

Heroes of Faith

GIDEON, MAN OF VALOR

Chapter 1

There is a curiously modern ring about the story of Gideon, the Israeli leader who, with only three hundred men, put an army of one hundred and thirty-five thousand to ignominious flight and afterwards, with the aid of a few thousand reinforcements, destroyed them utterly. This is a narrative about men possessed not only of grim tenacity in battle for the defence of their fatherland, but also of sterling faith that their cause was right and for that reason God would go with them and give them the victory. Gideon was not only a military strategist of high order; he was also a man of the Covenant which God had made with His people at Sinai, and he believed with all his heart that he was an instrument of God.

For perhaps a couple of generations Israel had lived more or less at peace since the resounding victory of Barak and Deborah over the Canaanites, recorded in Judges 4 and 5. Now in the sixth chapter it is shown that again all is not well with the nation. Barak and Deborah and the heroes who had fought with them were all dead, and the religious enthusiasm engendered by that great deliverance half a century in the past had evaporated; apostasy and Baal-worship were now rife in the land. In consequence, and in accordance with the provisions of the Covenant, Israel's enemies had gained the ascendancy over them. The greater part of the nation was in bondage

to the Midianites and had been so for seven years.

This was no ordinary bondage. When, in past days, Chushan king of Aram-Naharaim, Eglon king of Moab, and Jabin king of Hazor, oppressed them for greater or lesser periods, the oppression took the form of exaction of tribute—a proportion of their flocks, and herds, their crops and their possessions, but their national life was able to continue although impoverished. These Midianites and Amalekites were of a different stamp and came with a different purpose. They were the nomadic Bedouin hordes of the eastern desert, always on the move, living “off the land,” moving on from each temporary abiding place as soon as its natural resources were exhausted to find another. Every year at harvest time they moved westwards to the settled lands of Canaan, pouring across the Jordan in their thousands and setting up their tents in the fertile valley of Esdraelon, from whence they scoured the land as far south as Gaza (Judges 6:4), taking all the cattle and flocks and all the harvested crops, leaving the unhappy inhabitants with nothing. And when they had taken all, they moved back to the desert, like the locusts to which they were compared (ch.6:5). Year after year they did this; because of them Israel was greatly impoverished, and at last they “cried unto the Lord.”

They had been told this would happen. At Sinai God had said that if they forsook him “*ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it.*” (Lev.26:16) Now they realized the fulfillment of those words, and in their distress they cried unto the Lord.

God is never slow to respond when the entreaty is mixed with faith. Once again there was a wave of contrition and repentance sweeping over the nation and God was quick to act. The first step was to impress upon the people the heinousness of their sin. He sent them a prophet whose name is unknown, for it is not given. He reminded them of the great events of the past, of the deliverance from Egypt, and the journey to the Promised

Land, and the casting out of its inhabitants that they might inherit it, and of their ingratitude in forgetting all this and repudiating their God. *“Ye have not obeyed my voice,”* He told them. (Judges 6:10). But at the same time He was moving to deliver; He had selected his instrument and the angel of the Lord was already on his way to visit Gideon.

Was Gideon himself, in fact, the unnamed prophet? He was evidently a man of faith and greatly concerned for the vindication of the Divine Name and might well have already won some recognition as one who sought to turn Israel back to the true faith. Be this as it may, it is clear that when Gideon, threshing wheat under cover of the winepress in the endeavor to hide it from the sight of the marauding Midianites, looked up and saw the traveler sitting there under the terebinth tree, he was quite unprepared for what was to follow.

“The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor,” came the stranger’s greeting. *“Oh my Lord,”* was Gideon’s respectful rejoinder. *“If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? And where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of? . . . Now the Lord hath forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.”* (ch. 6:12,13) This is not the language of unbelief; it is the language of disappointment. The Lord had delivered in the past: of that Gideon was sure, on the authority of his forefathers. Why then did God not deliver now, when the very future existence of the chosen nation seemed threatened? The problem was too great for Gideon, he could only ask *“Why?”* and wait for the Lord to reveal His purpose. And the Lord looked upon him, and knew him for the man of faith and action that he was, and said to him, *“Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. I HAVE SENT THEE!”* (ch.6:14) To Gideon’s protestation that his family was the least in his tribe, and he himself the least in his father’s house, there came the reiteration, *“thou shalt smite the Midianites,”* and at that Gideon demurred no longer. Like Moses of earlier time, his native humility was overcome by the Divine assurance, *“I*

will be with thee;" his faith and courage both were equal to the occasion. Without reservation he put himself into the Lord's hands to be the instrument of salvation.

It is not long before tests come upon those who give themselves to God in this fashion. As it was with Jesus, who went straight from Jordan to the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil, so with the followers of Jesus. The act of dedication of life to Him is followed by some experience or requirement designed to demonstrate just how sincere and steadfast is that dedication. So with Gideon. The first instruction he received was to destroy the altar of Baal and cut down the *Asherah*, the idolatrous fertility symbol which served the local community, and take the sacred bullocks from the sacerdotal precincts. He was then to build an altar to God and sacrifice all these appendages of Baal worship upon it, and so challenge the forces of idolatry in a manner which they dare not ignore and from which he could not retreat. In a very real sense he was to nail his colors to the mast and defy the entire established order of his village.

Now this same chapter states that the children of Israel had already begun to cry to the Lord for deliverance, and this implies that a reaction against Baal worship was at least already in progress. It was evidently not yet whole-hearted. The cry of faith going up to heaven was as yet weak, but it was there. It now needed a resolute figure to stand up and declare himself for the God of Israel, to sound forth the age-old rallying cry, "*Who is on the Lord's side, who?*" rousing the dormant but never entirely obliterated belief in Israel's mission as the people for God's purpose. A spokesman was needed to remind them of their invincibility when God was with them, giving them victory against apparently hopeless odds so many times in history. Gideon was that man. Without hesitation he carried out the Lord's injunction.

It would seem that his own father, Joash, was an idolator. The altar of Baal, and the *asherah* and the sacred

bullocks are all described as being his—apparently on his land and in his custody. Gideon himself must have been in middle age. According to chapter 8:20 he had at least one son grown to manhood at this time, so his father may well have been the patriarch of the village. Nevertheless, with the aid of ten of his servants, the deed was done and when the men of the village arose next morning they found, to their consternation, the remains of their idol god smoking upon another altar that had not been there the day before.

Of course, there was anger and a great deal of shouting, and a fury of consultation on the situation. Finally a deputation was sent to Joash demanding that his son be given up that he might be put to death for the outrage committed against Baal. Evidently the citizens of Ophrah were not numbered among those of Israel who had begun to forsake Baal to serve the living God. It seems, though, that Joash at least began to see the light. He flatly refused his neighbors' demands, and taunted them with their zeal for a god who could not save himself. "*Will ye plead for Baal?*" he enquired sarcastically. "*Will ye save him? If he be a god, let him plead for himself since someone hath cast down his altar.*" (ch. 6:31) The extent to which the logic of this argument penetrated is not apparent from the account, but it might be that there was not much time for further discussion, for almost immediately, it would seem, a fresh and much more serious crisis developed. The annual invasion of the Midianites and Amalekites and the children of the east had begun.

The valley of Jezreel—the symbolic site of Armageddon, where all the great battles between Israel, Syria, Egypt and Assyria were fought—lies across the northern half of the land of Israel, from Jordan to the sea. It is about twenty miles long and varies from four to eight miles wide. It forms the natural passage for peoples coming in from the east and heading for Canaan, Judea or Egypt, and has been thus used from antiquity. Into this valley came the hosts; as chapter 7:12 says, they

“ . . . lay all along the valley like locusts for multitude, and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude.” Ophrah was about five miles away up in the hills fringing the south side of the valley, so that it would not be long before the news reached Gideon and his fellows. In past times this had been the signal for the whole population to seek hiding places in the caves and ravines of the highlands (see ch.6:2) with such food as they could carry, leaving the invaders to plunder their farms and homes of everything movable. But not this time! Gideon, too, had acquiesced in the general submission in the past, now he was possessed of a new spirit, born of a strength induced by his zeal and courage in the affair of the idols. He had proved himself faithful in a small thing and now the Lord was going to use him in a great thing. The men who a few hours ago were thirsting for his blood now realized that under his leadership they could strike a blow for freedom which without him they would not have dreamed of attempting.

So, *“the spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, and all Abi-ezer were gathered after him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also was gathered after him: and he sent messengers unto Asher, and unto Zebulon, and unto Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.”* (ch. 6:34,35) In next to no time the whole of the countryside for miles around was roused. Contingents from four of the tribes of Israel, those most closely affected by the invasion, came marching to join him. Gideon found himself at the head of an army of men numbering more than thirty thousand! It is evident, though, that he was pinning his hopes for victory not upon the military prowess of his followers but upon the power of God. The first thing he did upon finding himself in command of this force was to ask a sign of God that He would indeed deliver Israel.

