

Teach us what we shall do for the child who will be born

God again punished the Israelites for their sin by bringing oppression from the Philistines. This oppression lasted for forty years, from the time of Jephthah to the period of Samuel's leadership (1; cp. 10:7; 1 Samuel 7:11–13; approximate dates 1087 to 1047 BC). We do not read of the Israelites crying out to God in their need but it is encouraging to observe that God has faithful people even during the darkest periods of apostasy. Manoah and his wife were such a couple. They lived in Zorah, a city of the tribe of Dan on the border with Judah, about seventeen miles west of Jerusalem.

Manoah's wife was unable to bear children (2). One day, *'the Angel of the LORD'* appeared to her and told her that she would conceive and bear a son who would *begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines*. He was to be a Nazirite from birth and she too was to observe Nazirite law (3–5). The Nazirite way of life involved abstinence from strong drink or any product of the vine, refraining from cutting the hair, and avoiding contact with a dead body (see Numbers 6:1–21). This way of life was usually a short-term commitment, but Samson was to remain a Nazirite for life.

The woman told her husband about her divine visitor and of his amazing message (6–7). Manoah was not unbelieving as Sarah was hundreds of years earlier, or Zacharias hundreds of years later, when they were given the promise of a son (Genesis 18:10–15; Luke 1:13–20). He prayed, saying, *'Oh my Lord, please let the man of God whom you sent come to us again and teach us what we shall do for the child who will be born'* (8). He was concerned to bring up his promised son in a God-honouring manner. He wanted more than his own best for the boy, he wanted God's best! Our children too, are precious gifts from God, but they face many pressures in this world which is hostile to the Lord. **Every Christian parent must prayerfully seek the Lord and search the Scriptures so that they will know how to train their children (see Proverbs 22:6).**

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Notes for 1 May are included in the notes for April

He had thirty sons. And he gave away thirty daughters in marriage

The chapter concludes by giving a brief mention of the judges who succeeded Jephthah: Ibzan of Judah, Elon of Zebulun and Abdon of Ephraim (8–15). They judged Israel for a total of twenty-five years and we are told where they are buried and a little about their family life. You may wonder why the Bible concentrates on such details without giving us any account of their spiritual life, of victories in battle (if any), or of the spiritual condition of Israel at that time.

It is obvious from the size of the families that Ibzan and Abdon were polygamists and may have had concubines (see comment on Gideon, chapter 8:29–31). Ibzan *had thirty sons. And he gave away thirty daughters in marriage* (9). Matthew Henry writes, ‘What a difference there was between Ibzan’s family and that of his immediate predecessor Jephthah! Ibzan has sixty children and all married, Jephthah but one, a daughter, that dies or lives unmarried. Some are increased, others are diminished: both are the Lord’s doing’ (Bible Commentary). Dale Ralph Davis adds, ‘Once we see this we almost automatically ask, “Why?” Why does God give to one and withhold from another? Why does Yahweh give and take away? Why does he order our affairs with such differences?’ (COMMENTARY ON JUDGES).

Are you perplexed by God’s dealings with you. You may have suffered disappointment; you may know loss and heartache. You may remain single when you long to be married. You may yearn to have children but heaven appears to be silent. **We cannot fathom the ways of God, but please remember that he is infinitely wise and kind. He loves us and he will never forsake us.**

*God shall alone the refuge be
And comfort of my mind;
Too wise to be mistaken, he,
Too good to be unkind.* (Samuel Medley)

If you are feeling puzzled by God’s providence in your life, do read Jerry Bridges’ book, ‘Trusting God even when Life Hurts’ published by NavPress.

JUDGES

Joshua died in 1390 BC and during the following ten years the tribes of Israel were governed by their elders. The period of the judges extends from 1380 BC to the beginning of the reign of King Saul in 1043 BC (these dates are approximate). After the death of Joshua and his fellow-leaders, the Israelites turned away from God to worship idols. The Lord punished them by bringing oppression from surrounding tribes and nations. Though the people deserved their punishment, God had pity upon them, and raised up judges to deliver when they cried out to him (2:7–13). Though God graciously raised up a deliverer when the people cried out to him in their distress, there isn’t any evidence that they repented of their wickedness except on one occasion (10:15–16). When the judge died, the sorry pattern of apostasy and wickedness soon reappeared (2:14–19). The influence of the judge did not extend to the whole nation but was often confined to just a section of the country. The function of the judges was:

- To act as magistrates applying God’s law to the life of the nation and to keep sin in check (cp. Deuteronomy 16:18; 17:9; 19:17).
- To deliver the people from foreign oppression.

Leon Wood writes, ‘No people ever had a beginning which promised anything as that designed for Israel’ (DISTRESSING DAYS OF THE JUDGES, page 66 – published by Zondervan). Israel had enjoyed godly leadership under Moses and then Joshua. God was with them and had demonstrated his power among them but the promised land was never fully occupied because of disobedience (2:1–3, 21–23). Gordon Keddie points out that this book is ‘about hard times. It deals with sin very explicitly, but, unlike pornography, which is the art of making sin attractive, it shows sin in all its ugliness and repulsiveness.’ (Preface to EVEN IN DARKNESS, published by Evangelical Press).

Key verse:– *In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes* (17:6; 21:25). This aptly describes the western world in the 21st century and the Book of Judges has much to teach us.

Outline of Judges

1. Incomplete Conquest through Disobedience – 1:1 to 3:6
2. Oppression and Deliverance through the Judges – 3:7 to 16:31
3. Confusion, Corruption and Chaos – 17:1 to 21:25

For further reading:

Judges – Such a Great Salvation by Dale Ralph Davis (Christian Focus).

Even in Darkness – Judges and Ruth simply explained by Gordon J. Keddie (Welwyn Commentary Series published by Evangelical Press).

Table of Judges in Israel

Chapter	Enemy	Judge
3:8–11	Mesopotamians	Othniel
3:12–31	Moabites	Ehud, Shamgar
4:1 to 5:31	Canaanites	Deborah
6:1 to 10:5	Midianites	Gideon Tola, Jair
10:6 to 12:7	Ammonites	Jephthah
12:8–15		Ibzan, Elon, Abdon
13:1 to 16:31	Philistines	Samson

Gideon is not described as a judge, but he was a deliverer whom I have included in the above list.

Gordon Keddie dates the events in the book of Judges from about 1400 BC until 1050 BC, a period of about 350 years. We cannot however, provide accurate dates.

29 MAY

Judges 12:1–7

Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?

We have already seen that the people of Ephraim were proud and jealous by nature (see notes for 19th May). When they heard of Jephthah's success over the Ammonites, they were furious that they had been denied a share in the glory of victory. They told him that they would burn down his house with fire.

