Lessons in Leadership from the Book of Judges

General Introduction

If we are not systematic readers of the Bible we will unwittingly skip much of the Book of Judges with its crude, cruel and often sordid stories. There is a savage paganism that is often a stumbling block to people who expect the Bible just to have nice homilies. We need not suppose that the writer of Judges approved of all the brutal details recorded. The book tells of the tragic judgement of God on a people who cared nothing for His claim on their loyalty. They turned aside to other gods and soon found themselves corrupted by the disastrous evils of the pervasive surrounding culture. The Book of Judges warns of the moral and political degradation that follows disregard of God's moral laws and compromise with the prevailing godless lifestyle. The result is always moral and spiritual corruption, political serfdom and poverty.

Judges also records the deeds of four men of this period who are included in Hebrews chapter 11. So Judges is a sad and solemn book reminding us of our fragility and how easily we can backslide.

They began to occupy the land under Joshua. They were to consolidate their gains. They had to fight to enjoy their inheritance. Clearly they didn't expect this. So, in time, tribe after tribe compromised and failed. The tribe of Dan didn't even try. Compromise is not trying. It is giving up too soon. The consequence of compromise in the first generation is seen in the second!

We tend to focus on Samson and perhaps on Gideon and forget the rest. There are four men mentioned in God's honour roll in Hebrews 11: 32 – Gideon, Barak (and Deborah), Samson and Jephthah. Barak was timid. Gideon was cautious. Jephthah was a cut-throat – a highland bandit. Samson was the great "might have been". But did they all qualify for this great Hall of Faith? We will look at the lives of these three men and one woman – Deborah – for she had a major part to play in Barak's life. You will see some lessons for our lives and especially for leaders today.

God is the Great Master in re-making people, re-moulding them in character and conduct and making them into leaders of faith who accomplish His will in their generation.

George Liddell wrote:

"Give me a man of God – one man whose faith is master of his mind,
And I will right all wrongs and bless the name of all mankind.
Give me a man of God – one man whose tongue is touched with heaven's fire,
And I will flame the darkest hearts with high resolve and clear desire.
Give me a man of God – one man, one mighty prophet of the Lord,
And I will give you peace on earth – bought with prayer and not a sword.
Give me a man of God – one man – true to the vision that he sees,
And I will build your broken shrines and bring the nations to their knees."

This is a bit simplistic but still true. God's method is men and women who are God-mastered, who live **by faith** – not trying to maintain a fragile balance between the pros and cons of belief in God. **By faith** they have a firm commitment to God for time and eternity come what may. This produces men and women of action.

A look at the conditions of the people of God around 1400 BC

- The twelve tribes were weak, scattered and disorganised, with no established leadership or administration since the death of Joshua. Far from living in victory and in peace, they were the prey and prisoners of their foes. Joshua had gone. David was yet to come.
- They were confined to the high, harsh, inhospitable mountain areas with their dry and seldom green slopes. Down in the valleys their proud and powerful foes enjoyed the lush green

agricultural fields and easy living. Their foes got the goodies but, ***"They were in terrible distress"*** (2:15). They lived out a miserable existence – a relentless hopeless struggle pitted against a harsh natural environment and cruel and oppressive neighbours. They lived in caves, in pitiable hovels and in goats' hair tents.

In Afghanistan in the mountainous central area – Hazarajat – the Hazara people live like this. They are Shi'ite surrounded by a nation of Sunni. They are of Mongolian descent. They are not Aryans. They too are often in terrible distress from their remote inhospitable environment and their oppressive neighbours. When in power, the Taliban killed thousands of them.

- The Iron Age had dawned amid barbaric invasions as the Middle East empires of the Bronze Age came crashing down in ruins. Iron was the latest high-tech weapon. Its monopoly was jealously guarded by the new "super powers". Og, King of Bashan, boasted a massive iron bed – proof of his one-up-manship in the new technology.

This is what the opening chapters of the Book of Judges describe. The last five chapters disclose an almost worse situation – their moral plight. The Ten Commandments are a road map to people's well-being. Yet almost every sin was being committed regularly. It is hard to speak about this section of Judges. It is embarrassingly sordid. For Micah stole from his mother and converted the proceeds into an idol. A wandering Levite with no financial income was hired by Micah to set up the "Canaanite establishment religion". The Levite later proved false to his employer when offered better pay and prospects by the covetous, idolatrous, murderous Danites. This hireling-of-a-Levite was Jonathan – probably a grandson of Moses (27:30). Degeneration! These chapters are a record of civil war, harbouring criminals, prostitution, marital desertion, homosexuality, rape and the mass abduction of young girls. This is the result of: ***"Everyone doing what was right in his own eyes"***.

In these middle chapters of Judges there are repeated cycles of sin – deserting the Living God for Ba'al. The result is servitude to the Canaanites. God, as it were, orders our misery to bring us to repentance. The People of God had forgotten how to fight (3:2). The spiritual battlefield is the greatest teacher. We shouldn't always seek to protect people from the battlefield. A lack of difficulties often keeps us from discovering the power of God. This eventually resulted in pleading prayer to the merciful, covenant-keeping God for deliverance and salvation. God answered by raising up divinely appointed leaders. There is a pattern:

- sin brings servitude – prayer brings salvation
- departing from God brings retribution – repentance brings deliverance

These principles hold true today. God's judgement still operates in this way for God is still God.

In Judges, 12 judges are mentioned – seven in some detail. In each case it is worth asking yourself:

- Who is the enemy?
- What is his strategy?
- Who is the deliverer?
- How did he deliver?

The character of Ba'al and the character of God (very briefly)

"They (the People of God) ***went after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them."*** Principally they served Ba'al and the Ashtoreth. Ba'al was regarded as the source of sexual potency and the power to beget children. Sex became the centre of worship and involved temple prostitutes and a great deal of promiscuity. Asherah was the goddess of fertility.

But God is a God of holiness. The great issue at stake was the development of a God-fearing people and the coming of the Messiah. The conflict between good and evil was as intense as ever. Barak and Deborah, Gideon and Jephthah all became involved in God's purposes and this involved battle.

This conflict goes on today as fiercely as ever. Issues of eternal consequence are being shaped around us! Are we aware? How deeply do we care? How significantly are we involved? Our prayer life is probably the most accurate gauge.

So then as now, issues of eternal destiny were at stake – the cleansing of the land from idolatry (and in our case the cleansing of our hearts and minds); the pure worship of the One True God of holiness and authority; the development of a God-fearing people and finally the hastening of the return of the Lord Jesus. Issues of eternal consequence among the nations are at stake today.

It is in this environment we see heroic leadership in a conflict that is raging as fiercely as ever today. How keenly are we aware of what is going on? How deeply do we care? What is the price of our involvement?

Introduction to the Book of Judges

The Hebrew title is "SOPETIM" (saviours, deliverers).

It is largely a book of warnings – not edification.

There are 12 judges (3:5 – 16:31)

- Their exploits are recorded without praise or blame (their actions speak for themselves).
- If they are commended, it is for their faith and courage – not for their morality.
- There are 6 major prophets and six minor ones.
- Four of the 6 has serious moral failures: Ehud – Gideon – Jephthah – Samson.
- They were raised up by God but their actions were not initiated by God.
- The Spirit of the Lord came upon them. (3:10, 6:34, 11:29)
- There was a cycle of apostasy, servitude, supplication, salvation and apostasy.

Lessons from the Book of Judges

- History repeats itself – cycles
- The danger of syncretism
- The danger of being seduced by the culture around us – absolutes
- The honesty of the Bible – radical evil will only be dealt with by the Cross
- The importance of Great Leadership – Moses and Joshua
- The necessity of both holiness and power – Samson
- The danger of revival without repentance – Josiah 2 Kings 22-23
- The theocracy will now have to operate through a monarchy:
  "Every man did …" 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25
- If the religious leadership fails morally so will the whole nation – ch. 17-21
- The 12 judges illustrate the weakness of the Old Covenant.
  The 12 apostles will illustrate the strength of the New Covenant – Jn. 14:17

Barak and Deborah – chapters 4 and 5

1. The Background

The surrounding Canaanites were having a great time! Nationally, by now, they had had about 1000 years of rule in the Fertile Crescent. They were years of culture. The Iron Age had dawned. They were inventive – writing etc. They had grown rich with trade both overland and by sea routes. There was wealth and power behind them – power in an "armoured division" – 900 chariots of iron. The art of making iron was developed by the Hittites. Iron was the best technology known to man at this date for a man to kill his neighbour.

Jabin, their king, had a good commander-in-chief in Sisera. Each chariot carried three fully armed men – two with spears and bows and arrows and all three with iron swords. The chariots were powered by the fastest, most versatile engine of the day! True only two or three horse power, but what horses! The Hyksos had perfected the military use of the chariot drawn by horses. The chariot originated in the steppes of Central Asia, but the Hyksos had perfected it. It was the world's finest fighting force astride the world's main trade route. To the poor unarmed People of God this army was all the dissuasion they needed to follow the call of God to remain separate and distinct from the religion and materialism of the Canaanites.

There was Heber, a Kenite, a descendant of Moses father-in-law Jethro – of Arab descent. He had come to terms with the Canaanites. His philosophy was possibly: 'if you can't beat them, join them'. But close by, only 2 miles away up in the hills of Napthali, lived Barak. Danger was close at hand, but the "goodies" were beyond his grasp in a place difficult to reach with chariots.

The twelve tribes were weak, scattered, disorganised and with no established leadership or administration. Far from being conquerors of Canaan, they were the prey and prisoners of their foes. You have seen it all on a far greater scale. You see it in different parts of Sudan, Somalia, in the Hazarajat Mountains of Afghanistan and in many other places – the poor, almost technology-less and helpless, being harassed by those with superior technological weapons.