Some might be inclined to consider this request for a sign, an indication of a lack of faith but it was not

necessarily so. The sign might have been more for the encouragement of the men who had rallied to his side and to confirm in their minds the power of the God of Israel. On the other hand, it might have been Gideon's desire for assurance that he had correctly interpreted the new power that had possessed him as being, in truth, the Spirit of the Lord. Was he doing right in accepting the service of these thousands of Israelites and was this moment the critical one in which to sally forth to do battle with the enemy? There is an element of sober caution in his approach to the point where he must put his forces to the test, harmonizing well with the inflexible conviction that God was with him when at last he went into battle. It speaks not of weakness of faith or of indecisiveness, but of a deep-rooted determination that he should interpret the Divine leading aright, neither lagging behind that leading nor stepping out in front of it. So he suggested the sign that would convince him, and the Lord responded according to his faith. He set out a fleece of wool on the ground and in the morning, although the dew was heavy all around, the fleece itself was inexplicably dry. Again he set it out and asked for the wonder to be reversed, and sure enough in the morning the ground was bone dry and the fleece wringing wet. Simple little signs, but they told Gideon all that he wanted to know and without further ado he rallied his men and gave the word to march.

They made their way for five miles across the hilltops and halfway down the northern slopes of Mount Gilboa above the waters of Harod. ("Mount Gilead" in ch.7:3 is an early copyist's mistake for Gilboa—Gilead lay on the other side of Jordan.) From here they could survey the valley below, some four miles wide with the rising ground of Moreh beyond it (see ch.7:1) and in that valley the camp of the Midianites. Here the Lord stopped him.

There were too many men in Gideon's army. That was the gist of the Lord's message. There was a danger that when the Lord had given the victory they might well

take the credit on account of their own numbers: “*Lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me.*” (ch.7:2) The remedy was simple; there was to be a drastic weeding out of the army. First of all, Gideon was to make a proclamation throughout all the host bidding every man who was in any way fearful or afraid of the coming battle to return home forthwith. Two-thirds of them promptly packed up and departed; twenty-two thousand went and ten thousand remained. Perhaps the martial ardor which had roused so many of them to militant action just as quickly evaporated when they looked down on that valley and saw those hundred and thirty-five thousand muscular Bedouins ready for a fight. Their newly revived faith in God was still very weak and it died a sudden death at that moment. Perhaps Gideon, watching them go, remembered his insistence on a sign from the Lord that he was doing right in initiating this conflict and was glad that he had obtained the assurance. But now the Lord had another word for him.

There were still too many men. Take them down to the waters of Harod, said the Lord, and command them to drink. It must have seemed a risky business, for the stream ran—and still runs—through the valley itself, and the enemy camp was only a short distance away on the other side. Nevertheless Gideon obeyed the order, and before long ten thousand men were gathered along its banks. And here the Lord drew Gideon’s attention to a singular circumstance. Despite the close proximity of the enemy camp, by far the majority of the men got down on the knees to drink, oblivious to the disadvantage at which they were placed should the enemy decide to launch a sudden attack. Three hundred men, and three hundred only, drank with their heads up and their eyes fixed upon the distant scene, drawing up water in their hands instead of lapping as a dog would lap. Instinctively they were ready for an emergency.

By these three hundred will I deliver, said the Lord. Send the rest back! This must have been the moment when Gideon's faith was tested to the uttermost. Three hundred only against that mighty host? Four hundred and fifty Midianites to each Israelite? Was such a miracle even possible? We have to remember that in Gideon's day there was no precedent for this victory. All past conflicts, whether or not the Lord had been concerned, had seen the participation of Israelites in their thousands. The initial invasion of the land under Joshua, the subsequent victories of Othniel over the Hittites, of Ehud over the Moabites, and Barak over the Canaanites, all were achieved by large and well-equipped forces of men. Now the Lord told Gideon that he was going to disperse what was in all probability by far the largest force Israel had yet to face with a paltry three hundred men. And as if to challenge his faith, the Lord said, "*Arise, get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thine hand.*"—Judges 7:9

The upshot of the story shows that God had chosen a fit man. Without hesitation Gideon acted. The use that he made of his three hundred men and the manner in which he routed the enemy, and all that came after, continues to inspire the reader. There is no break in the narrative at this point; that goes on immediately to tell of Gideon's strategy and attack, but there is the attainment of a definite critical stage at this point. Here, at the waters of Harod, the Lord steps out of the affair, having done all that is necessary for Him to do, and leaves the execution of the matter to Gideon. All the Israelite leader had to do was obey instructions and victory was assured. God had already delivered the Midianites into his hand. The details of that victory, and the events which ensued in consequence, and how it affected the life of Gideon and the welfare of Israel in later times, follows.

Chapter 2

“Arise, get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thine hand.”—Judges 7:9

This stirring command was Gideon’s signal to act. From the peaceful life of a country farmer he had emerged, by appointment of the Lord, as the military leader of thirty thousand men eager to deliver their homeland from the invading Midianites. But the Lord had reduced his army to a mere three hundred, telling him that these would be enough to achieve the victory he planned. Now his small force was gathered on the northern slopes of Mount Gilboa overlooking the valley where the enemy was encamped. The nature of his instructions was unusual and the manner in which he was to launch the attack would seem laughable if judged by earthly standards of warfare. But this was the Lord’s war and Gideon knew his God well enough to be persuaded that His way was right. The Lord had told him that the victory was as good as accomplished and now gave him the word to advance and, as it were, left the whole issue in his hands.

There was no hesitation. Gideon went immediately into action. He might well have pleaded that his men needed a night’s rest before engaging the enemy. They had started out early in the morning (Judges 7:1) and, after their journey to the site of the coming battle had spent the rest of the day eliminating the unwilling and the unready. Now it was night (ch.7:9), probably soon after six o’clock, which is the approximate time of darkness in Israel. The attack took place between ten and eleven that same night

(ch.7:19) and there was much to be done beforehand.

First of all Gideon, with his attendant Phurah, made a personal reconnaissance of the enemy camp. Overhearing a Midianite recounting his dream and his fellow interpreting it to signify the Midianites' defeat at the hand of Israel, Gideon rightly deduced that that host was at least in a state of apprehension. He could go back to his men elated and summon them to the attack, but he did not do so at once. First of all, we are told, "*he worshipped and returned to the host of Israel.*" (ch. 7:15) In the midst of the enemy, in imminent danger of detection and capture, he nevertheless found time to pause and render thanks to God and, doubtless, supplication for continued guidance and support. Only then did he make his way back to his own followers and safety.

Now Gideon prepared for battle. The Lord had given him three hundred men with the assurance that no more were needed. Even though the Lord had guaranteed victory, it still devolved upon Gideon to make the best possible use of his three hundred men. Whether the subsequent course of action was suggested to him by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and thus God-given, or was the outcome of his own strategic ingenuity, we know not, but probably the former. The account says that he divided his forces into three companies of a hundred men each and provided each individual with a trumpet, a torch and an empty pitcher. Where he obtained three hundred pitchers and trumpets at such short notice does not readily appear. But remembering that he had only lately dismissed nearly thirty thousand men who had come from fairly distant parts of the country prepared for a possibly lengthy campaign, it may well be that plenty were available in the general camp impedita. What is more important is the fact that no provision seems to have been made for weapons. Certain it is that with a trumpet in one hand, a pitcher in the other, and a torch held somehow, there was not much maneuvering space for a sword. It

is evident that the initial attack at least, devised to put the enemy to flight, was going to be launched without the assistance of the traditional weapons of war, and in fact it was this completely different and unexpected technique which accomplished the desired end. There is something here which was echoed in the confident words of the boy David when he faced the giant Philistine, Goliath. *“Thou comest to me with a sword and with a spear and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied.”* (1 Sam.17:45)

A hasty instruction to the warriors and the three companies were dispatched to their positions. One party of a hundred men was to station itself on the slopes of Mount Moreh to the north of the enemy camp, one on the slopes of Mount Gilboa to the south, and one across the head of the valley to the west. The torches were to be concealed in the pitchers so that no light showed. The Midianites lay in the valley, but they were surrounded on three sides by a handful of men probably well spaced out. The only avenue of escape was to the east, towards Jordan. The narrative itself does not give these geographical details; it tells only of the three companies and that, when stationed according to Gideon’s instructions, *“they stood every man in his place round about the camp.”* (ch. 7:21) However, it only needs a glance at a large-scale map of the district to see that this clearly was the plan of campaign. So, by ten o’clock, *“ . . . the beginning of the middle watch”* (ch. 7:19) all was ready. (Unlike the system in Roman times, ancient Israel had three “watches” in the night—six to ten, ten to two, two to six.) The first shift of sentries had gone off duty, doubtless reporting to their successors *“a fine night and all’s well,”* oblivious of the silent watchers on the hillsides. The second shift began to make themselves as comfortable as they could, shrouding themselves in their long robes from the night cold and hoping for a swift passing of the next four hours. Meanwhile, Gideon, at the head of his own party—it has been remarked in our own

times that Israeli officers in action are always in front of their men and never behind—moved silently towards the outskirts of the Midianite camp “*when they had but newly set the (middle) watch*”

