

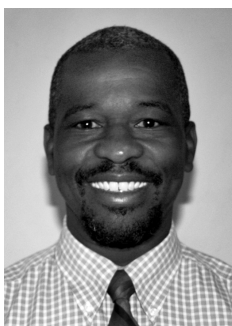
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“Men God Used: Based on the Lives of the Judges”

by

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About the Author



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LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 1

JUDGES 1:1-21

JUDE 1:3-4

*“And the people served the LORD
all the days of Joshua...”*

THE TIME OF THE JUDGES (I)

The book of Judges presents the history of the dark ages of God's people, Israel. It was a time when the nation seemed to grope in the dark and walk without direction. A time when her sins separated her from her God and repeatedly caused her to fall. This is a book of testimony to the frailty of man, and the grace, compassion, and long-suffering of God.

The book also presents to us men whom God chose and empowered, filled, led, and used by His Spirit to lead, deliver, and judge the nation. Men raised in times of national emergencies, and through whom God's grace, compassion and long-suffering was extended to the nation. As we look at the men God used, we begin by considering the time of the judges.

“Now after the death of Joshua...” (Judg 1:1; 2:6-7). Before the time of the judges, there was the conquest and possession of the Promised Land. The book of Joshua concluded with a solemn assembly and a call to personal and national responsibility as summarised in the words *“choose you this day whom ye will serve”* (Josh 24:15). Though the nation responded with commitment to serve, and obey God (Josh 24:24), this was not one to be made once and for all, but one to be affirmed repeatedly and individually in each generation. Israel had come into and possessed a land whose inhabitants were being judged of God because of their idolatry and sin (Gen 15:16). They were to be separate from the idolatry and sin that had brought judgment to the inhabitants of Canaan. What they confidently affirmed verbally in Joshua 24:16, 18, 21, and 24 (*“We will serve the LORD”*) was to be practically lived out daily. Joshua and his generation left the nation a legacy of loyalty, a heritage of faithfulness upon which they were to build, showing them that this is the way in which they should walk (Isa 30:21). It was their responsibility to share in the faith of their fathers actively by their choices, and in continuing in the same path.

THOUGHT: (Read Proverbs 14:34.)

PRAYER: (Use Job 36:11-12.)

MONDAY, JANUARY 2
JUDGES 1:22-36
DEUTERONOMY 11:22-32

*“For if ye shall diligently keep
all these commandments
which I command...”*

THE TIME OF THE JUDGES (II)

Each generation chooses its path, and this one chose to depart from the faith and path of its fathers. They were to be distinguished by their holiness and separation, and through this, their light was to shine among men to the glory of God. Their responsibility was to continue in obedience to God, His Word and His will even after the death of Joshua and the elders. They were to complete the conquest, and live in the land according to God’s will, but instead they chose to walk by sight and not by faith.

“And it came to pass, when Israel was strong...” (Judg 1:28). This verse reflects the start of their departure! They departed from their commission, they had a change of mind and purpose, and they trusted in their own wisdom and thoughts, neglecting clear instructions given by God. Circumstance, temporal advantage, and current benefit reigned supreme. Their minds became authority, and they did not follow God’s Word. The command to eradicate the Canaanites was one that would ensure their separateness and enhance their holiness. It had spiritual benefits; it would deliver them from the temptations of the Canaanite ways. They did not look at it from the spiritual perspective; they did not consider that corrupt communications corrupt good morals (1 Cor 15:33). They chose compromise instead of separation. At the time, God enabled them to separate, giving them strength, but they opted to compromise. They departed from God’s Word and followed their minds, they rejected God’s plan and set up a different path for themselves. They mistakenly equated their military strength with spiritual fortitude! The gains we make in whatever area should never make us self-reliant or make us neglect our spiritual life.

There is no temporal gain that is worth the spiritual ruin that disobedience to God’s Word and Will brings. Our desire must always be to know God’s Word and to walk in obedience to His revealed Will.

THOUGHT: (Read Proverbs 3:5.)

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 86:11.)

TUESDAY, JANUARY 3

JUDGES 2:1-10

PSALM 71

*“...and this people will rise up,
and go a whoring after the gods...”*

THE TIME OF THE JUDGES (III)

Judges chapter 2 opens with confrontation. The charge against God's people is their infidelity, and the angel of the Lord confronts them with evidence of this. Their infidelity is set against the context of God's covenant faithfulness, and its evidence is in their disobedience to His commands. The LORD had been faithful in fulfilling His promises made to the patriarchs. He had brought them out of Egypt. He had given them the Promised Land. He had given them His commandments and required loyalty and obedience from them. However, the nation, through its disobedience, showed itself unfaithful to the LORD.

“...they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare...” (Judg 2:3; 3:4-7). Their compromise with the Canaanites (which began with subjection and had now developed into marrying them) defiled the nation and compromised the spirituality and purity of Israel's worship. The presence of, and now relations with, the Canaanites had become a snare, a trap in which they constantly stumbled, a point of departure at which they continually strayed. They now had no spiritual fortitude or strength, they were not able to withstand or escape the lure of idolatry. They were trapped and could not escape; they would henceforth suffer.

“...there arose another generation after them...” (Judg 2:10). Each generation must be loyal! The godly influence of Joshua and the elders led to loyalty among the people. The influence of compromise and the idolatry of the Canaanites now led the people astray. Separation would have stamped out this corruption and maintained purity. Each generation has the responsibility to build its relationship with God! The challenge of the subsequent generation is to keep and defend the heritage of the faith of their fathers. Our sons must provide the answer to the question: “Will our sons defend the faith?” To help them do so, we defend the faith in our generation, and faithfully teach and commit to them that which we have received!

THOUGHT: (Read Jude 3-4.)

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 71:17-18.)

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 4

JUDGES 2:11-23

NEHEMIAH 9:1-31

*“Ye shall not tempt the LORD
your God...”*

THE TIME OF THE JUDGES (IV)

The failure and apostasy of the nation is clearly summarised here as the LORD dealt with them in light of their apostasy. In this section, we see the principles that underlie the recurring cycle of sin and apostasy – condemnation and servitude – repentance and supplication – deliverance and peace. A pattern that recurs over the period of the judges. Their disloyalty would always lead them to forsake God, forgetting His grace and mercies, and overlooking His mighty works on their behalf.

“And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD...And they forsook the LORD...” (Judg 2:11-13). The religion and gods of the Canaanites seemed appealing to them with their emphasis on temporal and physical wellbeing and prosperity. Their failure to remove the Canaanites from the land and their imperfect obedience to God not only allowed for the continuance of Canaanite idolatry, but also changed the focus and purpose of Israel. The gods, which did not exist except in the imaginations of the Canaanites, now had captured the imagination of Israel. Israel was now enslaved and weakened. They could not resist the temptation of material prosperity that was tied to idolatry. Their morality decayed, as they succumbed to the immorality that accompanied idolatry, and so sensuality reigned.

“In those days there was no king...every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). This observation which is repeatedly made in Judges 17:6 to 21:25 emphasises a characteristic of the time of the judges, that of anarchy. Every man pleasing himself is the outcome of spiritual decay. Selfishness reigned even among the Levites as is depicted by the account of Micah’s priest (Judg 17-18) and that of the “concubine chaser” (Judg 19). This anarchy almost annihilated the tribe of Benjamin. The discord and disorder are tied to the absence of a king in the land, yet God was their King! Even the monarchy established later also deteriorated confirming that their departure from God and His Word and Will is the true cause of the evil and ills that plague God’s people.

THOUGHT: (Read Psalm 119:137-140.)

PRAYER: (Use Nehemiah 9:32-38.)

THURSDAY, JANUARY 5

JUDGES 2:11-23

EXODUS 34:5-9

*“When they cried unto thee, thou
heardest them from heaven...”*

THE TIME OF THE JUDGES (V)

The period of the judges is not only a picture of the failures and rebellion of God's people (Israel), it is also a picture of God and His grace and mercy, His longsuffering and goodness. It magnifies the attributes of God, who in His covenant faithfulness according to His promise to the Patriarchs, made sure that His mercy like light shone brightly in the darkness of the day's apostasy and rebellion.

“Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them...” (Judg 2:16-18). In a period when anarchy reigned, God repeatedly raised judges. Men who, despite their personal weakness and despite the national apostasy, would rise up to face the national emergency, and would champion God's cause. These were men raised for such a time, and men who would serve in their time. Men who would be filled and empowered by the Spirit of God, and who through God's leading would bring God's people out of the servitude that their sin had led them into. Men who, after all they did, would still be forgotten and whose influence would wane with time as the nation would slip back into apostasy and anarchy. The longsuffering of God, and His grace and mercy, were magnified by the fact that, though the turning to the LORD was superficial and temporary, God would still in mercy relieve the nation. God, though seemingly used as a kind of emergency and crash aid service, mercifully heard their cry and raised up men to deliver them.

Though each cycle of apostasy seemed more severe, God's grace was sufficient and abundant (Rom 5:20). Indeed! Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. Conscience can be dulled and lulled by cycles of sin, but God's grace and mercy are able to revive it and bring it to true repentance. Their faith always had to rest in God and not men! The men used of God were varied by time and tribe, the help they gave was short-lived with differing effects, but the God who chose and used these men abides forever and is ever gracious and merciful, all-knowing and all-powerful.

THOUGHT: “Through grace we can conquer, defeat all our foes, God leads His dear children along.”

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 108.)

FRIDAY, JANUARY 6

JUDGES 3:1-11

HEBREWS 13:7-17

“...the LORD was with the judge
and delivered them...”

OTHNIEL (I)

“God is not looking for men of great faith, He is looking for common men to trust His great faithfulness” (Hudson Taylor).

The picture presented in Judges 3 is of a seemingly handicapped generation. In Judges 2:10, they did not know God or His mighty deeds, but they had heard them in the accounts given to them. In Judges 3:2, they had not experienced the wars of the conquest. They had inherited the Promised Land and the peace they enjoyed. They did not see the battles of the conquest and they thought to place under tribute instead of to remove the Canaanites from the Land! They ended up being enslaved themselves and God raised for them a deliverer in Othniel.

“...Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother” (Judg 3:9 cf. 1:13-15). This introduction is similar to Joshua 15:17. He had a rich history and a heritage of godly association. He had the experience of fighting alongside Caleb who had shown bravery and had a testimony of faithfulness and trust amidst a flood of evil report back in Kadesh Barnea. Just as evil communication corrupt good morals, godly association and apprenticeship can raise up a standard that God can use to fight the enemy when he comes in like a flood. The benefit and service that the godly home provides for the church cannot be measured. God has commanded the teaching of His statutes at home. Paul commended Timothy’s faith and linked it to the home where he was raised by his mother and grandmother. Not much is said of Othniel, his skills, how he delivered Israel, what he used to subdue and defeat the Mesopotamians, but his association with Caleb is set forth plainly! It was not only the home or familial relationship, but he also fought alongside Caleb in the conquest! In a generation that did not know the battles of the conquest, there was one who had been in those battles, alongside a godly and faithful man of God. He did not forget the example he saw, and he became the example to his generation!

THOUGHT: (Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13.)

PRAYER: “O give us homes where Christ is Lord and Master, the Bible read, the precious hymns still sung; where prayer comes first in peace or in disaster.”

SATURDAY, JANUARY 7

JUDGES 3:1-11

PSALM 15; 24:3-6

*"...when they in their trouble
did turn unto the LORD..."*

OTHNIEL (II)

"And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him..." (Judg 3:10-11). Apart from the godly example, heritage and experience of Othniel, the Bible highlights one other thing concerning this first judge. Though he did go out to war and overcome, yet it is not his skills, or tactics that are recorded. Neither are weapons of warfare mentioned. But something far more important and necessary is mentioned: his source of strength! The empowering by the Spirit of the LORD is the common thread throughout the lives of the judges. It was stated in the introduction of this series of readings that it was the LORD who raised up deliverers. And the account of the judges begins on a spiritual note: the first judge, and the first mention of the leading and empowering by the Spirit of the LORD. The children of Israel with their unclean hands and idolatrous lives brought upon themselves pain, slavery and God's wrath (Judg 3:5-6). It is against such a background that the spiritual emphasis of Othniel and his surrendered will to God are found.

In our service for the LORD, the primary focus must not be on the skills or weaknesses we possess, neither should it be on our activities or achievements, but rather it should be on our Christlikeness! Othniel's effort did bring rest for forty years, but the attention is on the Spirit of the LORD which came upon him, and the LORD who delivered! As a vessel in the master's hand, he was greatly used, but as the LORD has clearly put in Scripture, he must have been a man who purged himself from *"these [things]"* (2 Tim 2:20-22) to be a vessel meet for the Master's use! There is room for acquiring the skills necessary through the help and instruction of other godly men, if the heart is set right!

THOUGHT: "The real secret of an unsatisfied life lies too often in an unsundered will." (Hudson Taylor)

PRAYER: "Jesus, fill now with Thy Spirit; hearts that full surrender know, that the streams of living water from our inner man may flow."

EHUD (I)

The account of Ehud follows that of Othniel. Like Othniel, not much detail is given concerning Ehud: his life before God raised him to deliver Israel, or what he did after he had accomplished God's call and purpose. What is recorded of his life is hinged on the sovereignty of God in choosing and using him. What is noted about him is his lineage (from the tribe of Benjamin) and his weakness (he was left-handed).

“...Ehud the son of Gera...a man lefthanded...” (Judg 3:15). The emphasis of the right hand as signifying strength and blessing is unmistakable as one reads the Bible: from Joseph placing Ephraim towards Jacob's left hand in Genesis 48:13-18, to the songs of deliverance attributing God's deliverance to his “right hand” (Exod 15:6-12), and in the Psalms signifying security with the LORD at the right hand (Ps 16:8, 11), and saving by the right hand (Ps 17:7; 18:35; 20:6; 44:3). Thus, the highlighting that Ehud was left-handed points to his weakness, and disadvantage. Being left-handed was a weakness undesirable for Ehud for another reason: the Benjamites were known to be ambidextrous or able to use both hands effectively (Judg 20:16 cf. 1 Chron 12:2). Yet his weakness would be God's means for deliverance of Israel from Moabite oppression.

What was seen as inferior was the source of deliverance for God's people. This does not mean that we should give to God that which is less than our best just because He can use it for His glory. Rather, God for His glory has chosen and used weak things, and things despised. Thus, no flesh should find reason to glory before God. God's help for Israel came from what to them would have been an unexpected source. In choosing Ehud, God is sovereign, and in using Ehud, God is omnipotent. Ehud was unlike Othniel, but as God used Othniel, He could also use Ehud. God is not limited by our impediments!

THOUGHT: God gives grace and strength to us to serve for His glory.

PRAYER: (Use Galatians 6:14.)

MONDAY, JANUARY 9
JUDGES 3:12-30
NEHEMIAH 4:1-2, 16-23

*Am I a soldier of the cross,
a follower of the Lamb?*

EHUD (II)

“All God’s giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on God being with them” (Hudson Taylor).

God raised Ehud, a man with visible weakness in the eyes of men, and gave him opportunity at an unexpected time. God gave him both access to Eglon, and privacy with Eglon, to accomplish for Israel a great deliverance.

“But Ehud made him a dagger which had two edges...” (Judg 3:16). This verse is set in the context where Ehud was to represent the people by bringing their tribute (a testimony to their servitude and weakness) to Eglon. With this errand to Eglon, Ehud devised a plan and prepared for its execution. Taking advantage of his visible weakness, he was able to enter into Eglon’s presence with a concealed dagger. He went on to complete the errand and delivered the tribute to Eglon. He showed great courage and composure in this. And as the others left, he pretended to have a secret message to the king so as to gain private audience with him.

In the assassination of Eglon, no suspicion was aroused, and Ehud carried out his secret mission skillfully and smoothly. We find here also the place of wisdom and skill if man is to accomplish God’s call and will. We see this in the preparation and concealing of the dagger by Ehud, in the accomplishing of the task to bring tribute to Eglon, and also in the sending away of the rest, and his seeking private audience with Eglon. In the same, we see also the providence of God. Ehud was able to get away easily and safely, with the assassination still unknown to Eglon’s servants, and they had no suspicion whatsoever of Ehud as he left. The confusion of finding their king dead also favoured the Israelite attack. They placed themselves strategically at the fords of Jordan, and the Moabite dominion was broken. God’s man (raised in God’s time) wrought deliverance aided by God’s providence and he attributed the death of Eglon to the hand of the LORD as he led Israel to break the yoke of Moab over them.

THOUGHT: “And shall I fear to own His cause or blush to speak His name?”

PRAYER: Increase my courage, Father. Supported by Thy Word, I’ll bear the toil and endure the pain.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 10

JUDGES 3:12-30

1 TIMOTHY 6:3-12

*“But godliness with contentment
is great gain.”*

EHUD (III)

“Curiosity and selfishness killed the king” might be an appropriate lesson from what befell Eglon. When Ehud pretended to have “*a secret errand*” (Judg 3:19), the king’s response was the beginning of his downfall. It is the king who desired privacy; it is he who sent away all his servants from the room. He chose to set all else and everyone else aside to receive this secret errand by himself. Many a time, we too find ourselves disappointed and conned by men who would present to us some secret way to gain wealth and convince us that no one should know of the dealings.

Eglon was fat, and his body concealed Ehud’s dagger (after Ehud had thrust it into Eglon’s belly) such that it could not be retrieved.

“And they slew of Moab at that time about ten thousand men, all lusty, and all men of valour...” (Judg 3:29). The men of Moab, though men of valour, were also “*lusty men*.” When they oppressed the children of Israel, they had no self-control and had set aside personal discipline. They were fat from the burden they had placed on the Israelites. A life of ease and plenty changed soldiers fit for war into men unfit for war. The fruits of oppression, that had seemed sweet to them, were now a burden of bitterness as the LORD had risen on behalf of His oppressed children.

How often have we pierced ourselves with sorrows by our covetousness and our lack of contentment? How many times have the pursuit of worldly pleasures and the satisfaction of fleshly lusts brought us untold pain and suffering? Hudson Taylor said it best when he said, “To me it seemed that the teaching of God’s Word was unmistakably clear: ‘Owe no man anything.’ To borrow money implied to my mind a contradiction of Scripture, a confession that God had withheld some good thing, and determination to get for ourselves what He had not given.” Indeed, “*godliness with contentment is great gain*” (1 Tim 6:6).

THOUGHT: “To watch and pray, and never faint, by day and night strict guard to keep.”

PRAYER: “Not for ease or worldly pleasure, nor for fame my prayer shall be, gladly will I toil and suffer only let me walk with Thee.”

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11

JUDGES 3:31

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

“...we are his workmanship,
created in Christ Jesus...”

SHAMGAR (I)

In the accounts given, the cycle that characterises the period of the judges is indicated: Israel did evil – God delivered them into enemy hands – Israel oppressed for a time – Israel cried under oppression – God raised a deliverer. In the account of Shamgar, these details are missing. Trying to account for these missing details would lead us only to speculations, so we will focus only on the details given concerning him.

“...Shamgar the son of Anath...” (Judg 3:31). The names are non-Israelite, with Anath being a name of a Canaanite goddess. From his name, Shamgar would be considered a Canaanite as he not only possessed a heathenish name, his father is named after a Canaanite goddess. But Shamgar could be an Israelite from an assimilated background. Probably just as today, parents look to their modern-day heroes and idols in naming their children, so was it then, such that Canaanite names found their way into Israelite homes. If so, from a background which seems to have accepted and assimilated the spirit of the land and day, God still found a man He could use. God in His wisdom has used families to bless many with a godly heritage and prepared them for His use through their families, as we saw in Othniel and Timothy. But in Shamgar, God also in His grace chose and used a man that did not seem to have the benefit of a godly family or upbringing. God is not limited by means, nor is He limited in power. As He in providence uses the godly family heritage to mould men for His use, He in His sovereignty, can also choose and use one who has not had the blessing of a godly heritage and background.

“...he also delivered Israel” (Judg 3:31). The one who did not possess an Israelite name, and whose father bore the name of a Canaanite goddess, one to whom, we would have said, “Your name betrays you,” was the one God used for the deliverance of His people.

THOUGHT: Christ’s righteousness alone can cover and change me.

PRAYER: O, for grace to love and serve Thee more.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 12

JUDGES 3:31

MATTHEW 25:14-30

“...for without me
ye can do nothing.”

SHAMGAR (II)

“How victories are sometimes won in the face of the greatest improbabilities. One man against six hundred! Some men would have succumbed under the mere pressure of numbers, but Shamgar fought the crowd. Do not let us blame men for working with instruments that have not been officially or technically approved. The one great object is to do good. What meaner instrument can there be than the Cross?” (J. Parker).