Jephthah emphatically denied their accusation that he had not called upon them to fight against the Ammonites. The reverse was the case – they had not come to his aid when requested. He pointed out that God had given him victory and asked, '*Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?*' (1–3). They were not as ready to listen to Jephthah as their ancestors had listened to Gideon (8:1–3). They found, however, that Jephthah was not a man to put up with such petty complaining and it does appear that there may already have been some tension between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites (4).

Jephthah and his men slaughtered the aggressive Ephraimites in the ensuing battle. Those who tried to escape over the Jordan were intercepted by the Gileadites who challenged them to say the word 'Shibboleth' (the Ephraimites could not pronounce the 'sh'), and no mercy was shown to them (5–7).

The slaughter of the Ephraimites was unnecessary. There should never have been a civil war. All military effort should have been directed against Israel's enemies. It is very sad to observe that there are some Christians who are like the Ephraimites. They want to have pre-eminence in the church and are offended if it is denied them. I do hope that you are not a twenty-first century 'Ephraimite'. **We must be humble and gracious if we are to be blessed and used by God (cp. 1 Peter 5:5–6)?**

I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it

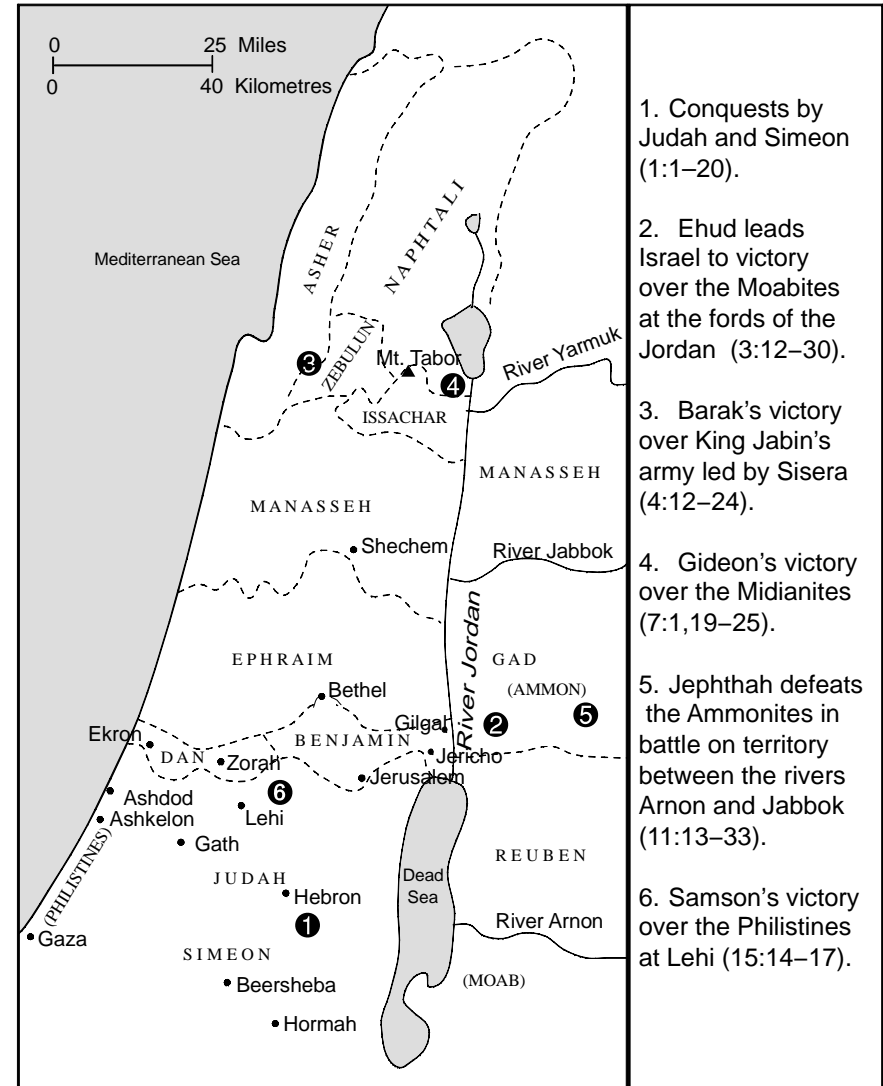
Jephthah made a vow to the LORD that if God gave him victory over the Ammonites, whatever came out of his house to meet him would be the Lord's and would be offered up as a burnt offering (30–31). You can imagine his horror when he returned to Mizpah to see his daughter, who was his only child, coming to meet him. He told her, 'I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it' (35).

Did Jephthah actually make a human sacrifice of his daughter? Bible scholars are divided in their opinions. * Human sacrifice is forbidden by the Lord (Deuteronomy 12:31). God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac but he never allowed the patriarch to go through with the sacrifice. I am inclined to agree with those who believe that Jephthah, knowing that God would not accept human sacrifice, consecrated his daughter to perpetual celibacy, hence she bewailed her virginity for two months (37). She would never be married nor bear children. We must not indulge in unprofitable speculation about the outcome of Jephthah's vow, but rather be taken up with the obvious lessons of God's Word.

Jephthah's daughter was a godly young woman who submitted to her father's authority and to the Word of God (36). Remember, she was brought up in times when there was much religious confusion and wickedness, but godly training in the home bears good fruit. We must be very careful about making vows. **We should never make vows to obtain things from God, but rather make vows as an expression of our gratitude to him for favours already received.** We must also beware of making vows which we will never be able to keep, or which might compromise our conscience as in Jephthah's situation: 'I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it.'

* Matthew Henry and Dale Ralph Davis are of the opinion that Jephthah did indeed offer his daughter as a human sacrifice. Leon Wood, Andrew R. Fausset and Gordon Keddie reason that he consecrated his daughter to perpetual celibacy.

Location of some of Israel's victories in Judges



1. Conquests by Judah and Simeon (1:1–20).
2. Ehud leads Israel to victory over the Moabites at the fords of the Jordan (3:12–30).
3. Barak's victory over King Jabin's army led by Sisera (4:12–24).
4. Gideon's victory over the Midianites (7:1,19–25).
5. Jephthah defeats the Ammonites in battle on territory between the rivers Arnon and Jabbok (11:13–33).
6. Samson's victory over the Philistines at Lehi (15:14–17).

So the LORD was with Judah ... but they could not ...

The opening words of Judges, ‘Now after the death of Joshua’ were probably intended as a title and ‘an editorial note’ (NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY 1958 reprint). The events recorded in chapter 1:1 to 2:6 took place during Joshua’s lifetime (his death is recorded in chapter 2, verse 8).