“*The sword of the Lord and Gideon!*” (ch. 7.20) The cry rang out loud and clear in the quietness of the night. In a moment, as the dazed sentries sprang up, the cry was echoed and re-echoed from every side. As the awakened Midianites tumbled out of their tents and began feverishly to collect accoutrements and weapons, there came what sounded like the clashing of the arms of a mighty host. Looking up they perceived a myriad points of light on the hillsides around the camp. Gideon’s men, following instructions, had dashed their pitchers on the rocks and revealed their torches, at the same time sounding their trumpets and shouting their battle cry. In that dense darkness the twinkling lights, the noise of splintering earthenware, the strident blast of trumpets, and the shouting of men, must have seemed to the Midianites as though a vast avenging host was converging upon them from all directions, save one. Only toward the east were there no shouts, no trumpets, no lights, so the entire host, in sudden panic, fled in utter and indescribable confusion that way in an instinctive bid to escape. The River Jordan was only twelve miles away and an easy ford existed there. Once across Jordan they could be measurably safe and on the way to their own land. So they ran, in the darkness of the night; ran as they had never run before, leaving behind them all their property, their tents and possessions, their camels and asses and beasts of burden on which they had expected to carry home the spoils of the raid on Israel’s land. Now all these things were left behind to be a spoil for Israel. So they pressed on, looking back from time to time only to see those flickering torches and hear those piercing trumpets as the three hundred pursued them through the valley.

It would seem from chapter 7:22 that in the confusion

and the dense darkness the Midianites and Amalekites mistook each other for pursuers and began to fight among themselves, added to which the thousands of Israelites who had been rejected by Gideon at the waters of Harod now joined in the pursuit and assisted in the confusion of the fugitives. It is here that a rather strange factor is introduced. According to chapter 7:22, the fleeing hosts most unaccountably turned aside from the direct route across Jordan and made their way towards Abel-meholah on the Israeli side of Jordan and some twenty miles to the south, thus placing themselves at the mercy of their pursuers. Why they thus failed to cross the river into relative safety at the easiest point is incomprehensible save for one element in the story. Chapter 7:24 says that Gideon sent messengers to the tribe of Ephraim upon the mountains, bidding them come down and hold the fords of Jordan at Beth-barah, the crossing point in question. The narrative reads as if Gideon sent this message after the attack and whilst the flight was in progress, but another glance at the map shows the unlikelihood of this. Long before the messengers could have climbed the twenty miles or so into the mountains, and the Ephraimites had responded by going another twenty miles to the fords, the host would have cleared the dozen miles which lay between them and safety. The probable conclusion is that Gideon had sent his messengers before he attacked the Midianites and the men of Ephraim were already in position when the flight began.

The tenses in Hebrew are not so rigid as in English and the form which speaks of past time does not always indicate clearly the relation of two past events to each other in a narrative. In this case, verse 24 probably is better rendered in English "*and Gideon had sent messengers,*" that is, *before* he advanced to the attack. In consequence, the fleeing Midianites found their channel of escape across the Jordan blocked by another force of armed men and so were compelled to turn southward in their search for a way out. They had now roused all

Israel against them and were more or less surrounded. Out of that hundred and thirty-five thousand fugitives only fifteen thousand succeeded in getting across the river. The remainder were slain by the now thoroughly aroused Israelite population.

The significance of this apparent outcome of the debacle lies in the demonstration it affords of Gideon's implicit faith in God's promise that He would deliver. Gideon was so sure he would rout the invaders that he stationed the Ephraimites along the river in advance to ensure that they did not get away. He evidently intended to make certain that the Midianites would never invade again. And they did not. The settled nations—Moab, Ammon, Edom, Syria—do figure in later struggles with Israel but not Midian or the peoples of the East. The victory was complete and it never needed to be repeated.

But Gideon was not finished yet. He meant to destroy Midian utterly. He pursued the pitiable remnant from Abel-meholah across Jordan to Succoth, from Succoth to Penuel, from Penuel to Karkar, and there he caught up with them. There he "discomfited" the remaining fifteen thousand and slew their chiefs, Zeba and Zalmunna. It was a terrible slaughter and probably in great part unnecessary, but this was the spirit of the times and there was the memory of the past seven years of oppression to be avenged.

Such wholesale massacre, however, does involve the question as to what extent the Lord was responsible. Did God in fact command and empower Gideon to embark upon this career of carnage and destruction? The first hasty answer in most minds might well be "yes" on the strength of the angelic visit to Gideon and the Divine assurance that by his instrumentality Israel was to be delivered. A deeper study of the narrative, however, suggests flaws in this conclusion. There were two phases of this conflict: first, the putting of the Midianites to flight by the three hundred men, without the use of arms but solely by trumpets, torches and pitchers; and second,

the slaughter of the host, which was effected not only by the three hundred but all the other thousands of Israelites who at first had been eliminated from the campaign. It is to be carefully noted that the Lord's instructions were limited entirely to the use of the three hundred men with their trumpets and torches, with no mention of other armed force. The remaining thirty-odd thousand were expressly ruled out. These, said the Lord, "*are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel say . . . mine own hand hath saved me.*" (ch.7:2) With the panic flight of the enemy, the deliverance was accomplished. Had there been no opposing force of Ephraimites at Beth-barah they would have crossed the Jordan and made their escape. They surely would not have come back that year at least. The Lord would have fulfilled his promise to deliver, and that without the use of weapons of war. It is significant that this is as far as the Lord's instructions went. There is nothing said about bringing back the rejected thirty thousand and, in fact, He did definitely say that He did not want them to participate in the victory. It might well be, therefore, that this part of the campaign was not of the Lord's command and measurably heedless of His will. Having put the enemy on the run, Israel could not resist the temptation to finish them off in traditional fashion.

This was always Israel's undoing. At the Exodus God told them they had no need to fight when they entered the Promised Land: He himself would go before them and give them entrance. (Ex.23:22,27-30), and He himself would eliminate the inhabitants "*by little and little*"—evidently by natural decrease—so that they could enter into full occupancy without war. They would not have it that way. They relied rather upon their own warlike propensities and in consequence they spent ten years in savage warfare, and even then never really succeeded in completely eliminating the idolatrous inhabitants from the land. The same experience befalls Christians, collectively and individually. The Lord will fight for us if we let him, but if, on the contrary, we insist upon employing the arm of the flesh, He will leave

us to do so and experience the consequences. It worked that way with Gideon and his men.

That failure to follow the Divine leading implicitly all the time led later to a misappropriation of the spoils of war and that in turn to a new idolatry which, as the old chronicler says regretfully, "*became a snare to Gideon and to his house.*" (Judges 8:27) When those thousands came back to their own land rejoicing in their victory and began the work of sharing out the spoil gathered from the Midianites' abandoned camp, it is evident they had completely forgotten the part God had played in this whole affair. They were crediting the outcome to their own valor and power, just as the Lord had foretold in chapter 7:2. "*Rule thou over us,*" they said to Gideon, "*both thou and thy son, and thy son's son also; for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian.*" (chapter 8:22) How evident it is that their success had gone to their heads and they were now dreaming of a nation organized on the basis of military strength and governed by a king like the nations around them. Several centuries later Israel was to ask Samuel to make them a king for the same reason, and it is not always realized that the first attempt of Israel to choose themselves a king was here in the days of Gideon.

So soon after their deliverance were they forgetting the basic principle of their nationhood, that the Lord was their king and they themselves all brethren together. So it has been, sadly, so many times with Christian believers throughout the centuries. The urge to set up visible leaders who will head a group or company gathered around some particular thesis, or ideal, takes on such an importance that the headship and guidance of Christ is forgotten and the power of the Holy Spirit in the community becomes submerged under the more immediate appeal of human power and policies. "*Make us gods to go before us,*" was the cry of Israel in the wilderness. (Ex. 32:1) The cry is still raised and with equally lamentable results.

It is to the honor of Gideon that he flatly declined their

offer. *"I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you."* (ch. 8:23) He, at least, knew that the survival of the nation depended on their allegiance to God and the Covenant, and he would not be a party to any innovation which denied that basic principle. He was prepared to remain a military leader to "judge" in the sense of this term in the Book of Judges—the word really means one who stands up to defend the right and deliver the oppressed and was applied to all the deliverers of Israel from enemy oppression in the period preceding the monarchy. Gideon thus classed himself with Joshua, Othniel and others who before him had delivered the nation but accepted no election to high office nor suffered the creation of a hereditary kingly dynasty in Israel. Gideon had been an instrument in the Lord's hands for the deliverance of Israel. He gave all the glory to the Lord and took nothing for himself, and with that he was content.