“...slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad...” (Judg 3:31).

This gives to us the second detail concerning Shamgar. We find in this section what God enabled Shamgar to accomplish. He not only did something logically and naturally impossible, but also did it with an unconventional and unlikely tool. Shamgar faced the Philistines with an ox goad. The instrument used for prodding the oxen as they ploughed and for scraping the earth stuck to the plough turned into a mighty weapon. We have a Swahili saying which in English would translate to: “He who blames the plough is not a farmer” (though literally the translation would use the verb “choose”). It is the workman who uses the tool and so the workman is more than his tools. His attitude towards the work, his skill in performance of the work can make him rise above the circumstances he faces and accomplish much. Shamgar fought with an unlikely tool against a great foe and won. Note: The slothful servant hid his master’s talent and achieved nothing (Matt 25:18). What Christ highlights of the slothful and bad servant is his perspective of and relationship to his master. The servant’s view of the master affected his service.

“...he also delivered Israel” (Judg 3:31). The one who was, as it seemed, ill-equipped and not ready for the Philistines was the one God used. One battle is all he had, and he won. If we would give ourselves fully to God and seek to be faithful in all things, there will be profit in our effort under whatever circumstances we find ourselves working and serving in.

THOUGHT: “Let us press on, then, never despair, live above feeling...”

PRAYER: Grant, O Lord, “a willing mind, a ready hand, to do whatever I know.”

FRIDAY, JANUARY 13

JUDGES 4:1-5

JOSHUA 11:1-11

*“Trust in the LORD
with all thine heart...”*

DEBORAH–BARAK–Jael (I)

The Israelites found themselves enslaved again, this time being brought under oppression by a familiar foe. Both the names Jabin and Hazor are mentioned in the book of Joshua (Josh 11:1-11). What the Israelites had subdued by the grace of God under the godly leadership of Joshua and the elders, rose again and now oppressed them greatly. They now turned to God for help, and He who had enabled the fathers to defeat the foe would again help them get the victory.

“And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth...” (Judg 4:4). This verse introduces Deborah. She is introduced as a prophetess and as a wife. In this, we see the sovereignty of God. God decides whom He chooses and how He uses them. At a time of national declension, when spiritual apathy reigned, and idolatry and rebellion against God was rampant, God chose Deborah to speak for Him. At the time of Eli in 1 Samuel 3:1-9 when the Word of God was rare, God revealed Himself to the child Samuel. This does not mean children have a part in pastoral ministry. Likewise, Deborah’s story does not mean that women have a part in pastoral ministry. God does not choose against His Word, and as He has plainly put the qualifications of those who would hold pastoral offices, we should place hands only on those who qualify.

Deborah is also identified as wife of Lapidoth. Her service to God does not diminish or negate her God-given role and duty. God may give and has given gifts to men, but with the gifts, the same God has also given roles and duties. One who is faithful in the one cannot and ought not to be negligent in the other. Israel would come to Deborah for a Word from the LORD, but she who would tell others of the LORD’s way and will, must herself be obedient to the same will and diligent in performing what God required of her.

THOUGHT: “Ever to the Saviour cling, trust in Him and none beside.”

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 86:11.)

DEBORAH–BARAK–Jael (II)

“And Deborah, a prophetess...she judged Israel at that time” (Judg 4:4). Did Deborah in her discharge of her call to God usurp authority and despise the order set by God? No! She did not. As was noted earlier, the time of the judges was a time of spiritual declension and rebellion. This was seen in the idolatry and evil that characterised that time and in the general weakness of the character of the people of that time.

“And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah...” (Judg 4:5). The people went to her for judgment, but she did not sit at the gate, but under a palm tree. In the Old Testament times, the place set for judgment where the elders and leaders sat was at the gate, and this was practised even during the period of the judges. Boaz in Ruth 4:1ff went to the gate to settle the issue of the redeeming of Elimelech’s property and Ruth. It was at the gate of the city that disputes were brought (Deut 25:7), judgments and punishments meted out (Deut 17:1-5; 22:15, 19, 23-24); and also at the gate of the city of refuge a matter was heard and determined by the elders of the city (Josh 20:4).

“And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go...” (Judg 4:8). The reluctance of men to take the lead is seen in Barak’s reply. Her message to him was clear, *“Hath not the Lord God of Israel commanded?”* (Judg 4:6). God’s promise too was clear, *“And I will draw unto thee... and I will deliver him into thine hand”* (Judg 4:7). Her reputation and faithfulness to God was sure: the people went to her for judgment, and Barak himself requested that she accompany him to war. When those who would serve God do not rise to serve, God in His Sovereignty raises up those who would serve in their place.

Deborah is neither an example of women taking up leadership and pastoral roles, nor an example of rebellion against God’s order. Rather, by her obedience, faithfulness, and submission to God in dark times, her example shows God’s sovereignty over man even in dark times.

THOUGHT: “Ever to the Saviour cling, trust in Him and none beside.”

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 86:11.)

DEBORAH-BARAK-JAEL (III)

Men often seek their own glory and honour in their pursuits. In the call and commissioning of Barak, his reluctance comes out clearly, but we can see in him other traits too. Though his reluctance shows the weakness of the men at that time, his reluctance does not diminish his true faith in God (Heb 11:32). His faith in God is seen as follows:

"And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh...went down from mount Tabor, and ten thousand men after him" (Judg 4:10-14). In this, his faith, courage and leadership are seen. Having received the assurance he wanted, the following resulted:

(1) Barak's leadership is seen. He gathered 10,000 soldiers, and then went before and they followed him into battle.

(2) Barak's courage is seen. He had been hesitant, but not afraid. Once assured, he did his part and kept his word. The enemy might be mighty and very well equipped, but he had given his word *"I will go"* and he did not go back on his word. That men would heed his call, and follow him into battle reinforce the leadership and courage of Barak.

Barak's faith shines in all this. His pursuit was purely based on God's Word. He had been chosen and commissioned, so he went forth to battle. He knew that he would not get any personal glory, for he had been told, *"the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour"* (Judg 4:9); and yet he still took that journey not seeking his own good or personal glory. This characterises a faithful man. What if people were to remember his weakness in that a woman had to ride by his side for him to go to battle, or that it was a woman who slew Sisera the captain of the army? How then would people perceive him? He still went forth, he did his part, and led the army, and his remembrance was not based on what he did not do, but rather on his faith as stated in Hebrews 11:32. Faith will always sacrifice personal glory, and overcome personal fears in the pursuit of accomplishing God's will and purpose.

THOUGHT: Intent and affection manifest in conduct and pursuits.

PRAYER: "Take the world but give me Jesus, in His cross my trust shall be."

MONDAY, JANUARY 16

JUDGES 4:17-24

ISAIAH 31:1-5

*“Favour is deceitful,
and beauty is vain...”*

DEBORAH–BARAK–Jael (IV)

Desperate men take desperate measures. Sisera, the captain of a defeated army, deserts both his position and his chariot. He resorts to escape by foot, and providence leads him to the tent of Jael. God’s Word must be fulfilled, for God is not a man that He should lie (Num 23:19); if He has spoken, it must come to pass for He will accomplish it.

Beauty and deception both lie in the eye of the beholder. When Sisera came across the tent of Jael, he saw a sanctuary and not the house of his slaughter. When he saw Jael, he saw hospitality and friendliness. It was a sight different from the one he had just fled from; and to him, his life like a bird escaped from the snare of the fowler, seemed to be spared. The invitation from Jael was readily accepted, the offer of refreshment gladly received, and with a false sense of security he was lulled into sleep. Little did he know, it was the sleep of death!

“Then Jael Heber’s wife took a nail of the tent...for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died” (Judg 4:21). The panic and fear of the fleeing general were met by the calm and resolve of a woman with a mission. Like the parable of the unjust steward (Matt 16:1-8), the incident between Jael and Sisera serves to warn us. Unlike Sisera, we must learn to be careful and exercise caution in these last and perilous days, for we may never know where danger lurks. Moreover, like Jael, we must find courage and strength to take a stand for the truth and for that which is right even under difficult circumstances.

Above all, we must learn that God’s will is sovereign. Sisera and his 900 chariots were defeated and God’s Word accomplished exactly as had been proclaimed. Indeed, an *“horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength”* (Ps 33:17). God’s grace and mercy are immeasurable. The cries of His children (though they be stiff-necked) are heard and deliverance provided by His grace and mercy.

THOUGHT: (Read Psalm 20:7.)

PRAYER: Sovereign God over all, keep us in the strait and narrow way.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 17

JUDGES 5:1-11

2 CHRONICLES 15

*“The LORD is with you,
while ye be with him...”*

THE SONG OF DEBORAH (I)

The song of Deborah gives an expanded account of the narrative of Judges chapter 4. In this expanded account, God’s work through divine intervention and through providential intervention are highlighted. The song, thus, has various lessons on how God works as seen from what God has done. First, God raises men!

“...when the people willingly offered themselves” (Judg 5:2). This reflects the theme that runs through the book of Judges. God used men, men who were available. It was God who worked and accomplished all the deliverances, it was God who saved, who brought peace, who freed the children of Israel from bondage; but in accomplishing it, God used men. The times were of spiritual declension, times when every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Although that was the general characteristic of that time, there were individuals, men who despite their personal weaknesses, and despite the widespread declension and idolatry, *“willingly offered themselves,”* ill-equipped and out-numbered in the face of great dangers, to face a powerful oppressor. Yet they offered themselves to the LORD!

When many offer themselves to worldliness, idolatry, and sinful pursuits, there are those who offer themselves to God. When many rise to prominence and take up leadership for personal gain and glory, there are those who offer themselves for service for God’s glory and to further God’s cause. It is such men that God would use. Deborah’s song is not about the exploits of Barak, or about her influence in the recently concluded battle. Rather, it is for *“praise to the LORD God of Israel”* (Judg 5:3). May God grant us men like the *“governors of Israel, that offered themselves willingly among the people”* (Judg 5:9).

THOUGHT: “Who is on the Lord’s side? Who will serve the King? Who will leave the world’s side? Who will face the foe?”

PRAYER: “Jesus Thou hast bought us, with Thy blessing filling, make Thou us willing. Saviour we are Thine.”

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 18

JUDGES 5:12-22

JOSHUA 10:5-14

“The LORD fought for Israel.”

THE SONG OF DEBORAH (II)

The second lesson from the song of Deborah is that God controls circumstances. God’s cause is providentially carried out by human agencies. God can also divinely intervene, making use of circumstances and nature to accomplish His purpose. God used Jabin to chastise Israel. The oppression of Jabin woke them up and brought them back to their senses. They returned to God and forsook the idols. The Canaanite oppression had brought hard times (Judg 5:6-7). The hard times and oppressions were “God’s alarm clock” waking up His slumbering children.

“The river of Kishon swept them away...” (Judg 5:21). When God raised men, the tribes arose and followed after the leaders into battle. Inspired by their leaders, they marched into war. They *“jeopardied their lives unto the death”* (Judg 5:14-18). However, they came against a superior army, one that had successfully oppressed them (Judg 4:2) and was well equipped and had superior military equipment (Judg 4:3). But the Canaanites’ military superiority became their weakness in the battle field. Their iron chariots worked against them because God controls circumstances. He whose voice the winds and waves obey, was fighting for Israel, and elements of nature fought against the Canaanites (Judg 5:20). The enemy did not succeed in fighting against God’s children, and did not succeed in fleeing either. When the fight was lost, the flight too was futile. The help that came from God was sufficient for complete victory over the enemy. Hence in the song, Deborah sings, *“O my soul, thou hast trodden down strength”* (Judg 5:21).

The contrast and change of Israel’s conditions and fortunes are attributed to only one thing: their acknowledgment of God and their return to God. They were few and weak, the leaders did not manage to enlist all to help in the fight, but they were on the Lord’s side, and God who controls all of nature, enlisted the elements of nature to help them.

THOUGHT: Great are the things we may expect from God when His grace is our help.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 79:8-9.)

THURSDAY, JANUARY 19

JUDGES 5:23-31

1 CORINTHIANS 3:5-15

“...he that gathereth not with me
scattereth abroad.”

THE SONG OF DEBORAH (III)

The third lesson drawn from the song of Deborah is that of the grace of God. God who is almighty and omnipotent, able to do all things, and who controls the elements of nature, is pleased to enlist the help of men in accomplishing His purpose and design. His purpose cannot be defeated. The weakness and frailty of the men raised also cannot defeat the purposes of God who has enlisted them to do His will. Just as Jonah's disobedience and reluctance did not deter the will of God, so also the refusal of Meroz to join the LORD's cause did not hinder its accomplishment.

“Curse ye Meroz...Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be...” (Judg 5:23-24). It is of God's grace and mercy that we are invited to be fellow-labourers with God, and to have a part in His work. The refusal to support Israel in their quest was refusal to support the LORD Himself. Regardless of the reason (whether it was personal differences with those already enlisted, personal weakness or fear of the mighty enemy being faced, or other commitments and associations that seemed more favourable in the present time), once the choice was made, the consequence was fixed. For Meroz, the choice to not support Israel fixed upon them the curse. Gamaliel warned the Jews in Acts 5:33-39 to take heed of their choice lest *“haply ye be found even to fight against God.”* Moreover, the Scripture is full of such examples like Amalek (Exod 17:14; Deut 25:19). Standing against God's cause is standing against God Himself. For Jael, her choice brought upon her the LORD's blessings. She took the LORD's side while alone in her tent. She did not go out looking for the battle, but when it came, she stood with the LORD, and she was blessed *“above women in the tent”* (Judg 5:24).

For Sisera, he had made the choice to oppress God's people, and cause them untold pain and suffering. He and his troops perished, for the pronouncement is: *“let all thine enemies perish, O LORD”* (Judg 5:31). Grace gives us a part in God's work, which, if we do, makes us fellow-labourers with God. Faithfulness to God brings us blessings.

THOUGHT: We hinder God's work when we do not join it.

PRAYER: (Use 1 Samuel 25:28.)

FRIDAY, JANUARY 20

JUDGES 6:1-10

JEREMIAH 7:21-28

“...to obey is better
than sacrifice...”

GIDEON (I)

Among the judges, Gideon is one whose account bears much detail. Three chapters are given to the account of Gideon, which is second only to Samson who has four chapters given to him. The account of Gideon also begins with an extensive account of the Midianite oppression.

“...the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian...” (Judg 6:1). The oppression of the Midianites seemed to have been characterised by raids in the land in which they plundered the Israelites. It was a fresh oppression after the previous ones, but also one that was novel and unlike the previous ones. This oppression led the children of Israel to seek refuge in dens and caves during the raids and periods of plunder. Their efforts brought no relief to them, and their poverty reminded them of the LORD, like in the case of the prodigal son, and turned them to seek His face again. Even for us, how true it is that distress is often an effective messenger to remind us of the LORD, His goodness to us in the past, and to both prompt us to pray and teach us to turn to God for help.

“That the LORD sent a prophet unto the children of Israel...” (Judg 6:8). Through the prophet, God opened their eyes to their “lostness,” reminded them of past favour and mercy from Him, and bought them to their knees and prayer. To their prayer, God responded with a message. Their turning to God seemed to be an act of desperation, a last resort, a grasping-at-straws effort. In the other accounts, we are told that when the children of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer. Here we are told that when they cried unto the LORD, the LORD sent a prophet unto them. His message was one of condemnation, similar to the account of what took place at Bochim in Judges 2:1. Those who forget the past are bound to repeat it, and here they were given a lesson in history. They were once bondmen, they were once delivered. Every instance of bondage and oppression has found deliverance and reprieve from God alone! Every instance of bondage and oppression has had one cause, disobedience: “*ye have not obeyed my voice*” (Judg 6:10).

THOUGHT: Unwillingness to submit to God makes us unfit for His use.

PRAYER: “Master, speak and make me ready, when Thy voice is truly heard, with obedience glad and steady, still to follow every word.”

SATURDAY, JANUARY 21

JUDGES 6:12-24

DEUTERONOMY 28:15-26

“...if thou wilt not hearken unto the
voice of the LORD thy God...”

GIDEON (II)

The LORD sent a prophet to the children of Israel to rebuke them and remind them of their covenant with God and of their disobedience. The Angel of the LORD also appeared to Gideon. God chooses men, and God knows where to find the men He desires to use. In the call of Gideon, we find many lessons on God's dealings with men, especially in relation to the call to service. First, we see the Sovereignty of God in the call.

“And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him...” (Judg 6:12). The call of Gideon is introduced by the presence of the LORD. In Judges 6:11, the Angel of the LORD came and sat where Gideon was at work (fearful, but not slothful, industrious even in difficult times). In verse 12, the Angel of the LORD announced Himself with a greeting, and the greeting spoke of the divine presence of God with Him. God's work is done in the power and strength of God and therefore there is none that can do the LORD's bidding unless God is with him. In verse 16, Gideon's commission and success were hinged on one reason alone: the presence of the LORD. Gideon's prayer and devotion in verses 17 to 21 revealed to him the presence of God such that Gideon was terrified. After being strengthened and comforted by God, he built an altar and named it Jehovah-shalom.

The sovereignty of God is also seen in His dealing with Gideon. The Angel of the LORD said to him, *“The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour”* (Judg 6:12). This was said to a man hiding while threshing wheat. God was going to make Gideon a mighty man of valour. He chose and sent Gideon not because of any trait or value in Gideon, but because as God, He is able to use, and had chosen to use, Gideon despite and in spite of all his weaknesses. Gideon's response was a complaint, but the LORD simply confirmed the call and commission to Gideon: *“Go in this thy might,”* and again *“have not I sent thee?”* (Judg 6:14).

THOUGHT: “God calling yet! Shall I not hear? He calls me still; can I delay?”

PRAYER: “O Jesus, Lord and Saviour, I give myself to Thee.”

GIDEON (III)

The second lesson we find in God's dealing with Gideon in relation to his call is the grace of God in the call. Gideon was threshing wheat “in hiding” from the sight of the marauding Midianites. This indicates the grace of God in the provision of a harvest. Gideon, in his hiding place, threshing God's gracious provision, was visited by the Angel of the LORD. The conversation that the Angel of the LORD had with Gideon clearly presents the grace of God in the call of Gideon.

“...if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us?...” (Judg 6:13). Gideon, when greeted by the Angel of the LORD, responded with a complaint. Gideon's complaint revealed the grace of God in the call of Gideon. In his complaint, Gideon failed to examine himself, his times and the evil that the prophet had rebuked. He also failed to examine the Word of God through which God had clearly spelt out the consequences of forsaking Him. In his assessment, Gideon faulted God claiming, *“the LORD hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites”* (Judg 6:13). Yet the following verse says, *“...the LORD looked upon him...”* (Judg 6:14). This is grace, marvellous grace of a loving, patient God communing with His child who had questioned God's presence with them in the absence of His miraculous acts (Judg 6:13).

“...Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel?...” (Judg 6:15). Gideon, in response to God's commissioning, was fully conscious of his weakness, and the apparent disadvantage that his background and position brought. In his own eye, by virtue of his family and birth, he had nothing to offer. He had nothing in himself that he could rely on, nor draw confidence from. Nothing but grace could strengthen him for the task ahead of him. To this came the response that availed to him the grace and strength needed for the work ahead. God said to him, *“Surely, I will be with thee”* (Judg 6:16). This was grace, sufficient grace for the call bestowed upon him.

THOUGHT: “God calling yet! I cannot stay; my heart I yield without delay.”

PRAYER: “Take Thou my heart and make it all Thine own.”

MONDAY, JANUARY 23
JUDGES 6:25-32
1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-13

*“But if they obey not,
they shall perish by the sword...”*

GIDEON (IV)

The third lesson we find in God’s dealing with Gideon in relation to his call is the test of faithfulness. God chooses men who are undeserving, men who are weak. He chooses men sovereignly and of His grace. God will send, empower and use the men He has chosen. What God requires of those He has called is their faithfulness and allegiance to Him.

“Take thy father’s young bullock...and throw down the altar of Baal” (Judg 6:25). This was Gideon’s first assignment. Before going to battle against the Midianites and breaking their yoke of oppression, he was to throw down the altar of Baal at home. Things must be set right in his own home before they were set right in the nation. The first task Gideon was given was to replace the idolatry established in his home by his father with the true worship of God who had called him and chosen him. It was a test of faithfulness and allegiance to God. This task was not a new one. It was the same task that had been given to the Israelites as they entered to possess the Promised Land (Exod 34:13; Deut 7:5) and it will be the task of future generations whenever God raises a man to lead His people back to Himself in revival (2 Kings 18:4; 23:14; 2 Chron 15:16; 31:1; 34:4, 7).