The tribes of Simeon was given its inheritance within the territory of Judah (Joshua 19:1) and both tribes fought together to possess their inheritance (3,17). They defeated the Canaanite king Adoni-Bezek at Bezek (location of this Bezek is unknown; it was presumably in south of Canaan). Adoni-Bezek had in the past cut off the thumbs and big toes of the kings he defeated in battle (this practice rendered them unfit to take up arms). When he received the same treatment, he recognised that he was fairly punished (7). *Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap* (Galatians 6:7).

The events in verses 10 to 15 are also recorded in Joshua 15:15–19 (see notes for 27 January). The Kenites, who descended from Moses’ father-in-law, were a nomadic tent-dwelling people (cp. 4:11) They were allowed to settle in Judah (16). Verse 19 gives an indication of a failure by the Israelites to trust in the Lord: *So the LORD was with Judah. And they drove out the inhabitants of the mountains, but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland, because they had chariots of iron* (19). They had been given precious promises of the Lord’s presence with them to enable them to defeat powerful armies (Deuteronomy 20:1; Joshua 17:18). They were more aware of their own weakness than the fact that God is almighty. If they had trusted in him the Lord would have given them victories as he had in the past.

Are you discouraged on account of defeat in your spiritual battles (eg. when dealing with remaining sin in your life, with problems of prayerlessness, fear to witness)? Remember, if God is with you, you have no reason to fear nor to be defeated (Psalm 20:7).

Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah

Jephthah tried to negotiate with the Ammonites before going to war with them. He sent messengers to their king to ask why he wanted war with Israel. The king responded by saying that he only wanted to recover land which the Israelites had seized from Ammon before they entered Canaan. Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of Ammon. He knew his history and pointed out in reply that:

- The territory possessed by Israel between the rivers Arnon and Jabbok had never belonged to the Ammonites. Israel had taken it from Sihon, king of the Amorites (15–23; cp. Numbers 21:21–31).
- The Ammonites had no right to possess what had been Amorite territory. The Lord had given it to Israel to possess (22–24).
- If Balak, king of Moab in Moses’ time did not fight Israel for this Amorite territory, why should the Ammonites (25)?
- Israel had possessed the land for three hundred years. Why hadn’t the Ammonites sought to recover it before (26)?
- He reminded the king of Ammon that he was the aggressor and that the Lord, the Judge, would settle the outcome of the battle between Israel and Ammon (27).

Jephthah’s reasoning fell on deaf ears. He was not a bloodthirsty man who delighted in warfare. He sought peace, but not at any price. *Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah* as he advanced towards the Ammonite army (29). He may have acquired great military skills, but he knew that he needed the Lord’s help in the battle (30). God gave him a great victory as the Israelites routed the Ammonite army (32–33). We should always be grateful to God for the gifts that he gives to us and for the skills that we are able to gain, but they are not sufficient in and of themselves. **We must know the empowering and help of the Holy Spirit in all of our work for God.**

Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?

Jephthah was ‘*a mighty man of valour*’ who bore the stigma of being the son of a prostitute. He was rejected and driven out by his half-brothers when he grew up. They were determined to exclude him from receiving any share in the family inheritance. He went to the land of Tob (a region just south of the Yarmuk river – see map, page 5). There he gathered around him, a band of *worthless men* who like himself had been rejected by society (1–3). They became a very effective fighting force under his leadership.

It was about 1087 BC and the Ammonites had oppressed the tribes east of the Jordan for eighteen years and were now prepared for battle (10:8,17–18). The desperate elders of Gilead went to Tob to seek Jephthah’s help. It would appear from his response that some of his brothers were among them. He said to them, ‘*Did you not hate me, and expel me from my father’s house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?*’ (7). Jephthah was a spiritual man who was prepared to help those who were unworthy of such help. They solemnly promised to make him their head if he would lead them against the Ammonites. He then returned with them to Mizpah in Gilead where he was recognised as their head and commander (6–11).

God is no respecter of persons. The illegitimate child, who had been hated and rejected by his own family, became one of the great heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:32). No one is beyond the reach of the grace of God. The Lord often chooses those who are despised by the world as leaders (cp. 1 Corinthians 1:27). The Lord *raises the poor from the dust ... to set them among princes* (1 Samuel 2:8). **Christian, never allow past hurts or rejection to haunt you or to embitter you. The Lord loves you. He chose you for himself before he made the world. He has accepted you and made you his child. Rejoice in him!**

But the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites

The remainder of Judges chapter 1 is a record of the failure of the tribes of Israel to drive out the Canaanites and to possess their inheritance (except for the taking of Bethel, 22–26). Judah *could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland* (19) and similar experiences are repeated in the following verses — *the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites* (21); — *Manasseh did not drive out . . .* (27); — *Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites* (29). — *Nor did . . .* (30,31,33). What was the reason for this shameful failure?

- There was a lack of faith in God’s promises to make them invincible against their enemies (see yesterday’s notes on verse 19; cp. Joshua 3:10; 23:5).
- Disobedience to God’s command to drive out the Canaanites. The Lord had warned Israel that if they did not drive them out, they would be irritants in their eyes and thorns in their sides and would harass them (Numbers 33:55–56). *When Israel was strong ... they put the Canaanites to tribute, but did not completely drive them out* (28, 30,33,35). Matthew Henry comments ‘it was owing to their covetousness; the Canaanites labour and money would do them more good (they thought) than their blood.’ Dale Ralph Davis writes, ‘This text carries its admonition for God’s people in any age. For one thing, it tells us that it is possible for the believer’s life to display the marks of success and yet be a failure in the eyes of God. Christian success (whether personal or in the form of a glossy evangelical enterprise) is not necessarily the same as pleasing God’ (COMMENTARY ON JUDGES, page 25).
- If they had detested the idols of Canaan, they would have had a holy determination to drive out the inhabitants of the land and to destroy the vile shrines used for idol worship.

We may feel that we would never have had such an unbelieving, disobedient attitude had we been in Israel in those times. **If we accept defeat in our battles and fail to trust the Lord in our trials, are we any better than Israel of old?**

The people lifted up their voice and wept

The Angel of the LORD came and rebuked the disobedient Israelites. What did he have to say to them?

- He reminded them of what God had done for them (1).
- He reminded them of God’s promise to them (1).
- He told them what God had expected from them (2).
- He rebuked them for their disobedience (2).
- He told them how he would punish them (3).

The people were so distressed that they wept (*‘Bochim’* means ‘weeping’) and made sacrifices to the Lord (4–5). **It is possible to weep when hearing or reading the Word of God and yet not truly repent of sin.** Events were to prove that their repentance shallow and not real; it did not last. True repentance brings a change in our lives and sin is loathed and forsaken. Matthew Henry observes: ‘This was good, and a sign that the word they heard made an impression upon them: it is a wonder sinners can ever read their Bibles with dry eyes . But this was not enough; they wept, but we do not find that they reformed, that they went home and destroyed all the remains of idolatry and idolaters among them. Many are melted under the word that harden again before they are cast into a new mould.’