Unfortunately Gideon made one sad mistake. The final episode in the story shows how fatally easy it is for even the most ardent and faithful follower of the Lord to be taken off his guard by some seemingly insignificant thing which mushrooms into a serious breach of the Divine standards and becomes a deep-rooted canker in his life. In Gideon's case it may have seemed quite harmless at the time—just a somewhat irregular means of giving honor to God, and admittedly not altogether in line with his precepts. But in its effect, as the chronicler says in chapter 8:27, *"it became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house."*

The story that continues tells, not of a resounding victory and mighty deliverance wrought in faith and by the power of God, consequent upon careful adherence to the leading of God, but of an endeavor to do honor to God in a manner not commanded by Him and in violation of His ordained arrangements. It reveals how the highest ideals can become polluted by the lowest of standards if they are not fashioned in accordance with the expressed will

of God and what could have become the greatest triumph lead at last into deepest tragedy.

Chapter 3

The third phase of Gideon's career was marked by his making the tragic mistake which blemished the brightness of his spectacular career. As a successful military commander, hero of a notable victory, he was a very different man from the simple farmer pictured in Judges 6. At that time his implicit and obedient faith in God enabled him to carry out the Lord's commands to the letter, and in consequence the Midianite hosts had been put to flight and the land delivered, as the Lord had promised. The fact that Gideon went beyond his instructions afterwards and allowed the remainder of Israel to help him destroy the enemy to a man may well be put down to an excess of zeal not justified by the necessity of the case, but his subsequent refusal to allow himself to be made king by his grateful countrymen and his insistence that the Lord must be their only king shows that his heart was still right. But this same zeal, even more unwisely directed, led him into serious trouble in the matter of the ephod.

It all began when Gideon rejected the plea that he become their king. Although he declined the invitation, he did ask of his countrymen one favor, that they would give him an offering of the gold rings taken from their camels. The request was received with enthusiasm and Gideon found himself possessed of a considerable amount of gold and other valuable regalia taken from the defeated kings. The account shows that Gideon did not want this

for himself but for the worship of God and the honor of his native village. Of these golden rings and ornaments and luxurious clothing, we are told he “. . . *made an ephod, and put it in his city (village) in Ophrah.*” (ch.8:27) An ephod was a garment intricately constructed of valuable fabrics, precious stones and fine gold, worn by the High Priest of Israel as indication of his sacred office and by virtue of which he could approach to God for counsel and instruction. In later times possession of the ephod became invested with a kind of superstitious reverence and it was believed that any who could gain such possession would thereby be able to command a hearing and a response from God. There were two occasions in the life of David when he took it upon himself to summon the High Priest to his side so that with the aid of the ephod the Lord could be asked to give instructions as to forthcoming operations. But Gideon had been in close touch with God throughout this whole series of happenings and would hardly be likely to think the possession of an ephod necessary for any further instruction at this juncture. It becomes a valid question therefore: what was his purpose in doing this?

The Tabernacle, which was the center of Israel's worship and the responsibility of the Aaronic High Priest, at this time stood at Shiloh, having been finally erected there following a few years at Gilgal during the conquest of the Land. The tribes went there on the occasions of the great feasts and here the High Priest conducted the annual Day of Atonement ceremonies. But Shiloh was in the territory of the tribe of Ephraim, and there was no love lost between Ephraim and Manasseh, Gideon's own tribe. Jealousy had existed between them from earliest times when Manasseh, the eldest son of Joseph, had been passed over by the patriarch and the birthright conferred on Ephraim. Something of that jealousy emerges in this very story when the Ephraimites chided Gideon for not calling them to the battle before he had started the rout. His tactful reply in chapter 8:1-3 avoided a serious clash, but the animosity was there. Chapter 12 of Judges tells of another occasion

when Ephraim was involved in fratricidal strife with men of Manasseh. It might well be, therefore, that Gideon had formed the idea that the institution of some kind of a center for approaching God in the territory of Manasseh might well advance the status of his own tribe relative to the brother tribe and be welcomed by the northern tribes, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, who had assisted him in the campaign. Already, a century or more in the past, a rival priesthood with images and ephod had been set up in the extreme north by the tribe of Dan (the story is told in Judges, ch.18, but chronologically it was long before Gideon's day.) That center of worship had denigrated into flagrant idolatry and the official priesthood at Shiloh had been able to do nothing about it. Perhaps Gideon, in his zeal for the Lord, thought that he could succeed where Shiloh had failed and at least establish a center of worship more acceptable to the northern tribes than the one in the territory of the universally disliked tribe of Ephraim. If that was in fact his idea, he was grievously in error in supposing that any deviation from the Divine arrangement, no matter how sincerely undertaken, could be productive of anything but ill.

Thus it was in this case. Gideon had in effect set up a rival sanctuary to the legal one in Shiloh and the consequence was that *"all Israel went thither a-whoring after it; which thing became a snare to Gideon, and to his house."* (Judges 8:27) That expression means that unlawful worship and ceremonial was carried on in Abi-ezer of Manasseh and the fact that the Deity worshipped was the Ever-Living and not Baal did nothing to mitigate that fact. It is probable that Gideon established some kind of priesthood, and attempted to emulate in some degree the ceremonies which could rightfully only be observed at Shiloh. Thus, there were three places in Israel claiming to represent God before the people—Shiloh in Ephraim, Dan in the far north where a renegade Levitical priesthood functioned, and this at Abi-ezer. The sad refrain of the Book of Judges comes to the mind: *"In those days there*

was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”—Judges 17:6

The wonder is that the knowledge and service of the God of Israel subsisted at all. Evidently it did in measurable degree, for after Gideon's victory the land had rest for the unusually long period of forty years, and this of itself denotes that there was no general apostasy. The most reasonable conclusion is that under Gideon's leadership the nation remained nominally loyal to God and the Covenant, and the shrines of Baal were destroyed, leaving a form of worship which so far as its ceremonial aspect was concerned represented no more than a pale reflection of what it could have been had the Covenant been zealously observed in all its provisions.

There is another possibility which may explain Gideon's institution of this rival sanctuary, an action so much out of character compared with his earlier scrupulous observance of Divine leading. At some time during the period of the Judges there was a violent disruption in the High Priestly family whereby the ordained succession from Aaron's son, Eleazar, was broken and the priestly office transferred to the descendants of Aaron's younger son, Ithamar. The Scriptures are completely silent as to the details of this affair; it is not so much as mentioned anywhere. Judges 20:28 indicates that Phinehas, son of Eleazar, was High Priest in his turn and then no more is recorded until, much later on, we find Eli, of the line of Ithamar, as High Priest in the days of Samuel. Josephus has a little more to say, although the source of his information is unknown. He says that after Phinehas, his descendants, Abishua, Bukki and Uzzi, were High Priests and then the office passed to Eli, who was the first High Priest of the line of Ithamar. Now the days of Eli's youth must have coincided fairly well with the time of Gideon. Eli is represented in the Scriptures as an indolent and indifferent High Priest and his sons, his destined successors, irreverent and depraved.

One wonders if some "power struggle" within the

family of Aaron occurred at or just before the time of Gideon which resulted in the legal line of Eleazar being ousted from Shiloh and the junior line substituted by force and illegally. The reputation of Ephraim generally and the character of the inhabitants of its chief towns—Shechem, Bethel, Shiloh, and so on—was such that almost any kind of roguery could take place. Although Shiloh was the place where the Tabernacle stood for over four hundred years, the Lord bitterly reproached the people there for their iniquity and predicted that his judgment would come upon it—as it did in the days of Samuel. *“But go ye now to my place which was in Shiloh,”* he said to Jeremiah, *“and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people.”* (Jeremiah 7:12) It was in fact the iniquity of the people and priesthood there in Ephraim that caused the Lord to take away the birthright which in Jacob's day had been given to Joseph, and to award it to Judah, so that Judah became the royal tribe. *“He forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which He placed among men . . . He refused the tabernacle of Joseph, and rejected the tribe of Ephraim, and chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which He loved . . . He chose David also his servant.”* (Psalm 78:59-71)

What great crime was this which took place in the very place of God's sanctuary; what depth of iniquity was there in the lives of those people and priests in Ephraim which drew forth such condemnation from the Most High? The behavior of Eli's sons during the boyhood of Samuel (I Sam. 2:22), of Abimelech and the men of Shechem (Judges 9), of Micah and his graven images in the very vicinity of Shiloh (Judges 17) are only three incidents which show just how far gone in the ways of evil were these professed men of God.