“...he could not do it by day, that he did it by night” (Judg 6:27). The LORD’s will must be done, but obedience does not necessarily call for defiance. The same God who calls for obedience gives wisdom in the exercise of His will. From the reaction of the men of the city when they rose up in the morning (Judg 6:28-30), Gideon’s assignment would have been perilous and humanly impossible to perform were it done in broad daylight. Gideon accomplished it to the fullest under the peace and dark of night. Daniel and his three friends also exercised wisdom in obeying God and keeping themselves pure from foods offered to idols when they were carried away captive to Babylon (Dan 1:8-16). At times, we make things more difficult for ourselves by our defiance in the name of faithfulness to God.

THOUGHT: My obedience in the exercise of faith will strengthen my faith.

PRAYER: “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus.”

GIDEON (V)

The fourth lesson we find in God’s dealing with Gideon in relation to his call is the necessity of trust. In the conversation with the Angel of the LORD, Gideon was clearly conscious of his inability and weakness. His complaint also showed his immaturity in faith. He was able to remember the accounts of God’s miraculous work, but he could not associate it with their responsibility to be faithful and true to God. Now that he had declared his allegiance to God, and the Midianites had gathered for their raids, the time had come to take a stand and accomplish his call. God’s spirit stirred up Gideon and he took the initiative. He called and gathered the children of Israel in preparation for war.

“And Gideon said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said” (Judg 6:36). The service of God requires preparation, but it is not solely dependent on our preparation as men. We walk by faith and not by sight and whatsoever is not of faith is sin. Gideon sought God’s guidance for the task ahead. But his prayer for guidance also revealed his weak faith and rising doubt. People had responded to his call, they had come prepared for battle. They had cried by reason of the oppression, and now that there was opportunity to do something about it, they availed themselves. But Gideon, the man who had called them, the one who was chosen by God, had a fit of doubt. He went to God with his doubt and God patiently accommodated him. Many have looked at Gideon’s fleece not as a sign of doubt and wavering trust, but rather as a sign of faith, and have encouraged many to “*put a fleece*” before God. Yet, Gideon had come back to God who had revealed Himself and confirmed that it was the LORD who talked to him (Judg 6:16-21), and Gideon knew that it was the LORD (Judg 6:22). That encounter had led him to declare allegiance by breaking down the altar of Baal. But now, at the sight of the Midianites, he doubted and asked for a sign. God’s patience with him, giving him the signs he desired shows the necessity of trust in the service of God and the fulfilling of the call.

THOUGHT: The Christian draws his joy from the unseen, not the seen.

PRAYER: “...Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 25

JUDGES 7:1-8

DEUTERONOMY 20:1-10

*“...bring them down unto the water,
and I will try them for thee there...”*

GIDEON (VI)

The fifth lesson we find in God's dealing with Gideon in relation to his call is the necessity of obedience. For God's work to receive God's blessings, it has to be done in God's way and for God's glory. The only way to do God's work in God's way is to obey God's Word.

“And the LORD said unto Gideon...” (Judg 7:2, 4, 7). Victory is not guaranteed by numbers on your side. Victory is influenced by attitude not multitude. The attitude presented to us in Gideon is that of obedience. Their oppression was due to their spiritual departure. They sought after other gods, they were enticed into, and enslaved by, the idolatry of the land. This would happen again unless they were fully persuaded and committed to their God. The victory that they were to get against the Midianites must accomplish this. If their victory makes them trust in the arm of flesh, they will soon falter and fail, and go astray again for the arm of flesh is limited and hence always failing. The victory must not vaunt them up but humble them, and so the instructions given to Gideon were directed at thinning, not beefing up, the army. In obedience to God, the army was reduced from over 30,000 men to 300 men!

“...By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you...” (Judg 7:7). There is no special significance in the lapping of water as opposed to bowing the knees to drink. We should not place undue emphasis on it, as that would diminish from why the LORD reduced the numbers. Remember, all this was because they were prone to say, *“Mine own hand hath saved me”* (Judg 7:2). What effect the drastic reduction in the numbers had on those who remained cannot be stated. What effect it had on the enemy as the army of Gideon was gathered when the Midianites had pitched at Jezreel is unknown. But what is clear is the aim and end to which the reduction was made: that the Israelites might attribute the victory to God and thus place their trust and confidence in Him alone. The greatest hindrance to trusting and obeying God is often self-confidence.

THOUGHT: “Obedience is the very best way to show that you believe.”

PRAYER: Grant us obedience to Thy Word, and rest in Thy pleasure.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 26

JUDGES 7:9-25

MARK 8:36

*“What shall a man give
in exchange for his soul?”*

GIDEON (VII)

If the fifth lesson we find in God’s dealing with Gideon in relation to his call is the necessity of obedience, then the next lesson and one that is tied to the fifth has to be confidence. The events of the day in the reduction of the army were, to human nature, alarming and deflating. But Gideon, having submitted himself and the army to God in obedience, was now strengthened with confidence. The time had come for him to “*go in this thy might*” (Judg 6:14). He had obeyed God and allowed Him to try the people for him. He had allowed God to choose and filter the army. What had happened did not make sense in human warfare, but Gideon had sent away the rest of the men and retained the 300 men.

“And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him...” (Judg 7:9). The LORD orders all things according to His good will, and He had designed the encounter to confirm to Gideon that his choice to obey and submit to God was the right choice, and to give him and the 300 men confidence to face the Midianite multitude. A trip to the Midianite camp under the cover of darkness had him arrive at the camp to hear the enemy talking amongst themselves about Gideon’s victory. The trip inspired gratitude, worship and confidence (7:15).

“...The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon” (Judg 7:18, 20). With victory affirmed, and his confidence boosted by the visit to the Midianite camp that night, Gideon hastened to attack. The enemy scattered, confused and afraid in the dark at the sound of battle. The men of God, on the other hand, stood with their lamps in their hands. The battle was not theirs, it was the LORD’s, and they had to stand firm in obedience. They stood there in the dark with no weapons in their hands; they had the trumpets in their hands, which they blew, and lamps, which they held high, in their other hands. The enemy fled, and cried, fighting against themselves.

THOUGHT: “Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before.”

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 86:11.)

FRIDAY, JANUARY 27

JUDGES 8:1-21

ROMANS 12:1-8

*“A soft answer turneth away wrath:
but grievous words stir up anger.”*

GIDEON (VIII)

The accounts of the previous judges end with the deliverance of Israel from the enemy's oppression, but not in Gideon's case. In Judges chapter 8, we do not only have details of the route of the Midianites, but we also have details of life after victory. We have in it the challenges Gideon encountered and the decisions he made, both wise and unwise.

“And the men of Ephraim said unto him, Why hast thou served us thus...” (Judg 8:1). Judges 8:1 reveals God's wisdom and knowledge of man. God had said that they would *“...vaunt themselves against me...”* (Judg 7:2), and here was Ephraim doing exactly that against Gideon. Ephraim had been called in the course of the battle and had offered reinforcements (Judg 7:24-25). They intercepted the fleeing Midianites and slew two princes. Having done their part, they confronted Gideon, puffed up and proud. They chided *“with him sharply”* (Judg 8:1) for overlooking them and not calling them to help at the beginning of the battle. They thought themselves to be the true strength of Israel as was evident from Gideon's statement that appeased their anger: *“...what was I able to do in comparison of you...”* (Judg 8:3). They did not see the hand of God in all that had taken place, and felt insulted that smaller tribes went to war without them.

“Then their anger was abated toward him, when he had said that” (Judg 8:3). Gideon in his response to the Ephraimites used great wisdom. He did not recount to them his call or commission from God. He also did not recount to them the night visit or the clarion call of the 300 men against the Midianites. Instead, he appeased them by reminding them of what God had enabled them to do even as they were discontented after accomplishing it. When he referred to his contribution, he presented it as insignificant in comparison to theirs. Gideon thus, by wisdom and a soft answer, averted the potential of a civil war after a great victory that freed them from the oppression of the Midianites.

THOUGHT: Hard arguments are often best faced with soft words.

PRAYER: O Father, help me in my responses that I do not promote anger.

GIDEON (IX)

The account of the challenges Gideon encountered and the decisions he made teaches very important lessons. In the first part of Judges chapter 8, we learn the importance of humility when God is pleased to use us. In the second part of Judges chapter 8, we will see the importance of watchfulness and carefulness when God is pleased to use us.

“...Rule thou over us...for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian” (Judg 8:22). The Ephraimites chided Gideon and Gideon exercised wisdom and humility, and averted a crisis. The men of Israel, on the other hand, came with a proposal and invitation to kingship. After a great victory over a great oppressor, Gideon is no longer the least from a poor house in Manasseh, but the people’s choice for king. In addition to freeing Israel from oppression, Gideon appeased the arrogance of Ephraim. Israel was looking to put its welfare, present and future, in the hands of Gideon and his posterity. Again, we see that God’s assessment of Israel rang true: they were quick to forget God and trust in man. Gideon’s response showed how he had grown through the experiences he had. He declined the invitation that put him and his posterity on a pedestal because it was God’s hand that had wrought the deliverance. God can and will use men he chooses, therefore they ought to perish the thought that limits the welfare of the whole country to a man and his posterity.

“And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city...” (Judg 8:27). The last recorded act of the man who started by breaking down the altar of Baal and cutting down the grove was making an ephod, which became a snare to him and his house. Gideon sat in Ophrah, but God’s tabernacle was in Shiloh (Deut 12:5). This made the coming of Israel to Ophrah (instead of to Shiloh) disobedience. But despite all this, God out of His grace, gave the country rest and peace forty years in the days of Gideon (Judg 8:28).

THOUGHT: Prayer and watchfulness is as necessary in times of victory and ease as they are in times of dire distress.

PRAYER: *“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt 6:13).*

WHEN CORRUPTION RULES, NATIONS DECLINE (I)

The rise and fall of Abimelech is an outstanding chapter in the book of Judges. It highlights the corruption of man, and its fruit on society. This account gives us God's verdict and testimony on the nature of man, and the effect that nature has when unbridled and in position of influence and power.

“Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh” (Judg 9:2). Abimelech cunningly rose to usurp power and take up rulership in place of Gideon his father. From the methods he used and actions he took to secure power, it is clear that he was driven by personal and ungodly ambition. What father Gideon had declined (when Gideon was alive), son Abimelech pursued (after Gideon died). Abimelech appealed to fleshly relations, taking advantage of the influence and reputation of his father Gideon and appealing to his mother's roots in Shechem. His claim that all the sons of Gideon would reign over them (Judg 9:2) was one that was unsubstantiated and probably untrue. In addition to that, Gideon had refused dominion both for him and for his sons. Abimelech excited envy among the men of Shechem and rallied them around him by malice.

“And all the men of Shechem gathered together...and made Abimelech king...” (Judg 9:6). We can discern three things from those who seek and vie for leadership positions. These things should, in our eyes, disqualify the person and deem him unfit for leadership as they are signs of selfish and ungodly ambition. They are, first, peddling falsehood and half-truths and promoting divisive identities like what Abimelech did in Judges 9:2-3. Second, bribery and promoting a false narrative of popularity by surrounding oneself with hired persons, like what Abimelech did in Judges 9:4. Third, destroying others to promote their own cause. True leadership and success is not built on the demise and destruction of others. Abimelech eliminated seventy of his brothers as he saw them as competition and obstacles on his path to leadership.

THOUGHT: When seeking leadership, look for it in character; seek for it in the best, not worst, of men.

PRAYER: Teach me, Father, to distinguish the true from the false, and good from evil.

MONDAY, JANUARY 30
JUDGES 9:7-21
2 KINGS 14:8-14

*“If my people...
shall humble themselves...
then will I hear from heaven...”*

WHEN CORRUPTION RULES, NATIONS DECLINE (II)

The parable of Jotham gives us a lesson and a plea for godly and wise election of leaders. Jotham survived Abimelech’s massacre of the sons of Gideon, and from a safe distance gave a prophetic parable that is timeless and instructive even for this age. The parable deals with the choice of leadership. It does not condemn choosing leaders, but rather decries choosing unfit leaders. Corruption destroys nations as it leads to a poor choice of leadership. How do men unfit for leadership rise to leadership and positions of influence?

“The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them” (Judg 9:8). The first thing presented in the parable that leads to the rise of unfit men is the reluctance of fit men. The trees went in search of the king, but the trees that had proven profitable in life all declined the responsibility. Leadership is not to be handed to idle men. Those who have proven responsible and profitable in other spheres of life, those who have served others, who have been tested and by their fruit revealed their value, they are the ones who should be approached for positions of leadership. But when approached, they should not refuse to take on the additional responsibility for the service of God and men. The refusal of the choice trees was the first factor. The second thing presented in the parable is the lowering of standards of consideration. The trees went to the bramble which had nothing to offer, but was considered only because the choice trees declined. When choices are made only because those suitable cannot be found, declension follows. Standards should be maintained, not lowered. If suitable men are lacking, the search must continue, the training and grooming must go on, the standards should not be changed. The bramble which had no value, and which cast no shadow invited the trees under its shadow. The third thing presented in the parable is apathy in making the choice. *“All the trees”* (Judg 9:14) would include even the choice trees who declined to lead. They refused to lead, but they also consented to the leadership being handed to the unfit. We may not all be able to be in leadership, but all must vote wisely, for fit (not unfit) men.

THOUGHT: When government is offered to the unfit, society decays.

PRAYER: Father, grant us wisdom as we cast our votes.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 31

JUDGES 9:22-57

PSALM 73

*“Righteousness exalteth a nation:
but sin is a reproach to any people.”*

WHEN CORRUPTION RULES, NATIONS DECLINE (III)

The parable of Jotham became a prophecy that was fulfilled in the times of Absalom. Like begets like, and those who live by the sword die by the sword (Matt 26:52). From the life of Abimelech, we can also observe that treachery begets treachery as you reap what you sow.

“When Abimelech had reigned three years over Israel” (Judg 9:22). Abimelech rose to power with the support from the Shechemites, and he gathered vain and light people behind him. It was these same men (those who supported him and his cause) who turned against him and dealt treacherously with him (Judg 9:23). When deceit and selfishness unite men in any cause, the cause cannot stand, as the same deceit and selfishness become the seed for discord among them. The treachery against Abimelech is attributed to the sovereign and just retribution of God against his treachery to his father’s house. The human cause of the discord is not stated, but its progress is highlighted. It is seen in the planned robberies by the men of Shechem (Judg 9:25) and the rebellion of Gaal against Abimelech (Judg 9:26).

“...serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem: for why should we serve him?” (Judg 9:28). The kind of appeal that Abimelech made to the men of Shechem (which swayed them to follow him) was the same kind of appeal used to turn the men of Shechem against him. Influence gained by subjective reasons is subject to be lost the same way. Abimelech put himself to them as their bone and flesh. Gaal questioned that to challenge the loyalty of the men of Shechem to Abimelech. Men who support and join you in sinful and evil endeavours cannot be counted upon to remain faithful. Men whose allegiance you gain by treachery will turn against you at the earliest opportunity. In the end, both Abimelech and Gaal were killed, and the prophecy and curse of Jotham fell upon the men of Shechem. None of them prospered by their treachery. All of them perished because of it.

THOUGHT: Corruption and vice bring disgrace, and degrade a nation.

PRAYER: Father, turn us away from evil and lead us in righteousness, and may we dwell in peace in our nation.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 1

JUDGES 10:1-5

1 CHRONICLES 12:23-40

“...In returning and rest
shall ye be saved...”

TOLA AND JAIR

After the death of Abimelech, we are introduced to two judges Tola and Jair. These two accounts are very interesting in their lack of information on actions and events. Gideon’s account was filled with details and, from them, many lessons. After Gideon, the depiction of the darkness and corruption brought by Abimelech is also graphic, though the period was not a very long one. Then comes Tola and Jair, to whom five verses summarise their lives. In the five verses, a total of up to forty-five years are accounted for. Men normally talk of “the calm before the storm,” but in Tola and Jair we seem to find the calm that followed the storm.

“Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of Issachar; and he dwelt in Shamir in mount Ephraim” (Judg 10:1). After Abimelech, who in treachery usurped power and leadership by appealing to “bone and flesh” (Judg 9:2), Tola, a man of Issachar who dwelt in mount Ephraim, judged Israel.

Nepotism and the ensuing despotism had led to civil war. It is to this that the account of Tola is tied. There is nothing about what Tola did or how he ruled for twenty-three years. In a time when men looked for help from their own “bone and flesh,” God sent help and peace. What went through the minds of the people after Abimelech is not known, but what is told to us is that two judges delivered Israel, not from outside threats and marauding invaders, not by sword and shield, bows and arrows, for none of that is mentioned. However, what is made clear is that under their rule there was peace.

“And after him arose Jair, a Gileadite, and judged Israel twenty and two years” (Judg 10:3). Jair, a Gileadite, was the first judge from across the Jordan. This perhaps shows the extent of peace that followed the ugly times under Abimelech. Like Gideon, Jair had many sons, thirty in number. Though Tola and Jair’s acts are not highlighted, they were men like the judges before them. They were evidence that God’s grace abounds toward all His people.

THOUGHT: Even in times of peace and rest, God’s grace is our strength.

PRAYER: Father, grant us peace through the leaders whom Thou appoints us.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2

JUDGES 10:6-18

1 KINGS 9:1-9

“...if ye shall at all turn from
following me...”

JEPHTHAH (I)

After the period of peace under Tola and Jair, Israel gave herself again to idolatry. The sin and idolatry of Israel was widespread and recurring. It seems that they were steadfast and faithful as far as the judge was, and without a shepherd, they strayed like sheep with each one doing what was right in his own eyes. The diversity of their idolatrous forays reveals the extent of their depravity and weakness, as well as the enticing nature of the religions of the lands.

“And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD...” (Judg 10:6). The apostasy of Israel is highlighted and impressed upon us by repeated use of the conjunction “and” which is repeated eight times after the phrase “in the sight of the LORD.” The lure from the idolatrous practices of the nations surrounding them was clearly overwhelming. They forgot God, they forgot their history too, the past oppressions and deliverances, and as a dog returning to his vomit (Prov 26:11). Israel returned to the idols that had been the cause of her woes. After the death of a judge, the nation ran back to the idols that had previously caused their ruin, and compounded them with new idols. Israel was willing to serve all gods at so great a cost, and forsake the only true and living God who was their only salvation, revealing what is in man. He is quick to believe the lie and reject the truth. He is willing to follow every wind of doctrine, every superstition, every delusion, every lust and sinful indulgence, every deception, but forgets the truth and peace of God.

“And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel” (Judg 10:7). The consequence and judgment for apostasy are equally highlighted for us both in the anger of the LORD poured out in the chastisement and oppression (Judg 10:7-10), as well as in the rebuke of the LORD (Judg 10:11-14). They had no legitimate claim for help at all, and were referred to seek help from their idols. However, where sin had abounded, grace did much more abound (Rom 5:20), and God would extend to them His grace once again.

THOUGHT: Obedience confirms allegiance. Either obey God or sin!

PRAYER: O Father, grant that we may not indulge ourselves but carefully consider how often we have provoked Thy wrath against us.

JEPHTHAH (II)

In Judges 11, we are given an account of the man Jephthah. His account begins with his rejection. His story is similar but worse than that of Abimelech. His mother was not a concubine as in Abimelech's case. His mother was a harlot. As such, he was unwanted in his father's house and eventually his father's sons thrust him away. But he was the one whom God had chosen to use to deliver His people; and there is even a record of his faith in Hebrews 11:32.

“Then Jephthah fled from his brethren...” (Judg 11:3). Jephthah's rejection and exile from among his father's brethren put him on a path that would bring him back in due time. He became a leader of a band of outcasts like himself and was thus, by divine providence, schooled and prepared to serve the very same people who rejected him. The one, who was denied a part in the inheritance, was called upon to lead the fight to secure the inheritance against the invading Ammonites.

“And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead...” (Judg 11:7). In the meeting that the elders had with Jephthah as they sought his help, Jephthah held them responsible for the actions of his own brothers, but agreed to their request because of the distress they were in. This brought him back into the society from which he had been chased, and put him in the forefront of their fight against the Ammonite oppression. In the whole dialogue, Jephthah made mention of the LORD as he responded to the invitation to be leader in the battle against the Ammonites. He did not appeal to his courage or experience gained in the years spent at Tob, but rather to the LORD who would subdue the enemy and give them into the hand of Jephthah. In this conversation, Jephthah revealed a different spirit from that of the natural man. He did not allow pride to blind him into declining the elders' invitation, even though he held them responsible for what had happened to him. Moreover, unlike Abimelech, Jephthah received his commission in Mizpeh in the presence of the LORD (Judg 11:9-11).