Dale Ralph Davis asks, ‘Does anything go beyond Israel’s tear ducts? Is anything more lasting than water produced here? ... Our response to Yahweh’s accusing word should be more than wet eyes. It is good to be moved to tears but better to be brought to repentance’ (COMMENTARY ON JUDGES, page 28, 27).

The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD which he had done for Israel, (7). Joshua and his elders exercised a restraint on the waywardness of the people. Once their generation had died, the people embraced the worship of Baal and other Canaanite gods.

And his soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel

This chapter begins by mentioning two little known judges. Tola of the tribe of Issachar, *arose to save Israel* and judged for twenty-three years. After him, Jair a Gileadite, judged for twenty-two years. He was the first judge from the east of the Jordan (1–5). The words, *Then the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD* are repeated several times in the book of Judges (6; eg. 2:11; 3:7,12; 4:1; 6:1; 13:1). The Israelite’s appetite for idolatry was increasing rather than diminishing. They added the gods of their neighbours to the worship of the Baals and the Ashteroths. We should not be surprised that their wickedness and ingratitude provoked the Lord to anger. He brought eighteen years of oppression from the Philistines in the west and from the Ammonites in the east (6–9).

The distressed Israelites cried out to God confessing their unfaithfulness and idolatry. The Lord reminded them of his previous deliverances and told them that he would no longer deliver them. They should call upon their idols for deliverance. They knew in their hearts, however, that idols were useless and so they put away their foreign gods (10–16). Psalm 106:36–46 provides an inspired commentary on the times recorded in today’s reading. — *Many times he delivered them; but they rebelled against him by their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity. Nevertheless he regarded their affliction, when he heard their cry* (Psalm 106:43–44).

Verse 16 ends with an amazing statement about God: *And his soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.* Dale Ralph Davis comments, ‘Many Christians, especially those who have a lively sense of God’s severity but little of his kindness, should meditate on this text. You must see Yahweh’s heart’ (COMMENTARY ON JUDGES, page 137). **God chastises us for our sin because he loves us (cp. Hebrews 4:15; 12:5–11). He is also moved with compassion for the repenting sinner and is prepared to forgive.** The Ammonites were gathering for battle but God was preparing another judge to deliver his people (17–18). Let us rejoice in our gracious, merciful God!

Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech

After Abimelech had reigned for three years, *God sent a spirit of ill will* ('evil spirit' – AV; ESV) *between Abimelech and the men of Shechem* in order to bring judgment upon both parties (22–24). Treacherous Abimelech was on the receiving end of treachery. The Shechemites ambushed and robbed those who travelled on the mountain tracks around the city and Gaal led a rebellion against Abimelech. It appears that Shechem had both Canaanite and Hebrew inhabitants. Hamor was a Canaanite (28; cp. Genesis 33:19; 34:2; Joshua 24:32).

Gaal appealed to the Canaanites in Shechem to remove Abimelech (26–29). Zebul, Abimelech's trusted ruler of the city sent messengers to his king to warn him of the plot. Abimelech defeated Gaal and destroyed Shechem. He then set fire to the fortress temple of Baal killing those who had taken refuge within its walls (30–49).

Abimelech then attacked and took the town of Thebez which was probably in alliance with Shechem against him. He had used fire to destroy those in the fortress in Shechem; he now prepared to set fire to the tower in Thebez where many had taken refuge. A certain woman, sheltering in the tower, dropped a millstone on Abimelech's head which crushed his skull. The dying king hastily called on his armour-bearer to kill him so that he would be spared the disgrace of being killed by a woman (50–55). The very thing that Abimelech was so anxious to conceal is the one thing most remembered of him (2 Samuel 11:21).

Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech ... and all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads thus fulfilling the curse of Jotham (56–57). Abimelech's 'fire' had destroyed the Shechemites, and their 'fire' had destroyed him. **If we sow the seeds of evil and treachery, we will reap a bitter harvest.** *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap* (Galatians 6:7) What kind of seed are you sowing?

Another generation ... who did not know the LORD

Another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD (10). They may have known much about Yahweh ('the LORD'), but they did not know him personally. How did they arrive at this sad state of affairs? The Israelites had been commanded by God to drive out and destroy the inhabitants of the land because they were so wicked (Deuteronomy 9:4–5). The Israelites failed to do this (1:27, 29, 30–33) and they soon began to live like the Canaanites and to worship their gods (13; cp. Psalm 106:34–40). We too must resist the pressures of a godless society. We are not to be conformed to this world *which seeks to persuade us to conform to its evil ways* (Romans 12:2). Worldliness will sap our spiritual strength and devotion to God and we must resist such pressures if we are to please him (cp. James 4:4; 1 John 2:15–17). When our thinking is moulded by the Bible, we are better equipped to resist the influence of the world.

We can have religion without knowing the Lord. Such a religion may have all the outward trappings of Christianity – church-going, praying and Bible reading, and yet be shallow and superficial. In such a case, God is not first in the life and sin is enjoyed rather than shunned. That kind of religion is dangerous because it deceives people into believing that they 'will get there in the end', but it will not be heaven that they reach. The Lord Jesus warned, '*Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven*' (Matthew 7:21–23).

Is your Christianity real? Do you really know the Lord? Have you repented of your sin so that you hate it and have forsaken it? Do you love the Lord Jesus, rejoicing in his death and resurrection to save you? Are you seeking to please him each day and to know him better? Are you longing for his return? If you have a warm, vibrant, joyful Christian life, filled with praise to God, you will not be seduced by false religion nor by the charms of this world.

Yet they would not listen to their judges

Our reading today describes the treachery of the Israelites in turning from the Lord to serve the gods, Baal and Ashtoreth (11–13). Baal ('lord') was a name for the storm-god Hadad; Ashtoreth was a goddess of fertility whom the Canaanites worshipped as the consort of Baal. The worship of these gods involved sexual immorality in its ritual. This was supposed to guarantee the blessing of children, good harvests and increased livestock.

God had warned Israel that the gods of Canaan would be a snare to them if they did not destroy their altars (2–3). We now see how these words were to prove true (11–13). Notice that it was God who delivered the Israelites into the hands of their enemies and that *the hand of the LORD was against them for calamity* (14–15). They received their just deserts, but God is great in mercy: *The LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies ... for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them* (18). After the death of the judge they reverted to their wicked and stubborn ways (19–20).

The Lord had allowed some of the Canaanites to remain in the land and to live alongside the Israelites for the following reasons:

- To punish the Israelites for their apostasy (3, 20–21).
- To test Israel's faithfulness to himself (22; 3:4).
- To sharpen Israel's military capability (3:2).