The People of God had been cruelly oppressed by King Jabin for a full twenty years and God let this happen. ***"And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin King of Canaan"*** (4:2). Then God intervened. His time to act had come. Why? ***"The people cried out to the Lord to help"*** (4:3). He always acts in His time and usually when we are desperate enough to listen, learn and obey. It often takes us leaders decades to realise that what we are doing isn't working. We need to cry to the Lord for His victory.

The Lord Jesus depicted God as a "waiting Father" – waiting for the time when the foolish younger son would, ***"Come to himself"***, see the true cause of all his troubles was himself and return home.

God sent for Barak. How does God speak to us? In whatever way He chooses, for God is God. When He speaks He gets through to a man or a woman. This time God spoke through a woman, Deborah, who lived down south in Bethel. She was no cute little Debbie, but a tough, aggressive Boadicea of a woman or a Joan of Arc – an Iron Lady if ever there was one! She sent a summons to Barak and he reported quickly. Bethel was about 50 miles away – not far today, but then Barak had to walk over the hill tracks in danger of brigands. Deborah was the prophetess of the People of God at that time. Barak was a very ordinary sort of person and that was all!

"Has not the Lord … commanded you? … Go and deal with Sisera." If Barak had been a cockney Londoner you can just imagine the dialogue: "What me?" "Yes, you!" Barak was a hill farmer – no tough guy with experience in warfare. Yet he got the job! Just imagine his reaction! ***"Collect 10,000 men of Naphtali and Zebulun*** (both northern tribes) ***and muster them for war on top of Mount Tabor"*** (today Jebel-el-Tur due east of Nazareth). Militarily this was rather stupid. Sisera could observe every man and every movement as they gathered on the mountain top. Then from the top of the mountain they were to charge down the hill barefoot with hardly a sword or shield between

them and attack Sisera's well-disciplined, well-equipped army. It was crazy. But God said, ***"I will draw out Sisera … to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops and I will give him into your hand"*** (4:7). The Kishon (Nahr el-Maqatta) flows into the sea at Haifa.

Imagine Barak's reaction! It very nearly flattened him. He was terrified to go to meet Deborah – like being summoned to Buckingham Palace. He had to muster an army on Mount Tabor that could easily have been seen by Sisera who was based in Meggido. What must Barak have thought? Mad! Crazy! Deborah had flipped her lid! He had to collect some untrained, unarmed, unkempt hillbillies and send them to fight this crack armoured division. ***"Draw them out!"*** Barak must have thought this was a cruel farce. But no, Barak evidently believed Deborah was a prophetess and God was speaking through her.

This was God's Word and it worked! God's work – Barak's hand! Either God didn't know Barak or, in fact, Barak didn't know God! Do we? ***"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet".*** (Rom. 16:20) The hands and feet are those of a feeble man, but the operating power is God's!

"Only if you will go with me," replies timid Barak sweating under the shade of a palm tree where Deborah sat. She consents to this but tells him that the honour of the day will not go to him, but to a woman! So Deborah promptly gets up and goes with Barak. Deborah was a woman of action! We have no idea who her husband was. Possibly he was no longer alive. But Barak had faith. In effect, he said to himself, "This sounds far too mad to be true – just crazy. But if you, God, will come along then I'll be in it! But not on my own! Not without you God!" That's faith! Barak didn't believe God was planning a mass suicide programme for the people of Naphtali and Zebulun.

Barak summoned men from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali to the hill Tabor and amazingly 10,000 came! God said, ***"I will draw out Sisera to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops and I will give him into your hand"*** (4:15) ***"and the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak, by the edge of the sword."***

Barak heard God's Word and it worked! God's work – Barak's hand = complete victory! They were more than conquerors! 10,000 men and one woman! The Lord was going to rout Sisera, subdue Jabin and give victory to His People that day – strong, amazing stuff! Test your faith in God! Be aware of the things He is commanding you and **do it now**! Find something He forbids and stop doing it n**ow**. His power is imparted to **will** and **do** what He wills and to resist what God forbids.

2. What about Deborah – the woman that God used?

"These things were written for our learning" (1 Cor. 10:6 and Rom. 15:1). I think God usually uses men in leadership – especially in 'battle' situations, but when none are available or because He chooses to show He is not dependent on men, God uses women. We have many examples of this in Scripture. He certainly used Deborah! As we have seen, it was an awesome task to raise an unarmed army from a disunited people. Deborah was called to initiate the victory. Jabin and Sisera represented forces that were cruel and powerful. They seemed unconquerable. This is very similar to the forces arrayed against the Gospel today. Why did God choose Deborah? She was ready to listen to God. She was a prophetess. She was a woman of faith and courage and great capacity. She had a deep concern for the people. She was troubled, moved, disturbed and challenged by the 20 years of defeat.

This is where our concern begins. We need a heart of compassion – a concern for the neglected oppressed – the many "have nots" – without the Lord Jesus and without any realistic hope.

Deborah was fully consecrated to the Lord and identified with her people. Nothing was too hard, too impracticable, too impossible or too big to undertake if God had commanded it. She was ready to, ***"Present her body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God"*** (Rom. 12:1). She was a woman of faith. God needs such men and women today – those who will assess the past and soberly go forward in obedience to the commands of God and in faith in His power to perform what He promises.

3. How God brought about victory: the Song of Deborah and Barak (chapter 5)

The Biblical chroniclers knew how to write history! And that was from the perspective of heaven. The Lord routed Sisera and subdued Jabin, King of Canaan, and destroyed him (4:24). The Message puts it this way, ***"Barak charged down the slopes of Mount Tabor …. God routed Sisera – all those chariots, all those troops – before Barak. Sisera jumped out of his chariot and ran. Barak chased the chariots and troops all the way to Harosheth Haggoyim. Sisera's entire fighting force was killed – not one man left!"***

How? What happened? An invincible army destroyed! We might have expected a horrible massacre of that weaponless rabble of hill people – perhaps just carrying sticks and stones. We might have thought they would be crushed under the wheels of all those chariots. But the Canaanites were annihilated! Bodies and horses and ironmongery were spread all over the whole valley floor! Only Sisera got away on foot! Panic drove him and he ran for his life. He made for the tent of Heber – a traitor to the Jewish people. He arrived safely at Heber's tent. The song gives the answer to the question, 'What happened?'! ***"From heaven the stars fought*** (sending rain) ***from their courses they fought against Sisera"*** (5:20). Magnificent! It was probably a major flash flood in the Wadi Kishon that grounded Sisera's fast moving armoured division and bogged down his soldiers. Perhaps they took to their heels to avoid getting drowned in heavy armour. Sisera got away to the Kenite's tent on foot and was ignominiously dispatched by a woman's hand, ***"And the land had rest for 40 years"*** (5:31). This was probably an antiphonal song and is some of the finest poetry in Scripture.

When the Russian ambassador to Paris heard of Napoleon's plan to invade Russia in 1812, he apparently said, **"Man proposes, God disposes".** Silently tiny soft snowflakes fell – many millions of them. They brought to a halt and then almost buried one of the finest military forces of the day. Napoleon ought to have remembered, for strangely, a flash flood in this same Wadi Kishon enabled Napoleon to defeat the Turks in April 1799.

All the forces of nature combined with the political and military powers of the nations of the earth, to fulfil the purposes of God. He makes the wrath – and even the folly – of man to praise Him. His is the hand that writes all of history. He is God – God of yesterday, today and the future. ***"This God is our God for ever and ever."***

[There is some science in all this. Rainclouds don't just happen. Clouds need stars – stars that have exploded. The star dust spreads everywhere. Some of it is caught in the earth's gravitational field. The dust is ionised by the sun's radiation and around these tiny particles water vapour condenses to form raindrops. God planned it and told Deborah the exact time and she told Barak. ***"Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand."***]

Note that some of the 10,000 were willing volunteers (5:2) and even some leaders offered themselves. Leaders need followers. But not all the tribes responded favourably to Barak's call. ***"Among the clans of Reuben there was great searching of heart."*** Reuben lived in the area south of Amman – centred round Medeba – north of the Arnon River, ***"Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds?"*** They were raising sheep as if there was no national crisis. They stuck to their selfish interests and let nothing disturb their quiet and comfortable home life. They heard the voice of duty and their hearts responded. They heard the call. They experienced the pain and shame of being under the Canaanites. They saw the issue clearly. They understood the challenge, but they were too attached to the material and the worldly – to comfort and security. They heard the bugle call to battle, but they preferred the bleating of their sheep. So their brethren went to war and they stayed neutral.

4. Those who didn't go to battle

These are the same issues that face us all. It isn't a commitment to a place or even a people, but obedience to the Lord and a commitment to the Great Commission. The people of Reuben had words of derision spoken over them. They yielded to the status quo – so did Gilead, Dan and Asher.

Some were probably afraid. Some were probably unconcerned or accepting the situation. Others were complacent. Gilead was on the east bank – the home of the tribe of Gad. Dan, in the far north and around Joppa, remained in their ships and their trade. Asher sat still (5:17). They were in business as fishermen [see Gen. 49:20]. For them it was business as usual. Dan was dead to the call of God – fishing, money and affluence were all they were interested in.

It wasn't submission to the status quo that moved man like Henry Martyn, William Carey and Robert Morrison of China. The captain of the sailing ship that took Morrison to China sneeringly asked him, **"Do you think you are going to make any impression upon China?"** His answer was, **"No sir, but I believe God will!"**

Yet there were 10,000 whose faith triumphed over their fears. This is the story of all advances of the Kingdom – men and women of faith who dare great things for God.