THOUGHT: God's choice is not governed by man's rules.

PRAYER: O Father, help me trust Thee with my decisions and future.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 4
JUDGES 11:12-28
DEUTERONOMY 20:10-15

*“If it be possible,
as much as lieth in you,
live peaceably with all men.”*

JEPHTHAH (III)

Jephthah's first act was a diplomatic one. He sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites. He did not go to war with the aggressors as a first resort. As God had instructed through Moses, he first sought peaceful means. God's people are not to wage unrighteous wars, they are not to fight with a neighbour that is content to dwell safely beside them, or fight out of hatred or selfishness. They are not to fight out of lust and thirst for power. Jephthah, in sending word to the king of the Ammonites, showed that it is the Ammonites who had sinned and not Jephthah (Judg 11:27) and so his war would be a righteous war and God would fight for him.

“And Jephthah sent messengers again unto the king of the children of Ammon” (Judg 11:14). This begins a detailed statement of historical facts defending Israel's right to the land that had belonged to the Amorites and the Moabites. Jephthah knew the history of Israel and the accounts recorded in the Pentateuch. The conquest of Sihon, king of the Amorites, is given in Numbers 21 with clear indication of the Ammonite borders in verse 24, while the account of Balaam and Balak is in Numbers 22 to 24. Jephthah then ended his response to the Ammonite king by pointing out that the Moabites remained silent (Judg 11:25) though they had a greater claim than his.

“Wilt not thou possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess?...” (Judg 11:24). The statement that Jephthah sent also had a spiritual implication. His testimony of Israel's history showed that Israel had not sought out for themselves the land they had possessed, and even while passing through to possess the Land of Promise, they had purposed to just pass through the land now in question (Deut 2:9, 29). Denying Israel the right to the land they possess would also deny the Ammonites' right to any land they possess by conquest; and if they were to seek a quarrel, then God would be the Judge between them (Judg 11:27).

THOUGHT: Conflict must not be the believer's first option or recourse.

PRAYER: Father, grant unto us wisdom in times of distress to pursue peace.

JEPHTHAH (IV)

Jephthah, left with no recourse other than to battle the Ammonites and moved by the Spirit of the LORD, went forth to battle. He went forth and took the battle to the Ammonites. He had accepted to be leader over Israel and had spoken before the LORD to the elders and people, and had spoken to the king of the Ammonites; now he was moved to act, guided by the Spirit of the LORD. He was God's man for that hour.

“And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD...” (Judg 11:30). The thought that victory belongs to the LORD and that He gives it, was in Jephthah's talk with the elders who went to invite him to lead them against the king of the Ammonites (Judg 11:9). He expected victory as he went forth, and he made a vow. There is nothing wrong with making a vow, as vows are one's expression of devotion and commitment to God (see Gen 28:20; Num 6:2; 30:2). In Deuteronomy 23:21-23, instructions were given to Israel about vows. Vows were left under the power and discretion of the man who made them, but were to be restricted to things that were lawful and in accordance to the revealed will of God. There was a clear warning that though it was of one's free will, the vow was binding and was to be paid once uttered (see Ps 61:8; 116:14).

The obligations that come with vows demand that vows be done soberly, seeking the clear will and counsel of God. They are not to be made rashly or out of impulse or emotions. One such example is Joshua and the Gibeonites. God held Israel responsible in 2 Samuel 21 for Saul breaking the vow. Faithfulness and commitment to the fulfilment of our vows are mandatory and so all vows are to be entered into soberly and for the glory of God. Marriage and ministerial (ordination) vows are vows that many take lightly in this age. Making a vow is at our discretion, but once the vow is made, breaking it is never an option as it will not please God.

THOUGHT: We must approach God with care when in the midst of trouble or distress.

PRAYER: (Use Jonah 2:9.)

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 6

JUDGES 11:34-40

1 SAMUEL 1:10-28

“...then shall the LORD
be my God.”

JEPHTHAH (V)

Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites was conclusive, though the details given are not extensive. As Jephthah returned to Mizpeh victorious, and the land joyous, he expected that the leaders of Israel would fulfil their word to him, and he would fulfil his word and vow to the LORD.

“And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house...” (Judg 11:34). To his horror and dismay, his daughter came out to meet him. His only child now belonged to God because of his vow, and Jephthah lamented his loss. In his zeal he vowed, and then he regretted it. Vows are to be fulfilled with joy as acts of devotion, not with regret and lament. That he regretted what he said when he vowed is a clear indicator that he vowed rashly and had not thought it through carefully. Hannah, during the period of the judges, made a vow, but she came with a song and a sacrifice to fulfil her vow. One who gives to the LORD should not regret what he has given or consider it a loss. Offering ourselves a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1) is to be done with joy and considered our reasonable service.

“...My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the LORD, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth...” (Judg 11:36). The response of Jephthah's daughter is remarkable. Her gratitude for the deliverance God had wrought was the reason she gave as she accepted to bear the burden of her father's vow. For what God had wrought, her life and virginity were a price she submissively gave up. She requested a two-month reprieve, but not to mourn or regret her decision to submit, or to lament her father's rash vow. The two months were not spent with her father who had been “brought low,” but rather her maiden companions; and they bewailed not her untimely death, but her virginity (Judg 11:37). And as she had requested, she returned after the period given her that her father might fulfil his vow to the LORD. She made no attempts to avert or subvert the tragedy befalling her. Jephthah too, though distressed, still fulfilled his vow to the LORD. Vows are important and must be fulfilled. Therefore, we must be careful what vows we make.

THOUGHT: Make vows that you will fulfil with joy, not with regret.

PRAYER: Father, give me the grace to fear Thee and fulfil my vows with joy.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 7

JUDGES 12:1-7

1 SAMUEL 11:1-11

*“When pride cometh,
then cometh shame...”*

JEPHTHAH (VI)

For the second time in the period of the judges, the men of Ephraim rose up against a judge decriing their being overlooked. This second time, it resulted in a civil war unlike the first time under Gideon when they were appeased with a soft answer. Jephthah, who earlier was sought out to lead the fight against the Ammonites, did not seek diplomacy or to appease the Ephraimites. His words and actions were not like those of Gideon. Gideon appeased their wrath; Jephthah humiliated their pride.

“And Jephthah said unto them, I and my people were at great strife with the children of Ammon; and when I called you, ye delivered me not out of their hands” (Judg 12:2). Jephthah exposed the Ephraimites in his charge against them. They had been sought for help, but they did not offer any. They had refused to offer leadership at a time of crisis, and leadership had been sought elsewhere. The Ammonites had oppressed the children of Israel for eighteen years (Judg 10:8), and now the Ephraimites came up in arms not against the enemy, but against their brethren whom the LORD had used to subdue their common enemy.

“Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim...” (Judg 12:4). Their threats against Jephthah were met with firm and decisive action. Jephthah led the people against an external oppressor, and also led them against internal aggression from a proud brother. The Ephraimites called the Gileadites *“fugitives of Ephraim”* (Judg 12:4), treating them like unwelcomed foreigners. The fords, which the men of Ephraim had secured in Gideon’s time, were now secured by Jephthah’s men and a simple test was devised to ascertain the identity of those who wanted to pass through. The men of Ephraim were betrayed by their speech: at the first in their proud speech against Jephthah that led to the war, and now that they were defeated by the men of Gilead, one word “Shibboleth” revealed their identity and forty-two thousand men were killed (Judg 12:6).

THOUGHT: Pride never profited anyone, swallowing yours won’t kill you.

PRAYER: Father, help me to resist pride and arrogance and to stay humble.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 8

JUDGES 12:8-15

PSALM 127

“...it is appointed unto men
once to die, but after this
the judgment.”

IBZAN, ELON AND ABDON

After Abimelech, there were two judges who ruled in peace and tranquillity. Now, after Jephthah, we are given the account of three judges who similarly ruled Israel. During their time no clear external enemy or oppression is mentioned. There are no details given concerning their contribution to Israel, but what seems to be highlighted is what Jephthah seemed to have lost by his rash vow. For two of these three judges, their children are mentioned (Judg 12:9, 14). However, unlike Jephthah, no heroic acts are recorded of them nor is there any account of sacrifices made. But whether one has a record as that of Jephthah or of that of Ibzan, Elon and Abdon, no one lives forever. Jephthah, with his great heroic acts which greatly affected him, ruled for six years and then he died; and many may assume that the sorrow upon the loss of his only child may have hastened his death. As for Ibzan and Abdon, both had many children and saw them marry. These two judges ruled for seven and eight years respectively, and then they died. As for Elon, his record is that he ruled for ten years; nothing is said about his children. And then he too died. The certainty of death is clearly set forth for us in the accounts of these judges.

“Then died Ibzan, and was buried at Bethlehem” (Judg 12:10). After all that Ibzan had done for Israel and for his family, he died. The reality and certainty of death ought to make us careful of how we live. Irrespective of the circumstances of our life, whether favourable or unfavourable, we have the obligation to be diligent in our duties as the Preacher advises in Ecclesiastes 9:10: *“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”* We must be obedient and faithful to our Lord and Saviour as Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 enjoins: *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”*

THOUGHT: The believer’s comfort is that he shall die once only.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 90:12.)

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9

JUDGES 13:1-7

NUMBERS 6:1-21

“...ye shall be unto me a kingdom
of priests, and an holy nation...”

SAMSON (I)

Samson is the judge who is given the most extensive coverage in the book of Judges. He has four chapters to his account, and the account of his life begins with an account of an angel sent to his parents to announce his birth. Unlike the account of Gideon which focused on the call of Gideon and how God dealt with him in the preparation for his battle with the Midianites, Samson's account delves mainly into his forays and his personal life and weaknesses even as he was used by God. Thus, Gideon's account highlights man's response to the sovereignty of God in calling and using him, while Samson's account highlights man's responsibility in maintaining a life worthy of the vocation and call to which God has called him. For all the other judges, the call of each one of them is presented as a personal one, with God dealing with them personally. For Samson, before he was born, an angel was sent to his mother.

“Now therefore beware, I pray thee...the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb to the day of his death” (Judg 13:4-7). The account begins with the first encounter of Manoah's wife with the angel. This is set in the summary statement of the forty-year Philistine oppression with no details of how they were oppressed. The angel announced the good news that she would be a mother, and immediately gave instructions concerning her responsibility, and the child's calling. The accounts of the other judges present the judges with respect to the duty of their call. In Samson's case, what is emphasised is not what he shall do, but what he should be. The duty of the other judges were to be done by the strength and empowering of the LORD. The Spirit of the LORD repeatedly coming upon them points to this. In the case of Samson, the purity of life and consecration to God, not only during the days of service, but the whole of life, is emphasised as pointed out in the angel's visit to Manoah's wife. Note also that Manoah's wife did not negotiate these terms, nor did she raise any question. Her first response was to relay to her husband her encounter with the angel. God's service must be on God's terms; man's responsibility is simply to comply.

THOUGHT: As children of God, holiness must be our standard and aim.

PRAYER: Grant, O Father, that we may abide in Christ and obey His Word for Thy praise and glory all the days of our lives.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10

JUDGES 13:8-14

PSALM 127-128

*“If a man therefore purge
himself from these...”*

SAMSON (II)

The second appearance of the angel to Manoah and his wife was occasioned by Manoah's request upon hearing his wife's message of the angel's first visit. This second visit came with specific instructions on parental responsibilities that many a time are not fully comprehended by would-be parents.

“...teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born” (Judg 13:8).

This request highlights the greatness of parental duties and care. It presents parents as God's stewards moulding their children after God's will and purposes. As such, parents must know God's will and Word so as to know what to do concerning the children God has blessed them with. God's response to this request further shows that it is His will that parents should know how to raise their children because He honoured Manoah's request with an appearance and with a response of instructions on their duty as God's stewards in raising up the man God would use to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines.

“...Of all that I said unto the woman let her beware” (Judg 13:13). The

angel did not say any new thing, but reiterated what was already known. Whether it is out of unbelief or doubt that Manoah sought for confirmation, or for whatever other reasons that Manoah was not satisfied with the explanation and words of his wife, it is clear that God's will and word is immutable. We should not think that there will be any new revelation needed in order to be good parents, or that we could be exempted from any responsibility revealed in God's Word. Our responsibilities, as read from God's Word and proclaimed to us by God's faithful servants, are what God wants us to heed and beware. The parents' holiness and purity forms part of the child's holiness and separation. We ought to be careful how we live and what testimony and example we set for our children to follow. We must keep ourselves holy for the Lord's use, and as an example to our children.

THOUGHT: “Emptied that Thou shouldest fill me, a clean vessel in Thy hand.”

PRAYER: For Thy use, cleanse me by Thy Word, and fill me by Thy Spirit.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 11

JUDGES 13:15-23

GENESIS 18:1-15

*“Is any thing too hard
for the LORD?”*

SAMSON (III)

Manoah’s conversation with the angel was quite different from the conversation that his wife had with the angel. The reason for the distinction rests in the reason that *“Manoah knew not that he was an angel of the LORD”* (Judg 13:16). His attention was directed towards this “stranger” who bore such glad tidings and news of a blessing they had longed for. This conversation also reveals the grace and patience God shows to His children who are ignorant of Him as He brings them to the knowledge of His will.

“...I pray thee, let us detain thee, until we shall have made ready a kid for thee” (Judg 13:15). Manoah makes a request to prepare a meal, but he was ignorant of how to serve God. To his request, instruction was given on how he ought to perform acceptably. Motive is never sufficient reason for service to be accepted. There has to be added to motive, obedience to the revealed will of God. All of Manoah’s effort and preparation would be fruitless unless it was in accordance to God’s Word and instruction.

“...What is thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honour?” (Judg 13:17). Manoah asked a question that remained unanswered, yet the angel gave him understanding. What is necessary to be known, will be rewarded with an answer; what is not to be known will not be answered. What they needed to know in order to fulfil their duty and responsibility was confirmed to him. Manoah went on to bring a burnt offering and offered it to the LORD, and in their sight the identity of their visitor was revealed as the angel *“ascended in the flame of the altar”* (Judg 13:20).

“...We shall surely die, because we have seen God” (Judg 13:22). As Manoah bemoaned his ignorance, we are taught the value of having godly companionship. In the midst of his fears, he was encouraged by his wife. His wife used sensible reasoning. She showed that she had paid attention and taken to heart all the events of the day, and that from what the LORD had revealed, she found strength and courage and comfort.

THOUGHT: (Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.)

PRAYER: Grant us grace to abide by Thy will, Father.

SAMSON (IV)

The record of the birth of Samson and the summary of his upbringing are in these two verses, Judges 13:24-25. This record highlights the faithfulness of God in fulfilling His word to the parents concerning the birth of their son, and fulfilling His promise to use Samson to break the Philistine oppression. But this record also highlights the faithfulness of Samson's parents to their God-given call, and responsibility both to the instructions of the LORD by the angel to Manoah's wife as well as to the raising of Samson as a Nazarite.

"And the woman bare a son..." (Judg 13:24). After the angelic appearances and promises, the woman bore a son. God honoured His word, and the woman obeyed God's word too. God had made provisions for the man He would use. These provisions were sovereign and providential. It was sovereign in that God's choice of who were to be parents cannot be explained in any other way than it was by God's sovereign will. It was providential in that as Samson developed, his life was shaped by his parents' choices and testimony. Yet God had a hand in them, and his parents had conscious and deliberate responsibilities too. Through all this, *"the LORD blessed him"* (Judg 13:24).

"And the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times..." (Judg 13:25). The introduction to the life of Samson is with a statement that does not highlight his might or strength, but rather the Spirit of the LORD which was the source of his might and strength. Before considering his exploits, which involved multiple encounters against the Philistines (unlike the accounts of the other judges, which focused on one account with which deliverance was wrought), we are given to know that God who had called and chosen to use him, did use him. His life will clearly portray what it means and requires to have the LORD as one's strength and what it takes for God to use us for His glory. His life will also show the grace and mercy which the LORD extends when He chooses to use man and the consequences that accompany wilful disobedience to the Word and will of the LORD.

THOUGHT: Devotion to God straightens my paths and saves from hurt.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 86:11.)

SAMSON (V)

When God calls, what does He require from man? When God uses us, what does it indicate? The birth and development of Samson is summarised by the faithfulness of God to His Word and that of his parents to God’s Word. The Proverbs instruct us: *“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it”* (Prov 22:6). This indicates that there is parental responsibility to *“train up a child”* and there is also the child’s personal responsibility to *“not depart from it.”* The life accounts of Samson present to us the failure in his personal responsibility through wilful disobedience of what he knew and was taught concerning the Word and will of God for his call and life.

“And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman...” (Judg 14:1).

The personal account of Samson begins with his straying from the ways of the LORD and from the teachings of his parents. *“There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death”* (Prov 14:12). This may be an appropriate summary of Samson’s forays. The account that led him down the *“ways of death”* is in the choice of a wife, a matter to which the world constantly shouts: *“follow your heart,”* *“love is blind,”* *“love knows no bounds”* and other such statements. In such a matter concerning the choice of a wife or husband, our flesh and human nature (like Samson) seek to play tyrant and overrule the Word and will of God. And to many of us (like Samson), it sets us on a road away from God, filled with many heartaches, disappointment and regrets.

“But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the LORD...” (Judg 14:4).

Though we are subject to our imperfections and submit to our lusts, which lead us astray and pierce us with many sorrows, God in His sovereignty can use them for His glory to fulfil His purposes and design for our lives. But we may still have to suffer the consequences and the hurt that accompany our sinful strayings. God is sovereign over all things. When He calls, He requires us to be responsible through obedience to His Word and will in our daily choices.

THOUGHT: Wilful error has no profit; obedience brings no regrets.

PRAYER: Father, help me to obey Thee daily.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 14

JUDGES 14:5-7

PROVERBS 8:32-36

*“Hear instruction, and be wise,
and refuse it not.”*

SAMSON (VI)

Samson’s decision to marry a Philistine, ignoring his call and God’s commands blinded him. He failed in his part to be obedient to his God and call, yet God continued to be gracious to him. God’s grace is seen in the Spirit of the LORD empowering him when he met a lion.

“Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath...” (Judg 14:5). The giving in of his parents to his desire to marry a Philistine did not indicate the approval of the LORD. Just because someone gets his own way does not mean that he is right, because there *“is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death”* (Prov 14:12). Samson literally encountered death in the way he had chosen as he went to seek for the wife he desired, but by the grace of the LORD, he subdued and killed the lion. But this man, who could tear up a lion who pounced on him unexpectedly, was not able to subdue the selfish and sinful passions that, like a tyrant, laid hold on him. This highlights his disobedience and defiance for would not the same God, who gave him grace to overcome the lion, give grace and wisdom to subdue the passion.

“...but he told not his father or his mother what he had done” (Judg 14:6). There is no reason given as to why he did not tell his parents what he had done. Could it be out of modesty that he did not want to brag about his exploits for it was not yet time for his ability to be known and published abroad? Or could it be that his conscience accused him of his defiance and he thought his parents would take it as a sign of God’s disapproval and remind him of his error in his choice of wife? Whatever the reason, it is just stated that he did not tell, and that he continued with his ungodly pursuit for a Philistine wife. Like Balaam, who even after having a conversation with his donkey, proceeded on in the pursuit of the honour and riches promised to him by Balak.

THOUGHT: “Fight manfully onward, dark passions subdue, look ever to Jesus He’ll carry you through.”

PRAYER: (“Ask the Saviour to help you, He is willing to aid you.”)

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 15

JUDGES 14:8-11

PROVERBS 4:1-15

*“Wisdom is the principal thing;
therefore get wisdom...”*

SAMSON (VII)

Time had passed. Samson persisted in his desire to have his Philistine bride. The account is given of what happened as he again went down the same road. It is a very illustrative story indeed. On this road, he met death, and God gave grace. As he returned, the events of the past were not forgotten.

“And after a time he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcase of the lion...” (Judg 14:8). After the visit in which he encountered and killed the lion, he had to make a trip again and as he travelled the same route, he reached the place where he had killed the lion. He turned out of the way to go and look at the carcass. Samson’s life is filled with lessons for us. As he turned to look at the carcass, he was faced again with temptation, succumbed to temptation and went against his Nazarite vows. He was drawn by the lust of the flesh: honey in the carcass of the lion. It was *“good for food”* (Gen 3:6). But in order to access it, he must come into contact with the carcass which for him, a Nazarite, was forbidden.

“...But he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion” (Judg 14:9). This is the second time in the same chapter and sequence of events that we are told that Samson hid information from his parents. This is a clear indication that he knew he was doing wrong. He was helpless to resist and did not want to be held accountable by his parents, to be chided and reminded of how he ought to be separate and have his sin pointed out again to him, for he already knew it.

