding and glean after the reapers. By great diligence she might gather enough day by day for the bare sustenance that contents a Syrian peasant, and afterwards some other means of providing for herself and Naomi might be found. The work was not dignified. She would have to appear among the waifs and wanderers of the country, with women whose behaviour exposed them to the rude gibes of the labourers. But whatever plan Naomi vaguely entertained was hanging in abeyance, and the circumstances of the women were urgent. No kinsman came forward to help them. Loath as she was to expose Ruth to the trials of the harvest field, Naomi had to let her go. So it was Ruth who made the first move, Ruth the stranger who brought succour to the Hebrew widow when her own people held aloof and she herself knew not how to act.

Now among the farmers whose barley was falling before the sickle was the land owner Boaz, a kinsman of Elimelech, a man of substance and social importance, one of those who in the midst of their fruitful fields shine with bountiful good humour and by their presence make their servants work heartily. To Ruth in after days it must have seemed a wonderful thing that her first timid expedition led her to a portion of ground belonging to this man. From the moment he appears in the narrative we note in him a certain largeness of character. It may be only the easy kindness of the prosperous man, but it commends him to our good opinion. Those who have a smooth way through the world are bound to be especially kind and considerate in their bearing toward neighbours and dependants, this at least they owe as an acknowledgment to the rest of the world, and we are always pleased to find a rich man paying his debt so far. There is a certain piety also in the greeting of Boaz to his labourers, a customary thing no doubt and good even in that sense, but better when it carries, as it seems to do here, a personal and friendly message. Here is a man who will observe with strict eye everything that goes on in the field and will be quick to challenge any lazy reaper. But he is not remote from those who serve him, he and they meet on common ground of humanity and faith.

The great operations which some in these days think fit to carry on, more for their own glory certainly than the good of their country or countrymen, entirely preclude anything like friendship between the chief and the multitude of his subordinates. It is impossible that a man who has a thousand under him should know and consider each, and there would be too much pretence in saying, "God be with you," on entering a yard or factory when otherwise no feeling is shown with which the name of God can be connected. Apart altogether from questions as to wealth and its use, every employer has a responsibility for maintaining the healthy human activity of his people, and nowhere is the immorality of the present system of huge concerns so evident as in the extinction of personal good will. The workman of course may adjust himself to the state of matters, but it will too often be by discrediting what he knows he cannot have and keeping up a critical resentful habit of mind against those who seem to treat him as a machine. He may often be wrong in his judgment of an employer. There may be less hardness of temper on the other side than there is on his own. But, the conditions being what they are, one may say he is certain to be a severe critic. We have unquestionably lost much and are in danger of losing more, not in a financial sense, which matters little, but in the infinitely more important affairs of social sweetness and Christian civilisation.

Boaz the farmer had not more in hand than he could attend to honestly, and everything under his care was well ordered. He had a foreman over the reapers, and from him he required an account of the stranger whom he saw gleaning in the field. There were to be no hangers on of loose character where he exercised authority; and in this we justify him. We like to see a man keeping a firm hand when we are sure that he has a good heart and knows what he is doing. Such a one is bound within the range of his power to have all done rightly and honourably, and Boaz pleases us all the better that he makes close inquiry regarding the woman who seeks the poor gains of a common gleaner.

Of course in a place like Bethlehem people knew each other, and Boaz was probably acquainted with most whom he saw about; at once, therefore, the new figure of the Moabite woman attracted his attention. Who is she? A kindly heart prompts the inquiry for the farmer knows that if he interests himself in this young woman he may be burdened with a new dependant. "It is the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab." She is the daughter-in-law of his old friend Elimelech. Before the eyes of Boaz one of the romances of life, common and tragic too, is unfolding itself. Often had Boaz and Elimelech held counsel with each

other, met at each other's houses, talked together of their fields or of the state of the country. But Elimelech went away and lost all and died; and two widows, the wreck of the family, had returned to Bethlehem. It was plain that these would be new claimants on his favour, but unlike many well to do persons Boaz does not wait for some urgent appeal; he acts rather as one who is glad to do a kindness for old friendship's sake.

Great was the surprise of the lonely gleaner when the rich man came to her side and gave her a word of comfortable greeting. "Hearest thou not, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, but abide here fast by my maidens." Nothing had been done to make Ruth feel at home in Bethlehem until Boaz addressed her. She had perhaps seen proud and scornful looks in the street and at the well, and had to bear them meekly, silently. In the fields she may have looked for something of the kind and even feared that Boaz would dismiss her. A gentle person in such circumstances is exceedingly grateful for a very small kindness, and it was not a slight favour that Boaz did her. But in making her acknowledgments Ruth did not know what had prepared her way. The truth was that she had met with a man of character who valued character, and her faithfulness commended her. "It hath been fully showed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother-in-law since the death of thine husband." The best point in Boaz is that he so quickly and fully recognises the goodness of another and will help her because they stand upon a common ground of conscience and duty.