"Issachar were faithful to Barak and into the valley they rushed at his heels." The Lord Jesus calls us to put Him first – at all cost and for all time. Normal standards of security must be left behind. Zebulun and Naphtali ***"risked their lives to the death"***. They weighed the matter. Some would surely die on the battlefield and some would probably be maimed for life. They were prepared to risk all rather than that God's People should be in bondage and they be disobedient to the will and call of God.

In Acts 15:26 Paul and Barnabas, ***"Risked their lives for the sake of the Lord Jesus"***. In Acts 20:24, while speaking to the Ephesian elders, Paul said, ***"I do not account my life of any value nor precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God".*** Rev. 12:1 speaks of those who have conquered, ***"…. For they loved not their lives even unto death"***.

There are still hard places calling for us – men and women of faith, courage and perseverance who will not shrink from giving our all for the Lord Jesus. As with Barak, all the powers of heaven are on our side – storms, winds, torrents, thunder and lightning – as they set out in obedience to God's will.

Sisera's army and horses got bogged down in the torrents. They were an easy prey for the people. All that heavy, expensive iron armament – all those massive fearsome chariots – was now junk. They were bogged down – doomed! God gave them victory. Victory was won at the price of sacrifice, risk and jeopardising life and possessions.

Meroz was cursed. It was a village about 7½ miles south of Barak's home. The bitterness of the curse (5:23) suggests that Meroz was under a holy obligation to obey Barak's summons. Perhaps they allowed Sisera to retreat through their village and did nothing. They wouldn't get involved.

We have a strategic part to play in our generation. Never before have we had so many opportunities. The battle rages on around us. The people of Meroz were well placed to serve. They stood in the pathway of the work of God. But they did nothing. They didn't rise to the occasion. They failed to take the opportunity or to take part in the victory.

Do we rise to every opportunity? Opportunities are increasing. Are we indifferent? Are we ready for a reprimand? May God deliver us from apathy! May He take us out of our complacency. Where is our treasure? Where are our interests – our hearts – our goals? Does God's "well done" rests upon us? Or rather the judgement of God?

In all of this song only three people are mentioned by name, Barak and two women Deborah and Jael. ***"Most blessed of women is Jael …."*** (5:24) Jael had wisdom and discretion. She also had courage and daring. She had faith and confidence. God requires from us the same loyalty and devotion that Jael had. Jer. 48:10 puts it very bluntly, ***"Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord with slackness."*** Ezek. 34:4 is very challenging, ***"The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, those who have strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought …. So they were scattered because they had no one, because***

there was no Shepherd …. My sheep were scattered all over the face of the earth with none to search or seek for them." So judgement came on them.

5. ***"God has not given us a spirit of timidity …."*** (2 Tim. 1:7)

To timid Barak in the Old Testament and to timid Timothy in the New Testament the call of God comes – a call to courage – a summons to faith – to go into action when we least feel like it and put to the test our commitment to obey God. It is for this reason Barak is included in Hebrews 11. Courage and calmness usually go together.

Luther was an outstanding example of courage although he often suffered from bouts of depression. He feared neither the Pope, nor councils, nor king. Listen to the hammering as he boldly nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. Listen to his answer when his friends warned him of the danger of going to Würms, **"Go not to Würms? I shall go to Würms though there were as many devils as tiles on the roofs."** Then there is the immortal defence he gave the day he was in mortal danger, **"I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything** (since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience)**. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. May God help me."**

Luther's courage, his conscience and his confession changed Europe. Yet so many leaders God chooses seem to be naturally timid and shrink from the limelight. God constantly has to say to them, ***"Be of good courage"***. The Lord Jesus had to do the same to His disciples, ***"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world!"*** (Jn. 16:33). So we are expected to move from one crisis to another, but with no worries, for in the Lord Jesus there is peace. So rejoice, show courage for the Lord Jesus has already conquered the world!

So, ***"Up Barak – this is the day! The Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the Lord go out before you?"*** He says the same to us, "Up! This is the day of the Lord. I am with you. Quit yourselves like men; be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. ***"Be strong*** (like Timothy) ***in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, for God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and self-discipline."***

Are you naturally diffident, timid and retiring? Listen to what AW Tozer wrote:

"A true and safe leader is likely to be one who has no desire to lead, but one who is forced into a position of leadership by the inward pressure of the Holy Spirit and the pressure of the external situation. I believe it might be accepted as a fairly reliable rule of thumb that a man who is ambitious to lead is disqualified as a leader. A true leader will have no desire to lord it over God's heritage, but will be humble, gentle, and self-sacrificing - as ready to follow as to lead when the Spirit makes it clear that a wiser and more gifted man than himself has appeared."

These are wise words from a very wise man.

So timid Barak was no hero. He was unpretentious, inconspicuous and just ordinary, yet God called him and gave him this job of liberator. In **faith** he took it on and God delivered His people by Barak's hand. Barak was quite ordinary. God made the difference! Barak is listed with Moses who saw the invisible hand of God and by faith he subdued kingdoms and brought deliverance – by faith – and so God is not ashamed to be called Barak's God, very ordinary though he was.

God doesn't look for men who are perfect, self-confident and of high intelligence, but for weak people who are desperate enough to rely on His strength, needy enough to receive His grace, humble enough to depend on His Holy Spirit and contrite enough to repent and seek forgiveness. He looks for people with nothing in their hands, who have nothing to offer except their need and themselves – people with nothing to glory in except God Himself.

We are in a modern-day Barak situation – ***"In sore straits – brought low"*** by evil forces of greed and violence, by the principalities and powers. But at Bethlehem the Lord Jesus entered history, on our side, to fight our battles and win our victories. At Calvary the Lord Jesus routed these demonic

powers of ruination. Judgement and doom are inherent in God's antagonism to sin and the overthrow of evil. As the Lord Jesus rose He stripped death of its ultimate power over us as believers. Life immortal is held out to us in the Gospel – a new life-power is in us now as we are in Christ. We have a whole new way of living in society.

What does this mean in reality? We may have been defeated 1000 times, but no matter! The Lord Jesus is able to save the uttermost flop! If a man or woman has many prayerless days, holding off God, keeping him at arm's length, he/she can still discover a personal friend in God Almighty – one who loves, cares, and concerns Himself with every detail of our lives. God's love surrounds God's child! And all this because of the Cross! ***"God was in Christ reconciling us to Himself."*** (2 Cor. 5:19)

There is a verse of hymn:

"Then let my soul arise,
And tread the tempter down.
My Captain leads me forth,
To conquest and a crown.
The feeblest saint shall win the day,
Though earth and hell should bar the way."

So up Barak, Timothy and you! This is the day, the day of God. The Lord is in the field. March with Him against the strong forces of evil. Be strong and face the challenges of these days – the task assigned to you and the responsibility entrusted to you. The stars in their courses, the clouds in the sky, the rain on the hills and the floods in the Kishon move at His command – planned with precision in eternity. They arrive, precipitate and flood on time – God's time of retribution – of Sisera's doom and the deliverance of God's People. So, up for the Lord! He advances ahead of you. Do you believe that Jesus is Lord? That God is really the Almighty God? Do you believe that:

- He will not tolerate our present evil and disastrous course?
- He is able to save us from it and from ourselves?
- God is going to use us – modern-day 'Baraks' – the weak people of this world?

Everyone who knows his own heart knows that at rock bottom our problems are spiritual. However much we try and fudge and speak of social issues or economic problems or corrupt governments, all these are relatively cosmetic. Only **spiritual change** in man can touch the real need. Once that takes place, political/economic/social issues will quickly begin to sort themselves out. We are ambassadors of the Lord Jesus to the nations – to the world. This is a task that demands our total dedication.

"Now may the God of all hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13).

6. What are some of the lessons from Barak's life?

These lessons will never be outdated for God's principles don't change and nor do our obligations!

- **Supremely God is God**. He is the Sovereign Lord. He is living. It is so instructive to watch God at work through history, in current world affairs and in our lives. Let it fill you with awe, trust, obedience and increase your understanding of His purposes for you. Let this build hope and assurance. Remember God's promises, ***"I have overcome the world." "I am coming soon." "Behold, I make all things new."***
- **Man is deeply inflicted with a propensity to sin**. Long ago the People of God again and again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. It is like an oft repeated chorus. We have a tendency to fall down, never to rise up – to fall down and to move away from God and goodness and never towards it. We may desire to do good, but we can't do it. We know what is right, but don't live up to it. And we can't get rid of this propensity. All moral corruption, all social and political decline and failure results from turning away from God. We are defiant towards God. We may

try and polish our personalities with cultural refinements, but only the Lord Jesus can break this dreary cycle of recurring sin. He sets prisoners free!

- **There is a divine retribution at work in history** and at work in the world today. This retribution is the inevitable response of a holy God to sin. First it is the wrath of God on the sins of His own people. He uses political and economic powers, natural disasters and our own folly to effect retribution on sin. **Then** those same political powers experience retributive justice themselves at the hand of God. Recurring political crises – monetary, militarily, economic, social upheaval, violence, inflation and scarcity are but a divine assertion that Jesus is Lord! Heaven's insistence is that God is God! Ignoring His commands and despising His salvation must lead to judgement, loss, confusion and the ultimate breakdown of society. Behind all this is a great and merciful purpose – to lead us to rethink our situation – reverse our rebellious course and return to God in penitence – in a word, to dethrone man (self) and enthrone God: i.e. to come to terms with His great eternal reality.
- **God always responds to repentance with forgiveness**. The cry of desperation for deliverance will not go unheeded. Is there a greater tragedy than the judgement of God on His own people? Is there greater grace than forgiveness for us when we repent? ***"Who is a pardoning God like you? Who has grace so rich and free?"*** We will do much more for the nations on our knees that we will ever do on our feet. For God is a God of compassion. God's ear is always open. His heart beats with compassion.
- **Faith is obedience in scorn of the consequences**. Barak had a trembling faith, but he accepted that God is God and that was enough to get the heavens moving! ***"The stars …."*.** Find out what God wants you to do and do it. Faith is not belief in spite of any evidence. Such faith, yielding, trusting, trembling obedience to a sovereign, supreme, living, active God and His commands and authority is all that God seeks of us. Find out what God wants you to do and do it.
- **The last lesson!** A lesson that is so contemporary! Though a nation has had thousands of years of history, possesses the latest technology (the 900 iron chariots or whatever), if it spurns God, despises his laws, persecutes His people, it destroys itself. When its cup of evil is full, then the finger of history – God's little finger writes, ***"weighed: found wanting: finished"***. Jabin, Sisera, Caesar and a host of others are no more. All tyrants both ancient and modern are doomed.