How often we pierce ourselves with many sorrows and fall into sin because we turn out of the path set before us. James clearly puts it that *“every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed”* (James 1:14). Samson’s trips to Timnah had no good fruit, for they were all rooted in lust. His seeking a bride out of his personal lust led to the first trip. The return trip brought him to honey that was forbidden but he refused to resist, or tell his parents the truth about it.

THOUGHT: “Yield not to temptation for yielding is sin.”

PRAYER: Father, help me to always look up to Thee.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16

JUDGES 14:12-20

PROVERBS 27:11-16

"The waters wear the stones..."

SAMSON (VIII)

Judges 14:12-20 highlights the carnality and wilfulness of Samson. At this point, Samson had had his way in having his parents get him the wife who pleased him well. Moreover, at the wedding feast which was held at the bride's home, the Philistines *"brought thirty companions to be with him,"* and he was in their company feasting and probably drinking and indulging with them in the entertainments that accompanied the festive mood. He set himself up against them with great odds in the course of these festivities by the riddle he gave them. These odds may also reveal his desire for the *"change of garments"* (Judg 14:12). He promised to give each one of the thirty companions a change of garments if they were to be successful in solving the riddle. However, he expected to receive from each one of them one change of garments if they were to fail to solve the riddle.

"...Entice thy husband, that he may declare unto us the riddle...have ye called us to take that we have? is it not so?" (Judg 14:15). His riddle turned out to be his source of vexation during the seven-day period. The companions that had been chosen to be with him during the period could not answer the riddle. They went behind his back and threatened his wife. She in turn persistently pestered Samson concerning the answer to the riddle and though he withheld the answer from her at the first, it gradually became a burden unbearable, and on the final day, he told her the answer. The Philistines came back to Samson with the answer. He lost the bet and had to give thirty changes of garments.

"...And his anger was kindled, and he went up to his father's house" (Judg 14:19). What had been a week of feasting and looking forward to getting the woman that had pleased him well turned out otherwise. Samson fulfilled his pledge by finding and killing thirty Philistines, after which he returned to his father's house. Not only were his expectations disappointed, he received no changes of garments, and now also no wife, as his wife was given to one of his companions. How true it is that *"we can do nothing against the truth"* (2 Cor 13:8). His lust was not satisfied and his wilfulness unrewarded.

THOUGHT: "Shun evil companions bad language disdain."

PRAYER: Father, keep me on Thy strait and narrow path.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17
JUDGES 15:1-8
GENESIS 49:1-7

“...in their anger they slew a man,
and in their selfwill
they digged down a wall.”

SAMSON (IX)

Emotions fluctuate and do not last forever, so Samson's anger waned, and he once again made a trip to Timnah seeking his wife, not knowing this would be the beginning of his battles with the Philistines. By God's providence, Samson would be freed from an unequal yoke with the Philistines and would be prompted into beginning to free the Israelites from the oppression of the Philistines. The grace and sovereignty of God are seen in this. God uses a man for His purpose even when the man being used is not seeking His will.

“...Now shall I be more blameless than the Philistines, though I do them a displeasure” (Judg 15:3). The effort Samson put in to vent his anger is astounding. He moved to avenge the personal wrong that he had suffered. The Philistines had threatened his wife and her house to get the answer to the riddle, and now, the same wife had been given to his companion. His recourse was foxes with firebrands on their tails set free into the Philistines' fields with the hope of the Philistines' harvest going up in smoke. To this, the Philistines responded with an attack on the Timnite family. Vengeance begets vengeance.

“...Though ye have done this, yet will I be avenged of you, and after that I will cease” (Judg 15:7). The scene which began with Samson carrying a kid, going to Timnath seeking reconciliation and to take his wife, had degenerated into a cycle of violence. The family wronged Samson, and in response, he burned the fields of the Philistines. In this, Samson wronged the Philistines, and in their response, they burned the Timnite's family in their house. To this, Samson responded: “yet will I be avenged of you, and after that I will cease” (Judg 15:7), but it would not be the end, and he would not cease. Getting even never makes things even, and Samson having killed them, moved on to dwell in the top of the rock, probably knowing that there would be retaliation.

THOUGHT: Vengeance ignores God, peace, and a brother's plight.

PRAYER: Vengeance belongs to Thee, Father. May I never take things into my own hands.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18

JUDGES 15:9-13

PROVERBS 30:11-14, 20

“...to him that knoweth to do good,
and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”

SAMSON (X)

Samson's encounter with the men of Judah in today's passage gives us a glimpse of the extent of the Philistine oppression. The preceding events might have come to the attention of the men of Judah: the burning of the harvest by Samson, the killing of the Timnite family, and Samson's slaughter of the Philistines. News travels, and if the Philistines heard what had happened and gathered themselves against Judah, Judah would also have heard. Yet there is no indication of the men of Judah finding some form of hope or drawing courage from what one man was able to do.

“And the men of Judah said, Why are ye come up against us?...” (Judg 15:10). The response of the Philistines to this question is testimony to the effect of Samson's feat. The gathering of an army worried the men of Judah. Why an army to pursue one man? The men of Judah, out of fear of their oppressors sought to deliver Samson into the hands of the Philistines. Their question to Samson is very telling: “*Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us?*” (Judg 15:11). The fear of man is indeed a snare. The men of Judah could not see past their fear to seize the opportunity that God had presented to them through the acts of Samson. Samson permitted them to bind him, having secured their word that they would not turn on him to slay him themselves. This time it would be one man's battle against a powerful oppressor.

What a sad picture when men of God persist in their sorry state and fail to see God beginning to move in their midst. There were three thousand men and not one voice of concern about delivering Samson bound to the Philistine oppressor. Instead, their response was an acceptance of their oppression and a pointing finger at Samson. “*What is this that thou hast done unto us?*” (Judg 15:11). There was no evidence of hope, only acceptance of their slavery. How many having their senses dulled by the world and their eyes blinded would be satisfied with the status quo and the reign of sin in their lives? Some would even get angry and turn against any who try to waken them up out of their slumber.

THOUGHT: Compromising for the sake of convenience is sin.

PRAYER: (“He is willing to aid you, He will carry you through.”)

SAMSON (XI)

Unlike the other judges, Samson would fight alone. He did not assemble an army, neither was he called to head one. His battles against the Philistines began with him being delivered up to the Philistines by his own kindred. As God pleases, He would, in the course of our service to Him, raise up those who would work with us and support us. However, even when no one stands with us, God is still able to use us. What is important is not how many we have “on our side,” standing with us, but rather, the assurance that we are standing for the LORD and for the truth of His Word.

“...and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him...” (Judg 15:14). The men of Judah were about to be witnesses of nothing short of a miracle. The Philistines, taunting Samson, probably thought they had him bound and thus helpless. At the same time, the men of Judah indicated (by their delivering of Samson) their acceptance of the sorry state under Philistine oppression. Unfortunately, the shouts of victory turned into the confusion and agony of defeat by an act of God. The LORD is able to strengthen one man against an army, and through that one man with nothing but the jaw bone of an ass, God accomplished a great slaughter.

“And he was sore athirst, and called on the LORD...” (Judg 15:18). The feat of the day under the empowering of the Spirit of the LORD took a toll on the body. Victory was gained over the enemy, but energy and strength were drained from the body. Samson was left parched and thirsty, and he knew that what he needed could not be gotten by strength or might, but by favour and grace of the LORD. So he called on the LORD. God graciously provided for His servant and revived his spirit without chiding him. Though no support is found, the lonely man leaning on God is refreshed. God’s work may be taxing, and at times may be done alone with no help from man, but it will never lack the grace and supply of the ever-present and ever-gracious Master who cares for His children.

THOUGHT: Through faith we will conquer.

PRAYER: (“Look ever to Jesus He’ll carry you through.”)

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20

JUDGES 16:1-3

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-14

“...by means of a whorish woman
a man is brought to a piece of bread...”

SAMSON (XII)

Judges 15 closes with a summary that Samson judged Israel twenty years. In the accounts of the previous judges, such a summary would conclude the account of the judge's life. However, in the case of Samson, we are still given incidents in his life, events that present both his strength and weaknesses. In the section before us today, the wayward and sensual nature of Samson is highlighted. One would think that past grace would be enough to change a man. If only he remembered how God had delivered him when the men of Judah gave him up to the Philistines. If only he remembered how he had thought he would die of thirst and God refreshed him and provided water. If only he remembered how the Philistines had assembled an army to pursue after him.

“Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot, and went in unto her” (Judg 16:1). The first thing that comes out in this verse is the fearlessness of Samson. He ventured into Philistine territory. Not only did he enter the city, he even slept in the city. The Philistines were not hasty; they lay in wait seeking an opportune time, wary of their enemy as they knew of his legendary strength. The second thing in this verse is Samson's weakness and wilfulness. His wandering eyes still wandered. In the past, he saw a Philistine woman who pleased him well, and that nearly killed him (were it not for God's grace and strength when he was handed bound to the Philistines). Now, again, it is pointed out that while at Gaza, he “*saw there an harlot*” (Judg 16:1). The deceitfulness of sin takes advantage of the carelessness of man. The scripture rightfully exhorts, “*Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall*” (1 Cor 10:12).

“And Samson...arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city...” (Judg 16:3). We see in this section the long-suffering of God towards His servant. Samson was complacent because of his supernatural strength. The physical ability hid the spiritual immaturity. The fact that God uses us is not evidence that God approves of everything we do. God's approval is measured in obedience.

THOUGHT: “Yield not to temptation for yielding is sin.”

PRAYER: Father, may I never doubt Thy ability.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21

JUDGES 16:4-5

1 KINGS 11:1-13

“...his wives turned away his
heart after other gods...”

SAMSON (XIII)

The troubles of Samson as given in the biblical accounts have the recurring temptation of a Philistine woman: from the woman at Timnath, to the harlot at Gaza. His downfall would be occasioned by Delilah at Sorek. The answer to his riddle was revealed after the importunate pestering of the woman he loved. The secret of his strength was pursued by the Philistines through the agency of a woman. Just as Daniel's enemies sought for an occasion against him (Dan 6:4), the enemies of Samson also sought for an occasion against him. But, alas, unlike Daniel whose enemies found no fault and noted that an occasion must be found “*concerning the law of his God*” (Dan 6:5), the Philistines did find it in the person of Delilah to whom they offered silver.

“...Entice him, and see wherein his great strength lieth, and by what means we may prevail against him...” (Judg 16:5). The enemy changed their tactics, they did not send an army, neither did they lie in wait with city gates closed, but rather, they took advantage of Samson's weakness. The one who had given in to the lust of the flesh was now attacked through it. Trials and dangers abound in the world, and God gives grace to us to avoid and overcome them. We may trust God and pray that He leads us not into temptation, but delivers us from evil. However, this does not give us permission to embrace temptation or put ourselves in the path of evil just because God is able to save. We are not to run into danger trusting that we will overcome or be delivered or as Paul puts it: “*continue in sin, that grace may abound*” (Rom 6:1-2). It was not Samson alone who was tempted, but Delilah too. The lords of the Philistines, knowing the grave danger of the task they had asked of her, enticed her themselves with a reward that would blind her to the threats and dangers. The bribe promised her had to be considerable lest she considered the danger involved too great. It was dangerous both physically, if her errand be found out, and also emotionally, if her attachment to him made her change her mind. Delilah, having been ensnared by the lords of the Philistines, would become their snare to entice and bring Samson to them weak and helpless.

THOUGHT: “*Keep thy heart with all diligence...*” (Prov 4:23).

PRAYER: May I trust in Thee daily, Father.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22

JUDGES 16:6-14

PROVERBS 5:1-14

*“Lest strangers be filled
with thy wealth...”*

SAMSON (XIV)

As one reads the account of how Delilah enticed and discovered the secret of Samson’s strength, one may be tempted to ask: How could Samson not be suspicious? How could he not have known? Some would think they would fare better than Samson. How ignorant we are of the depths and extent of our depravity! What we have in this section are the lulling and dulling effects of our sinful lusts. We also see the persistent nature and charm of the tempter. The scripture rightfully exhorts: *“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall”* (1 Cor 10:12). And again: *“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted”* (Gal 6:1).

“And Delilah said to Samson...And Samson said unto her...” (Judg 16:6-7).

This sequence recurs throughout the narrative. Sin entertained eventually overpowers! Delilah was diligent and persistent in her pursuit; Samson was playful and teasing in his response. He was blinded by his passion and the sensual satisfaction he found in her that he casually allowed her to delve into very sensitive matters. Just like Eve’s conversation with the serpent in the garden (Gen 3:1-6), there is great folly in entertaining sin, even if it seems to be in harmless conversations. It is probable that each lie Samson gave encouraged Delilah to be persistent. The only recourse that ensures one’s safety when under temptation is the one seen in Joseph’s encounter with Potiphar’s wife which is also commanded by the Apostle in his exhortations for personal conduct and relationships in 2 Timothy 2:14-26. There must be topics shunned so that purity may be maintained. Lusts and deep-seated desires must be avoided at all costs that we may be vessels of honour meet for the Master’s use. Many a time, like Samson, our backslidings begin unbeknown to us through the things we entertain and allow. We think them trivial or inconsequential and we entertain them to our own hurt and detriment. How many doubts have arisen because of the questions we entertained? How many compromises have led us astray?

THOUGHT: (Read Proverbs 23:26-28.)

PRAYER: My self-confidence led me to sin. Forgive me, Father.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23

JUDGES 16:15-22

PROVERBS 6:20-35

*“With her much fair speech she
caused him to yield...”*

SAMSON (XV)

Delilah applied herself diligently and variously to the accomplishment of her mission. Samson could not resist her charms, and continued going back to her. Although Samson mocked her, she continued to press for the secret. As she pressed, she began to burden him. She appealed to her reproach and their relationship. Her hurt and persistent pressing got to Samson. Once again, one would ask: How could Samson forget how he was vexed to death for the answer of his riddle? How could he forget the cost of that revelation? He had to kill thirty men to fulfil his vow, he had to capture three hundred foxes to avenge his loss, and it caused him to be bound and handed over to the Philistines by the men of Judah after he had avenged the death of the Timnite family. How could he forget? We forget how frail, deceitful and sick the heart of man is.

“...How canst thou say, I love thee, when thine heart is not with me?” (Judg 16:15). Samson’s continued commitment to Delilah is testimony of the deceitfulness and sickness of the human heart. He was vexed to death, but unable to leave. He was able to kill a thousand with a jawbone, and uproot a city gate and bear it away, but unable to muster the strength to walk away from sin though the heart is vexed, and thus unable also to keep his vow to God. That gives the picture of what sway sin can hold over the human heart. Note also that Samson’s commitment to Delilah could not change her heart’s resolve to betray him. Time passed, but she did not relent and as Proverb 19:13 states: *“A foolish son is the calamity of his father: and the contentions of a wife are a continual dropping.”* The continual dropping vexed Samson and his foolishness had separated him from God. Just as Samson fell because he did not separate, and indeed could not separate himself from Delilah, even so must the Christian who cannot separate himself from sin. He could not make the choice to separate from sin, so sin led him away from his Lord. The foolishness that had until now vexed his heart would soon begin to vex his body too, bound by fetters and set to *“grind in the prison house”* (Judg 16:21). The saddest statement though is that through all this Samson *“wist not that the LORD was departed from him”* (Judg 16:20).

THOUGHT: (Read Proverbs 7:26.)

PRAYER: Father, may my heart be fixed on Thee alone.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24

JUDGES 16:23-31

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-7:1

“...and my name continually
every day is blasphemed.”

SAMSON (XVI)

The previous section of Samson's life reveals to us two effects of sin when it is entertained in one's life. First, sin separates the sinner from God, and Samson knew not that the LORD had departed from him. Second, sin not only vexes the soul, but also vexes and troubles the sinner's body, and Samson the deliverer of the Israelites was himself bound in a prison house and forced to do hard labour. This final section of Samson's life presents to us two other effects of sin when it is entertained in one's life. It also illustrates and affirms the truth of Scripture as presented by James that *“when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death”* (James 1:15).

“...for they said, Our god hath delivered into our hands our enemy...” (Judg 16:24). This blasphemous statement was occasioned by the careless life of Samson. Thus, we see here the first effect of sin when it is entertained in life is that our sin and foolishness dishonour God's name. Although sin keeps us from God's work and purpose, God's work will never lack God's supply as God is not limited by means. But how true in every age do the words of Paul in Romans 2:23-24 ring: *“Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you.”* The Philistines not only praised their gods, but called for Samson to make sport in praise of their idols.

“And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines...” (Judg 16:30). The final effect of sin when entertained in life is death. Samson's final act seems to be his most selfless act, and his most fruitful one. Still, as James says, sin brings death. Paul asserted the same principle to the Corinthians when he addressed their abuse of the Lord's table. He said, *“for this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep”* (1 Cor 11:30). Sin is not to be entertained or given room in the life of the child of God. Samson was prone to the lust of the eyes, and it was only at the end, when he was physically blind, that he seemed to realise his call, and he gave his all.

THOUGHT: (Read Matthew 5:29.)

PRAYER: Father, help me to continually trust and obey Thee.

APPENDICES

The final five chapters (17-21) of the book of Judges do not highlight the work of any judge or man that God used, but rather, give a general view and understanding of life during the times of the judges. We are going to consider them as appendices before looking at the life of Samuel the last judge. These appendices highlight for us the reality of a failed nation and system. Some of the issues were raised in the introductory parts as we considered the times of the judges. The first of the two appendices (Judges 17-18) presents to us the failure in the domestic system. What ought to be remembered and taken into account is that the religion of Israel was one that permeated every aspect of their lives, and so the failure of the domestic system was also a failure of the religious life (since religion and the fear of the LORD was to be taught at home).

“...And his mother said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my son” (Judg 17:2). This family is introduced to us in the middle of an ongoing crisis in which a large amount of money had been stolen. The story begins with the identification of the thief, Micah, who confessed to stealing from his own mother. The confession was most likely predicated on the curse that the mother had cast upon the loss of the money. But the events that followed the confession and restoration of the amount reveal that the family was devoid of any spiritual understanding. First, the mother seemed to seek to reverse the curse by pronouncing a blessing on her son and making a graven image. Second, the mother said, “*I had wholly dedicated the silver unto the LORD*” (Judg 17:3), and yet when the silver was restored, only 200 out of a total of 1,100 were used for the graven and molten images. The lack of the fear of God is clear in this domestic picture. Stealing, making of graven images and the taking of the name of the LORD in vain are expressly forbidden by the LORD. The history of the nation and the golden calf incident could not have been so soon forgotten and, as such, the actions and events clearly evidence the ignorance of this family as to the ways of the LORD.

THOUGHT: Man’s problems stem from rejection of Wisdom.

PRAYER: Father, grant me wisdom and understanding that I may live godlily.

LORD'S DAY, FEBRUARY 26
JUDGES 17:7-13
NUMBERS 8:5-22

“...the priests the Levites
shall teach you:
as I commanded them...”

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (I)

The story of Micah presents to us that the failure of the domestic system is rooted in the failure of religious instruction and guidance. The people groped in darkness mainly because those who were supposed to shine the light of God's Word had hidden it under a bushel. Micah, the man who stole from his mother, the one who only restored what he had stolen due to pressure from superstition, was the one who now had a “*house of gods*” and “*made an ephod, and teraphim,*” and consecrated “*one of his sons, who became his priest.*” The failure of religious instruction and guidance is presented to us in the introduction of the Levite who passed by and became a priest for hire.

“...I am a Levite of Bethlehemjudah, and I go to sojourn where I may find a place” (Judg 17:9). The family's religious arrangement sufficed the family of Micah until a visitor passed by. Upon interaction with the man, Micah realised he was a true Levite who appeared displaced. Why the Levite was displaced is not told to us, but here is presented to us a man who had been forced by circumstances to forsake his call and seek out a living for himself. Micah invited him to stay and minister to his family with a promise of provision for basic needs (food, clothing and housing) and some stipend.

“...Dwell with me, and be unto me a father and a priest...and the young man was unto him as one of his sons” (Judg 17:10-11). The offer given by Micah and the reality that came to be did not correspond. The failure of the religious system is not only revealed in the idolatry of Micah's family and the seeking out a living of the Levite, but also in the changed roles. Though he was asked by Micah to be “*unto me a father,*” he became “*as one of his sons.*” Micah's superstitious heart was appeased and the Levite's physical needs were fulfilled and both were content with it. None sought to know or do God's will. All just sought to quieten the discontent within. That is what religion is turning into today: the silencing and dulling of the conscience through the scratching of itching ears and the satisfying of fleshly desires.

THOUGHT: Doctrine fuels faithfulness and sustains a church.