Is it then possible that Shiloh had in the days of Gideon fallen into the hands of a faction which made Eli, or perhaps his father, High Priest in defiance of the legal rights of the Eleazar line and that the true High Priest—whether Uzzi or one of his successors, Zerariah

or Meraioth, all recorded in I Chronicles 6 as the legal line from Eleazar, although not said to have been High Priests—was compelled to flee into exile? In such case, he would most likely cross the border into Manasseh. The enmity between that tribe and Ephraim would assure him of a welcome and safety, and the Manassites would certainly recognize him as the legal holder of the office. Gideon had already erected an altar in his home village and named it Jehovah-shalom: “God will give peace.” Did he now, in the flush of victory, add to his enthusiasm for the abolition of Baal worship a zeal for the service of God in a form which perhaps had not been known in Shiloh for many years past? Did he, in declining the offer of kingship over Israel, dream of a restored legal High Priest of the line of Eleazar, functioning not at Shiloh in Ephraim, but at Ophrah in Manasseh, and is this why he made the ephod?

We do not know. We only know that whatever the motive prompting his establishment of Divine service at the altar he had built, it was doomed to failure. It was not of Divine appointment. Despite all the shortcomings of the sanctuary at Shiloh, it was still the place where the Lord had put His name. The Ark of the Covenant still reposed within the Most Holy and the mysterious *Shekinah* still illumined that secret apartment with its supernatural light. It was for God, not Gideon, to say when the order of things was to come to an end. And when it did end, it was to Judah, not Manasseh, that the honor went; at Jerusalem, not Ophrah, where the Lord authorized a sanctuary for his name. It was to be Solomon, not Gideon, who in due time would restore the priestly office to the rightful line of Eleazar.

It is probable that Gideon’s fault was over-enthusiasm for God and failure to realize that enthusiasm itself can be a snare if it is not controlled by a scrupulous adherence to the Divine leading. It is not said of him in the case of the ephod, as it was in the case of the expedition, that he sought signs from God that he was doing the right thing.

It might well have been that his righteous indignation at the godlessness of Shiloh convinced him that as virtual ruler of the nation he must strike another blow for God, not against external enemies this time but against internal enemies. He underestimated the extent of irreligion which still existed in Israel. In destroying the altar of Baal at Ophrah and setting up in its place an altar to Jehovah and in doing away with the *asherah* and substituting an ephod, he had merely changed the name of the god and left the basic principle untouched. And so, idolatry was not completely eliminated in Israel. It was merely driven underground to bide its time for its re-emergence. It was going to require the work of Samuel, a century or two later, to replace the corrupt and godless priesthood at Shiloh by a new and vigorous administration which would bring all Israel back to a real and living faith.

Nevertheless Gideon did much to arrest Israel's decline into apostasy. He lived forty years after his great victory and during all that forty years, under his administration, the land had rest from enemies, a sure sign that in the main God was honored and the Covenant observed. But it was largely a personal loyalty; "*As soon as Gideon was dead, the children of Israel turned again . . . and made Baal-berith their god, and remembered not the Lord who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side.*" (ch. 8:33-39) A new generation arose that knew nothing of the famous deliverance except by the stories told by their grandfathers, and the whole sad experience had to be endured again.

So it has been throughout history. No generation seems able to learn from the mistakes of its predecessors. Each must learn by actual experience. In their arrogance and self-will, pride in their own abilities and achievements, men will not brook being told what is for their good. They cannot endure the thought that they owe existence and life to a higher power and are as yet immature babes, unable to fashion their own lives and steer their own course aright without acceptance of guidance and instruction

from on high. The thirtieth chapter of Isaiah presents an eloquent lament on this sad propensity in the hearts of men and its inevitable consequences. The people refuse the word of the Lord and reject His prophets. The Lord intervenes to tell them that in quietness and confidence in Him lies their real strength, but they will not have Him. “No”, say they, *“for we will flee upon horses,”* to which the Most High sadly responds, *“therefore ye shall indeed flee.”* *“We will ride upon the swift,”* they claim exultantly, and again, more sadly still, the response, *“therefore shall they that pursue you be swift.”* (Isaiah 30:16) There can be no escape from the consequences of their own folly and short sightedness. At the end of it all there is only utter ruin.

But not for ever. Just because man is an immature babe, and is so to the end of this present earthly life, God will not cast him off for ever. The lessons will be learned, and eventually, in a further stage of development, men will emerge chastened but better for the experience. So, says Isaiah, as he continues his strain, *“therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you . . . for the Lord is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for him . . . he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when He shall hear it He shall answer thee. And though the Lord give you the bread of affliction, and the water of affliction, yet . . . thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it.”* Just as the Lord delivered Israel in the days of Gideon when they repented and cried unto him, so all who turn from their own ways to seek him in sincerity and submission, whether in this life or the next, whether before death or after resurrection, will experience the truth of that saying, *“he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry.”*—Isaiah 30:18,19

There will be, there must be, an end to the day of grace and the opportunity of salvation—a time when those who resolutely and in the face of full knowledge choose Baal instead of the Ever-Living, choose death, which is all that

Baal can give, instead of life which comes only from the Ever-Living. But that moment does not come until the immature babe has been brought to the full stature of a man, fully cognizant of the issues between life and death, between good and evil, between righteousness and unrighteousness, and with clear understanding of the principles involved and the effects of his decision.

Israel in the time of the Judges alternated between the true and the false, between life and death, many times, and Gideon was only one of the many judges who rose up to deliver and bring them back to the right path. But they always slipped back again. The coming Age in which the living and the dead will stand before a Divine Deliverer greater by far than Gideon will face a final crisis greater by far than that incursion of Midianites in that far-off day; for Christ is set to destroy all evil, not for a limited time as then when other nations eventually ravaged the land of Israel again, but for all time. And with the end of evil will come the end of evil-doers; at the end of the Messianic Age it is going to be gloriously true that *“in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*—Philippians 2:10,11

SAMSON THE MIGHTY

When the Israelite tribe of Dan entered the promised land, the Philistines were already down in the flat lands bordering the sea, thirty or more miles away, and there was plenty of land for both. But now, both peoples were multiplying fast and wanting more and more land on which to settle. For 40 years the people of Dan had suffered marauding raids of Philistines, scouring the valley for plunder.—Judges 13:1

Tall, muscular men, these Philistine soldiers, wearing coats of mail and polished bronze helmets, were armed with swords and spears and other weapons, such as Israel had never seen before. They came from the Island of Crete in the days of Abraham, settling on the seacoast to grow corn for their native lands. Crete was already a civilized and progressive country, having a lively power of mechanical invention.

In the village of Zorah, Manoah and his wife were quiet, God-fearing Israelites of the tribe of Dan. They had faith that God would protect them from their enemies and give them prosperity as long as they honored him and obeyed his covenant, but they had one great sorrow. They had no son. No one to carry on their line and inherit

their lot in the land. It was hard for them to understand, for the covenant promised the blessing of children among other gifts.

One day in the fields, Manoah's wife met an angel. The angel told her that she would have a son and he was to be devoted to God, a Nazirite, and when grown to manhood, he would begin to deliver Israel from the power of the Philistines.

Since the Israelites were subject to the Philistines, instead of vice versa, it is an indication that Israel had failed to keep their covenant. If it had been kept, they were promised immunity from such things. The promise of a child who would begin to deliver Israel was a divine intimation that in some ways Israel had shown signs of repentance and God was quick to respond with promised deliverance.

The child was to be a Nazirite. The vow of a Nazirite was to mark the dedication of a man to God's service, either for a stipulated time or for his lifetime. (Numbers 8:2-8) The man set himself by fulfilling three obligations. He was to abstain from the fruit of the grape vine, not to pass a razor over his head (hair and beard to be allowed to grow, uncut) and he was not to become defiled by a dead body. The Nazirite was set apart for the performance of such direct duties as might be given him by God. The intimation to Manoah and his wife that their son was to be a Nazirite implied therefore that from birth he was separated for a very definite purpose. He shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.

His life began, full of promise. Born of devoted, God-fearing parents, trained in the strict self-discipline which strengthens character, sobriety and tenacity of purpose, while at the same time builds physical strength and stamina, he was conscious of a Divine destiny and calling.

The camp of Dan between Aorah and Eshatol was evidently a tribal meeting place where perhaps the elders of the villages and families gathered in conclave and the youth of the tribe met to engage in sports and contests of

skill. Samson would at such times stand out with superior strength and skill and surely the older men would notice and say to one another that God was about to fulfill his promise to raise up the deliverer for which their souls longed. Hopes must have run high.

Samson went to Timnath, a Philistine village, saw a beautiful Philistine woman and told his father and mother to get her for his wife. In one moment the parents' hopes and pride were destroyed. For him to deny all the high ideals inculcated in him from childhood by choosing a wife from the godless aliens must have caused heartbreak and disappointment throughout Zorah. With all the arrogance and self confidence of inexperienced youth, Samson answered his father's plea to "*find a wife of the families of Israel,*" with "*Get her for me, for she pleaseth me well.*"—Judges 14:3

With a heavy heart, Manoah performed the distasteful task demanded by the custom of the day—consulting with the Philistine father of the girl and agreeing upon the details of her dowry, the guarantees and assurances on behalf of his son, and all the arrangements which had to be made before the union could be effected. To the Hebrews, this was the real marriage; after which, the bride remained at her father's house for a period of months before her husband came to take her to his new home.