The only sure defence lies in a God-fearing people who exult in righteousness, social justice worldwide and personal integrity. Nothing else can save, prosper or defend. Nothing else is really worth preserving. As we see, corrupt government leads to national suicide.

God is still God. The nations are but men. To ignore the Lord Jesus leads to national decline.
To Him all authority in heaven and on earth is committed. To Him all powers on earth must bow.

"Men strut and fret their little hour upon the stage of history. The wind passes over them and they are gone and the place there knows them no more; but he that does the will of God abides for ever."

May you and I line up with God's purposes and be doers of His will, filled with the compassion of the Lord Jesus, filled with His Spirit, faithful, obedient, serving this generation in the will of God.

Prayer

Lord we long to see Your Kingdom come in our generation – Your will being done in these countries just as it is in heaven. Make this increasingly real to us. Come by Your Spirit into our hearts and lives, into our homes, into our ministries and rule over us – day in and day out in all Your royal power and grace. Extend Your control over all our being, all our talents and time, all our possessions and resources, so that all is in Your control, at Your command. Exalt the Saviour through us for Your glory. Amen.

Gideon

Judges 6-8 (Three chapters – 100 verses)

[Read 6:11-40; 7:1-25; 8:1-33]

1. Introduction

We looked at Barak and learned supremely that God is God. His authority may be challenged, but we can't escape it. That is the way things are! He is Lord. He is the all-sovereign Lord. And there is divine retribution at work in history.

We live in a world of recurring crises: wars, violence, ethnic cleansing, economic meltdowns, social and industrial troubles, rioting etc. All these are heaven's insistence that God is God and the divine assertion that Jesus Christ is Lord. Judges depicts the struggle between faith and culture.

We saw that through God's mercy, repentance brings deliverance, but ultimately all man-centred systems **must** fail and perish because God is God!

Today we will look at Gideon. He also appears in God's honour roll of men of faith in Hebrews 11:32. **Barak was timid**, but he had enough faith to overcome Sisera's armies. His trembling faith and obedience got the heavens moving! Gideon was similar in a way. He was afraid, a cautious man, and from that weakness God made him strong. Gideon's home was about 20 miles from where Barak lived. Barak lived on the hills overlooking the valley of Jezreel. Gideon also lived in the hills to the North West of Barak. These hills overlooked the Jordan Valley at the point where Wadi Yarmuk joins the Jordan. The Yarmuk is like a road (for camels) from the Eastern Desert. Joash, the Abierite, was part of the tribe of Manasseh.

Both Barak and Gideon were weak, lowly in social status and both must have appeared to their contemporaries to be crazy! Both acted in faith and out of obedience. Both became deliverers. The history of missions has many examples of such men who have done great things for God – the weak who have confounded the mighty. Never underestimate the power of any person who knows the Lord Jesus is with him/her and who is obeying a divine summons!

"For the weakness of God is stronger than men …. so that no human being might boast in the presence of the Lord" (1 Cor. 25, 29).

We are looking at the ways of God in the lives of men and women in relation to the affairs of nations. In the middle section of Judges there is a four-fold cycle:

sin: deserting the Living God for Ba'al and other Canaanite gods. This led to:

servitude to foreign aggressors. This led to:

supplication to a merciful covenant-keeping God for deliverance. This led to:

salvation through divinely raised up leaders.

These are the principles that run throughout Scripture and govern history and nations today. None can set aside God's laws with impunity. This is a fact that our permissive, materialistic society is discovering to its cost: the sorrows of family breakup, the suffering of a deprived underclass and the great fragility of the global economic systems. But things have to be very bad before any nation gets on its knees in earnest prayer to God and in repentance.

The basic cause of the people's problem and their deplorable condition was the same as ours today. It is as old as Genesis chapter 3! It is their broken relationship with God. Britain is strongly secularising and for all practical purposes, God is dismissed by most.

"In his pride the wicked does not seek Him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God" Ps. 10:2.

When Adam and Eve broke faith with God, they sought to blame another party. We too seek to deflect attention to other people/factors! But the state of the people in Judges just highlights their sin. ***"Every man was doing what was right in his own eyes"*** – setting his own standards. And our spiritual enemies, the powers of darkness, exact a fearful price on our society. ***" … and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years"*** (6:1-2).

The Midianites didn't occupy the land. They came to strip it of food and other things and this brought devastation – rather like the Mongol invasions 2,200 years later. Lack of food very quickly demoralises people. The enemy (the devil) also seeks to deprive us of our spiritual food. The Ephesian church experienced this. It caused them, ***"to abandon the love they had at first"*** under Paul's ministry (Rev. 2:4). In the parable of the sower, the thorny ground illustrates how we allow our lives be dominated by life's problems. God wants to bless all peoples. Let those that want His blessing seek His face.

God's people had to make themselves hideouts in dens and caves in the hills. You see this in many countries where there is constant war. So the people were harassed, oppressed, pillaged and humiliated by their ancient foes – the Amalekites and the Midianites who ***"devoured the produce of the land"***. They robbed them of their ***"sheep, oxen and donkeys"***. They were like a swarm of human locusts. So they were a people oppressed, insecure, fearful, impoverished and hungry and their guilt was the cause of their misery.

Sin brings servitude. Departure from God brings retribution. You can't checkmate God and it is great stupidity to try! But when they were, ***"brought very low because of Midian … they cried out for help to the Lord"*** (6:6). How low must we be brought before we repent? The lesson of Scripture is:

Repentance brings Deliverance – Supplication brings Salvation

Suffering can be God's megaphone to get us to listen to Him. In doing a work of God I think you need four things:

- a wine press
- an axe
- a new suit of clothes
- do you need a fleece?

What was the way of drinking all about? **Tests of Quality**

What can we learn from the end of the story? **Tests of Success**

God answered their cry by calling Gideon

First God sends an unnamed, unknown prophet to confront the people with a few home truths – His goodness, His claims on them and their disobedience. ***"You have not obeyed me"*** (6:10). The prophet then walks off to let them face up to the realities of their situation! Many of God's servants are unnamed, known only by one event that declares their faith, obedience and courage. They are God's faithful unknowns. Why did God choose Gideon? Well, at least he was trying to conserve their food supply. He recognised this priority!

2. You need a wine press!

A wine press is where you start asking the right questions. Gideon was a man of caution, but you can tell he was thinking very hard. There he was under a large oak tree. He had a small well-hidden threshing floor in a wine press. Threshing floors were usually on the hilltops where the wind could blow away the chaff. This was a very inefficient way of threshing. He was despondent, discouraged, depressed and probably near despair. He knew his history, but apparently God was nothing but history. Why, why, why, are we in this mess?

What would be your reaction if an Angel of the Lord appeared to you? Some believe the Angel of the Lord was a Theophany, for the phrase, ***"the Angel of the Lord"*** is widely used in the Old Testament

to denote God in showing Himself to men. [In the story, note v. 12 and v. 14]. What if He said to you, ***"The Lord is with you O mighty man of valour"*** ? Joy? Wonder? What poured out was deep frustration, but the right questions. Why, why, why are we in all this trouble? Why are our enemies victorious? What's gone wrong? Who is to blame? What is God doing for it looks like nothing? Is God dead? [see v. 13-14]

As Gideon beat out his grain, these questions beat into his brain. He was asking the right questions. Nothing much happens in the work of God until people get deeply dissatisfied with the status quo. The questions are similar to those in Ps. 44:9-26.

Evidently Gideon was a cautious man with a dislike of hasty action – a questioning man with a distaste of glib answers. There was a bit of Thomas in Gideon. The 'Thomases' among us believers demand reality. They are not satisfied with what looks like 'make-believe'. What we need is a questioning faith that probes the problems and faces the contradictions between what we claim to believe and reality. We need a faith that faces doubts and fears but still presses through to unquestioning obedience.

Gideon was tackling one of the immediate routines of life in very difficult circumstances. He was trying to feed and protect his family in the wisest possible way. At this time he was already a mature man for his son Jether was a youth (8:20). He had the sense to attack the altar of Ba'al at night. He had the courage to reconnoitre the Midian army camp at night. He was tactful and humble in success – as when he gave a controlled and reasonable answer to the men of Ephraim (8:2-3). He had the resolution and the courage to see the task through by chasing, ***"exhausted, yet pursuing"*** the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, way out into the desert and on to their home territory in order to destroy them. (8:4)

But in the wine press these abilities were **potential** - **but this is what God sees!** He sees our potential. ***"You are Peter*** (at the moment you are a little pebble pushed about by the smallest wave). ***You will be a mighty rock, stable, reliable, faithful to death."***

It was in the wine press, in the humble routine duties of life, that God called Gideon. The latent qualities of leadership are usually only discerned by God. First fulfil some simple tasks in a lowly area. Look at your team members. Are they fulfilling some simple tasks in a lowly area? Are they proving themselves faithful in what is least – the wine press? God is looking for such men and women for greater tasks. When God wants an effective worker, he calls those **at work** – tending sheep, mending nets, making shoes like William Carey and a Carpenter in a shop in despised Nazareth. Get down to the job in hand and you will give something for God to work on in your life.