PRAYER: Father, grant to our preachers faithful and wise hearts.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 27

JUDGES 18:1-6
2 KINGS 22:1-12

“...enquire of the LORD for me,
and for the people...”

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (II)

The domestic problem and failure were a reflection of the national condition. This is presented to us here in Judges 18. The nation is made up of tribes, and the tribes made up of families. The nation and tribes were only as faithful and strong as the families were strong and faithful. In Judges 17, we are given the story of Micah's family. In Judges 18, we have the story of the tribe of Dan. Interestingly, both stories involve the same Levite–Priest for hire. The tribe of Dan had trouble settling into their allotted inheritance. They faced pressure from the Philistines and the Amorites. In their desperation, they looked for alternatives and this brought a group of five spies to the homestead of Micah.

“When they were by the house of Micah, they knew the voice of the young man the Levite...” (Judg 18:3). Just as Peter, when warming himself by the fire, was identified by his speech, and Jephthah was able to identify the Ephraimites by one word, so Micah's priest was identified by his voice. The five spies turned in and struck a conversation with the young man. The young man narrated to them how he ended up in the house and although he told them, *“I am his priest,”* the spies sought his guidance and requested for his prayers for their mission. With this encounter, the stage is set for a family practice to become a tribal practice. The leaven that had leavened Micah's house would soon encompass the tribe of Dan for they too were discontent.

“...Go in peace: before the LORD is your way wherein ye go” (Judg 18:6). The shrine of idolatry was ready with a false hope that would hasten the spies in their mission to disobedience. Joshua and the elders erred in their judgment after taking the “evidence” provided by the Gibeonites and not asking counsel of the LORD. Likewise does everyone else err who does not seek the LORD's will on any matter no matter how good their intent may be. The spies went, liked what they saw, and brought a “good report” to the tribe, which led to their relocation.

THOUGHT: “...burdens are lifted at Calvary.”

PRAYER: Hear and save me in the day of trouble, O Lord.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

JUDGES 18:11-26

JOHN 2:12-17

*“Love not the world, neither
the things that are in the world...”*

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (III)

With the report of the spies, a report that was fuelled by the false hope given by Micah's priest and presented by a false assurance of spies who saw as man sees and not as God sees, six hundred Danite warriors responded to the challenge and set forth out of their allotted inheritance to seek out this new “land of promise.” Guided by the five spies, they made their way North and stopped by the house of Micah in Mount Ephraim.

“...Do ye know 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” (Judg 18:14). This invitation was for careful consideration and decision: “*consider what ye have to do.*” But alas, they made the wrong choice and decision. They considered that the prosperity of the spies was somehow by virtue of the Levite's blessing and intervention. In this, they considered wrongly. They thought that their prosperity would depend on the same priest and idols. In this, they thought wrongly. They then decided to raid Micah's temple and entice his priest.

“...is it better for thee to be a priest unto the house of one man, or that thou be a priest unto a tribe and a family in Israel?” (Judg 18:19). The picture of a worldly ministry, as Paul pointed out to the Philippians, consists of men who “*seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's*” (Phil 2:21). He then went on to warn against such, pointing out that their “*end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things*” (Phil 3:19). Micah's Levite, seeing better prospects and more respect, had a change of heart and mind. Interestingly, he failed to be a father to Micah and his house, and as the tribe of Dan left, “*went in the midst of the people.*” How true the counsel of Scripture given by Paul concerning bishops is: “*If a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?*” (1 Tim 3:5). One cannot take up the role of leading the flock to God whose eyes are focused on his temporal good and worldly progress.

THOUGHT: Successful ministry bases its focus on God and His Word.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 123:1-2.)

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1

JUDGES 18:27-31

PSALM 78:55-64

“...they tempted and provoked
the most high God...”

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (IV)

Judges 18:27-31 presents the capture of Laish by the Danite forces. The inhabitants of the city that dwelt secure by themselves and separate from other cities were suddenly smitten by the edge of the sword. A new city rose in its place. The name of the city was Dan. This new city would in the future become one of the nation's idolatrous centres during the divided kingdom period.

“And the children of Dan set up the graven image...” (Judg 18:30). Micah had lost his gods. But gods that can be moved, stolen and removed from their devotees are no gods. Those who steal them and set them up for themselves are no different from those from whom they stole. In this, the Danites showed that like family like tribe, and like tribe, like nation. True religion is not about the outward forms and organisations; for in a day Micah had lost everything, and in a day, as the Danites settled in their new land, they set up everything.

“...all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh” (Judg 18:31). At the first conquest led by Joshua, the place of worship was set up and established at Shiloh (Josh 18:1), and when the two-and-a-half tribes had discharged their commitment to their brethren, Joshua reminded them of their spiritual responsibilities before they departed to go across Jordan. When they erected an altar across Jordan, the tribes of Israel gathered at Shiloh ready to go to war against them (Josh 22:10-12). Now, the Danites had set up a new centre of worship, yet the Tabernacle was still in Shiloh. How had the godly nation backslidden? Had they forgotten their history? Did not this generation receive the heritage of piety? The tribe of Dan kept its idolatrous religion until the Philistines took the ark captive and Shiloh was destroyed during Eli's priesthood. The degradation of true religion, though gradual, is severe in its consequence. None is immune from its effect, priest or Levite, noble or commoner, and as such, all must watch and pray, all must remain steadfast in the faith. Sin always leads to destruction as Habakkuk points out in Habakkuk 2:9-20.

THOUGHT: Will our sons defend the faith?

PRAYER: Silence my heart in your presence, Father. Keep me faithful.

THURSDAY, MARCH 2

JUDGES 19:1-9

LEVITICUS 21:6-15

*“They shall be holy
unto their God...”*

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (V)

The second of the two appendices presents to us the failure of the national systems (Judg 19-21). It was a failure that almost wiped out one tribe from among the tribes of Israel. Just like in the first appendix, the account begins in a domestic setting, but unlike the first appendix, the setting here is in the domestic life of a Levite; a Levite who lived with a woman as if she was his wife but without the same status of a wife. Polygamy, divorce and concubinage are not part of the original plan for marriage. Thus, this second appendix begins by introducing us to a “hard-hearted” servant of God.

“And his concubine played the whore against him...” (Judg 19:2). The concubine did not have the official family status and tie as a wife and, as such, was not bound to be devoted or faithful to her man. The fact that she was a concubine also presumed that the Levite was a married man. Yet, this man still went after his concubine and sought to persuade her to come back to him. He wanted to continue their sinful lifestyle, even after she had compounded that by playing the harlot. The Bible does present concubinage as a common and prevalent practice, but nowhere does the Bible approve or recommend it. God in His sovereignty and grace made provisions in which women (and children) in this kind of relationship are not victims of vile, violent or unjust treatment by men, but that does not mean that such relationships are recommended or approved of.

“...he rose up to depart” (Judg 19:5, 7, 9). The trip to bring his concubine home took the Levite to the home of his concubine’s father where he spent five days. The Levite could not resist his concubine and went after her, even to her father’s home. While there, he was repeatedly detained and his stay extended to five days. His “father-in-law” detained him with *“Comfort thine heart”* (Judg 19:5, 8) and *“let thine heart be merry”* (Judg 19:6) for the five days. The man who served God was detained by food and drink when in pursuit of his concubine. What a sad testimony indeed.

THOUGHT: The corrupting influence of sin leads to a downward spiral.

PRAYER: (Consider Ezekiel 18:26-27 and seek God’s face in prayer.)

FRIDAY, MARCH 3

JUDGES 19:10-21

DEUTERONOMY 12:10-19

“...forsake not the Levite
as long as thou livest...”

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (VI)

The Levite, his concubine and their servant set out for home at a late hour. He heeded the invitation of his concubine's father to eat and drink, but did not consider the lateness of time as “*the day draweth toward evening*” (Judg 19:9). They set off on a day's journey that they could not complete by the end of the day. He was adamant to leave even though it was late.

“...the servant said...let us turn in into this city of the Jebusites, and lodge in it” (Judg 19:11). The Levite's attention was brought to the lateness of the hour again by his servant. The servant's concern of the approach of night comes with a suggestion to seek refuge in the city of the Jebusites. Just as his concubine's father's suggestion was refused, the servant's suggestion too was refused. The Levite's basis was that it was not a city of Israel and thus they pressed on to Gibeah where they sat down in the streets within the city for the night. No hospitality seemed forthcoming from the inhabitants of the city until an old man entered the city at even.

“...I am now going to the house of the LORD; and there is no man that receiveth me to house” (Judg 19:18). The Levite's answer to the old man was very telling. In his answer, he not only told where he was from, and where he was going, but also that he was a Levite “*going to the house of the LORD.*” But in all this he was careful to avoid the reason that took him to Bethlehemjudah. This coupled with his last phrase was probably aimed at securing a welcome and inviting hospitality. In this, he both recognised and used the respectability of the Levitical office because they were in need of lodging, yet his life's conduct did not promote the value and dignity of the Levitical office. When convenient for him, based on his assessment of the circumstances he found himself in, he talked about going to the house of the LORD in order to present a false sense of holiness, which he ought to have cultivated in his life. Yet this high call and office did not seem to be considered in his daily life. Here is hypocrisy, instead of holiness.

THOUGHT: Hypocrisy projects a picture that is not consistent with one's life.

PRAYER: “I would be true, for there are those who trust me.”

SATURDAY, MARCH 4

JUDGES 19:22-30

GENESIS 19:1-13

“...I pray you, brethren,
do not so wickedly.”

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (VII)

The Levite secured a welcome in the house of the old man, but not safety. The joy of finding shelter and hospitality was soon interrupted by a visit from sons of Belial. He had been noticed, but not welcomed, and when night fell, those who noticed him came knocking in what seems to be a re-enactment of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“...the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning...” (Judg 19:25).

Just as Lot had tried to intervene on behalf of his guests, this old man tried to intervene for this “man of God” that had visited and lodged with him. He probably thought it a lesser sin to give his daughter and the concubine to be defiled by the men of the city than to give the Levite to be sodomised. When the men of the city would not hearken to him, the Levite, hearing the conversation and the attempts of his host to secure his dignity, took matters into his own hands and handed over his concubine to the men.

“And her lord rose up in the morning... And he said unto her, Up, and let us be going...” (Judg 19:27-28). The morning saw the Levite prepared to depart and he uncaringly spoke to her words that did not seem to take into account the events of the night before. How could he sleep through the night? How could he rise up, prepare to leave and speak to her in such a curt and emotionless manner when he saw her body lying on the pavement? Without any response from her, how could he pick her up and continue on his journey? What had the Levitical office degenerated to as presented by the character of this man?

“...he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her...” (Judg 19:29). His plea for justice on behalf of his concubine was equally shocking. Saul would later use a similar method to rally the people to his side, but he used oxen (1 Sam 11:1-8). If this was the only recourse for him to get help, how hardened were the hearts of the Israelites?

THOUGHT: Constant sin dulls the conscience, and the dread of evil is lost.

PRAYER: “I am counting all but dross; I shall full salvation find.”

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (VIII)

The Levite's message had the whole nation in outrage and all Israel went out from Dan in the North to Beersheba in the South. The whole nation was gathered together and when assembled they sought to know how the wickedness occurred. The Levite was given audience to explain what had happened.

“...Tell us, how was this wickedness?” (Judg 20:3). The Levite gave his account of the events beginning at his arrival at Gibeah but distorted the night's events at the old man's house. That the men sought to slay him was not in the account of Judges chapter 19, and how the men got his concubine was also omitted from the Levite's account. Probably considering what had happened to his concubine, he concluded that he would have met the same fate had they had their way with him. Indeed, they did force his concubine and that caused her death. But he made no mention of the old man, or of his thrusting out his concubine to them.

It is sad that at this national gathering, *“the children of Benjamin heard that the children of Israel were gone to Mizpeh.”* Although twelve pieces were sent throughout the land, the children of Benjamin did not respond to the call. They did not seek to hear what had happened though the meeting was convened near them. The divided house was about to have a civil war.

“...give here your advice and counsel” (Judg 20:7). The Levite, having concluded his account of what had happened, called for the children of Israel to give their judgment and counsel. He sought that they give *“here”* their advice and counsel, i.e. a speedy judgment for folly that had been committed against Israel. And as he sought immediate decision, all the people with the effects and emotions brought about by the message they received and the account they had just heard arrived at one conclusion: Gibeah must be punished. The consensus was that they must act, and the unanimous decision was for all to take part, led by those selected by lot. The crowd was roused. Justice would soon be clouded and wild vengeance would ensue.

THOUGHT: Vengeance subverts justice when exercised by man.

PRAYER: Vengeance belongs to Thee, Father. May I trust in Thee.

MONDAY, MARCH 6

JUDGES 20:12-14

ISAIAH 5:18-21

*“Woe unto them that draw
iniquity with cords of vanity...”*

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (IX)

How the tribe of Benjamin handled the situation also played a part in its escalation. In the previous section, we saw that they did not attend nor even seek to know what had happened as Israel was being given an account of the events. So Israel decided in their absence and before venturing out to execute the judgment they had unanimously agreed on. They had arrived at the conclusion only at the word of one witness which was against God’s requirement of more than one witness for any matter to be established. They sent word throughout Benjamin seeking that the perpetrators be handed over to them.

“...What wickedness is this that is done among you?” (Judg 20:12). The men of Benjamin had an opportunity to exonerate themselves so that the innocent would not die with the guilty, but they had already chosen their side. They had earlier sided with the men of Gibeah in their not heeding or responding to the call. They now sided with the men of Gibeah in not hearkening *“to the voice of their brethren the children of Israel.”* Their love for their “brethren” blinded them to what was right and just.

“But the children of Benjamin gathered themselves together out of the cities...” (Judg 20:14). The Bible is clear about associating or identifying with sin and evil doers in their evil. Paul tells the Ephesians, *“have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness”* (Eph 5:11). But the Benjamites gathered together to fight for the evil, and they entered into a battle they could not and would not win.

What can we learn here? The frailty of the human mind, and the need to not only trust but adhere to the provisions God has given concerning how to deal with sin. Israel had a bloody civil war because God’s provisions and commands were ignored. The tribes of Israel proceeded, blinded by rage. The Benjamites went forth, blinded by love. The outcome would be disastrous, and eyes would be opened too late.

THOUGHT: Love exposes and removes sin. Love does not excuse or shield sin.

PRAYER: Father, may I be quick to confess my sins and to repent.

TUESDAY, MARCH 7

JUDGES 20:15-21

JOSHUA 7:1-5

“...the hearts of the people melted,
and became as water.”

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (X)

With the Benjamites and the men of Israel resolved in their positions and set in array for battle, war was imminent. The casualties were going to be high and all this would result from actions and choices taken by individuals. This should show us that no one can measure the full extent of the consequences of their actions whether it is for good, or whether it is for evil. May God always help us to seek His will and consider His Word in all choices we make.

“And the children of Israel arose, and went up to the house of God, and asked counsel of God...” (Judg 20:18). Whenever sin is to be addressed, there will be sympathisers who take the side of the sinners in the community. That happens even in the process of church discipline. How then can we excise the leaven that gradually leavens the whole lump? We must approach it spiritually, biblically and wisely. The men of Israel should have consulted the LORD before making their first choice, though they did right to subsequently seek counsel of God. They were already resolved and their question was not as in Judges 20:28: “*Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease?*” This question left room for God’s will and counsel, and recognised that though they sought to address sin and folly in the land, they were dealing with their brother. In this instance, however, the question was one of seeking divine approval for decisions already made rather than seeking counsel and direction on what to do: “*Which of us shall go up first to the battle against the children of Benjamin?*” (Judg 20:18). Consider the battles in the book of Judges which occurred in the same period and context: Gideon assembling thirty-two thousand men and God reducing them to three hundred; Barak assembling ten thousand men to face Jabin and his chariots; Jephthah not having the assistance of the men of Ephraim. Yet in all these battles, God gave the victory. It is not enough to be on the side of the right. We must stand on the side of the right, submitted and obedient to God and His will as revealed in His Word. God must be sovereign, and that means He must have a say in all our matters, and we must be driven by His Word and His glory alone as we do His will.

THOUGHT: God does not act in response to man, He is sovereign.

PRAYER: Father, may I truly submit my life to Thee.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 8

JUDGES 20:22-28

JOSHUA 7:6-26

“Up, sanctify the people...”

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (XI)

The first outing was disastrous for the men of Israel, but they encouraged themselves and came back again at the Benjamites. Determined to go up again, they consulted the LORD with a similar question, though this time it was not *“Which of us shall go up first?”* but rather *“Shall I go up again to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother?”* (Judg 20:23). The men of Israel went against the Benjamites again. There was no thought of changing tactics and after the second defeat they retreated to the *“house of God,”* fasted, and offered sacrifices before the LORD (Judg 20:26). The consequences of sin when entertained is disastrous to the whole body, not just a part. Proverbs 14:34 affirms, *“sin is a reproach to any people.”* What started between individuals was now bearing a great cost to the whole nation, and would bear a greater cost on the tribe of Benjamin which chose to defend evil.

“...And the LORD said, Go up; for to morrow I will deliver them into thine hand” (Judg 20:28). The defeats led them to sober up. The shame and sorrow of defeat humbled them and they sat before the LORD, and offered burnt offerings (which are for atonement, Lev 1:4) and peace offerings before seeking counsel of God. The exercise of discipline cannot be pursued with a spirit of pride or anger, but with a spirit of humility and submission to God. There will be measures that need to be taken and steps followed to ensure the sin is removed. But discipline is not just for the removal of sin that reproaches the people, it is also for the restoration of the offending “brother.” In the first two battles, they fought as if Benjamin was the sinner, and they the righteous administrators of God’s justice. This time, they began with self-examination, and humble prayer before God’s presence. Paul to the Galatians lays the responsibility of restoration upon *“ye which are spiritual”* (Gal 6:1). Just like under Joshua, the LORD’s battles are spiritual and are to be fought only after sin within the camp has been dealt with. Even under Samuel, the nation spent a day in God’s presence before fighting the Philistines (1 Sam 7:6). It is not enough that we deal with the sins of others; we must with equal zeal and determination deal with ours too.

THOUGHT: Sin troubles the whole body; we must strive for purity.

PRAYER: Father, help me to nip my sin in its bud.

THURSDAY, MARCH 9

JUDGES 20:29-48

JOSHUA 8:3-29

“...it shall not be well with the wicked,
neither shall he prolong his days...”

THE MEN WHO FAILED GOD (XII)

In the accomplishing of the will of God and discipline of the erring brother, there also has to be soberness in the fulfilling of our duties and responsibilities. The men of Israel having received assurance of victory from the LORD, still needed to strategise on how they would deal with Benjamin. They did change their approach this third time round, just as Joshua did with Ai after dealing with Achan's sin.

“And the children of Benjamin said, They are smitten down before us, as at the first...” (Judg 20:32). The deceitfulness of sin and its hardening and dulling influence on the mind was seen in the Benjamites. The two battles should not have had this effect on them, but rather should have opened their eyes to the resolve of the ten tribes on this issue. Despite losing the first two encounters, the men of Israel were coming back. The cost of the first two battles also should not have encouraged or emboldened the Benjamites for the third battle. Was the protection of men who had done evil worth the lives that were lost in the first two battles? But sin blinding them made them proud and emboldened them to boldly run to their own demise and ruin.

“...the men of Benjamin were amazed: for they saw that evil was come upon them” (Judg 20:41). The eyes of the Benjamites opened too late to remedy anything, but just in time to see what their rebellion brought them. This happens to everyone who stubbornly persists in sin and rejects correction. Their eyes began to open when no help was available and they were left at the mercy of their brothers who at this point were to them their enemies at war. They considered flight, but there was nowhere to flee to. Their solidarity in defence of error was broken and it was now everyone for himself. Though they had some semblance of success in their cause, the truth is that there was no profit in the pursuit of sin and all now shared in the wages of sin. The triumph of sin is temporary; its judgment and defeat are sure.

THOUGHT: (Read Ecclesiastes 8:11.)

PRAYER: Father, grant us grace not to rejoice in sin's fleeting pleasures, for its bitter cup surely follows.

FRIDAY, MARCH 10

JUDGES 21

2 CORINTHIANS 2:1-11

“...Sufficient to such a man
is this punishment...”

THE BITTER TASTE SIN LEAVES BEHIND

The conclusion of this second appendix gives in some measure a picture of the grief and loss that sin, when entertained, brings to a nation. The consequences of ruling our own lives and not submitting to the rule and law of the LORD are always disastrous, filled with grief and regrets.

“Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpeh...” (Judg 21:1). The first is the grief and regret from decisions made in the flesh and not according to the will of God. Man has no wisdom of his own, man’s heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer 17:9); and, as such, decisions made out of one’s own wisdom or by following one’s own heart will always be tainted by the depravity that pervades us. They decided in the heat of the moment when emotions were running high and thoughts clouded with the gross message they had received. Now, they were filled with grief and regret, and were bound and helpless by their own doing.

“And the children of Israel repented them for Benjamin their brother...” (Judg 21:6). The second is the grief and regret of actions dictated by the flesh and its emotions. When they had the responsibility of administering justice, and had the help of God, they went too far and almost annihilated Benjamin. Spiritual work cannot be done under the dictates of the flesh. They must be done under the guidance of spiritual principles and moderated by the fruit of the Spirit. The men of Israel had left their sword to slay unabated and the fire to burn, and in the blindness of the moment, spared not their brother.

“And the people repented them for Benjamin...” (Judg 21:15). The third is the grief and regret of giving Satan an advantage over them and being ignorant of his devices. The men of Israel realised that there was irreversible damage. They sought for alternative remedies, but those remedies too were not without faults. In their attempts to save Benjamin, they smote the men of Jabeshgilead. All this can be attributed to the self-rule of man. Satan gets an advantage over us when God is not Lord over our hearts!

THOUGHT: Is Christ my Lord? Does His Word hold sway over my life?

PRAYER: “Come in to stay, Come into my heart, Lord Jesus!”

SATURDAY, MARCH 11

1 SAMUEL 1:1-8

DEUTERONOMY 12:17-28

“...*thou must eat them before
the LORD thy God...*”

SERVING GOD THROUGH FAMILY TRIALS

Samuel's life began in the period of the book of Judges. Samuel was Israel's last judge who also served the LORD as priest and as prophet. He had the privilege of anointing the first two kings of Israel. He lived in a period of apostasy and self-will during the times of the judges. He saw this era end and a new era arise in the nation.

“And this man went up out of his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice unto the LORD of hosts in Shiloh...” (1 Sam 1:3). The challenges of the domestic life and the national life during this period were highlighted in the appendices of the book of Judges (Judg 17-21). The first chapters of 1 Samuel will present a similar picture at Shiloh. The picture given of Elkanah's family presents to us the place of personal responsibility and personal choice, especially in times of declension. We have in this picture a family that sought to serve God not only in times of national and religious crisis, but also in the midst of domestic difficulties and challenges. The verse begins with a reference to Elkanah, the head of the house, and his responsibility to worship God at the set times and at the set place. He was committed to the commands and statutes of God about worship despite the domestic conflicts between his two wives.

“...he gave to Peninnah his wife, and to all her sons and her daughters, portions: But unto Hannah he gave a worthy portion...” (1 Sam 1:4-5). The man's duty to provide for and lead his family is clearly presented here. He made sure not only that they did not appear before the LORD empty-handed, but also that everyone attended and actively participated in the worship. Every family has its challenges. Elkanah's family had one that was caused by personal choice (polygamy), and the strife worsen each time they prepared for worship. Elkanah also took responsibility for the family problems, speaking to Hannah to encourage and lift her spirits at the worship in Shiloh. We must live with the consequences of our choices, and continue to worship God through the trials of life we face.

THOUGHT: “Trusting Him whatever befall; trusting Jesus, that is all.”

PRAYER: O Father, behold us at Thy feet, a needy, sinful band.

SEEKING GOD WHEN TROUBLED

The picture given of the family of Elkanah was not one of a perfect family living in harmony. It was a picture of a family with its share of trials and troubles. To many, troubles and heartache would be reason not to pray. Our prayers are subject to our moods with "I am not in the mood to pray" being a common statement. Hannah's sorrow took away her appetite for food, but still drove her to seek God in prayer!

"And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore" (1 Sam 1:10). The provocations of Peninnah about her condition in life troubled her soul. Hannah's course of action amidst the pressures and taunts from her co-wife and the internal turmoil and sorrow of her soul was the wisest any person could make. "Take it to the LORD in prayer." She had no heart for feasting, but certainly had the heart to pray. Her prayer, though made in a public place, was a secret prayer, not spoken with well-ordered words, but from an earnest spirit focused on God. The times that they went to the tabernacle at Shiloh were the times that her adversary mocked and taunted her the most, but she went all the same. It was the place appointed of God to meet with Him, and thus she would bear with the anguish and get her opportunity to appear before the LORD with her petition.

"...I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD" (1 Sam 1:15). The censure of Eli, though unjust to Hannah, tells of the times of the judges. Men would be intoxicated and lack self-control in the house and presence of the LORD. Hannah prayed long and earnestly, and Eli watched and thought she was drunk. Things that drove men to seek solace in wine and strong drink drove Hannah to prayer. In her prayer, she vowed a vow. By faith, she voluntarily promised a special offering of thankfulness for answer to her prayer and willingly bound herself to devote her child to God's honour and service willingly (Eccles 5:4-5). Having committed her petition to God, her burden was lifted, and she then *"went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad" (1 Sam 1:18).*

THOUGHT: "Singing if my way is clear, praying if the path be drear."

PRAYER: Father, may I always keep close to Thee through prayer.

MONDAY, MARCH 13

1 SAMUEL 1:19-28

ECCLESIASTES 5:1-6

*“When thou vowest a vow
unto God, defer not to pay it...”*

THE JOY AND DUTY THAT ATTEND PRAYER

The first chapter of 1 Samuel presents to us a picture of a family that is committed to the worship and service of God despite its challenges. The role of Elkanah, the head of the family, is seen in each scene. Leading the family to worship at Shiloh, intervening to speak to Hannah when she was sorely vexed, and again in this section, supporting and seconding Hannah in her desire to fulfil her vow in consecrating their son Samuel.

“...she bare a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the LORD” (1 Sam 1:20). Hannah, having been true and earnest in her prayers at her time of distress, did not forget the LORD on the day of her visitation. This is clear in her deliberateness after the birth of her son. The name she gave to him reminded her of God’s grace at her time of distress. Considering that she sought leave of her husband to stay behind as the family went to worship, we can assume that Elkanah was consenting to the name given to the child by Hannah. The request she made of her husband at the time of worship was deliberately done with the aim of fulfilling her vow. Many would earnestly seek the Lord when pressed and be dedicated to His house and work only until their need is met and their burden lifted. When the burden is gone, and the need satisfied, they would forget and forsake God, His Word, and His house. To such, Solomon warns that it is better to not vow than to vow and not fulfil it (Eccles 5:4-6).

“And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her...” (1 Sam 1:24). The vow must be fulfilled, and Hannah did so with the joy and cheerful generosity of a grateful servant as well as with the deliberateness and carefulness of a tender and loving mother. Her joy and cheerfulness are seen in the sacrifice they brought which was beyond what the law stipulated. Her tenderness and love are seen in how the child was presented to Eli, the high priest, and in the provisions they brought for him with every visit to the Tabernacle (1 Sam 2:19).

THOUGHT: Where shall we go in time of need, but to the Lord of Heaven?

PRAYER: (Read Psalm 116:12-14.)

TUESDAY, MARCH 14

1 SAMUEL 2:1-10

JAMES 4:1-6

“...God resisteth the proud, but
giveth grace unto the humble.”

THEOLOGY LEARNED FROM PRAYER

God reveals Himself through His Word and through His works. Therefore, we can learn and know God through the prayers He answers as well as those He refuses to answer. John says if we ask according to God's will, He hears and answers. James says we do not receive because we ask amiss out of lust. What do we need to know about God? What theology does Hannah highlight in her song of praise to God for the answer she received from God?

“There is none holy as the LORD...” (1 Sam 2:2). The attributes of the LORD is where Hannah began her song of praise. The catechisms of the Protestant Christian faith, in explaining God, highlight the attributes of God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism to the question “What is God?” states, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.” Hannah, in praise to God, sings of His goodness (1 Sam 2:1), holiness (1 Sam 2:2), wisdom (1 Sam 2:3), power (1 Sam 2:4), and justice (1 Sam 2:5).

“The LORD killeth, and maketh alive...” (1 Sam 2:6). The providence and works of the LORD form the second part of Hannah's song of praise. The catechisms of the Protestant Christian in addition to the attributes of God also present the will and sovereignty of God. Concerning providence, the Shorter Catechism explains, “God's works of providence are, His most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions.” Hannah in her praise song also outlined God's governance and ordering of the lives of all His creatures. She pointed out His providential government, attributing life and death to God (1 Sam 2:6), poverty and riches to God (1 Sam 2:7), and status in life to God (1 Sam 2:8). She then pointed out God's preserving grace and mercy towards His saints (1 Sam 2:9-10).

Indeed, the knowledge of God's nature and work is the greatest source of joy and comfort to all of God's children amidst life's circumstances. As we pray, we learn; as we learn, we have joy and comfort in God.

THOUGHT: (Read Psalm 86:8-10.)

PRAYER: Help me to trust Thy goodness in all things, O Father.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15

1 SAMUEL 2:11-26

PHILIPPIANS 2:13-18

*“Do all things without
murmurings and disputings.”*

GROWTH IN GRACE AMIDST SIN AND DEPRAVITY

Judges 17 to 21 presents to us the depths of the depravity of the nation, and the accounts revolved around the lives of the Levites. The depravity of the priesthood is presented to us here in the picture of the house of Eli. But in the midst of the account of the depravity of the priesthood, there is a record of the growth in grace of the last judge of Israel.

“But Samuel ministered before the LORD...” (1 Sam 2:18). In an environment of defiance, blatant rebellion, and disobedience of the priests (the sons of Eli), Samuel learned obedience to the LORD. 1 Samuel 2:12-17 presents the wickedness of Eli’s sons, showing that grace is not inherited. We also see the depth of depravity and sin in the house of God’s anointed priests. But it is in the same house that God’s chosen instrument was nurtured, teaching us also that the power and grace of God are always sufficient for His elect no matter the circumstances. Darkness will never engulf the light, but rather light shines in the midst of darkness. Where priests despised the ordinances of God, a child honoured the Word of God. What a contrast!

“And the child Samuel grew on...” (1 Sam 2:26). When the men of God would not heed instruction or warning, when they cared not for their high calling and privilege and wronged both God and man, the child Samuel grew in favour both with God and man. The sons of Eli did not heed the warnings of their father, and the judgment they were warned against would soon come to pass, just as God’s blessings upon Elkanah and Hannah came to pass. The declension that was brought on by the deeds of the sons of Eli was great and seemed irreversible, but the grace and hope that were evident in the life of the little child growing in the Tabernacle surely was a bright light in the midst of such great darkness. The evil of the priests went on unabated, but it did not stain nor defile the young mind that was learning the ways of God in the same environment. Surely the LORD knows how to keep and protect His chosen saints and keep them from the depravity that pervades.

THOUGHT: Christian testimony is like light needed in darkness.

PRAYER: Father, when evil darkens my world, give me the light of Thy grace.

THURSDAY, MARCH 16

1 SAMUEL 2:27-36

EPHESIANS 5:1-13

*“Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice
and at mine offering...”*

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ABUSED GRACE

In the previous section, we saw the darkness in the high priest's house in the form of the rebellion of Eli's sons. And we saw the light of grace in the child Samuel's growth. In the midst of the account is given the response of Eli himself. He spoke against the rebellion, but did not act against it. In today's section, we see God moving to act against the sin in Eli's house.

“And there came a man of God unto Eli...” (1 Sam 2:27). The message that the man of God brought to Eli concerned the privilege and the duty of the service of the house of God. The message began with a reminder of the grace and kindness extended to the house of Aaron in calling them to minister to God. There was no reason for the greed of the sons of Eli, for God in His call to them had made provisions for their care and their wellbeing in that He had given *“unto the house of thy father all the offerings made by fire of the children of Israel”* (1 Sam 2:28). The LORD then asked for the reason for the degeneration of the priests in their performance of their high calling, and with the question comes the charge that Eli had preferred his sons above the LORD. They were given a great privilege to partake of what was brought for the LORD, but instead they stole from the LORD. Contentment with our portion is most necessary in serving God.

“...them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Sam 2:30). The message concludes with judgment on the rebellious house and saving grace on the people of God. God's purposes are firm, but they are founded on obedience and allegiance to God. When there is departure from God, we deprive and disqualify ourselves from the purposes and designs of God. God's purpose for the priesthood was withdrawn from Eli and his house, but the purposes and design for Israel would still be sustained and established forever. Those who degrade God's call and ordinances are the ones who will end up degraded and destroyed; God's purposes will never be defeated.

THOUGHT: When we twist God's Word, we twist to our own doom.

PRAYER: Forgive me, Father, for my failings. Strengthen me for Thy service.

FRIDAY, MARCH 17

1 SAMUEL 3

DEUTERONOMY 18:9-22

*“And the child Samuel
ministered unto the LORD...”*

THE MAKING OF A PROPHET

The call of Samuel is introduced by a dark setting. It is a dark setting not because he was called by the LORD when Eli the high priest “*was laid down in his place*” or that “*his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see*” (1 Sam 3:2). It is not because the call took place at night when “*the lamp of God went out in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was,*” or that “*Samuel was laid down to sleep*” (1 Sam 3:3). The setting is a dark one because at that time “*the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision.*”

“...the LORD called Samuel...” (1 Sam 3:4). The high priests (who were God’s representatives) and the Levites (who were God’s heritage) had forsaken the LORD and His revealed will. Those who have proven unfaithful in the Word given and have disregarded what God has plainly said will wait in vain for any revelation or communication from the LORD. The LORD will never lack instruments for His use. When those who had custody of the Law of God forsook it in pursuit of their selfish lusts, God chose a young boy who faithfully attended to the high priest: a boy who had not followed the bad example of the priests among whom he lived. Though “*Samuel did not yet know the LORD, neither was the word of the LORD yet revealed unto him*” (1 Sam 3:7). Samuel knew Eli to whom he attended, and dutifully time after time went to him when called. And when instructed on how to respond, he faithfully said as he had been taught by Eli when the Lord called again.

“And the LORD said to Samuel...” (1 Sam 3:11). The message given to the young Samuel was for Eli his teacher and guardian at the temple. It was not a new message, as it confirmed what the man of God had said to Eli earlier. What a burden on the young shoulders, what a test for the one who would be God’s mouthpiece! And yet, he faithfully attended to God’s Word before Eli. How did he sleep after hearing such a message? How did he relay the message to Eli telling “*every whit, and hid nothing from him*” (1 Sam 3:18)? God had made a man who would unflinchingly serve Him.

THOUGHT: (Read Galatians 1:10.)

PRAYER: Help me, Father, to be fearlessly faithful and obedient to Thee.

SATURDAY, MARCH 18

1 SAMUEL 4:1-9

JEREMIAH 26:1-6

*“Then will I make this house
like Shiloh...”*

THE PROVIDENTIAL CHASTENING HAND OF GOD (I)

Samuel was recognised in all Israel as God’s representative. He was the man of God and God would speak through him. 1 Samuel 4 thus presents to us the verity of the Word and the testimony of the LORD. What the LORD says will surely come to pass, it shall not fail. With this in mind, chapter 4 then is also a witness to the self-wilfulness of the people because though they all knew that Samuel was the man of God, there is no mention of his name in the whole chapter after verse 1. They did not seek him or consult him, or ask for the will or word of God at his mouth in their battle with the Philistines. They did not care for the LORD, but still wanted His care and protection as they fought the Philistines.

“...Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines?...” (1 Sam 4:3). Theirs was a question that should have led to self-examination, prayer and fasting, like when the Israelites were defeated at Ai. It would have led them to know their fault, their straying and their forsaking of the LORD. But did it have such an effect? No! Instead, their depravity and wilfulness took over, together with their idolatrous superstition. Proverbs 19:3: *“The foolishness of man perverteth his way: and his heart fretteth against the LORD.”* They thought they could force God’s hand by bringing the Ark of the Covenant into their camp.

“...and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God” (1 Sam 4:4). The children of Israel needed chastening, and the house of Eli had been appointed for punishment. To accomplish this, God used the Philistines. The Israelite camp in their conceit shouted with joy at the ark’s arrival, and the Philistines trembled at the shout of triumph that came from the Israelite camp. But was the LORD in the camp of the Israelites? Was the LORD with Hophni and Phinehas who had repeatedly and deliberately scorned and despised the offerings, ordinances and commandments of God? Would the LORD not deal with them as they had dealt with Him? The LORD will recompense them according to their deeds of unrighteousness against Him!

THOUGHT: (Read Psalm 18:25-26.)

PRAYER: Father, help me to live right with Thee and to joyfully submit to Thy Word.

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 19

1 SAMUEL 4:10-22

JEREMIAH 26:16-24

"And the ark of God was taken."

THE PROVIDENTIAL CHASTENING HAND OF GOD (II)

The providence of God works for the glory of God and for good to them that love God. Even when the individual events seem negative, the end is still always the glory of God. The Philistines did not believe they could win for they had heard of the mighty power of the LORD, but even in their fear, they stirred up one another and provoked one another to fight manfully. Those who were shouting for joy with the shout of triumph were soundly defeated, while those who were terrified at the prospect of facing the God of the Israelites emerged victorious.

"And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten..." (1 Sam 4:10). The strength of Israel was their God, but, with their sin and rebellion, they had turned against their God. They seemed to fight for the right cause because during the times of the judges the Philistines oppressed Israel, and Israel would continue to fight even to the time of Saul (1 Sam 13:19-20). But they still lost to the Philistines. They also had confidence of victory and of the very presence of God with them in the camp upon the arrival of the ark. But they still lost to the Philistines. They had not dealt with sin. They entertained and accepted it. Their victory did not depend on their confidence, or on the rightfulness of their cause. Their victory was bound to their spirituality and their relationship to God.

"...The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken" (1 Sam 4:22). They had the only true and living God, but they knew Him not. Their conception of God was not according to the Word and revelation of God, but after their own unspiritual and depraved hearts. We are not told how the ark left Shiloh or of Eli's involvement in it, but we are told his response when news of the capture of the ark came to Shiloh. It was news of calamity after calamity: Israel had fled before her enemy, there had been a great slaughter, Hophni and Phinehas are dead, and finally, the ark of God was taken. Eli fell back and died. His daughter-in-law gave birth prematurely. The greatest calamity to them was that the ark of God was taken! May we learn not to do anything that would bring upon us such an end.

THOUGHT: (Read Isaiah 59:1-2.)

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 51:9-12.)

MONDAY, MARCH 20

1 SAMUEL 5:1-12

PSALM 76

*“In Judah is God known:
his name is great in Israel.”*

THE PROVIDENTIAL CHASTENING HAND OF GOD (III)

The Israelites had acted presumptuously in taking the ark from Shiloh to the battlefield. The ark was taken, and the battle lost. 1 Samuel 5 and 6 have no mention of Samuel. We do not know what connection he had with all these events or where he was, but we do know, from the summary given after he passed God’s message to Eli, that *“the LORD revealed himself to Samuel...by the word of the LORD”* (1 Sam 3:21). 1 Samuel 4 told of the capture of the ark, and chapters 5 and 6 tell of the return of the ark.

“When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon” (1 Sam 5:2). We have been looking at “Men God Used” and this chapter reveals to us the sovereignty and omnipotence of God. God chooses to use men out of His own sovereign will and wisdom. He empowers them and uses them by His grace, but He is not bound by them or to them. What if there is no one to be used? Chapter 5 answers this question. The Philistines probably attributed their victory to Dagon and placed the ark in subordination to Dagon in the house of Dagon. But their god, whom they thought had wrought on their behalf a great victory, was found fallen and mutilated in the morning. It was their duty to raise up their god and put him back in his place. Their source of strength needed them in order to return to his place. His hands were cut off (no strength), and his head too (no wisdom). They collected the stump and restored it to his place.

“But the hand of the LORD was heavy upon them...” (1 Sam 5:6). The ark of God, on the other hand, had no one to attend to it; and the Israelites were scattered and defeated and Shiloh left desolate. Yet, without any human intervention or assistance, the ark of the LORD would *“go again to his own place”* (1 Sam 5:11). By the time the ark came to Ekron, the Philistines knew that it was the God of Israel who was plaguing and slaying them. They did not know what to do, but they did know that the ark needed to go back to its place. Man cannot fight against God. The pride of man will be humbled, and the power of God will be known.

THOUGHT: God’s power to punish, destroy or reward is unlimited.

PRAYER: “I need Thee, oh I need Thee, every hour I need Thee.”