Is it on such a ground you draw to others? Is your interest won by kindly dispositions and fidelity of temper? Do you love those who are sincere and patient in their duties, content to serve where service is appointed by God? Are you attracted by one who cherishes a parent, say a poor mother, in the time of feebleness and old age, doing all that is possible to smooth her path and provide for her comfort? Or have you little esteem for such a one, for the duties so faithfully discharged, because you see no brilliance or beauty, and there are other persons more clever and successful on their own account, more amusing because they are unburdened? If so, be sure of your own ignorance, your own undutifulness, your own want of principle and heart. Character is known by character, and worth by worth. Those who are acquainted with you could probably say that you care more for display than for honour, that you think more of making a fine figure in society than of showing generosity, forbearance, and integrity at home. The good appreciate goodness, the true honour truth. One important lesson of the Book of Ruth lies here, that the great thing for young women, and for young men also, is to be quietly faithful in the service, however humble, to

which God has called them and the family circle in which He has set them. Not indeed because that is the line of promotion, though Ruth found it so; every Ruth does not obtain favour in the eyes of a wealthy Boaz. So honourable and good a man is not to be met on every harvest field; on the contrary she may encounter a Nabal, one who is churlish and evil in his doings.

We must take the course of this narrative as symbolic. The book has in it the strain of a religious idyl. The Moabite who wins the regard of this man of Judah represents those who, though naturally strangers to the covenant of promise, receive the grace of God and enter the circle of divine blessing — even coming to high dignity in the generations of the chosen people. It is idyllic, we say, not an exhibition of everyday fact; yet the course of divine justice is surely more beautiful, more certain. To every Ruth comes the Heavenly Friend Whose are all the pastures and fields, all the good things of life. The Christian hope is in One Who cannot fail to mark the most private faithfulness, piety and love hidden like violets among the grass. If there is not such a One, the Helper and Vindicator of meek fidelity, virtue has no sanction and well doing no recompense.

The true Israelite Boaz accepts the daughter of an alien and unfriendly people on account of her own character and piety. “The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord, the God of Israel, under Whose wings thou art come to take refuge.” Such is the benediction which Boaz invokes on Ruth, receiving her cordially into the family circle of Jehovah. Already she has ceased to be a stranger and a foreigner to him. The boundary walls of race are overstepped, partly, no doubt, by that sense of kinship which the Bethlehemite is quick to acknowledge. For Naomi’s sake and for Elimelech’s as well as her own he craves divine protection and reward for the daughter of Moab. Yet the beautiful phrase he employs, full of Hebrew confidence in God, is an acknowledgment of Ruth’s act of faith and her personal right to share with the children of Abraham the fostering love of the Almighty. The story, then, is a plea against that exclusiveness which the Hebrews too often indulged. On this page of the annals the truth is written out that though Jehovah cared for Israel much He cares still more for love and faithfulness, purity and goodness. We reach at last an instance of that fulfilment of Israel’s mission to the nations around which in our study of the Book of Judges we looked for in vain.

Not for Israel only in the time of its narrowness was the lesson given. We need it still. The justification and redemption of God are not restricted to

those who have certain traditions and beliefs. Even as a Moabite woman brought up in the worship of Chemosh, with many heathen ideas still in her mind, has her place under the wings of Jehovah as a soul seeking righteousness, so from countries and regions of life which Christian people may consider a kind of rude heathen Moab many in humility and sincerity may be coming nigh to the kingdom of God. It was so in our Lord's time, and it is so still. All along the true religion of God has been for reconciliation and brotherhood among men, and it was possible for many Israelites to do what Naomi did in the way of making effectual the promise of God to Abraham that in his seed all families of the earth should be blessed. There never was a middle wall of partition between men except in the thought of the Hebrew. He was separated that he might be able to convert and bless, not that he might stand aloof in pride. The wall which he built Christ has broken down that the servants of His gospel may go freely forth to find everywhere brethren in common humanity and need, who are to be made brethren in Christ. The outward representation of brotherhood in faith must follow the work of the reconciling Spirit — cannot precede it. And when the reconciliation is felt in the depth of human souls we shall have the all-comprehensive church, a fair and gracious dwelling place, wide as the race, rich with every noble thought and hope of man and every gift of Heaven.

CHAPTER 4

THE HAZARDOUS PLAN

HOPE came to Naomi when Ruth returned with the ephah of barley and her story of the rich man's hearty greeting. God was remembering His handmaiden; He had not shut up His tender mercies. Through His favour Boaz had been moved to kindness, and the house of Elimelech would yet be raised from the dust. The woman's heart, clinging to its last hope, was encouraged. Naomi was loud in her praises of Jehovah and of the man who had with such pious readiness befriended Ruth. And the young woman had due encouragement. She heard no fault finding, no complaint that she had made too little of her chance. The young sometimes find it difficult to serve the old, and those who have come down in the world are very apt to be discontented and querulous; what is done for them is never rightly done, never enough. It was not so here. The elder woman seems to have had nothing but gratitude for the gentle effort of the other. And so the weeks of barley harvest and of wheat harvest went by, Ruth busy in the fields of Boaz, gleaning behind his maidens, helped by their kindness — for they knew better than to thwart their master — and cheered at home by the pleasure of her mother-in-law. An idyl? Yes, one that might be enacted, with varying circumstances, in a thousand homes where at present distrust and impatience keep souls from the peace God would give them.