The wine press is not only the place of asking the right questions. It is also the place of God's commissioning. ***"Go in this might of yours …. Do not I send you?"*** (6:14) ***"You have not chosen me. I have chosen you and appointed to you that you should go and bear fruit …."*** (Jn. 15:16)

Gideon's response is typical, "Who am I? What can I do?" – incredulity and unbelief! Moses, Jeremiah and many others have responded like this! But God, who sees our potential, completely discounts our natural-felt limitations. We feel the force of these and our lack of faith results in discounting God's enabling and moulding power. ***"Follow me and <u>I will make you</u> …."*** is the word of the Lord Jesus to each one He calls. Don't let natural diffidence keep you from great tasks if God has called you to them. But it is better to be humble and useful than proud and useless. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble and equips them to accomplish His purposes.

This is a **very encouraging principle**. When God calls, He equips. He makes our unknown, hidden potential **actual** when we respond in faith with obedience. ***"Go in this your might and save …."***

Now the action really starts in the wine press area. There is a change of pace from a quiet discussion to dramatic action! Gideon brings an offering. The angel touches it with his staff and poof! The whole thing bursts into flames and the angel vanishes. Wow! – a flash, a flame, a puff of smoke and all is gone! Where is Gideon? Flat on the ground, prostrate in fear, panting and trembling. He must die for

he has seen the Lord God and no man can see God and live! The wine press is also where we hear one of the loveliest words given to us in the Bible: ***"The Lord is Peace!"*** The consumed sacrifice speaks of God's forgiveness and Gideon's acceptance – pardoned, reconciled and accepted through the blood of the Cross. This is where each of us must start – reconciled with God by the sacrifice of the Cross – peace with God.

3. You need an axe!

Syncretism must go! Ba'als and Asherah must go. The Lord Jesus must be pre-eminent. Ba'al represents the assimilation by the believer of the standards of the surrounding culture with its gross materialism, sordid sex, flashy affluence, self-indulgent hedonistic lifestyle and flippant unconcern for others.

Here is instant action again! The battle for the land began in Gideon's village. The battle for the Lord began in Gideon's own heart. Judgement begins with the house of God – with true repentance as well as a thorough clean up and effective reform.

Could a more complex or emotional test have been devised? It required personal courage. His family's belief and family loyalty were all implicated. Gideon named the altar after the very great name of God that God had given him – **YHWH IS PEACE**. Now for the first time Gideon enjoyed the peace that flows from worshipping the true and living God. He began to experience the blessings of faith and obedience.

Often, following Gideon's example, we need help. Gideon took 10 others with him + 2 oxen. He pulled down the altar of Ba'al and used the axe to chop down the Asherah. And there on the top of the hill, so all could see, he built an altar to the Lord God and offered one of the bulls as a burnt offering sacrifice on the wood from the Asherah. He did it at night, but he did it. (6:24)

Now Joash, Gideon's father, enters the story. What a row there was the next morning in Ophrah village! Joash supported his son! Gideon must have been deeply blessed by a father who stood by him in one of the great challenges of his life. Joash was clearly a level-headed man in answering these truculent Ba'al supporters. ***"Let Ba'al act if he can – if he exists. Let evil vindicate its cause if evil be right!"*** Gideon's face must have glowed at hearing this! His father had changed. God had begun to work. Our obedience releases the power of God to operate in our situations!

4. You need a suit of new clothes

"The Spirit of the Lord clothed himself with Gideon and he sounded the trumpet." (6:34) Gideon became the garment of the Holy Spirit. The Midianites, the Amalekites and the children of the East invaded the land. God planned a counter offensive with Gideon at its centre.

"The Holy Spirit clothed Himself,
It makes the records say,
With Gideon; so he became
As nothing in the fray.
But just a suit of working clothes
The Spirit wore that day."

We need to be "clothed" by the Holy Spirit. The Lord took complete control of Gideon, as Gideon yielded himself to God. Sometimes it is dramatic, often it is not, but a divine power comes upon us enabling us to carry out the Lord's will. The Holy Spirit took possession of Gideon – a divine enduement providing a divine enablement for the task God had given to Gideon. There is an anointing of the Spirit for service for the task to which we are appointed.

When did the Holy Spirit take possession of Gideon? I think it was in 6:33 as Gideon watched this amazing camel horde pouring into the Valley of Jezreel – where Barak had defeated Sisera – from the desert east of the Jordan Valley. The Midianites had developed the military use of camels, relying on mobility rather than the weight of iron chariots like Sisera. They swept in from the deserts to raid

and plunder. This was followed by a quick retreat with their booty so they were soon out of range of any effective counter-attack. The threat was old. The strategy was new.

The Midianites crossed the Jordan and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. It was probably at this time that the Midianites killed Gideon's brothers at mount Tabor. (8:18) So often we want guarantees of success. God wants to lead us to the commitment of faith.

5. Do we need a fleece?

In 6:37 Gideon put out a fleece. Do you do this? Should you? I think Gideon was **self**-doubting rather than God-doubting. What a task he faced! He had to transform a demoralised people into an effective, efficient fighting force in order to meet the invaders who were renowned as ruthless and fierce fighters. He wanted confirmation that he was in God's will. One commentator says, **"The fleece was Gideon saying, 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief' ".**

For us, indwelt and led by the Spirit of God, it is perhaps doubtful if Gideon's act should be taken as the normal procedure. It is true that some believers make a practice of "putting out a fleece" – i.e. asking God to give them some tangible sign to confirm their guidance. This is probably a mark of spiritual immaturity – a desire to walk by sight instead of by faith alone. Possibly, in this case, the granting of the signs was God's gracious concession to the weakness of Gideon's faith – appropriate to this initial stage of his spiritual growth.

6. The Tests

The selection of Gideon's troops: The Tests of Quality

- **The test of numbers**

The invaders were in the well-watered valley; the defenders were on the high dry ground. Gideon blew the trumpet and God's people, sensing that God was with him, made a spontaneous response and flocked to his side. Yet he had the tremendous task of transforming demoralised farmers into an efficient fighting force equipped to take on this army of ruthless fierce fighters. Gideon must have been encouraged when 32,000 came to his side. The Midianites had 135,000. This was a ratio of approximately 1:4.

It must have been a considerable shock to Gideon when the Lord said to him, ***"The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands lest*** (the people) ***boast"*** that they themselves have won the victory. God has to guard Himself against the conceit of Christians! The least chance of a natural explanation of a spiritual victory immediately stimulates our pride. So God's warriors are small in number and so insignificant and apparently weaponless that no one will dream that the victory is anyone's but God's. So often deep down we think we could do so much more if we had more recruits, more money etc. If we don't, maybe God is pruning us and reducing us so that He receives the glory.

What clearly emerges is that it is God, not Gideon, who selects His favoured warriors. The men were not volunteers. The Lord Jesus said, ***"You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you …."*** (Jn. 15:16) and God looks for quality rather than quantity. He picks people who are disciplined, alert and courageous. He picks those who are prudent as well as brave; those who can face impossible odds without flinching or breaking rank. Those who fail to meet His standards are to be withdrawn from the firing line. They didn't lose their citizenship, but they were deprived of sharing the glory of victory.

It appears that victorious warriors **must** be few. With God numbers are irrelevant. ***"It is nothing with you, O Lord, to save by many or by few."*** (1 Sam. 14:6) The "few" is a story often repeated in history. Remember Jonathan and his armour bearer. We just need to put on the armour of God. (Eph. 6) So God introduced a number of tests that would eliminate those who were not qualified for inclusion in his select force.

- **The test of fear/timidity**

This was the first test. Fear cannot trust and this was to be a victory of faith. ***"Whoever is fearful and afraid let him return and depart"*** (7:3). The men had to decide for themselves whether they would go into battle. God allowed them the choice themselves. He didn't send any home. Fear is not cowardice, but it quickly leads to it. Cowardice in a believer is simply a breakdown of faith.

So 22,000 left quietly, leaving 10,000. Now the odds were down from 1:4 to 1:13. Gideon was told not to classify people, but just to watch. The Lord Jesus is for ever walking in the midst of the churches, watching his people. ***"I know your works"*** is His observation. What hinders God is the pride and self-sufficiency of His servants (7:2). Many respond in a wave of enthusiasm in a crowd, but drop out when difficulties come.

- **The next test: lapping or kneeling to drink**

The 10,000 had no idea that they were being tested. 9,700 threw themselves down by the river and drank with their heads down gulping the water thirstily. The highly mobile Midianites forces were ready to swoop down on men like this in a defenceless position.

But 300 were disciplined, alert, they knew that they were in the midst of hidden danger and kept their heads up scanning the scene. They lifted the water to drink with a cupped hand. In enemy territory **everything** is a matter of life or death. This is true in spiritual warfare. The 9,700 thought of themselves and their comfort first. They would be an easy target. So in this way the undisciplined casual fighters were eliminated.

- **The test of reduced numbers and weapons**

Now Gideon's forces were outnumbered by a ratio of 450:1. Humanly speaking victory was now impossible! But in addition to this, they were not allowed to take any weapons – no swords, spears, arrows etc. They could only take fragile pots, flaming torches and trumpets! It was absurd! But it worked! God understands camels and how berserk they become when panicked.

So, to a pre-arranged signal, at about 10 pm at night, each of the 300 broke his pot revealing the flaming torch and sounded a blast on his trumpet. Then they rushed into the enemy's camp. Thousands of camels panicked causing chaos among the Midianites who began to kill each other in the dark. It degenerated into a complete rout - a mad flight to get away!