Timnath was a village six or seven miles from Zorah, only a mile or so from the Philistine population. Mixed marriages were probably not uncommon, even though the Law Covenant prohibited them. Samson is the perfect example of the natural man who perceives not the things of the Spirit of God, even though he pays lip service to God and believes himself to be favored of God. The obligations of the Mosaic Law and of the Nazirite Vow meant nothing to Samson so long as he could go out and kill Philistines for God. Only when his natural strength failed him and he was brought low in suffering did his mind become enobled to better things.

Within a little while, Samson was striding along the path that led from Zorah to Timnath on the way to finalize the contract with the woman who had taken his fancy. He was an attractive, athletic figure of Hebrew youth, with flowing locks and keen, clear eyes.

Canaan was a fertile land with trees. The wilder parts between villages harbored many wild animals. Samson may not have been altogether surprised at the sudden appearance on the pathway of a lion. The beast was probably the more frightened. The young lion roared - a prelude to its crouching for a spring. Samson, confident in his strength and agility, waited for the leap. As it came, he stepped aside and in a lightning flash, got behind and above the animal, his hand round the throat and bent its neck backward till the life of the animal was gone. He flung the lifeless body by the wayside and strode away, reveling in his strength and, perhaps praising God for his victory. (chap. 14:5,6) The account says that the spirit of God came upon him to do this thing. He did believe God gave him physical strength in every time of need. And who reading the story and viewing the life of Samson can doubt that the holy spirit did indeed give him strength above that of most men, even though in the end he failed to make of it all that he might have had he been less a slave to his own fleshly passions?

The period of waiting ended and Samson again took the path to Timnath to claim his bride. As a rule, this was a festive occasion, with the bride waiting with her maidens, the groom accompanied by his men friends, and with merriment and rejoicing would he bring her back to her new home. On this occasion it is evident Samson set out by himself, his parents having preceded him.

Perhaps the marriage was not popular in Timnath and his friends wanted nothing to do with it. When the feast finally was held it was at the bride's house, not the bridegroom's and the groom's companions were Philistine men, friends of the bride. On the way to his bride, Samson found time to look for the carcass of the lion he had slain

some months previously when he last passed this way. He found the skeleton (quickly the flesh would have been consumed by vultures) and in the skeleton was a colony of bees. He scooped out the honey with his hand and went on, eating. When he came to his mother and father he gave to them and they ate, not knowing the honey had come from the carcass of the lion. (ch. 14: 8,9) Had they known, they would not have eaten, for the Law forbade eating anything defiled by association with the remains of the dead.

Samson committed two further breaches of his Nazirite vow in this incident. (Numbers 8:2-8) He defiled himself by touching the dead carcass and partook of that which the law defined as “strong drink,” in other words, fermented. The ancients used honey as a means of producing fermented liquors. For so small an immediate attraction as a mouthful of honey, he ignored his obligation to God. There is a strong likeness to Esau. Esau also insisted on marrying alien women and sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.

The wedding feast proceeded, but the outcome was disastrous. Thirty Philistine youths, drinking Samson’s wine, almost certainly spelled trouble, and it was not long in forthcoming. Samson—probably flushed with wine himself—challenged the thirty to a contest of wits. He would give a riddle. The loser would agree to pay 30 plain robes and 30 fancy robes. The youths accepted the challenge and Samson, remembering the carcass filled with honey gave them this riddle:

“Food came out of the eater and sweetness from the strong.”—ch. 14:14

For anyone unfamiliar with the circumstances, it would be difficult to solve. Probably the solution would be arrived at by a series of eliminating questions—similar, perhaps, to the game “20 Questions.” This however, was not just a party game. The Philistine youths had no intention of losing and after three days they determined to take drastic steps.

The feast was apparently designed to continue seven days. The improbability of such a period of conviviality with the people he had been commissioned from birth to oppose, fight, and, if necessary, destroy to deliver Israel apparently had not entered Samson's mind.

Samson's newly married wife was in a predicament. Her friends had threatened to burn down her father's house with her inside unless she obtained the riddle's answer and gave it to them. Rather than tell Samson of the threat, she used her womanly wiles, accompanied by a flood of tears, to tease it out of him. Therefore on the 7th day the Philistine youths gave Samson the answer. "*What is sweeter than honey, and what is stronger than a lion.*" (ch. 14:18) Samson was cold with anger. He knew where they had obtained the answer. In his fury, he went to the Philistine town of Ashkelon, deep in Philistine territory. There he surprised and murdered 30 Philistine men, stole their garments and came back to Timnath to pay his debt.

Samson returned to Zorah with his parents, leaving his wife at her father's house. Most likely his feelings were of wounded pride rather than of a man betrayed by the woman he loved. Accustomed to hero-worship and admiration, he was coldly furious at being slighted in the very quarter from which he least expected it.

His parents trudged home wearily behind him. Rioting, gluttony, drunkenness, theft and murder were the fruits of Samson's wedding feast. These were embedded into the character of the man of whom it had been predicted before his birth, "*He shall be a Nazirite unto God; he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hands of the Philistines.*" (ch. 13:5) When they arrived home and the full story of the week's disastrous happenings had been made known in Zorah, many must have mourned for their fallen idol, as their long cherished hope faded.

Many disappointed parents have been plunged into despair because of such an outcome of their efforts. The fault is often not in inadequacy of training, but in the near

overwhelming power of Adamic sin. In Samson's case a pretty face started him on the road to ruin. Behind it all is the influence of the one the Bible refers to as the "*god of this world*," blinding the minds of those who believe not.—2 Corinthians 4:4

Just as the seed of evil, sown in past generations comes to fruitage, so must the seed of righteousness, sown in prayer and faith by godly parents bear fruit one day. There are many prophetic scriptures which speak of a day of righteousness in which under the rule of Christ, the devil will be bound that he might deceive the nations no more and all men will learn of righteousness and the call to become reconciled to God.

It is not too much to expect that in some wonderful manner God will extend to all the Samsons of every age, in whose hearts reside the slightest possibility of repentance, the opportunity to turn again from their evil and accept Christ. Let every parent take comfort from the scriptural truth that God is not less merciful than our own hearts, that his love for the erring one is not less than ours, and that He will by no means loose his hold until He sees that all possibility of repentance is dead. It may take the supreme crisis of physical death to awaken some wayward one to the goodness of God.

But here in the story, Samson is farther away from God than ever. Of what use to say that the spirit of the Lord came upon him, when the only result was to strengthen him to great physical feats but never to reach his heart. Until then he could in no sense of the word be God's man. So he returned to Zorah, a disappointed, frustrated, vengeful man, consumed with a desire to execute further retaliation upon the authors of his wounded feelings.

Some time later Samson decided to go to the wife he had abandoned, bringing her back to Zorah, making her his wife in fact. His nature was probably not capable of maintaining deep emotion for very long and in the casual way which seems to have characterized so many of his actions, he apparently assumed that all that had

happened would by now be forgiven and forgotten.

His father-in-law thought he had seen the last of Samson, considered the marriage to be at an end and gave his daughter to one of the young men who had been the cause of all the trouble. The father-in-law offered him his younger daughter, but Samson was slighted again. (ch. 15:1,2) His vanity wounded even more deeply than before, he strode out of the house, vowing vengeance.

The whole story of Samson gives the picture of a man whose mind had not developed in pace with his body, a giant not aware of the moral significance of his actions. Now he was possessed of one idea only; revenge upon the whole Philistine community.

Samson was a country lad and knew how to track and catch the common (jackals) foxes. The time was the wheat harvest. The rains had ceased and the watercourses were dried up. Samson started catching jackals (foxes), tying them in pairs tail to tail, fixing burning straw or similar materials to each pair of tails. The terrified animals struggled frantically with each other, darting madly about as each sought to rid itself of the flames, setting fire to the grain in myriad places as they fled. Samson did this with 300 of them. (ch. 15:6)

By the time the last fire was out, and order restored, Samson was nowhere to be found and the majority of the entire crop of grain for the homeland of Crete (1,000 square miles) could have easily been destroyed. The disaster could well have been the turning point of Philistine fortunes in Canaan. Samson may have diverted the course of history but all he was thinking of at the time was personal revenge. The Philistines were also in the mood for revenge and they went up and burnt Samson's wife and father-in-law, (ch. 15:6) which raised Samson to fresh fury. Samson attacked them viciously and slaughtered many.