But, one may ask, why did Boaz, so well inclined to be generous, knowing these women to be deserving of help, leave them week after week without further notice and aid? Could he reckon his duty done when he allowed Ruth to glean in his fields, gave her a share of the refreshment provided for the reapers, and ordered them to pull some ears from the bundles that she might the more easily fill her arms? For friendship's sake even, should he not have done more?

We keep in mind, for one thing, that Boaz, though a kinsman, was not the nearest relation Naomi had in Bethlehem. Another was of closer kin to Elimelech, and it was his duty to take up the widow's case in accordance with the custom of the time. The old law that no Hebrew family should be allowed to lapse had deep root and justification. How could Israel maintain itself in the land of promise and become the testifying people of God if families were suffered to die out and homesteads to be lost? One war after

another drained away many active men of the tribes. Upon those who survived lay the serious duty of protecting widows, upholding claims to farm and dwelling, and raising up to those who had died a name in Israel. The stress of the time gave sanction to the law; without it Israel would have decayed, losing ground and power in the face of the enemy. Now this custom bound the nearest kinsman of Naomi to befriend her and, at least, to establish her claim to a certain "parcel of land" near Bethlehem. As for Boaz, he had to stand aside and give the goal his opportunity.

And another reason is easily seen for his not hastening to supply the two widows with every comfort and remove from their hearts every fear, a reason which touches the great difficulty of the philanthropic, — how to do good and yet do no harm. To give is easy; but to help without tarnishing the fine independence and noble thrift of poorer persons is not easy. It is, in truth, a very serious matter to use wealth wisely, for against the absolute duty of help hangs the serious mischief that may result from lavish or careless charity. Boaz appears a true friend and wise benefactor in leaving Ruth to enjoy the sweetness of securing the daily portion of corn by her own exertion. He might have relieved her from toiling like one of the poorest and least cared for of women. He might have sent her home the first day and one of his young men after her with store of corn and oil. But if he had done so he would have made the great mistake so often made nowadays by the bountiful. An industrious patient generous life would have been spoiled. To protect Ruth from any kind or degree of insolence, to show her, for his own part, the most delicate respect — this Boaz could well do. In what he refrained from doing he is an example, and in the kind and measure of attention he paid to Ruth. Corresponding acts of Christian courtesy and justice due from the rich and influential of our time to persons in straitened circumstances are far too often unrendered. A thousand opportunities of paying this real debt of man to man are allowed to pass. Those concerned do not see any obligation, and the reason is that they want the proper state of mind. That is indispensable. Where it exists true neighbourliness will follow; the best help will be given naturally with perfect taste, in proper degree and without self-sufficiency or pride.

A great hazard goes with much of the spiritual work of our time. The Ruth gleaned for herself in the field of Christian thought, finding here and there an ear of heavenly corn which, as she has gathered it gives true nourishment to the soul — is met not by one but by many eager to save her all the trouble of searching the Scriptures and thinking out the problems of life and faith. Is it wrong to deprive a brave self-helper of the need to toil

for daily bread? How much greater is the wrong done to minds capable of spiritual endeavour when they are taught to renounce personal effort and are loaded with sheaves of corn which they have neither sowed nor reaped. The fashion of our time is to save people trouble in religion, to remove all resistance from the way of mind and soul, and as a result the spiritual life never attains strength or even consciousness. Better the scanty meal won by personal search in the great harvest field than the surfeit of dainties on which some are fed, spiritual paupers though they know it not. The wisdom of the Divine Book is marvellously shown in that it gives largely without destroying the need for effort, that it requires examination and research, comparison of scripture with scripture, earnest thought in many a field. Bible study, therefore, makes strong Christians, strong faith.

As time went by and harvest drew to a close, Naomi grew impatient. Anxious about Ruth's future she wished to see something done towards establishing her in safety and honour. "My daughter-in-law," we hear her say, "shall I not seek rest — a *menuchah* or asylum for thee, that it may be well with thee?" No goal or redeemer has appeared to befriend Naomi and reinstate her, or Ruth as representing her dead son, in the rights of Elimelech. If those rights are not to lapse, something must be done speedily; and Naomi's plot is a bold one. She sets Ruth to claim Boaz as the kinsman whose duty it is to marry her and become her protector. Ruth is to go to the threshing floor on the night of the harvest festival, wait until Boaz lies down to sleep beside the mass of winnowed grain, and place herself at his feet, so reminding him that if no other will it is his part to be a husband to her for the sake of Elimelech and his sons. The plan is daring and appears to us indelicate at least. It is impossible to say whether any custom of the time sanctioned it; but even in that case we cannot acquit Naomi of resorting to a stratagem with the view of bringing about what seemed most desirable for Ruth and herself.