Gideon summoned his allies, the Ephraimites, to attack. Two Kings were captured and the fleeing Midianites were finally trapped just south-east of the Lake of Galilee. The whole land between the sea and Jordan was liberated. There were about 15,000 survivors out of 150,000. The two Kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, were finally captured about 6 miles north-west of the present city of Amman.

7. What principles can we learn from Gideon's battle?

- **Out with the Ba'als in our lives** – materialism, secularist thinking, the sensuality of the pervading society that the Lord Jesus labelled "mammon". It so insidiously undermines a life of discipleship. So out with the Ba'als! Make the Lord Jesus pre-eminent.
- **Only in hearts where the Lord Jesus is supreme is there true peace and security**. For then we know who holds the future. God is in charge!
- The Midianites' dream (7:10-14) showed that **the enemy was ripe for panic and defeat**. Evil tries to look triumphant, but it is just a smokescreen. Evil never feels secure. Death awaits all and then the final reckoning.
- **God doesn't suffer from the tyranny of numbers** – nor should we! One man can influence a whole generation when controlled by the Spirit of God.
- **Victory is won only through people of faith**, but fear and faith are incompatible. It was through faith that Gideon subdued kingdoms. (Heb. 11:32-33)

- **God allows us to classify ourselves** either with the alert and disciplined or else with the self-disqualifying. Sadly, they are usually the majority.
- **God isn't bound to usual or conventional methods to secure His ends!** Calvin said, *"God uses sin sinlessly to overthrow evil dominions and to establish righteous regimes"*.
- **Victory is independent of numbers**. In spiritual things, the numerical factor is of no overriding importance. God has often achieved His greatest works through a godly few.
- **Victory is not dependent on adequate equipment**. Often in the things of the Spirit there is no obvious connection between the means used and the results achieved.
- **Victory will be won by people of spiritual calibre, stamina and discipline**; not by those who are self-indulgent or lazy.
- **The glory of the victory is completely and entirely the Lord's**, but it is our privilege to be His instruments.

8. Gideon's failure

- The first consequence of victory over the Midianites was what we could call the **Ephraimite Syndrome**. Sadly, it is quite common. Gideon had to handle bitter criticism (8:1). Why? They thought that Gideon had deliberately excluded them from his plans. Now, after the victory, they wanted to join "the bandwagon". They hadn't taken any initiative to help Gideon. When we are left out of someone else's project do we sulk? Do we wallow in self-pity? It is of the flesh! When God works, He often works fast and some get left out. If that happens to you, never get jealous. Gideon's soft answer turned away their anger.
- The towns of Succoth and Peniel on the East Bank were clearly in a very difficult situation and it is easy to understand their reaction. Often we don't like to get on "the bandwagon" until we know it is going to succeed. In the end neither town helped the weary pursuing forces of Gideon. We need to beware of being overly cautious. But **don't over-react** like Gideon. He was critical, harsh and very judgemental.
- After this amazing victory Gideon's grateful countrymen invited him to start a hereditary monarchy (8:27). Gideon had enough wisdom to decline the offer. In simple faith he insisted that the Lord should be their sole King. But his son, Abimelech, wished otherwise! (8:28). Sadly, Gideon did ask for some reward. He refused power, but he wanted wealth! ***"….. every one of you give me the*** (golden) ***earrings gained from the Ishmaelites."*** What they gave him was about 187 kg of gold plus other valuable things. With the gold he made an ephod (an image of God). Its beauty and value caused it to become an object of worship and it was apparently used in divination. ***"It became a snare to Gideon and his house"*** (8:27).

9. Gideon's Legacy

- It was a sad end to a very great victory. The dreaded enemy didn't lift their heads during the 40 years of the days of Gideon (8:28). Beware of the perils of success and fame! Beware of spiritual decline as old age comes on. Those who serve great causes are always in danger of making that cause serve themselves.

  So don't ever desire to receive any credit for any of God's victories. Watch your motivations very carefully. Gideon called one of his sons Abimelech (8:32), which means, ***"My father is King."*** Why did Gideon do this? The sad fact is that compromise in one generation leads to unbelief in the next (8:33). Abimelech became a tyrant. What we sow, we reap. We are fragile and never invincible!

So Gideon was placed among the great heroes of faith. (Heb. 11:32) He yielded to the Spirit of God. In faith he accepted the risk of the utter defeat and death of his 300 in attacking the Midianites. In this way victory was won so that God got all the glory. He was patient, wise in some things and generous in dealing with the Ephraimites. He refused the kingship. Let us learn from him and his life.

Jephthah

Judges 11:1-40 and 12:1-7

1. Introduction

God is compelled to use some strange tools to carry forward His purposes. Jephthah is one of them, Samson is another. The writer of Hebrews said he hadn't time to recount the story of Jephthah's faith. How I wish he had! I am compelled to ask how on earth did Jephthah get from Judges 11 to Hebrews 11? How on earth? Well, heaven stepped in! That's the only possible explanation – God's electing grace! In God's eternal purpose and energising power, He was at work in the life of Jephthah. It was by faith that Jephthah, ***"Conquered kingdoms … became mighty in war … put foreign armies to flight."***

- ***"God chooses the foolish in the world to shame the mighty"*** (1 Cor. 1:27)

Jephthah Illustrates this principle often found in Scripture. God chooses whom He wills – often the people that would be overlooked by nearly everyone else. Humanly speaking Jephthah was a very obscure Middle Eastern "Robin Hood" who lived over 3,000 years ago. He had a poor start in life. His mother was a common pagan prostitute. His father had another wife who bore him many legitimate sons. Jephthah's father was evidently a tribal chief. His half-brothers were determined that Jephthah would not share in any of his father's inheritance. He was an illegitimate son. They would not have him and finally his father was compelled to turn him out of the home. Jephthah then fled to the land of Tob (identified with Jebel al-Arab on the edge of the Hauran on the borders of Syria.) Tob was rough hill country – a sort of wild no man's land – bandit country.

Adverse family background is never any bar to service for the Lord. Never underestimate what God can do with anyone, but especially with those that at first "appear" to be inadequate. I wonder how many workers of great potential our company has turned away from this part of the world.

Jephthah was rejected by his family, but later he was recalled and became their deliverer. This is no new story. You can trace it through Scripture from Joseph and Moses, to David and ultimately to the Lord Jesus. It happens in the secular world – i.e. Churchill and de Gaulle.

Jephthah gathered around himself others who were dispossessed, disgruntled – the "have-nots" in society. He became their leader – a "Robin Hood-type" leader of a group of bandits/outlaws, raiding caravans and settlements. In those lawless days such raiding was not considered illegal provided the people attacked were outside one's own tribe. Up until the late 19th century this state of affairs still prevailed in Arabia. Possibly Jephthah protected his own countrymen while raiding the desert tribes and probably the Ammonites. Eventually he became very good at this for 11:1 says that Jephthah was ***"a mighty warrior"***. His prowess was probably a result of bitter, tragic, heart-rending conflict and hate that dated from his infancy. He was learning to fight, and fight to win, as he grew from babyhood.

Time sometimes has a way of vindicating those who have been wronged, but usually in this evil world and in a cruel society; it is often the lot of good men to suffer rejection. And this appeared to be Jephthah's bitter fate.

So Jephthah had a poor start, taunted by his younger half-brothers, rejected by them and his father, turned out of his home and sent into the desert. Why does God allow this sort of thing?

- **In the Bible it is often in 'the desert experience' that God does His greatest work in us.**

God chose the desert for Moses. He chose rejection and the fugitive life for David. He chose Arabia for Saul of Tarsus. In their rejection and desperation men meet God. He purges away the dross in their lives. They learn the lessons of submission and dependence on God. They learn to discern God's purposes and be fitted for His service. It is from such experiences of pain and trial that we mine true

riches of character. Yet so often we reject this and seek to escape such experiences. Such trials would be less of a problem to us, God's People, if we accepted the Biblical perspective that suffering is a pointer of God's love for us. God's way 'up' is usually 'down' at first – see Gen. 50:2, ***"…. You meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about this present result".***

It shouldn't surprise us to be rejected, thrust aside, to face injustices and all the inequalities of life. Don't think it strange if you are experiencing these issues. Commit your way to the Lord. Don't seek to vindicate yourself. Wait on Him in quiet rest and confidence and you will find strength in a new meekness of spirit. Such a mark of 'sonship'/meekness is a pre-requisite for service and leadership.

What did Jephthah gain from this period?

- **Qualities of leadership**
  Among these outlaws/robbers he developed qualities of leadership. I suppose there are better ways and better environments to develop this essential capacity, but Jephthah had to learn it through what he got – "worthless fellows" – that collected around him (11:3). He took them on "short-term mission trips" (raiding)! Prowess in moulding and handling such rough, tough men and leading them against the raiding tribes, provided the basis of his call to service among his people. Do you handle people well? Or do you merely manipulate them?

- **Jephthah learned self-control**
  He was no wild brigand chief eager for blood and battle, murder and mayhem. Later he proved to be a diplomat and reconciler where battle could be avoided. His quiet restrained words to the Ammonites (11:12) and his careful justification of his people's cause indicate that he didn't seek conflict. He worked to avoid a collision course. Blessed **then** and blessed **today** are the peacemakers. How the world needs them!

  Jephthah said, ***"The Lord, the judge this day …."*** (11:27). This is a very sound principle. We too can afford to leave our cause in the Lord's hands if we walk in righteousness before Him and always seek His glory, never our own. A great deal hinges on our response to Mt. 6:33, ***"… Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness … ".*** What do we seek first? Are our efforts sullied by a hidden, "What do I get out of it?"