The Philistines sent men to capture him and he hid in a cave in the rocks. For the first time Samson was on the defensive. The men in Judah were not disposed to

help him. Apprehension for their own safety outweighed any feeling of support they may have had for their would-be national champion. Three thousand of them went to bind Samson and hand him over to the Philistines. (ch. 15:12-14) Samson made them promise not to kill him and allowed them to tie him with two new ropes, and lead him to the Philistines. As they approached the Philistines, the spirit of the Lord came upon him and the ropes snapped and he seized the only weapon at hand, an ass' jawbone lying on the ground.

The nature of his past exploits and the fact that he had always emerged unscathed, coupled with his appearance—a giant of a man, flowing locks and beard, enormous muscles, probably with a grim and fear-inspiring countenance—created confusion in the Philistine ranks. It is likely that the men of Judah, seeing him free himself and advance into combat shook off their fears and rallied to his support. Something of the spirit of the Lord might have been communicated to the men of Judah and caused them to remember the past glories of Israel, when their ancestors fought to establish a foothold in the land. It is reasonable to think that Samson, wielding his jawbone to good effect in the midst of the Philistines, was assisted by a goodly contingent of men of Judah, armed with whatever they could lay hold of, and after the battle 1,000 lay dead on the field.—Judges 15:15

Following the battle, Samson for the first time called on the Lord. Regrettably, it was only for an immediate drink of water. His mind was still on himself and material things. But God, ever ready to respond to the slightest trace of faith, gave answer. The hero suddenly found water bubbling out of a cleft in a rock and drank.

The result of this battle established Samson as recognized leader of at least the southern half of Israel. He remained "judge" for 20 years (ch. 15:20) although at no time was Israel freed from the Philistine yoke. Such law and order as there was in Israel was vested in Samson. Such freedom from oppression and victory

over enemies was due to the leadership of Samson. But there was no national return to God, no restoration of the Covenant. Their continued subjection to the Philistines is evidence of that, for whenever Israel did repent and return to God, He gave them actual deliverance from their enemies. That was a condition of the covenant. The rule of Samson, Nazirite though he was, was a purely secular one without God. Small wonder it ended in disaster.

Samson had now exercised rulership over Israel for 20 years without contributing to the moral or religious progress of his people. It was not a time of religious revival and Israel, in the main, went on worshipping other gods, and no voice was raised calling them back to the God of their Fathers.

Samson had every possible advantage fitting him for the role of national religious leader as well as political leader. His Nazirite upbringing and early training coupled with unusual physical attributes could have marked him as a leader everyone would have followed. Had the power of God been behind him, he would have been irresistible, but God can only work through men who are sincerely devoted to him and Samson was not. He was too much a slave to his own desires and passions. The women in Samson's life were the cause of his undoing and his failure to achieve what otherwise would have been a memorable destiny. Now, after 20 years unchallenged rule, we find him entangled with yet another woman, Delilah of Sorek in Judah, 40 miles from Zorah.—Chapter 16

It is likely she was an Amorite, the daughter of the people who inhabited Canaan when the Israelites first entered the land, and never succeeded in driving out. The Amorites were tall, well built, with fair hair and blue eyes.

Samson visited her whenever he chose, and no doubt had long ago given up any fear of danger from the Philistines. Twenty years' reliance on his personal strength and agility had built the impression of "good luck"

firmly in his mind. As for the things of God, he evidently never gave them a thought.

Samson's infatuation with Delilah did not go unnoticed and was the subject of a discussion of the councils of "five lords of the Philistines." The word "lords," described the official rank of a member of the ruling body of five which governed the Philistine colony in Canaan. They wanted to get the elusive Samson into their hands and wondered if they could get at him through this woman.

For information leading to capture of the hero they offered Delilah about \$40,000, which must have represented a big temptation. Delilah accepted the proposition. One evidence which might indicate Delilah was not one of Samson's own people is the fact that a Hebrew woman would have known the Nazirite secret without having to worm it out of him.

One would have thought that Samson, after a similar disastrous experience 20 years earlier would have been proof against a repetition. He would now be at least in his early 40s and, presumably, wiser in the ways of men and women than in those past days. Perhaps the guileless blue eyes of the fair-haired Amorite damsel persuaded him that she was incapable of the villainy once perpetuated by his dark-eyed Philistine love.

More likely, he had become reckless in the conviction that he was invulnerable, and that come what may, the Philistines would never capture him. So, while fully aware of the danger of revealing his secret, he was prepared to "play with fire," purely to torment the Philistines with false hopes which could not be realized.

To Delilah's tearful entreaties he responded with a fictitious story that if he could be bound with seven green withs (stems of a rush-like plant) that had never been dried, his strength would go from him. Next time he visited her, Delilah had a suitable party of Philistines concealed in the chamber. Samson may have had an idea they were there, especially when Delilah proposed binding him with seven green withs, Samson probably

assisted in adjusting his bonds and stood there laughing at Delilah's confidence that the money was as good as in her purse. As his would-be captors burst forth from their hiding place, he snapped his bonds like cotton thread and was gone, laughing uproariously at the joke.

It was not long before Samson was back to be met with more tears and reproaches. In order to restore friendly relations, Samson indicated to Delilah that the real trouble was that the green withs had snapped unexpectedly and what was needed were two new ropes that had never been stretched. It may be that Delilah took a few lessons in knot tying. Before very long the Philistines lay concealed in Delilah's room, with no better results than before. Delilah probably had a hard time explaining that she was doing her best, and may even have had threats of unpleasant consequences in the event of her failure.

Samson was getting reckless. Mischievously, he suggested his strength could be curbed by weaving his long hair with the web of partly made cloth even while standing by the loom. As Delilah looked at the loom, she reasoned that a man whose hair was woven in with the cross threads to make as it were a piece of cloth would be quite unable to break free unless he scalped himself. The next step was to persuade Samson to act the part he facetiously suggested.

On a set night, the hopeful captors crouched in their hiding place while the loom creaked and turned as Delilah steadily wove her lover's luxuriant hair into the strangest cloth ever woven. When it was finished, the weaving lay wound tightly around the roller which Delilah thoughtfully locked with the pin to avoid any possibility of unrolling.

Samson must have presented a pitiable and undignified sight with his head drawn close up to the roller, around which his hair was now wound and his body sprawled across the woodwork of the loom. What more fitting a picture could there be of a man who had become a complete slave to his own weaknesses?

For the third time the Philistines sprang out, expecting this time that there could be no escape. But they had still underestimated their quarry's strength. With one mighty heave Samson wrecked the loom, tearing free the roller with its roll of cloth together with the broken pin and parts of the loom as he could not be detached from the cloth and was away.

Samson's own people must by now have become used to his eccentricities. Only a few of the older ones who had regard for the God of Israel and remembered the circumstances of Samson's birth would shake their heads sadly and look hopelessly at one another. The account does not record how he explained the peculiar condition of his hair, ostensibly sacred to God, but now inexplicably woven in with some woman's weaving material. Nor does it say how long it took to disentangle the yarn from the hair and restore his flowing locks to their usual luxuriance.

In this story is enshrined all the tragedy of a man who flirts with danger and whose successive escapes from serious consequences only encourage him to live more dangerously. In a sense, it is the story of mankind, fallen into sin. Only utter disaster and heartbreak at the end brings him to a consciousness of his own folly and the true means of reformation and eventual happiness.

At this stage the Philistines apparently lost interest and went home. But Delilah had no intention of giving up so easily. She resumed her efforts with Samson and began to wear down his resistance. He apparently saw her often, for *"She nagged at him every day until he couldn't stand it any longer and finally told her his secret."* *"My hair has never been cut,"* he confessed, *"for I've been a Nazirite to God since before my birth. If my hair were cut, my strength would leave me and I would become as weak as anyone else."*—Judges 16:17

With that admission Samson signed his own death warrant. Delilah's instinct told her that this time he had revealed the truth. Maybe she waited awhile to

lull any suspicion on Samson's part that she might use this information. Samson's blindness to possible consequences is almost incomprehensible, except on the supposition that he relied again on his own physical ability to extricate himself from any difficulty.

"She lulled him to sleep with his head in her lap and they brought a barber and cut off his hair." Cruelly, she jerked him back to consciousness with the familiar words, *"The Philistines are here to capture you Samson."* (ch. 16:19,20) Samson, shorn of his locks, found himself bereft of the mighty strength which had so long been his and in which he had trusted. He himself apparently believed the secret of his strength lay as a Nazirite, the symbol of which was his long hair. The symbol meant more to him than the reality. It seemed that he could break every law of God and every aspect of his vow without considering his status as a Nazirite imperiled but he must retain his long hair. Samson's tragedy was to hold the symbol while rejecting the reality behind the symbol, and that has been the tragedy of a great many Christians.