The people gladly accepted the role of the judges to lead them to victory, but they did not want to be instructed by them: *Yet they would not listen to their judges* (17). If we refuse to listen to God and to obey him, he will surely punish us. **Do you listen for God to speak to you as you hear his Word preached or as you read your Bible?**

If you have acted in truth and sincerity

Gideon had told the Israelites that neither he nor his sons would rule over them (8:23). After his death, Abimelech, his son by the concubine, had no such qualms. He returned to Shechem and gave his mother's family the impression that they would be ruled by Gideon's seventy sons. He then persuaded them to lobby the men of the city to appoint him as king.

They accepted him and gave him silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men (1–4). He took his mercenaries to Ophrah where they murdered all his step-brothers (Gideon's sons) except for Jotham, the youngest, who had hidden himself. Jotham bravely stood outside Shechem on top of Mount Gerizim (where six tribes had uttered blessings if Israel obeyed God – Joshua 8:33) and called out to the wicked men of the city.

From the mountain, Jotham told the first parable recorded in Scripture. In this parable, the olive tree, the fig tree and the vine all refused to be king of the trees. The worthless bramble which did not afford shade from the sun, readily accepted the invitation of the trees to be their king.

Jotham was making the point that the men of Shechem and Beth Milo had chosen a worthless king who would not be able to protect them from their enemies. He warned these treacherous people, *'If you have acted in truth and sincerity with Jerubbaal (Gideon) and with his house . . . then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come from Abimelech which would destroy them both and they would destroy him. Jotham then ran off to be out of the reach of the wicked Abimelech* (16–21).

Christians do not always act *in truth and sincerity* (though they should). **Let us examine our own hearts and motives and be sure that no treachery is found within us.**

It became a snare to Gideon and to his house

We are repeating yesterday's reading to focus on Gideon's other foolish act. He asked the people to donate gold and precious materials (from their plunder) from which he made an ephod (25–27). This was an apron-like vestment covering both back and front of the wearer. It was made of 'gold and blue and purple and scarlet thread, and fine linen thread, artistically woven' (Exodus 28:6). Only the high priest was allowed to wear such an ephod (it had at its front a gold breastplate in which were kept the Urim and Thummin, by which God's guidance was sought – Leviticus 8:6–9). Gideon wanted to be like the high priest so that he could himself obtain divine guidance for Israel. He was treading on forbidden territory. His sin led to spiritual disaster. The Israelites began to worship the ephod which *became a snare to Gideon and to his house* (27). How careful we must be! If we do not regulate our lives and our worship according to God's Word, we will soon depart from God.

The seeds of ruin were being sown. Moreover, it was only a small step for the Israelites to go from ephod-worship to Baal-worship (33). **If a great man such as Gideon can be ensnared by Satan and brought down, let us not think that we are immune from the wiles of the devil.** After Gideon's death, an ungrateful Israel turned against his family and forgot God (29–35). They still knew about the Lord but they chose to ignore his goodness to them and they forsook him.

We do not have ephods or high priests today to ensnare us but there are other things. God has given us his precious Word to instruct us, to feed us and to build us up but many Christians are not satisfied. They are looking for prophecies and other supernatural gifts to guide them, but these are not for today. Their hankering after sensational and unusual experiences brings instability, a neglect of Scripture and false teaching into their lives. Others are looking to so-called Christian mysticism which derives its practices from eastern religions and spirit guides. **I urge you: Beware, beware, beware!**

They forgot the LORD their God

The nations left in Canaan are mentioned in verse 3. The five lords of the Philistines ruled over the five cities of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath and Gaza. God had forbidden his people to intermarry with the Canaanites and their disobedience led them into idol worship (6). The New Testament is quite clear in teaching us that a Christian should never marry an unbeliever (2 Corinthians 6:14–18; cp. 1 Corinthians 7:39). If we disobey God in this, we do so at our own spiritual peril.

We saw yesterday something of the loathsomeness of Canaanite worship. Apart from a refusal to acknowledge and worship God as the only true God who is sovereign over nature, the sanctity of sex and marriage was violated. We read that the people who *served the LORD all the days of Joshua*, served the gods of the Canaanites (2:7; 3:6). Their sin was truly appalling.

Israel fell into idolatry because they forgot God: *They forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs* (7). Moses had warned the people against this very thing (Deuteronomy 6:10–14). The sin of forgetting God continued to be a problem in Israel's later history (Jeremiah 2:32; Hosea 8:14). We too can forget God in our 'busy-ness' and rush. We may forget to worship and praise him for all his goodness to us; forget to pray and read his Word. **When we forget the Lord it becomes so easy for us to fall into all kinds of sin.** Krishna Pal, the first Hindu to be saved through the ministry of William Carey wrote these beautiful words:

*O thou, my soul, forget no more
The Friend who all thy misery bore;
Let every idol be forgot,
But, O my soul, forget him not.*

*Jesus, for thee, a body takes,
Thy guilt assumes, thy fetters breaks,
Discharging all thy dreadful debt;
And canst thou e'er such love forget?*

The LORD raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel

The Lord punished Israel by bringing oppression from Cushan-Rishathaim, the king of Mesopotamia (which lay to the north-east of Canaan, in the region of the River Euphrates; 8). Dale Ralph Davis points out that ‘Cushan-Rishathaim’ means ‘double wickedness’. I wonder if there is an irony in this? The Israelites had been doubly wicked in forsaking the Lord and in turning to the worship of idols. Israel *served the Baals and the Asherahs* and they also served ‘Double-Wickedness’ for eight years (7–8).

It would appear that *when the children of Israel cried out to the LORD* (9), it was not a cry of repentance. Davis writes, ‘When “Yahweh raised up a saviour” for Israel he was not reacting to any repentance on Israel’s part. If anything, he was responding to their misery rather than to their sorrow, to their pain rather than to their penitence. Who then can ever plumb the abyss of Yahweh’s pity for his people, even his sinful people, who are moved more by their distress than by their depravity? (JUDGES, pages 50–51). – ‘Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity ... He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in mercy’ (Micah 7:18).

The Bible constantly reminds us of the sovereignty of God over the nations of the world (and what a comfort this is in difficult or uncertain times): *‘He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim ... The LORD raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel ... The LORD delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand’* (8–10; cp 2:18).

The Lord raised up Othniel as the first of Israel’s judges. He was the nephew and son-in-law of Caleb who was already known for his bravery in battle (1:12–13). *The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel* (10). Othniel delivered Israel from the Mesopotamians and they then enjoyed forty years of peace until his death (9–11).