Now let us remember the position of the two widows, lonely, with no prospect before them but hard toil that would by and by fail, unable to undertake anything on their own account, and still regarded with indifference, if not suspicion, by the people of Bethlehem. There is no asylum for Ruth except in the house of a husband. If Naomi dies she will be worse than destitute, morally under a cloud. To live by herself will be to lead a life of constant peril. It is, we may say, a desperate resource on which Naomi falls. Boaz is probably already married, has perhaps more wives than one. True, he has room in his house for Ruth; he can easily provide for her; and though the customs of the age are strained somewhat

we must partly admit excuse. Still the venture is almost entirely suggested and urged by worldly considerations, and for the sake of them great risk is run. Instead of gaining a husband Ruth may completely forfeit respect. Boaz, so far from entertaining her appeal to his kinship and generosity, may drive her from the threshing floor. It is one of those cases in which, notwithstanding some possible defence in custom, poverty and anxiety lead into dubious ways.

We ask why Naomi did not first approach the proper goel, the kinsman nearer than Boaz, on whom she had an undeniable claim. And the answer occurs that he did not seem in respect of disposition or means so good a match as Boaz. Or why did she not go directly to Boaz and state her desire? She was apparently not averse from grasping at the result, compromising him, or running the risk of doing so in order to gain her end. We cannot pass the point without observing that, despite the happy issue of this plot, it is a warning not an example. These secret, underhand schemes are not to our liking; they should in no circumstances be resorted to. It was well for Ruth that she had a man to deal with who was generous, not irascible, a man of character who had fully appreciated her goodness. The scheme would otherwise have had a pitiful result. The story is one creditable in many respects to human nature, and the Moabite, acting under Naomi's direction, appears almost blameless; yet the sense of having lowered herself must have cast its shadow. A risk was run too great by far for modesty and honour.

To compromise ourselves by doing that which savours of presumption, which goes too far even by a hair's breadth in urging a claim, is a bad thing. Better remain without what we reckon our rights than lower our moral dignity in pressing them. Independence of character, perfect honour and uprightness are too precious by far to be imperilled even in a time of serious difficulty. Today we can hardly turn in any direction without seeing instances of risky compromise often ending in disaster. To obtain preferment one will offer some mean bribe of flattery to the person who can give it. To gain a fortune men will condescend to pitiful self-humiliation. In the literary world the upward ways open easily to talent that does not refuse compromises; a writer may have success at the price of astute silence or careful caressing of prejudice. The candidate for office commits himself and has afterwards to wriggle as best he can out of the straits in which he is involved. And what is the meaning of the light judgment of drunkenness and impurity by men and women of all ranks who

associate with those known to be guilty and make no protest against their wrong doing?

It would be shirking one of the plain applications of the incidents before us if we passed over the compromises so many women make with self-respect and purity. Ruth, under the advice of one whom she knew to be a good woman, risked something: with us now are many who against the entreaty of all true friends adventure into dangerous ways, put themselves into the power of men they have no reason to trust. And women in high place, who should set an example of fidelity to the divine order and understand the honour of womanhood, are rather leading the dance of freedom and risk. To keep a position or win a position in the crowd called society some will yield to any fashion, go all lengths in the license of amusement, sit unblushing at plays that serve only one end, give themselves and their daughters to embraces that degrade. The struggle to live is spoken of sometimes as an excuse for women. But is it the very poor only who compromise themselves? Something else is going on beside the struggle to find work and bread. People are forgetting God, thrusting aside the ideas of the soul and of sin; they want keen delight and are ready to venture all if only in triumphant ambition or on the perilous edge of infamy they can satisfy desire for an hour. The cry of today, spreading down through all ranks, is the old one, Why should we be righteous over much and destroy ourselves? It is the expression of a base and despicable atheism. To deny the higher light which shows the way of personal duty and nobleness, to prefer instead the miserable rushlight of desire is the fatal choice against which all wisdom of sage and seer testifies. Yet the thing is done daily, done by brilliant women who go on as if nothing was wrong and laugh back to those who follow them. The Divine Friend of women protests, but His words are unheard, drowned by the fascinating music and quick pulsation of the dance of death.

To compromise ourselves is bad: close beside lies the danger of compromising others; and this too is illustrated by the narrative. Boaz acted in generosity and honour, told Ruth plainly that a kinsman nearer than himself stood between them, made her a most favourable promise. But he sent her away in the early morning "before one could recognise another." The risk to which she had exposed him was one he did not care to face. While he made all possible excuses for her and was in a sense proud of the trust she had reposed in him, still he was somewhat alarmed and anxious. The narrative is generous to Ruth; but this is not concealed. We see very distinctly a touch of something caught in heathen Moab.

On the more satisfactory side of the picture is the confidence so unreservedly exercised, justified so thoroughly. It is good to be among people who deserve trust and never fail in the time of trial. Take them at any hour, in any way, they are the same. Incapable of baseness they bear every test. On the firm conviction that Boaz was a man of this kind Naomi depended, upon this and an assurance equally firm that Ruth would behave herself discreetly. Happy indeed are those who have the honour of friendship with the honourable and true, with men who would rather lose a right hand than do anything base, with women who would die for honour's sake. To have acquaintance with faithful men is to have a way prepared for faith in God.