As a medical or physical reason for his loss of vital strength, the removal of his hair is absurd. Nowhere in the story of Samson is unusual physical strength said to be inherent in the Nazirite's long hair. The idea that the strength was in his hair rests entirely on Samson's own testimony and represents only his belief.

He had betrayed his God! That was the terrible realization which smote Samson with all the force of a sledge hammer blow as he leapt up and realized that the hair in which he had taken such pride was gone. He was no longer a Nazirite and God was gone from him. While he kept his unshaven locks he gloried in the strength which he believed they conferred on him and cared nothing about the remainder of God's commands. Now he lost that which had been his glory and, in one moment of acute self-perception he saw himself as he was—a man whose persistent self-indulgence had separated him from

God, and blinded him to the calling of God, and betrayed him into the hands of the enemies of God. The bitterness of that moment deprived him of all power to resist and, as his exultant enemies led him away securely bound, he went with them passively, helplessly, a broken-hearted and despairing man.

His own foolishness and pride had led to the loss of that which made him a man of God and with that loss he had lost all. God had departed from him and he would never again possess strength with which to outwit and overcome his enemies. Doubtless these bitter thoughts possessed his mind as he trudged wearily into Gaza through the cheering crowds who had come to gloat over the capture of the man who had been their scourge for 20 years.

There in the prison house in Gaza, Samson found God. Blinded, in chains, condemned to spend the rest of his life trudging round and round pushing the bar of the heavy corn-mill-work which was normally was performed by animals—he had time to think. What passed between Samson and his God during those dark hours is not known to any man. All we do know is that at their close, Samson is found supplicating God in a manner which is entirely alien to his former attitudes. That is the evidence that in prison Samson became a changed man. There he saw himself in his true light. There he repented, and there God, who desires not that any should die, but would that they turn from their wickedness and live, accepted that repentance and wiped Samson's slate clean.

The Philistines, so exultant at their feat of overcoming the strong man, apparently overlooked one contingency, Samson's hair began to grow again. The thick, long tresses began to fall around the shoulders of the poor slave toiling at the mill and, as they grew, Samson began to flex his muscles and discover, to his surprise, that he again possessed tremendous physical strength. It is perhaps understandable that he concluded that there was a connection between the growth of his Nazirite

locks and the rediscovering of his physical power. But this time, there was no attempt to deliver himself. It began to look as though he was now waiting upon God. The recovery of his strength became a sign to him that God had forgiven him.

So it came about that, on a day when all Gaza was gathered for a celebration—of which a feature was acknowledgement to their god, Dagon, for delivering Samson into their hands (ch. 16:23)—the blinded captive was led out of the prison and into the arena to be made a public spectacle. The five lords of the Philistines were there and all the highest nobility and gentry, and on the roof of the building, 3,000 people crowded hoping to catch a glimpse of the legendary strongman. It is probable that in his blindness he was baited in various ways, making sport of his blindness to the delight of the drunken crowd.

The function was apparently a public celebration and not a religious proceeding. The building probably was the local games stadium which would be an open-air arena where the players performed. Likely it had a structure similar to a grandstand which was reserved for people of importance, with the roof thrown open to the public.

To accommodate such a crowd, even if closely packed, would demand something like 80' x 30' front to back. Both the interior seats and standing space on the roof would be sloping front to back so all could see. If made like modern grandstands the front of the building would be open throughout the length and the roof supported along the open front by light wooden posts with a balustrade along the roof to keep the excited crowd from falling off. The five lords of the Philistines would of course, be seated in the middle of the interior in the best seats.

Upon arriving at the pavilion, Samson can be imagined as taking his stand between the two center pillars, grasping them in his strong arms. There then followed one of the most tragically pathetic prayers of the

Old Testament, a prayer noble in its utter dependence upon the power of God. Samson had always relied on his own strength. Now, when that strength, misused, had brought him to this sorry state, he prayed to God that he might do at least one deed of valor though it be the last deed of his life, in the strength and power of God instead of his own. *“Jehovah, remember me again - please strengthen me one more time so that I may pay back the Philistines for the loss of at least of my eyes.”*—Chapter 16:28

And so saying, he bore with all his might on the two posts around which his strong arms were braced.

Samson had for the moment disappeared from sight, just under the roof. Human nature being what it is, there was undoubtedly a movement of people to the extreme edge of the roof in an endeavor to look over and see what he was doing. The excited crowd of people crowding to the front of the roof and craning over the edge had already increased the load on the front pillars to the danger point. Then Samson voiced his prayer, braced himself against the two wooden pillars, possibly no more than 4-5” in diameter and already creaking and bowing under the strain, he heaved with all his might. The more he was able to bend the columns out of perpendicular, the greater would be the crippling effect of the human load above, until at length he reached the point of no return. The roof began to sag and the milling crowd showed their apprehension while the nobility under the roof jumped up in sudden alarm at the reality of what a few seconds earlier seemed but a foolhardy gesture of the blind captive.

At this point the wooden pillars would fracture under the strain and then with a rending and cracking of heavy timbers, accompanied by cries and shrieks from above, the entire roof caved in and fell forward with its 3,000 occupants upon those seated in the audience below.

True to his nature, he had the last word with the Philistines after all.

In life an apostate, in death Samson was a true Nazirite in communion with God, putting his trust in God and invoking the power of God. His was a wasted life, but before his death he saw the light. His brothers and other relatives came and extracted his body from the wreckage and buried him with his parents. He judged Israel 20 years but he never destroyed the Philistine power. If the five lords perished in the catastrophe at Gaza, there would be a period of political uncertainty which would explain the evident decay of Philistine power over Israel in the time of Samuel, only a generation or so later. Samson, the Nazirite, who failed his commission, was the one judge who wrought no deliverance in Israel. He did at least, *“begin to deliver Israel out of the hands of the Philistines.”*

It might reasonably be wondered why the name of Samson appears in the gallery of heroes of faith in the 11th Chapter of Hebrews. His life was not one of service to God. He had nothing of the faith of Abraham, the loyalty of Moses or the devotion of Samuel. He does not appear as a leader of the type that will be wanted in the next age when the law of the Lord goes out from Zion and there will be Princes of God established to direct and lead men in the ways of God. Yet his name is included as one of those who having *“received a good report through faith received not the promise, God, having provided some better thing for us (the Christian Church) that they without us should not be made perfect.”*

It is possible that God saw something in Samson's character. The story, written by onlookers, does not reveal anything we cannot see. Could it be that the lad Samson up to, say 20 or so years of age, was sincere and devout in his profession to God's service, that he was swept off his feet by the attractions of the woman he wanted for his wife and thereafter floundered 20 years without God, basking in the light of admiration and flattery, and that the final tragedy of blindness, captivity and neglect brought him to his senses? In such a case, although

the consequences of those 20 years of folly could not be avoided, the Father would put them behind his back and they would be seen no more.

Might it not be that the character of Samson while in Gaza prison was purified and ennobled by this sequel to his life's experiences, so that in the future he would forever be God's man? If this be so, then he suffered physical blindness and death in order that he might receive spiritual sight and eventual life. So it might well be that Samson, at the end, was seen worthy and suitable for a place in the procession of the "Old Testament Saints," or "Ancient Worthies," as they are variously called, who will occupy positions of influence in the new Kingdom when Christ reigns on earth. If such be the case, we can only praise God who alone can produce characters of sterling worth from such weak clay.

As a pictorial representation of the entire history of man, the story of Samson is very apt. Mankind in the person of Adam was created for the Divine purpose to fulfill a Divine commission, and given every possible blessing and advantage. Like Samson, mankind turned away from God into paths of self-indulgence, dissipating the marvelous powers given by God in unworthy ways. In the end, mankind's own willful course leads him to utter ruin. But, after the wreck of all that his own hand has created, mankind will find God and "whomsoever will" may become reconciled to God. For God has appointed a day, the coming Messianic age, in which men, chastened by their experiences of sin, will be brought face to face with the ultimate choice between good and evil.

The salvation of Samson at the 11th hour is our guarantee that God will never let go of the sinner while there is any hope of his seeing the error of his ways, coming to Christ in sincere repentance and of acceptance of him and so being reconciled to God and becoming a citizen of God's world.

That is why, in the wisdom of God, there is an age appointed to follow this present evil world, an age in

which Satan is to be bound that he might deceive the nations no more, with Christ reigning as King over the restored and perfected earth. In that age, the entire human race will continue their life's experience with full opportunities to compare the equitable administration of the King of righteousness with the darkness and injustice of this present world of sin. Only after that final lesson in God's school will the ultimate choice be demanded: the incorrigible, unregenerate reap the inevitable wages of sin and the regenerate be received, like Samson into full fellowship with God and into eternal life. That is the gospel of the Kingdom, the *"good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people."* (Luke 2:10) That is the sublime truth which lies behind the words of Jesus, *"the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost"* and it will always be gloriously true that *"there is joy among the angels of heaven over the sinner that repenteth."*—Luke 15:7