I will not rule over you ... the LORD shall rule over you

Gideon’s victory over the Midianites prompted some of the men of Israel to invite him to be their king. He sought no such honour, but desired that they acknowledged God’s rule over them (22–23). So far, so good, but many a great man has come to grief and Gideon was no exception (cp. Noah – Genesis 9:20–24; David – 2 Samuel 11; Uzziah – 2 Chronicles 26:15–16).

Gideon’s victory over the Midianites was completed and the people had gathered up so much treasure from the plunder of the defeated army. They were now rich beyond their wildest dreams after being themselves plundered for years and more important, they were safe and secure within their own nations’ borders. They were grateful and wanted Gideon to be their king: *Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, ‘Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian’* (22). Gideon’s response, *‘I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you’* sounds very spiritual (23) but he took on the lifestyle of a king. He had seventy sons, many wives and a concubine in Shechem (30–31). The concubine had a son whom she called Abimelech which means ‘My father is king’. Abimelech was a treacherous man, who years later, slaughtered all of Gideon’s sons except Jotham, who escaped.

Dale Ralph Davis observes, ‘We meet ... inconsistency and disappointment, if he refused kingship, he nevertheless hankered after it (eg. in giving the name “My father is king”). If in some way he accepted it, he disappoints us in his lack of discretion, in his giving opportunity for further apostasy (v. 27b). ... It is ever our danger that after being used by God in some way, we mouth humility but practise pride. We may know Spirit’s power (6:34) and yet lack the Spirit’s wisdom’ (COMMENTARY ON JUDGES, page 113). **Let us beware of pride; it is deadly and will destroy us (Proverbs 16:18). Be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5–6).**

When I come back in peace

Gideon and his three hundred continued to pursue the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, and the remaining fifteen thousand soldiers left with them. When Gideon reached the towns of Succoth and Penuel which were situated on the river Jabbok (see map – page 5), he asked the inhabitants to feed his exhausted troops. They scornfully refused to help because they did not believe that Gideon with such a small army could be enjoying a total victory over the Midianites. They lived east of the Jordan and would be in greater danger of Midianite reprisals if the Israelites were defeated. They were fellow-Israelites and Gideon was understandably angered by their ridicule and indifference. He warned them, ‘*When I come back in peace*’ and God had delivered the kings into his hands that he would deal with them severely. (4–9).

God gave Gideon continued success and he routed the Midianites and captured the two kings, taking them to Succoth and Penuel. He was able to show those who had scorned him that God had given him victory over the kings. He punished the leaders of Succoth and destroyed the tower at Penuel. When Gideon interrogated the two kings, his worst fears were recognised. He discovered that they had killed his own brothers. Gideon ordered his eldest son Jether, to kill them but the youth was afraid and Gideon himself killed them (10–21).

Gideon’s persistence in going after the Midianites is a challenge to us all. The jealous Ephraimites had delayed him; the cowardly attitude of the people of Succoth and Penuel discouraged him; he was tired and exhausted, but he would not rest until he had completed his God-given task. Dale Ralph Davis writes, ‘Here is instruction for us: sometimes the people of God are a great disappointment. (If you don’t know that, you may not survive in the church.) Don’t allow God’s people to disillusion you; at least be prepared for it’ (Judges, page 109). **Let us persevere in the work that God has given us to do, whatever the difficulties and discouragements.**

When the children of Israel cried out to the LORD

I stressed in yesterday’s notes that the sovereignty of God is written throughout the Bible. Here we have it again: *So the LORD strengthened Eglon king of Moab against Israel* (12). Following Othniel’s death, the Israelites lapsed into their old sinful ways and God punished them by bringing them under servitude to Eglon, King of Moab. He attacked Israel in alliance with the Ammonites and Amalekites and took possession of Jericho (*‘the city of palms’*, 13).

The Lord again displayed his sovereign grace towards Israel: *When the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for them* (15). Surely by now, the Israelites would have realised that the gods of the heathen are useless and cannot answer prayer? **When they prayed to the living and true God, things happened!** How often do you cry out to the Lord in your need? Read Romans 8:32; Hebrews 4:16 and be encouraged.

The deliverer whom God raised up was Ehud, a left-handed Benjamite (left-handedness seemed to run in this tribe, cp. 20:15–16). The Lord is sovereign over all of our physical characteristics and he used Ehud’s left-handedness to take Eglon off guard. Ehud would have appeared to be unarmed and the obese Moabite was not expecting an attack from the left hand. Heartened by his success in killing the Moabite king, Ehud led the Israelites to a great victory over Moab and there were then eighty years of peace (16–30).

We know little of Shamgar (31; 5:6) but he accomplished great victories against the Philistines with his ox goad. Ox goads were used to urge oxen forward and were up to eight feet in length; they were pointed at one end with a metal tip. They could be a very effective weapon when used as a spear. Shamgar was a solitary figure in his fight against the Philistines, but the Lord uses the ‘ones’ and the ‘twos’ in his service. **Never give up when you feel alone in the Christian warfare. We are never alone because the Lord has promised never to leave us nor forsake us** (Hebrews 13:5–6).

Has not the LORD gone out before you?

Ehud was able to deliver the Israelites from the power of Eglon and the Moabites but was not able to deliver them from the slavery of sin nor destroy the idols that were in their hearts. They returned to their evil ways after the death of Ehud (1). We rejoice in having a Saviour who frees us from the enslaving power of sin (John 8:34–36).

The now familiar pattern is repeated. The Lord used Jabin, the Canaanite king to oppress Israel for twenty years (Jabin was the name used for the kings of Hazor – Joshua in his time killed a king of Hazor referred to as Jabin; Joshua 11:1–14). Jabin had a strong army with nine hundred chariots under the command of Sisera (1–3). God again heard the prayers of Israel and spoke through Deborah, a prophetess who judged Israel in Ephraim (4–5). She told Barak to assemble an army of ten thousand men from his own tribe of Naphtali and from Zebulun. She promised that the Lord would give him victory over Sisera (7).

Barak was a man of faith (Hebrews 11:32) but lacked confidence and wanted Deborah to accompany him in battle. He said to her, *‘If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go’* (8). He may have achieved a greater deliverance had he addressed these words to God. She told the diffident leader that the Lord would sell Sisera into the hands of a woman (9–10). **Let us beware of repeating Barak’s mistake of trusting in men more than trusting in God.**

Deborah told Barak to go up to fight the Canaanites, saying, *‘Has not the LORD gone out before you?’* (11–14). God gave him a great victory apparently sending heavy rain which flooded the river Kishon. The Canaanite chariots were swept away in the floods (15; cp. 5:19–22). Sisera fled to the tent of Jael, a Kenite (11,17). She invited him to hide and to rest in her tent and gave him milk to drink. As Sisera slept, Jael killed him by driving a tent-peg through his skull (18–24). Deborah’s prophecy (9) had been fulfilled. The Lord uses the most unlikely people to accomplish his purposes. Let us worship him praise him!