Let us not fail, however, to observe where honour like this may be found, where alone it is to be found. Common is the belief that absolute fidelity may exist in soil cleared of all religious principle. You meet people who declare that religion is of no use. They have been brought up in religion, but they are tired of it. They have given up churches and prayers and are going to be honourable without thought of God, on the basis of their own steadfast virtue. We shall not say it is impossible, or that women like Ruth may not rely upon men who so speak. But a single word of scorn cast on religion reveals so faulty a character that it is better not to confide in the man who utters it. He is in the real sense an atheist, one to whom nothing is sacred. About some duties he may have a sentiment; but what is sentiment or taste to build upon? For one to trust where reputation is concerned, where moral well being is involved, a soul must be found whose life is rooted in the faith of God. True enough, we are under the necessity of trusting persons for whom we have no such guarantee. Fortunately, however, it is only in matters of business, or municipal affairs, or parliamentary votes, things extraneous to our proper life. Unrighteous laws may be made, we may be defrauded and oppressed, but that does not affect our spiritual position. When it comes to the soul and the soul's life, when one is in search of a wife, a husband, a friend, trust should be placed elsewhere, hope built on a sure foundation.

May we depend upon love in the absence of religious faith? Some would fain conjure with that word; but love is a divine gift when it is pure and true; the rest is mere desire and passion. Do you suppose because an insincere worldly man has a selfish passion for you that you can be safe with him? Do you think because a worldly woman loves you in a worldly way that your soul and your future will be safe with her? Find a fearer of God, one whose virtues are rooted where alone they can grow, in faith, or

live without a wife, a husband. It is presupposed that you yourself are a fearer of God, a servant of Christ. For, unless you are, the rule operates on the other side and you are one who should be shunned. Besides, if you are a materialist living in time and sense and yet look for spiritual graces and superhuman fidelity, your expectation is amazing, your hope a thing to wonder at.

True, hypocrites exist, and we may be deceived just because of our certainty that religion is the only root of faithfulness. A man may simulate religion and deceive for a time. The young may be sadly deluded, a whole community betrayed by one who makes the divinest facts of human nature serve his own wickedness awhile.

He disappears and leaves behind him broken hearts, shattered hopes, darkened lives. Has religion, then, nothing to do with morality? The very ruin we lament shows that the human heart in its depth testifies to an intimate and eternal connection with the absolute of fidelity. Not otherwise could that hypocrite have deceived. And in the strength of faith there are men and women of unflinching honour, who, when they find each other out, form rare and beautiful alliances. Step for step they go on, married or unmarried, each cheering the other in trial, sustaining the other in every high and generous task. Together they enter more deeply into the purpose of life, that is the will of God, and fill with strong and healthy religion the circle of their influence.

Of the people of ordinary virtue what shall be said — those who are neither perfectly faithful nor disgracefully unfaithful, neither certain to be staunch and true nor ready to betray and cast aside those who trust them. Large is the class of men whose individuality is not of a moral kind, affable and easy, brisk and clever but not resolute in truth and right. Are we to leave these where they are? If we belong to their number are we to stay among them? Must they get on as best they can with each other, neither blessed nor condemned? For them the gospel is provided in its depth and urgency. Theirs is the state it cannot tolerate nor leave untouched, unaffected. If earth is good enough for you, so runs the divine message to them, cling to it, enjoy its dainties, laugh in its sunlight — and die with it. But if you see the excellence of truth, be true; if you hear the voice of the eternal Christ, arise and follow Him, born again by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever.

CHAPTER 5

THE MARRIAGE AT THE GATE — RUTH 4

A SIMPLE ceremony of Oriental life brings to a climax the history which itself closes in sweet music the stormy drama of the Book of Judges. With all the literary skill and moral delicacy, all the charm and keen judgment of inspiration the narrator gives us what he has from the Spirit. He has represented with fine brevity and power of touch the old life and custom of Israel, the private groups in which piety and faithfulness were treasured, the frank humanity and divine seriousness of Jehovah's covenant. And now we are at the gate of Bethlehem where the head men are assembled, and according to the usage of the time the affairs of Naomi and Ruth are settled by the village court of justice. Boaz gives a challenge to the goal of Naomi, and point by point we follow the legal forms by which the right to redeem the land of Elimelech is given up to Boaz and Ruth becomes his wife.

Why is an old custom presented with such minuteness? We may affirm the underlying suggestion to be that the ways described were good ways which ought to be kept in mind. The usage implied great openness and neighbourliness, a simple and straightforward method of arranging affairs which were of moment to a community. People lived then in very direct and frank relations with each other. Their little town and its concerns had close and intelligent attention. Men and women desired to act so that there might be good understanding among them, no jealousy nor rancour of feeling. Elaborate forms of law were unknown, unnecessary. To take off the shoe and hand it to another in the presence of honest neighbours ratified a decision as well and gave as good security as much writing on parchment. The author of the Book of Ruth commends these homely ways of a past age and suggests to the men of his own time that civilisation and the monarchy, while they have brought some gains, are perhaps to be blamed for the decay of simplicity and friendliness.