- **Jephthah became a *"mighty warrior"*** (11:1)
  He was mighty through God and through conflict. We will never become, ***"More than conquerors through Christ who strengthens us"*** (Rom. 8:37) unless we are tested through conflict.

  While his own people's tribes lived in defiant disobedience to God, under the judgement of God and under the oppression of their enemies, all the time God was preparing a deliverer in a strange environment against the day of the people's repentance and their cries to Him for deliverance (10:15).

So throughout Scripture, God had His man/woman ready for His great interventions in history until God's great Deliverer and Saviour the Lord Jesus appeared. Samuel tells us that, ***"The Lord sent Jephthah"*** as a deliverer of the nation. (1 Sam. 12:11)

2. Learning magnanimity as a leader

" … the people made him head and leader over them." (11:11)

The elders of Gilead came to him. It was probably about 20 years since he had been thrown out of his home and village. They had done nothing to save him then. Now they came to beg a favour of one whom they had previously wronged. ***"The Ammonites made war…."*** (11:4) So when the people of Gilead found the enemy at their gates, the elders made their way to Tob and to Jephthah and said to him, ***"Come and be our leader"*** that we might fight against the Ammonites.

What do you make of Jephthah's response? ***"Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?"*** (11:7). Contritely, they admit that this was why they had come. It was probably the last resort!

In v. 9 Jephthah agrees to be their leader on condition he is not regarded as a temporary stopgap, to be sent away again at their convenience. They agreed that he should become their longterm leader and judge. The agreement is ratified before God at Mizpah.

So what do you make of Jephthah's response? Had he nurtured all these years a bitter desire for revenge – to become top dog, to get even with them at least and to rub their noses in the dust? Such revenge sounds sweet to some, but it always turns to great bitterness of heart. Only deep penitence, that knows our own sins have been forgiven for Christ's sake, can free us from such lingering resentment. There is nothing so destructive or so damaging as resentment. No one who harbours it can know the joy and blessing of God. Yet Christians who are trained counsellors say that burning resentment is a major problem for many workers!

Was Jephthah wise in refusing to undertake a short-term rescue operation without the assurance that he would have the authority afterwards to ensure peace and protection? Was he probing, like Joseph with his brothers, to see if there had been a real change of heart in the elders of Gilead? [This is like the question: what value are short-term relief operations in a crisis today, if they are not followed by effective long-term development and reconstruction?]

What should we do in such circumstances? What should be our attitude when those who have wronged or ignored us, hurt and scorned us, later call to us for help when they are in trouble? Jephthah's answer – and the Bible's answer – is **magnanimity** coupled with wise arrangements to redress the past, secure the future and redeem the present. There must be no bitterness, no revenge, no personal aggrandisement, but rather a servant heart and a concern for the public good.

Let us allow the Lord Jesus to free us from these former things and may the latter deeply motivate us by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Eph. 4:32 Paul sums up God's teaching on such very human situations, ***"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you".***

What was the fight with the Ammonites all about? It was about who should control the East Bank. Both sides claimed the right. This is a dispute – at least on the West Bank – that is very familiar to us. So nothing has changed over more than 3,000 years! Clearly both sides laid claim to the land then, as now, supported by prescriptive and historic rights.

Let us keep praying for this very troubled area today. I don't think there can be any solution without compliance with the principles of the Bible that call for a change of attitude and so go far beyond UN resolutions. I certainly don't want to belittle anyone today seeking a peace deal that will solve the problems between Israelis and Palestinians. But I have little faith they will succeed. Can there be any solution without compliance with the principles of the Bible and a change of attitude? Scripture requires the following:

- We must love our neighbour as we love ourselves.
- We need to recognise that such love does no wrong to our neighbours.
- The so-called 'Golden Rule' (Mt. 7:12) states, ***"Whatever you would that others should do to you, do so to them".***

As Paul said, ***"But now God commands all peoples everywhere to repent …."*** (Acts 17:30) and obey His laws – especially the 'Golden Rule' – for all their lives. So are we, ourselves, fulfilling this great rule in our daily lives? To do so would resolve nearly all the personal tensions and conflicts that so hinder team life – let alone international conflicts!

3. Avoiding a situation where my heart is right, but my head is wrong!

The Tragic Vow

Note the timing (11:29), ***"Then the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah."*** It was when he went out to meet and defeat the enemy. As we seek the filling of the Holy Spirit, the guidance of the Holy Spirit and an understanding of the will of God, we may be sure our spiritual resources will be matched to the needs of the situation confronting us.

Spirit-led men and women can go into any challenging or difficult situation as required. They can have absolute confidence that God will work in them and through them to do His will. Here then, for Jephthah and for us, is the secret of his great achievement in battle. He was Spirit-empowered for the task given to him by God.

What then are we to make of Jephthah's terrible vow? Was that too inspired by the Holy Spirit? Knowing that God had fully empowered Jephthah for victory, what then of his foolish, thoughtless, aweful vow? What led him into such rashness? And in the event, what obligation did he have to carry it through to its terrible conclusion of killing his daughter? His wife had apparently died leaving him with an only child – a daughter.

Jephthah had simple wisdom in public affairs, but fearful folly in his personal affairs. How many of us lack balance in life? Jephthah gets into Hebrews 11 as a man of faith, but this faith was marred by grievous ignorance of God's character, God's grace and God's will. To sacrifice his daughter was directly contrary to the law (Lev. 18:21; Deut. 12:31). Yet we may not judge him too harshly for his cruel stupidity for it proceeded from an anxious heart. We too find it hard to believe that God always deals with us in grace. How many of us have followed Jephthah in seeking to earn our sanctification or spiritual breakthroughs in ministry by some form of vow or bargain with God? Jephthah did this as did Jacob long before him.

Perhaps his lovely young daughter died at the anguished heart and trembling hand of her father. God didn't intervene as with Abraham and Isaac. Jephthah stands as an example and a warning to us of rash folly. May God preserve us from ill-considered pledges and actions for they inevitably involve others – perhaps those closest to us. We need each other. We must seek the counsel of others. We must act in fellowship. May we who seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit never fail to be watchful in thought and motive! Don't ever act precipitously!

How can we be kept from such a devastating mistake as Jephthah's? His heart was right, but his head was completely wrong. There is an emphasis in Scripture in Romans 12:2, ***" …. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."***

The same is found in Phil. 1:9-11, ***"… It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment so that you may approve what is excellent …."***.

Acts 17:11 shows us that knowing the will of God always requires intellectual effort, honest thinking, prayer-pondered shrewd discernment and sober judgement. This Biblical stress balances the mystic form of direct, instant inspiration that can easily confuse our subconscious egotistical desires with God's will for us.

So to know the will of God often requires hard intellectual effort followed by a choice – often between two hard options. I must not lean on my own understanding. It is not infallible! I must recognise my human limitations, yet I must judge and prove all things – the whole situation – with care and much prayer and then move forward committing my way to God with confidence in His promise to guide and keep – ***"He will direct your paths"***.

So what put Jephthah into Hebrews 11 as a man of faith? I think it was his stark, self-shattering obedience to God as he understood the claims of God. He stands as an amazing example of integrity

and faithfulness to commitment to the Lord Jesus. Faith without daily, active commitment is a lifeless corpse. **Faith is obedience in scorn of the consequences**. That is what Jephthah teaches us.

Jephthah and his teenage daughter understood enough to know that God must come first in the life of a parent and a child and no earthly tie, however dear, can supplant the place of God. Jephthah and his daughter (sadly we don't know her name) died in faith that sought to obey God at any cost. I think this teenage girl was one of the noblest women in Scripture!

4. Was Jephthah right to fulfil a vow so rashly made?

King Saul made a rash vow and it nearly cost the life of his son Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:24-46). That vow was revoked by the will of the people. King Herod also made a rash vow to grant any request of his daughter Salome. She demanded the head of John the Baptist to be brought to her immediately. We read, ***"… the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given".*** (Mt. 14:9 and Mk. 6:26)

So let us be clear and state without any equivocation that no-one is committed to fulfil a vow/promise if to do so requires being disobedient to the clear teaching of the Bible. No commitment to do wrong is ever morally binding. Have you ever given your word to do something and then found you were committed to do something wrong? You may well find yourself in such a predicament! What should you do then? Refuse to carry out the terms of the promise. Let no false pride (like Herod's) or moral cowardice cause you to comply with a promise wrongly given, or even rightly given at the time, that you later find out commits you to evil or wrong. Refuse to comply! Stand firm for the right. If there is an escape clause, a contingent provision, withdraw and make full, prompt compensation – as may be required. No promise to do wrong is morally binding.

Jephthah solemnly declared, ***"I have opened my mouth to the Lord and I cannot go back!"*** We learn from Jephthah's vow that he clearly understood it created an obligation that must be met. And this is the teaching of Scripture. So it is much better not to vow/promise rather than vow and fail to carry it out – see Num. 30:2 and Deut. 23:23.

Psalm 15:1-4 asks, ***"Who shall dwell on Your holy hill?"*** Who will abide in Christ? Who will be filled with the Holy Spirit and do great things for God? (v. 4) ***"He who swears to his own hurt and does not change …"***. It is those who go through with their commitment whether it costs more than they bargained for or not. We are to be people of our word, fully dependable, ***"I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back!"*** Jephthah teaches this – the solemn, binding character of a promise. This creates an obligation that must be met.

5. Was Jephthah's daughter sacrificed like an animal?

If he did so, it was in flagrant disobedience to the Law (Lev. 18:21). Commentaries say, ***"Whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me … it shall be the Lord's*** or ***"I will offer it up as a burnt offering"***. So there were two options – sacrifice as a burnt offering or, according to Lev. 27:1-8, Jephthah's daughter could have been ransomed with money. It is far more probable that Jephthah devoted his daughter to a life of celibacy and seclusion. This daughter of Jephthah said, ***"My father, you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me as you have said …".*** (v. 36) In response to God, Mary, the Lord's mother, said something very similar (Lk. 1:38), ***"Behold the bond slave of the Lord, be done to me according to Your Word"***. Truly Jephthah had an amazing daughter!