Why have you done this to us?

The people of Ephraim were proud and considered themselves to be the most important of the twelve tribes. Their ancestor Ephraim had been honoured by Jacob above his older brother Manasseh (Genesis 48:8–20); Joshua was from their tribe, and the tabernacle was located at Shiloh in their territory. Gideon had called upon them to guard the fords of the river Jordan in order to cut off the fleeing Midianites. They had done this with considerable success, killing Oreb and Zeeb, two of the enemy princes (7:24–25). They were angry however, that Gideon (of the tribe of Manasseh) had not involved them until victory was assured. He himself was in hot pursuit of the Midianites but was delayed as the jealous men of Ephraim complained, *‘Why have you done this to us?’* (8:1). What lessons are there for us in this incident?

- The path of obedience to God’s will is not always smooth. We may leave ourselves open to misunderstanding just as Gideon did. He could not have involved the Ephraimites at an earlier stage in the battle. Moreover, God had told him to reduce his army to just three hundred men. The self-important men of Ephraim may have been very difficult to convince that this was the correct strategy.
- We must guard ourselves against nurturing a jealous spirit. Satan has destroyed or hindered many a church through jealous men or women who feel that they are not being recognised. God is sovereign over our lives and we must commit our way to him. The Ephraimites did not learn this lesson (cp. 12:1).
- Gideon had good reason to be annoyed at the petty bickering of the men of Ephraim. He answered them gently however, taking the heat out of a tense situation. He likened their success to a bumper grape harvest while his vintage (*‘of Abiezer,’* cp. 6:11) was like their gleanings (the left-overs, 2). We, too, must learn to be gentle with those who provoke us. *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger* (Proverbs 15:1). **If we have a jealous heart or a harsh tongue, let us confess it before God and repent.**

When Gideon heard the telling of the dream ... he worshipped

The Lord, mindful of Gideon's fears, said to him, 'Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down ...' (9–10). It is reassuring to know that God understands our fears and that he does not mock us in our weakness.

The Lord told Gideon to go with his servant to an outpost of the Midianite camp. There, they heard one of the Midianites describing to his companion a dream that he had just had. His companion said, 'This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon ... for into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp.' He interpreted the dream as a sign that the Lord would give Gideon a great victory over them (13–14). When Gideon heard this *he worshipped* (15). **The fearful, hesitant warrior, was reassured. He was filled with wonder at the wonderful ways of God.** He had once lamented the lack of seeing God working miracles for his oppressed people (6:13). He was now seeing it happen.

Gideon returned to the camp of Israel where he encouraged his three hundred men. He divided them into three companies. Each man had an empty pitcher with a lamp inside it in one hand, and a trumpet in the other. When Gideon blew his trumpet they were to blow theirs and shatter the pitchers allowing the light to stream out from the lamps. They were to cry out, 'The sword of the Lord and Gideon.' This was to be done at the beginning of the middle watch (after 10.00 pm) when most of the massive Midianite army would be asleep (16–18).

This strategy caused panic, confusion and disorder among the Midianites so that they turned on each other. They were routed and fled in disarray pursued by the Israelites who called on the tribe of Ephraim to guard the fords of the river Jordan and so cut off the fleeing Midianites (19–25). What a mighty work the Lord wrought through Gideon and his small army! They were *out of weakness made strong, became valiant in battle* (Hebrews 11:34).

When the people willingly offer themselves, bless the LORD!

Deborah called on the kings and princes of the surrounding nations to hear her song of praise to God. She celebrated God's mighty acts in the past (4–5), and praised him for the recent deliverance (19–31) and for making his people willing to offer themselves in service (2,9). Israel had recently been in a sorry state. The oppression of the Canaanites had made travel unsafe. Highways were deserted and village life had ceased. Their enemies had disarmed them (6–8).

All had been changed with the defeat of Sisera. The people would now praise God and recount his *righteous acts for his villagers in Israel* (11). We may not have military success to cause us to praise God, but think of what God has done for us in sending his Son to die and to rise again to conquer Satan and death, and to save us from our sins. We too should recount the righteous acts of God and make known the gospel. We should be a praising people because God is glorified in the offering of praise (Psalm 50:23).

When the people willingly offer themselves, bless the LORD! (2). Deborah also blessed God for *the rulers of Israel who offered themselves willingly with the people* (9). Men from other tribes also willingly came to reinforce the army that Barak had raised from the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun (13–15). **Do you offer yourself willingly to serve the Lord, especially in work that may be tough and for the most part unseen?** There are many jobs to do in every church and willing helpers who cheerfully go about their tasks are a great blessing and encouragement to us all. *Your people shall be volunteers (willing – AV) in the day of your power* (Psalm 110:3).

*In full and glad surrender
I give myself to thee,
Thine utterly and only
And evermore to be.*

(Frances Ridley Havergal)

Great resolves of heart ... great searchings of heart

The tribes east of the Jordan (half of Manasseh, Gad, Reuben), as well as Asher and Dan (see map, page 5) failed to come to the help of their western neighbours in their battle with the Canaanites (15–18). The men of Reuben had *great resolves of heart ... great searchings of heart* but they did not put their good resolutions to work, despite the challenge to their own hearts. The word translated ‘*searchings*’ conveys the idea of examination and deliberation. The Reubenites discussed the call to battle but failed to give any help to Barak. The work of God will never prosper on good intentions. Do we rise to the challenge when God speaks to us through his Word?

Deborah was instructed by *the angel of the LORD* to curse Meroz bitterly. We do not know how the inhabitants of Meroz refused to come *to the help of the LORD against the mighty* (23). The ‘*mighty*’ may refer to the fleeing Sisera after God had swept away his troops in the floods (19–23). If we turn away from work in our church when we are able to help, we will attract the strong disapproval and chastisement of God. We will have to give account at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9–11). **Will we be ashamed?**

*Teach me to live! no idler let me be
But in thy service hand and heart employ,
Prepared to do thy bidding cheerfully,
Be this my highest, this my holiest joy.* (Ellen E. Burman)

Jael, who did not belong to Israel, could have remained neutral, but she killed the fleeing Canaanite army commander and was commended for her bravery (24–27). The song poignantly describes Sisera’s mother waiting anxiously for his return from battle and of her women companions seeking to allay her foreboding. Perhaps he was delayed because he was plundering the defeated Israelites (28–30)? The song ends by invoking a curse on all of God’s enemies and a blessing on those who love him (31).