More than one reason may be found for supposing the book to have been written in Solomon's time, probably the latter part of his reign when laws and ordinances had multiplied and were being enforced in endless detail by a central authority; when the manners of the nations around, Chaldea, Egypt, Phoenicia, were overbearing the primitive ways of Israel; when luxury was growing, society dividing into classes, and a proud imperialism

giving its colour to habit and religion. If we place the book at this period we can understand the moral purpose of the writer and the importance of his work. He would teach people to maintain the spirit of Israel's past, the brotherliness, the fidelity in every relation that were to have been all along a distinction of Hebrew life because inseparably connected with the obedience of Jehovah. The splendid temple on Moriah was now the centre of a great priestly system, and from temple and palace the national and, to a great extent, the personal life of all Israelites was largely influenced, not in every respect for good. The quiet suggestion is here made that the artificiality and pomp of the kingdom did not compare well with that old time when the affairs of an ancestress of the splendid monarch were settled by a gathering at a village gate.

Nor is the lesson without its value now. We are not to go back on the past in mere antiquarian curiosity, the interest of secular research. Labour which goes to revive the story of mankind in remote ages has its value only when it is applied to the uses of the moralist and the prophet. We have much to learn again that has been forgotten, much to recall that has escaped the memory of the race. Through phases of complex civilisation in which the outward and sensuous are pursued the world has to pass to a new era of more simple and yet more profound life, to a social order fitted for the development of spiritual power and grace. And the church is well directed by the Book of God. Her inquiry into the past is no affair of intellectual curiosity, but a research governed by the principles that have underlain man's life from the first and a growing apprehension of all that is at stake in the multiform energy of the present. Amid the bustle and pressure of those endeavours which Christian faith itself may induce our minds become confused. Thinkers and doers are alike apt to forget the deliverances knowledge ought to effect, and while they learn and attempt much they are rather passing into bondage than finding life. Our research seems more and more to occupy us with the manner of things, and even Bible Archaeology is exposed to this reproach. As for the scientific comparers of religion they are mostly feeding the vanity of the age with a sense of extraordinary progress and enlightenment, and themselves are occasionally heard to confess that the farther they go in study of old faiths, old rituals and moralities the less profit they find, the less hint of a design. No such futility, no failure of culture and inquiry mark the Bible writers' dealing with the past. To the humble life of the Son of Man on earth, to the life of the Hebrews long before He appeared our thought is carried back from the thousand objects that fascinate in the world of today. And there we see the faith and all the elements of spiritual vitality of which our own belief and

hope are the fruit. There too without those cumbrous modern involutions which never become familiar, society wonderfully fulfils its end in regulating personal effort and helping the conscience and the soul.

The scene at the gate shows Boaz energetically conducting the case he has taken up. Private considerations urged him to bring rapidly to an issue the affairs of Naomi and Ruth since he was involved, and again he commends himself as a man who, having a task in hand, does it with his might. His pledge to Ruth was a pledge also to his own conscience that no suspense should be due to any carelessness of his; and in this he proved himself a pattern friend. The great man often shows his greatness by making others wait at his door. They are left to find the level of their insignificance and learn the value of his favour. So the grace of God is frustrated by those who have the opportunity and should covet the honour of being His instruments. Men know that they should wait patiently on God's time, but they are bewildered when they have to wait on the strange arrogance of those in whose hands Providence has placed the means of their succour. And many must be the cases in which this fault of man begets bitterness, distrust of God, and even despair. It should be a matter of anxiety to us all to do with speed and care anything on which the hopes of the humble and needy rest. A soul more worthy than our own may languish in darkness while a promise which should have been sacred is allowed to fade from our memory.

Boaz was also open and straightforward in his transactions. His own wish is pretty clear. He seems as anxious as Naomi herself that to him should fall the duty of redeeming her burdened inheritance and reviving her husband's name. Possibly without any public discussion, by consulting with the nearer kinsman and urging his own wish or superior ability, he might have settled the affair. Other inducements failing, the offer of a sum of money might have secured to him the right of redemption. But in the light of honour, in the court of his conscience, the man was unable thus to seek his end; and besides the town's people had to be considered; their sense of justice had to be satisfied as well as his own.

Often it is not enough that we do a thing from the best of motives; we must do it in the best way, for the support of justice or purity or truth. While private benevolence is one of the finest of arts, the Christian is not unfrequently called to exercise another which is more difficult and not less needful in society. Required at one hour not to let his left hand know what his right hand doeth, at another he is required in all modesty and simplicity

to take his fellows to witness that he acts for righteousness, that he is contending for some thought of Christ's, that he is not standing in the outer court among those who are ashamed but has taken his place with the Master at the judgment bar of the world. Again, when a matter in which a Christian is involved is before the public and has provoked a good deal of discussion and perhaps no little criticism of religion and its professors, it is not enough that out of sight, out of court, some arrangement be made which counts for a moral settlement. That is not enough, though a person whose rights and character are affected may consent to it. If still the world has reason to question whether justice has been done, — justice has not been done. If still the truthfulness of the church is under valid suspicion, — the church is not manifesting Christ as it should. For no moral cause once opened at public assize can be issued in private. It is no longer between one man and another, nor between a man and the church. The conscience of the race has been empannelled and cannot be discharged without judgment. Innumerable causes withdrawn from court, compromised, hushed up or settled in corners with an effort at justice, still shadow the history of the church and cast a darkness of justifiable suspicion on the path along which she would advance.