TUESDAY, MARCH 21

1 SAMUEL 6:1-12

2 SAMUEL 6:1-11

*“What shall we do to the
ark of the LORD?”*

THE PROVIDENTIAL CHASTENING HAND OF GOD (IV)

1 Samuel 5 ends with the gathering of the lords of the Philistines and a statement on the heaviness of the hand of God upon the Philistines. God is able to defend the honour of His name and reveal the glory of His power and majesty. When the ark was brought to the camp of the Israelites, the Philistines rightly trembled because of what they had heard of the mighty works of God. When they captured the ark and brought it to the house of their god, they probably had lost the fear of the LORD and honoured their idols. Now, again with fear and trembling, they sought how the ark would return to its place.

“...What shall we do to the ark of the LORD? tell us wherewith we shall send it to his place” (1 Sam 6:2). Their priests and diviners, who convened to consider the plight of the Philistines and how to get reprieve, gave full answer to the questions posed to them. The idolatrous people who knew not the Word of the LORD knew that it was the hand of the LORD that had been heavy upon them for the seven months that the ark had been in their possession. Their priests pointed out to them that there had to be a trespass offering that accompanied the ark. They were responsible for the calamity befalling them by the dishonour they had shown in the capture of the ark. The instructions given came with a specific reason and stern warning to the lords of the Philistines. They must *“give glory unto the God of Israel: peradventure he will lighten his hand from off you, and from off your gods, and from off your land”* (1 Sam 6:5). They must not be as the Egyptians, unless they desired a similar fate.

“...make a new cart, and take two milch kine...” (1 Sam 6:7). The second step was to send off the cart with respect and honour. They used a new cart, and cows that never had a yoke on them, and left without any guidance both to prove that what had befallen them was no coincidence, and also to let the God who plagued them and defended the honour of His name decide and lead His ark where He willed. God did show His sovereignty and wisdom, and what was impossible and improbable happened as the ark returned home.

THOUGHT: God is able to save, He can reveal His glory among nations.

PRAYER: O mighty Father, by Thy grace, turn me to obey Thee.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22

1 SAMUEL 6:13-7:2

NUMBERS 4:1-5, 15-20

“...they shall not touch
any holy thing, lest they die.”

THE PROVIDENTIAL CHASTENING HAND OF GOD (V)

God revealed His might and power to the Philistines. The lords of the Philistines who followed the ark all the way to the border went back home knowing that it was God. The Philistines, though ignorant, had handled the ark with great care and caution. The children of Israel, though knowledgeable, mishandled the ark to their own destruction.

“And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD, and the coffer that was with it...” (1 Sam 6:15). The men of Bethshemesh upon seeing the ark, received it, and honoured it. They claved the cart for wood, and offered the cows that had dragged the cart from the Philistine country. They had Levites take down the ark from off the cart showing that they knew what God had said concerning the handling of the ark. They were recipients of God’s bountiful mercy, and they harvested their fields. God had blessed their efforts and labours. For seven months the ark was captive in a foreign land and they had not attempted to bring it back; but, lo and behold, the ark was back without their effort or intervention. They offered sacrifice, for indeed there were great reasons to do so.

“And he smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD...” (1 Sam 6:19). The day which started with the joy of a harvest, and which was added the joy of the return of the ark, changed into a dark and dreadful day of horror “because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter” (1 Sam 6:19). Their curiosity replaced their reverence, and wilfulness replaced obedience. From the involvement of the Levites in removing the ark and the sacrifice, it is clear that they knew what they were handling. But, alas, the indignity they had shown in bringing the ark to battle continued. This time round, they profaned the ark and brought upon themselves swift chastisement. We must never be too familiar with the things of God to lack proper reverence due to God. Obedience to God’s Word is our safeguard when we approach God.

THOUGHT: (Read Deuteronomy 29:29.)

PRAYER: Father, may I never speak of Thee without speaking with Thee first.

THURSDAY, MARCH 23

1 SAMUEL 7:3-14

2 CHRONICLES 15:1-7; 16:7-12

“...the eyes of the LORD
run to and fro...”

REVIVAL UNDER SAMUEL (I)

The ark was not returned to Shiloh from where it was taken, but rather it rested at Kirjathjearim. The invitation from Bethshemesh was honoured by the men of Kirjathjearim and they hosted the ark for twenty years. There is no indication that it became the religious centre of Israel during this period nor that the yearly worship and sacrifices were done there. There is also no indication of any chastisement from the LORD on the men of that city like there was at Bethshemesh.

“And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel...” (1 Sam 7:3). The ministry of Samuel was different from the ministry of the other judges. In the accounts of the other judges, the focus was on the military exploits and deliverance from oppressing forces. And the life of the nation after the deliverance was set in summary form. But Samuel, apart from being a judge, was also a prophet and a priest to Israel. Another distinction is that the other judges’ work was limited to parts of Israel with tribes involved or affected by the judge mentioned, but in Samuel’s case, he ministered to *“all the house of Israel”* (1 Sam 7:3). Samuel’s first service to Israel in this section was directing and exhorting them to repentance and a return to the LORD. This exhortation was given at a time when *“all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD”* (1 Sam 7:2).

“...and Samuel cried unto the LORD for Israel; and the LORD heard him” (1 Sam 7:9). The second service of Samuel to Israel was to plead for Israel before the LORD in their time of trouble. He spoke to the LORD on behalf of the people, that they might find mercy to help in their time of need (Heb 4:16). Earlier in 1 Samuel 3:19, we are told that Samuel was faithful in delivering God’s word such that *“the LORD was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground.”* Now, Samuel was also faithful in praying for the people that when he called *“they gathered together”* (1 Sam 7:6) and when in trouble they cried to Samuel to *“cease not to cry unto the LORD our God for us, that he will save us...”* (1 Sam 7:8).

THOUGHT: (Read Acts 6:2-4.)

PRAYER: Father, grant to us pastors devoted to the Word of God and to prayer.

FRIDAY, MARCH 24

1 SAMUEL 7:15-17

DEUTERONOMY 11:16-25

“Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived...”

REVIVAL UNDER SAMUEL (II)

The conclusion of 1 Samuel 7 gives to us a summary picture of the public life of Samuel. Under the leadership of Samuel, Israel experienced peace with the Amorites and repossessed the cities that the Philistines had taken from them. And, under his leadership, Israel began to have a change of heart. Their reliance on God and contrition of heart were reflected in how they put away *“Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the LORD only”* (1 Sam 7:4). This is a departure from the testimony in the book of the Judges where repeatedly *“they forsook the LORD”* (Judg 2:12-13) and *“served Baal”* (Judg 2:11, 13; 3:7; 10:6, 10).

“And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life” (1 Sam 7:15). The godly leadership of Israel’s last judge brought revival and a turning back to the LORD just as the godly leadership of Joshua had done (Josh 1:5; Judg 2:7). During the days of Samuel’s life, he saw the desolation of Shiloh, the help of the LORD (seen in the stone of testimony that he called Ebenezer), the Philistines subdued, and the nation becoming a monarchy. During his days, he pursued the spiritual welfare of the nation beginning from his call to put away the strange gods, his preparation of the people’s hearts unto the LORD, to his commitment to not stop praying for them. He knew that the glory of the nation was their LORD and thus the good of the nation rested on their spiritual growth and relationship to God.

As judge, he helped the nation in their general and physical welfare; and as a deliverer he helped them against the external oppression and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies. As judge, he also had a hand in the administration of justice and maintaining the morality and spirituality of the nation, duties which continued even after the nation requested for and had their first king, Saul. It is in the performance of this duty that he had his yearly circuit, and he had his house in Ramah where *“he built an altar unto the LORD”* (1 Sam 7:17). Here, Samuel spent his days serving the LORD to whom his mother had committed his life even before his birth and who appeared to him when he was a child.

THOUGHT: (Read Psalm 99:6.)

PRAYER: Father, grant us pastors who are committed to Christ.

SATURDAY, MARCH 25

1 SAMUEL 8:1-8

DEUTERONOMY 17:14-20

“...set him king over thee, whom the
LORD thy God shall choose...”

ISRAEL ASKS FOR A KING

1 Samuel 8 presents to us the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. Whenever there is a change of guard and a change of generation, care is required. The passing on of the baton is key to smooth transition and the continuing of the race.

“And his sons walked not in his ways...” (1 Sam 8:3). The spirituality and morality of a people cannot be sustained by memory of past events alone. History has an important part, and heritage must be passed on from one generation to the next, but personal spiritual vitality must be pursued too if the faith and heritage passed on are to be maintained. Samuel wished to pass on the mantle to his sons, and wished that the work of the LORD would continue as his strength waned with the passing of years. But, alas, his sons *“walked not in his ways”* (1 Sam 8:3). This was evident to the people such that the elders, when they came to Samuel at Ramah, told him: *“thy sons walk not in thy ways”* (1 Sam 8:5).

“...make us a king to judge us like all the nations” (1 Sam 8:5). Although the LORD had made provisions for the children of Israel to have a king (Gen 49:10), the people’s request was grievous to Samuel because their request was not for a king as God had designed and foretold through the prophecies and promises given aforetime. Their request for a king was patterned after the surrounding nations, *“like all the nations”* (1 Sam 8:5). Samuel sought the LORD about the matter. And as such the LORD’s response to Samuel was: *“they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them”* (1 Sam 8:7). They had the favour and blessings of God, but craved after a worldly system. They had given two reasons for their request: the age of Samuel and the straying of his sons. Were these reasons for rejecting God who had been “Ebenezer”? They had left out God in their deliberations and not considered Him in their desires. Samuel was aging, but the LORD is eternal!

THOUGHT: (Read Galatians 6:7-8.)

PRAYER: Father, when tempted to do wrong, make me steadfast and strong in Thee.

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 26

1 SAMUEL 8:9-22

2 PETER 2:1-3

*"Hearken unto their voice,
and make them a king"*

WARNING AGAINST REJECTING GOD

So prone are we, as men, to be partial in our view of circumstances and things as we consider choices available to us and make decisions. The elders of Israel considered their future with partiality; Samuel took the matter to the LORD who reminded him that the affront was not to him as servant, but to God who was Master. The message that the LORD sent back to the people through Samuel was a warning of what would come as a result of their request and desire to be like the nations of the world.

"This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you..." (1 Sam 8:11). The appeal of the worldly system and its lure kept them from seeing the decay and cruelty that accompanied it. The lure of the world also blinded them to the losses they would suffer and the grace they would be deprived of. Today too, many do not count the cost of the choices and decisions they make. False prophets, false apostles, false teachers abound luring men with promises of health, wealth, prosperity and grandeur. However, it is all but a ploy, a smoke screen with which they trap them, fleece them, and enslave them, binding them to their whims.

The prevalence of heresies and false teachings and the increasing deception is a testimony to our nature to be rash in our decisions, and to be attracted to the luring appeal of the world and worldliness. Strange and new doctrines get propagated and also find acceptance and secure following, when God's Word is available in many languages for all to read. Men do not want to read the Word revealed, but seek new revelations daily. To such (like to the men of Israel who desired a king like unto the nations) should this solemn warning be sounded: *"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ...And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof..."* (1 John 2:15-17). There is danger in forsaking God, and there is no joy in pursuing the world. Yet, the sad response of the children of Israel to Samuel is also the grim reality today. Despite the truth proclaimed, many still say: *"...Nay; but we will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations..."* (1 Sam 8:19-20).

THOUGHT: *"...present your bodies a living sacrifice..."* (Rom 12:1).

PRAYER: Father, grant me strength which is perfected in my weakness.

MONDAY, MARCH 27

1 SAMUEL 9:14-19

ISAIAH 44:24-28

*“Then Saul drew near
to Samuel in the gate...”*

SAMUEL AND SAUL (I)

The meeting of Samuel and Saul provides an excellent picture of the wonders of God’s providence. There is perfect harmony in the things we would call “secular” and the things we would see as “spiritual,” revealing to us how true it is that *“all things work together for good”* (Rom 8:28). Examples: the dreams of two convicts in a prison cell in the account of Joseph’s life; the cry of a baby in the basket in the river Nile in the account of Moses’ life.

“Now the LORD had told Samuel in his ear a day before Saul came...” (1 Sam 9:15). Although the people had hastened in their desire for a king, and though their desire was fuelled by a worldly perspective, the LORD permitted them to appoint their king. Yet in all this, God by divine providence ordained the meeting of Samuel and Saul. Ordinary circumstances and normal duties of both Samuel and Saul would be what God used for them to meet. For Samuel, it was his spiritual duty as seen in the message of the young maidens: *“make haste now, for he came to day to the city; for there is a sacrifice of the people to day in the high place”* (1 Sam 9:12). While for Saul, it was his filial duty as seen in the errand he was sent to do by his father: *“And Kish said to Saul his son, Take now one of the servants with thee, and arise, go seek the asses”* (1 Sam 9:3). Also, though it is Saul who chose which servant to take, God’s providence led him to pick the servant who would say: *“Behold now, there is in this city a man of God...let us go thither...”* (1 Sam 9:6).

“...the LORD said unto him, Behold the man whom I spake to thee of...” (1 Sam 9:17). The charge against Israel in their desire for a king like the nations was: *“they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them”* (1 Sam 8:7). But in His directing providence, God informed Samuel concerning Saul that *“this same shall reign over my people”* (1 Sam 9:17). The people’s desire for God had waned, but God’s love and concern over them were steadfast. They were still His people and as such He silently but surely worked on their behalf even in their rebellion. God’s purposes will never be defeated.

THOUGHT: *“Known unto God are all his works...”* (Acts 15:18).

PRAYER: (Read Philippians 4:6.)

TUESDAY, MARCH 28
1 SAMUEL 10:1-8, 17-25
PSALM 75

*“But God is the judge:
he putteth down one,
and setteth up another.”*

SAMUEL AND SAUL (II)

Samuel performed his duties to God with such diligence, faithfulness and ease such that we quickly forget that at the first instance when the people requested for a king, he was displeased (1 Sam 8:6). To many of us, like the prophet Jonah, our emotions and views of things would greatly affect our performance of duties and tasks required of us. What maturity we see in Samuel. His initial attendance to Saul was quite remarkable. In this section, we see Samuel’s anointing of Saul.

“Then Samuel took a vial of oil, and poured it upon his head, and kissed him...” (1 Sam 10:1). The initial actions of Samuel (in having the servant proceed forth, anointing, and speaking to Saul in confidence and in secret) presents the wisdom with which Samuel went about performing his duty. Saul would be the people’s choice, but the people’s choice was within the providence and foreknowledge of God, and the people’s choice would reign by God’s permission. Samuel, in private, made known to Saul what would happen to him, and gave him signs that would confirm to Saul that though he was the people’s king, he had to know that *“the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will”* (Dan 5:21).

“And Samuel called the people together unto the LORD to Mizpeh” (1 Sam 10:17). The selection of Saul was by lot. The people had asked for a king, and Samuel had solemnly warned them. Despite the warning, they insisted, saying, *“Nay; but we will have a king over us”* (1 Sam 8:19). The day they would have their king came, and they were gathered at Mizpeh, the same place where they had repented and turned to the LORD, and asked Samuel, *“Cease not to cry unto the LORD our God for us”* (1 Sam 7:8). At this place, Samuel again charged them and plainly told them: *“ye have this day rejected your God, who himself saved you out of all your adversities and your tribulations”* (1 Sam 10:19). And yet the people still presented themselves for the choosing of a king by lot.

THOUGHT: Do I reaffirm my commitments or negate my vows?

PRAYER: (Read Psalm 116:14.)

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29

1 SAMUEL 13:8-15; 15:16-28

PSALM 37:34-40

*“The LORD hath rent the kingdom
of Israel from thee this day..”*

SAMUEL AND SAUL (III)

In the biblical record, the first two encounters between Samuel and Saul give to us the account of the rise of Saul as king over Israel. Today, we read in 1 Samuel 13 and 15, the two encounters which give to us the account of the rejection of Saul from being king over Israel. Both of these encounters have to do with whether Saul would obey the instructions given to him in the performance of his duty as king over Israel. In his private audience with Samuel, Saul was made to know that it was God who ruled and appointed rulers, hence if Saul would establish his kingdom, he was to do so by obedient allegiance to God.

“And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God..” (1 Sam 13:13). The LORD had given His people to Saul, and had also given victory to Saul against Nahash. Therefore, as the Philistines rose again against God’s people, and another war was looming, Saul chose to rush in, instead of trusting and waiting on God. He failed to remember history when God was faithful and had granted victory against the same enemy. His self-will was evident. Although he had the assurance of God’s help, for Samuel had promised to come, he chose not to wait on the LORD, but to intrude. He also had the opportunity to repent when confronted by Samuel, but he chose to justify and excuse himself while blaming and accusing all others including Samuel.

“Wherefore then didst thou not obey the voice of the LORD, but didst fly upon the spoil, and didst evil in the sight of the LORD?” (1 Sam 15:19). Saul’s battle with Amalek was unlike that of the Philistines. In this case, he went as *“the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath”* (Rom 13:4) and as such obedience was of absolute necessity. He went at the order of God and in His power, therefore he should have fulfilled all that he was sent to do. His failure to execute judgment brought upon him judgment and Samuel’s pronouncement: *“the LORD hath rejected thee from being king over Israel”* (1 Sam 15:26).

THOUGHT: Obedience is better than sacrifice, and rebellion is sin.

PRAYER: (Read Psalm 86:11.)

THURSDAY, MARCH 30

1 SAMUEL 16:1-13

JEREMIAH 17:5-15

*“Blessed is the man that
trusteth in the LORD...”*

SAMUEL AND DAVID

What had begun as a sore displeasure for Samuel became a burden. After the incident with the Amalekites, Samuel never saw Saul again. Samuel mourned long for Saul (1 Sam 15:35). This was evidence of Samuel's heart. He was for the nation and he was committed to his task. He prayed for the nation, and taught them the good and right way though they had chosen for themselves a king like the nations around them. But his grief would not change God's will or purposes. God had provided for Himself a king just as He had announced to Saul through Samuel in 1 Samuel 13:14.

“...the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). Samuel, though a faithful servant greatly used of God and distinguished among the men of his generation, was still a man and was inclined to see as a man. He had asked the LORD, *“How can I go?”* (1 Sam 16:2), noting the peril that he would put himself in if Saul heard of the errand. Arriving in Bethlehem, Samuel had to assure the elders of Bethlehem who came trembling to Samuel when they saw him appear unexpectedly and were concerned lest there was sin hidden to their eyes (1 Sam 16:4-5). Men are limited in their knowledge and understanding of things, and the heart remains hidden.

“And the LORD said, Arise, anoint him: for this is he” (1 Sam 16:12). The faithful servant waited on the LORD to reveal his chosen one. He who searches the heart and tries the reins (Jer 17:10) thereof would reveal the right person. This ought not to be limited to the choice of kings alone. How often we fail to consult the LORD and we decide based on outward appearance. We choose churches to attend based on the beautiful buildings, appealing music, the scratching of our itching ears, and the respectability of those who attend. We choose by outward appearance and we try to keep up appearances and so put up a cloak of religiosity and become more like the Pharisee than the publican.

THOUGHT: God knows man's heart, and He searches it out.

PRAYER: Father, have mercy upon me. Search my heart, and try my acts.

SAMUEL'S DEALINGS WITH ISRAEL

What we have before us is Samuel's last recorded public address to the people of Israel. It was an address that charged the people and made known to them the state of their heart: a state that the book of Judges has endeavoured to show in the repeated cycles recorded in it. It was an address given to the people as they began a new chapter in the life of the nation, and sought to change the narrative that was in the period of the judges. "*There was no king in Israel*" (Judg 21:25), but now they had the king of their choice and desires. Samuel made them to understand their problem was not the absence of a king and so the presence of a king would not present to them a solution.

"...stand still, that I may reason with you before the LORD..." (1 Sam 12:7). Samuel began his address by rehearsing to them their history and heritage to point out their relationship to God and their duty and obligation based on that relationship. Their failure was not administrative but spiritual, and so the solution must be spiritual. The period of the judges and its trials was because "*they forgot the LORD their God*" (1 Sam 12:9), and their deliverance through men God used was attributed to their spiritual return to the LORD when "*they cried unto the LORD*" (1 Sam 12:10). The testimony of their history was that the LORD was their safety, peace, and prosperity. Israel owed everything to the LORD.

"If ye will fear the LORD, and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel..." (1 Sam 12:14). The LORD allowed them to have their king; that was great favour. This favour did not negate their obligation and duty to God, it did not change the truth that they owed everything to the LORD. They and their king were not at liberty to chart a new course for themselves, to forsake the covenant God had made with their fathers, or to continue in the sin that so often ensnared them in the past. There would be changes in life under their king, and this they were forewarned of, but allegiance to God must remain. They must "*turn not aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD...*" (1 Sam 12:20).

THOUGHT: "Oh Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end."

PRAYER: "O speak, and make me listen, Thou guardian of my soul."

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