6. What commitments does the Lord Jesus require of us?

- **He is to have absolute priority in our affairs**. Beware the pressure of divided loyalty. (Mt. 10:37).

  "Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and whoever loves son and daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me." There must be the priority of the Lord's claim on our lives. In our love for family the Lord Jesus requires an irrevocable commitment: ***"I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back".***

  See also Mt. 12:46; Mk. 3:32 and Lk. 8:20. How did the Lord Jesus handle the pressure of divided

loyalty? Clearly His family expected Him to treat them as His highest priority. They were His family. Then, as now, commitment to family was considered the greatest obligation. Such claims are always with us. Human ties are not to be ignored. The obligations of family are not to be disregarded. But the Lord Jesus is to have absolute priority in our affections. The pressure on our emotions can become intense. We cannot love our family too much, but we can let that love influence us too much. ***"He who loves father and mother more than Me is <u>not worthy of Me</u>. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is <u>not worthy of Me</u> and he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is <u>not worthy of Me</u>".*** (Mt. 10:37)

In Mark 3:31-35 the Lord Jesus uses the occasion to teach a lesson in discipleship. The Lord Jesus was never indifferent to His family. He supported His mother and family for years. On the Cross, His mother was His dying concern. He knew the pressure of their claim on Him – a claim of priority. But He emphasised a higher obligation – that of His calling and His anointing. The irrevocable acceptance of this prior claim makes all the difference in the great choices of life. We must never be poor parents or neglectful/forgetful of son or daughter. Sometimes the pressure on the emotions can become intense.

We need to say as disciples of the Lord Jesus, ***"I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back"***. The Lord Jesus knew that the cost of doing His Father's will was not only the Cross, but also the price to be borne by his human family – ***"Yes, a sword shall pierce through your own soul also"***. He knew His choice would inflict pain on the one most dear to Him of all earthly ties.

If this is the price of discipleship, I think it is the testimony of all who have accepted it, that the Lord Jesus is no man's debtor, for He promised 100 fold (10,000%) to those who are in full obedience to Him and His call on their lives. It is far better for our families that we be fully committed to the will of God and they be deprived of our immediate help than that we seek to modify God's claims on us.

Finding, following, keeping, struggling,
Is He sure to bless?
Saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs,
Answer – yes!

- **The pressure of material things: problems of our cultural heritage**

"If anyone doesn't renounce all that he has, he cannot be My disciple." (Lk. 14:33) As followers of the Lord Jesus, materialism, as a way of life, must go. Have you promised this? Have you kept your promise? Are you frequently "breaking your alabaster box" over the Saviour's feet? If you have, this commitment must stand firm and unfaltering. ***"I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back."*** We know that ***"Man can't live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"***. So we are to live by the Word of God. Some follow the Lord Jesus for the material – for the loaves and fishes. But eventually they turn away.

We live in a culture that is under the pressure of advertising. Economists in Britain are urging us to spend on material things – others have, you need, so you must have. Yet the Lord Jesus said, ***"A man's life does not consist in the abundance of things that he possesses".*** (Lk. 12:15) We need to repudiate this cultural value. All the evidence is that moving up the economic scale in order to find rest for our wearied and harassed minds, is a delusion. We need to determine that all our getting and spending is going on under God's control. How easy it is to say we are living to do the Lord's will, but be unaware of how much materialism dominates our thinking, spending and living.

Have you ever broken your "alabaster box" over the feet of the Lord Jesus? Perhaps nothing less than that will suffice to break the hold of the material over us and deliver us from its subtle

influence. ***"If any man does not renounce all that he has, he cannot be My disciple."*** Renounce the material – break the "alabaster box". This opens the way to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness content that all things necessary for obedience will be given to us.

- **The pressure of perplexing circumstances and problems in the work**

  It is **i**nevitable that they will come! Circumstances will test you. Situations will try you and tempt you to give up and go back and settle for spiritual mediocrity and ineffectiveness.

  John the Baptist, in such a test, sent a message to the Lord Jesus, ***"Are you He*** (the Messiah) ***or do we look for another?"*** He was in the grip of doubt. Had God's promises to him failed? What about the women at the tomb of the Lord Jesus? In their hour of despair when all their hopes were dashed, ***"They remembered His words"***. There are times when in great complexity you must remember His words to you – His call to service – His command to go to … and remember your response, ***"I have opened my mouth …"***

- **The problem of daily discipline: the pressure of lowering standards**

  "He who does not take up his cross daily and follow Me is not worthy of Me." Self-centred living has to go. The Lord Jesus must be supreme. This and nothing less is the stark commitment He requires. Self or the Lord Jesus? Have you made that choice? Then, ***"I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back!"***

These commitments must be the pre-condition of every choice and every decision.

Edmund Burke said over 200 years ago, **"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."** Good does not automatically prevail nor does it remain static. It always drops. Good intentions unfilled for want of discipline inevitably lead to a lowering of standards.

For some years you may have worked hard on the daily discipline of devotions. Thank God for that. But you never reach a plateau on which you can now keep moving forward without any effort, without discipline and without watchfulness. Obey Peter's injunction to go on adding to your faith (2 Pet. 1:5). If you don't, it will decline.

Have your standards of self-discipline slipped? It is by our standard of holiness, prayerfulness and way of living that we can influence and help to mould our disciples and the future church. So often in a crisis we stand firm, but at times of ease we let our daily discipline slip. But life is largely made up of the mundane and our spiritual growth and influence are governed by faithfulness in the little things of daily duty.

Someone has said, **"The test of character – the evidence of ability and trustworthiness – is doing the things that ought to be done, as they ought to be done, when they ought to be done, whether you feel like it or not."**

Faithfulness in that which is least is the way to spiritual growth and fruitfulness. Daily obedience to the Lord and daily faithfulness to duty don't get easier as you get older!

Daniel prayed three times a day. Isn't this a bit mechanical? I think prayer is every worker's greatest problem, both finding time to pray and actually praying. Wesley Duewel writes, **"Put prayer first"**. But prayer is a discipline before it becomes a joy. Your influence in whatever you do is largely determined by your prayer life. Someone has said, **"Discipline is organised self-control. Discipline is the sacrifice of a man's comfort, inclinations, safety and even life, for others – for something greater than himself. It is the refusal to be the weak link in the chain that snaps under the strain."**

"I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back." The stories the Lord Jesus told of an unfinished tower and an unwaged war remind us to what we have been called.

Gordon Hall said these poignant words to his wife as she cried in Bombay harbour in 1820, **"*I cannot go back.*"** She sailed with her two boys back to New England. Gordon was one of an epoch-making prayer group – the Haystack Prayer Meeting. A group of students at William's College, Massachusetts

met to pray for world mission. As they prayed in the open-air there was a thunderstorm and they rushed for cover under a haystack. Adoniram Judson was another member of this group.

In 1812 Judson sailed for Burma via Calcutta with Gordon Hall as his companion. They were turned away from British India as Britain was at war with the USA in 1812. But they appealed to the Governor General, Sir Evan Napeau, who was also Vice President of the British and Foreign Bible Society, that he should not turn away ambassadors of the Lord Jesus. He let them in. Gordon married an Englishwoman in India. They had two sons. One was very sick and they decided for the sick boy's sake that mother and boys should sail for "home". The sick child died on the voyage and the mother and son landed in New England as strangers in a strange land. They never saw Gordon again.

Gordon Hall was a pioneer evangelist/church planter in western India. He translated the Gospels into Marathi and began on the rest of the New Testament. His main ministry was as an itinerant evangelist in the inland areas visiting Hindu shrines to preach and distribute his Gospels. Near Nasik he visited the source of the river Godaveri (a holy river – next to the Ganges in holiness). It is about 4000 feet up in the Western Ghats. Cholera was raging. He slept that night just outside a Hindu temple. At 5 am he woke feeling very ill and by 8 am he was dead.

So he paid the price to help found the church in Maharashtra. At that Haystack Prayer Meeting he had made an irrevocable commitment, ***"I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back."***

Jephthah knew the binding irrevocability of a commitment to God. Let our commitment to the Lord Jesus be just as unswerving and as irrevocable. Amy Carmichael wrote a poem that included this verse:

On Thy brow we see a thorn crown,
Blood marks in Thy track.
Oh forbid that we should ever,
Turn us back.

Faith is that unique relationship in which we, mere creatures, set out to serve God and serve God alone. And we have the promise of the Father – the Spirit of power, the Spirit of discipline, the Spirit of obedience, the Spirit of sacrifice – through whom the Lord Jesus offered Himself to God and steadfastly set His face for Jerusalem. So every claim upon me for obedience, discipline, sacrifice and steadfastness in the coming days, as I seek to fulfil my calling – my commitment – is a claim on the resources of my indwelling Lord – the Holy Spirit.

So when claims of family make inordinate demands upon us, let us firmly and gently resist them. When we feel the pressure of materialism, let us renounce it. When our hearts are threatened with divided loyalties, when the shadow of dark doubt darkens our path and fear weakens our resolve, when we are under pressure to relax discipline and lower standards, **then** let the resolve ring in our hearts clearly, promptly, decisively, irrevocably and triumphantly:

"I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back!"

Our prayer

Enable us to run the race stripped of all hindrances, looking unto You – eyes always on the eternal. Help us to make a great beginning and to finish our course without regrets. May we not be marred by any betrayal of trust. May we be kept by the power of God to be presented faultless before Your glory without reproach and in exceeding joy.