Even in this little affair at Bethlehem the good man will have everything done with perfect openness and honour, and will stand by the result whether it meet his hopes or disappoint them. At the town gate, the common meeting place for conversation and business, Boaz takes his seat and invites the goel to sit beside him and also a jury of ten elders. The court thus constituted, he states the case of Naomi and her desire to sell a parcel of land which belonged to her husband. When Elimelech left Bethlehem he had, no doubt, borrowed money on the field, and now the question is whether the nearest kinsman will pay the debt and beyond that the further value of the land, so that the widow may have something to herself. Promptly the goel answers that he is ready to buy the land. This, however, is not all. In buying the field and adding it to his estate will the man take Ruth to wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance? He is not prepared to do that, for the children of Ruth would be entitled to the portion of ground and he is unwilling to impoverish his own family. "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I mar my own inheritance." He draws off his shoe and gives it to Boaz, renouncing his right of redemption.

Now this marriage custom is not ours, but at the time, as we have seen, it was a sacred rule, and the goel was morally bound by it. He could have insisted on redeeming the land as his right. To do so was therefore his duty,

and to a certain extent he failed from the ideal of a kinsman's obligation. But the position was not an easy one. Surely the man was justified in considering the children he already had and their claims upon him. Did he not exercise a wise prudence in refusing to undertake a new obligation? Moreover the circumstances were delicate and dispeace might have been caused in his household if he took the Moabite woman. It is certainly one of those cases in which a custom or law has great weight and yet creates no little difficulty, moral as well as pecuniary, in the observance. A man honest enough, and not ungenerous, may find it hard to determine on which side duty lies. Without, however, abusing this goal we may fairly take him as a type of those who are more impressed by the prudential view of their circumstances than by the duties of kinship and hospitality. If in the course of providence we have to decide whether we will admit some new inmate to our home worldly considerations must not rule, either on the one side or the other.

A man's duty to his family, what is it? To exclude a needy dependant, however pressing the claim may be? To admit one freely who has the recommendation of wealth? Such earthly calculation is no rule for a true man. The moral duty, the moral result are always to be the main elements of decision. No family ever gains by relief from an obligation conscience acknowledges. No family loses by the fulfilment of duty, whatever the expense. In household debate the balance too often turns not on the character of Ruth but on her lack of gear. The same woman who is refused as a heathen when she is poor, is discovered to be a most desirable relation if she brings fuel for the fire of welcome. Let our decisions be quite clear of this mean hypocrisy. Would we insist on being dutiful to a rich relation? Then the duty remains to him and his if they fall into poverty, for a moral claim cannot be altered by the state of the purse.

And what of the duty to Christ, His church. His poor? Would to God some people were afraid to leave their children wealthy, were afraid of having God inquire for His portion. A shadow rests on the inheritance that has been guarded in selfish pride against the just claims of man, in defiance of the law of Christ. Yet let one be sure that his liberality is not mixed with a carnal hope. What do we think of when we declare that God's recompense to those who give freely comes in added store of earthly treasure, the tithe returned ten and twenty and a hundred fold? By what law of the material or spiritual world does this come about? Certainly we love a generous man, and the liberal shall stand by liberal things. But surely God's purpose is to make us comprehend that His grace does not take the form of a percentage

on investments. When a man grows spiritually, when although he becomes poorer he yet advances to nobler manhood, to power and joy in Christ — this is the reward of Christian generosity and faithfulness. Let us be done with religious materialism, with expecting our God to repay us in the coin of this earth for our service in the heavenly kingdom.

The marriage of Ruth, at which we now arrive, appears at once as the happy termination of Naomi's solicitude for her, the partial reward of her own faithfulness, and the solution, so far as she was concerned, of the problem of woman's destiny. The idea of the spiritual completion of life for woman as well as man, of the woman being able to attain a personal standing of her own with individual responsibility and freedom, was not fully present to the Hebrew mind. If unmarried, Ruth would have remained, as Naomi well knew and had all along said, without a place in society, without an asylum or shelter. This old-world view of things burdens the whole history, and before passing on we must compare it with the state of modern thought on the question.

The incompleteness of the childless widow's life which is an element of this narrative, the incompleteness of the life of every unmarried woman which appears in the lament for Jephthah's daughter and elsewhere in the Bible as well as in other records of the ancient world had, we may say, a two-fold cause. On the one hand there was the obvious fact that marriage has a reason in physical constitution and the order of human society. On the other hand heathen practices and constant wars made it, as we have seen, impossible for women to establish themselves alone. A woman needed protection, or as the law of England has it, coverture. In very exceptional cases only could the opportunity be found, even among the people of Jehovah, for those personal efforts and acts which give a position in the world. But the distinction of Israel's custom and law as compared with those of many nations lay here, that woman was recognised as entitled to a place of her own, side by side with man, in the social scheme. The conception of her individuality as of individuality generally was limited. The idea of what is now called the social organism governed family life, and the very faith that was afterwards to become the strength of individuality was held as a national thing. The view of complete life had no clear extension into the future, even the salvation of the soul did not appear as a distinct provision for personal immortality. Under these limitations, however, the proper life of every woman and her place in the nation were acknowledged and provision was made for her as well as circumstances

would allow. By the customs of marriage and by the laws of inheritance she was recognised and guarded.

Now it may appear that the problem of woman's place, so far from approaching solution in Christian times, has rather fallen into greater confusion; and many are the attacks made from one point of view and another upon the present condition of things. By the nature school of revolutionaries physical constitution is made a starting point in argument, and the reasoning sweeps before it every hindrance to the completion of life on that side for women as for men. Christian marriage is itself assailed by these as an obstacle in the path of evolution. They find women, thanks to Christianity, no longer unable to establish themselves in life; but against Christianity, which has done this, they raise the loud complaint that it bars the individual from full life and enjoyment. In the course of our discussion of the Book of Judges reference has been made once and again to this propaganda, and here its real nature comes to light. Its conception of human life is based on mere animalism; it throws into the crucible the gain of the centuries in spiritual discipline and energetic purity in order to make ample provision for the flesh and the fulfilling of the lusts thereof.

But the problem is not more confused; it is solved, as all other problems are, by Christ. Penetrating and arrogant voices of the day will cease and His again be heard Whose terrible and gracious doctrine of personal responsibility in the supernatural order is already the heart of human thought and hope. There is turmoil, disorder, vile and foolish experimenting; but the remedy is forward, not behind. Christ has opened the spiritual kingdom, has made it possible for every soul to enter. For each human being now, man and woman, life means spiritual overcoming, spiritual possession, and can mean nothing else. It is altogether out of date, an insult to the conscience and common sense of mankind, not to speak of its faith, to go back on the primitive world and the ages of a lower evolution and fasten down to sensuousness a race that has heard the liberating word, Repent, believe, and, live. The incompleteness of a human being lies in subjection to passion, in existing without moral energy, governed by the earthly and therefore without hope or reason of life. To the full stature of heavenly power the woman has her way open through the blood of the cross, and by a path of loneliness and privation, if need be, she may advance to the highest range of priestly service and blessing.

To the Jewish people, and to the writer of the Book of Ruth as a Jew, genealogy was of more account than to us, and a place in David's ancestry

appears as the final honour of Ruth for her dutifulness, her humble faith in the God of Israel. Orpah is forgotten; she remained with her own people and died in obscurity. But faithful Ruth lives distinguished in history. She takes her place among the matrons of Bethlehem and the people of God. The story of her life, says one, stands at the portal of the life of David and at the gates of the gospel.

Yet suppose Ruth had not been married to Boaz or to any other good and wealthy man, would she have been less admirable and deserving? We attribute nothing to accident. In the providence of God Boaz was led to an admiration for Ruth and Naomi's plan succeeded. But it might have been otherwise. There is nothing, after all, so striking in her faith that we should expect her to be singled out for special honour; and she is not. The divine reward of goodness is the peace of God in the soul, the gladness of fellowship with Him, the opportunity of learning His will and dispensing His grace. It is interesting to note that Ruth's son Obed was the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David. But was Ruth not also the ancestress of the sons of Zeruah, of Absalom, Adonijah, and Rehoboam? Even though, looking down the generations, we see the Messiah born of her line, how can that glorify Ruth? or, if it does, how shall we explain the want of glory of many an estimable and godly woman who fighting a battle harder than Ruth's, with clearer faith in God, lived and died in some obscure village of Naphtali or dragged out a weary widowhood on the borders of the Syrian desert?

Yet there is a sense in which the history of Ruth stands at the gates of the gospel. It bears the lesson that Jehovah acknowledged all who did justly and loved mercy and walked humbly with Him. The foreign woman was justified by faith, and her faith had its reward when she was accepted as one of Jehovah's people and knew Him as her gracious Friend. Israel had in this book the warrant for missionary work among the pagan nations and a beautiful apologue of the reconciliation the faith of Jehovah was to effect among the severed families of mankind. The same faith is ours, but with deeper urgency; the same spirit of reconciliation, reaching now to farther mightier issues. We have seen the Goal of the race and have heard His offer of redemption. We are commissioned to those who dwell in the remotest borders of the moral world under oppressions of heathenism and fear, or wander in strange Moabs of confusion where deep calleth unto deep. We have to testify that with One and One only are the light, the joy, the completeness of man, because He alone among sages and helpers has the secret of our sin and weakness and the long miracle of the soul's

redemption. “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation: and lo, I am with you.” The faith of the Hebrew is more than fulfilled. Out of Israel He comes our Menuchah, Who is “*an hiding place from the wind and a covert from the tempest, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.*”

FOOTNOTES

^{ft1} Ewald.

^{ft2} Maspero.

^{ft3} “The Hittites,” by A.H. Sayce, LL.D., p. 36.

^{ft4} See Conder’s “Tent Work in Palestine.”

^{ft5} Ewald.

^{ft6} Henri Perreyve.

^{ft7} Richter, “Levana.”

^{ft8} Browning: “Rabbi Ben Ezra.”