Lest Israel claim glory for itself

I am indebted to Dale Ralph Davis for his application of the teaching of Judges concerning Gideon. He points out that throughout chapters 6 to 8 of Judges we are presented with the weakness of Israel and of Gideon. He writes, ‘One can trace this theme in Israel’s total helplessness (6:2–6), in Gideon’s lack of status and relative obscurity (6:15), in his fear of family and townspeople (6:27), in his need for additional assurance (6:36–40), in the radical reduction of his army (7:2–8), in his fear of the battle and need of additional encouragement (7:10–15)’ (COMMENTARY ON JUDGES, page 101). Gideon and Israel really were weak, and humanly speaking, their situation was hopeless.

Gideon mustered an army of 32,000 to fight the Midianites and their allies, but God told him that he had too many. God’s ways are different to ours (Isaiah 55:8). All those who were afraid were told to return to their homes and Gideon was left with just 10,000 men. He may have felt discouraged to see his army so drastically reduced but God still said, ‘*too many*’ (1–4). Gideon’s army was further reduced to just 300 men after a drinking test. Those who lapped water to drink were set apart from the majority who kneeled (5–7).

The Lord was determined to show Israel that their victory would come through him alone and not through their own military might, *Lest Israel claim glory for itself against me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me’* (2). D.R. Davis writes, ‘Does not 7:2 speak to us? Does it not tell us that there is a certain deviousness in God’s people, a tendency to steal God’s praise? Does it not teach us that sometimes he cannot trust us with his work unless we realize how inadequate we are to do it? This may explain why God frequently chooses such unlikely instruments’ (COMMENTARY ON JUDGES, page 104). We are often aware of our own smallness and weakness as we serve God among those who are indifferent or opposed to the gospel, but he is almighty and sovereign. **Let us be encouraged and always remember that any success that we enjoy in the Lord’s work is not of our doing, but is of God alone! To him be all the glory!**

If you will save Israel by my hand as you have said ...

Gideon is one of the great heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11. He had displayed his faith by obeying God's instruction to tear down the altar of Baal. His brave stand for the Lord had placed him in great danger (30). Gideon had seen God vindicate him by protecting him from the angry men of his city after he had destroyed the altar of Baal. He had seen his father take a forceful stand against Baal worship but he was still hesitant. Great men and women of faith are sometimes beset by doubts and fears and Gideon was no exception. The Holy Spirit came upon him and he was successful in assembling an army to fight against the Midianites (28–35). Despite all these things, he was still hesitant and weak in faith. He said to God, '*If you will save Israel by my hand as you have said ...*' (36).

Gideon asked God for a sign to prove that he really would deliver Israel as he had promised. He put out a woollen fleece and at his request, the Lord soaked it with dew while leaving the ground of the threshing floor completely dry. He then asked God to reverse the miracle. The next morning, he found the fleece completely dry but the ground soaked with dew (37–40). God is very patient with us, even when our faith is weak!

Some Christians, when seeking guidance, speak of 'putting out a fleece'. They may have to make a decision about changing job, moving home or something similar, and do not know which way to turn. They ask God to make certain things happen or for other signs to direct their decision making. **It is important that we see that Gideon did not put out his fleece to seek guidance, but to confirm the will of God which had already been revealed to him:** '*If you will save Israel by my hand as you have said ...*' The Bible sets out principles for godly living. If we love God with all of our heart, seek always to obey his will, humbly and prayerfully depending upon him, he will surely direct us (see Psalm 37:4–5). Let us be very cautious about using 'fleeces' when seeking guidance from God.

The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valour!

The Israelites had thoroughly defeated the Midianites under Moses' leadership (Numbers chapter 31). By this time, the descendants of those who had survived had again become a powerful fighting force. The Lord sent the Midianites, Amalekites and the people of the East to plunder Israel's livestock and harvests, reducing them to near starvation for seven years. The attackers began from near Gaza in the south (4), before moving north. Why was this? – The Israelites had still to learn the vital lesson which teaches us that God punishes sin. When the people prayed to the Lord, he sent them a prophet to remind them of his goodness to them (1–6). He had delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, had given them victory over the Canaanites, and given them the land. They had been warned about the consequences of idolatry but they had not heeded those warnings. They were being punished because of their disobedience (7–10).

God is merciful and he raised up Gideon from the tribe of Manasseh to free them from their oppressors. *The Angel of the LORD* appeared to Gideon as he was threshing wheat in a wine-press (to hide his meagre crop from the Midianites). The Angel told him, '*The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valour!*' (12). Gideon could not understand how the Lord could be with him and his people. He asked, '*If the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us?*' (13).

Gideon was much aware of his own weakness and unworthiness (15). It is encouraging to read however, that God saw Gideon as a *mighty man of valour* (12). **You may feel your own weakness and be discouraged, but who knows how the Lord may be pleased to use you if you trust in him and obey him?** God often chooses those who are weak to accomplish mighty deeds for himself (cp. 1 Corinthians 1:27). This principle is vividly illustrated in the next chapter.

* '*The Angel of the LORD*' is more than an angel – He is called God elsewhere in Scripture (11–16; cp. 14:3,21–22). Many Bible commentators believe that '*the Angel of the LORD*' describes the Lord Jesus as he appeared to men in Old Testament times before he came to earth at Bethlehem.

Surely I will be with you

Gideon recalled God's mighty power when he brought the Israelites out of Egypt and said, *'But now the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hand of the Midianites.'* (13). The Lord surprised him, telling him that he would send him to save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Gideon was not convinced; his clan was the weakest in Manasseh and he was the least (youngest) in his father's house. He was a 'nobody' who felt too inadequate to rise to the challenge that God was giving him. God then gave him a wonderful promise, *'Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man'* (16). In our weakness, we may know the strength of God; in our inadequacy, we know that nothing is impossible with God.

God had given the same promise to Moses and to Joshua (Exodus 3:12; Joshua 1:5). The Lord gave the same promise to his disciples (Matthew 28:20) and to Paul (Acts 18:9–10). He promises us, *'I will never leave you nor forsake you'* (Hebrews 13:5). *'Surely I will be with you.'* — Dale Ralph Davis comments, 'Basically God has nothing else or more to offer you. You can go through a lot with that promise. It does not answer your questions about details. It only provides the essential. Nothing about when or how or where or why. Only the what, or, better, the Who. *"But I will be with you."* And that is enough' (COMMENTARY ON JUDGES, page 95).

Are you facing great challenges? Do you find yourself in difficult or baffling circumstances? Do you feel that you cannot take any more knocks or buffeting? Are you passing through a deep valley of sorrow or loss? Remember the wonderful promise of God, *'I have called you by your name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned'* (Isaiah 43:1–2).

'Surely I will be with you.'

Tear down the altar of Baal that your father has

Gideon was uncertain that the Angel speaking to him and giving this wonderful promise and challenge was indeed the Lord. He begged the Angel to wait while he prepared an offering. The Angel told him to take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay it upon a certain rock, and pour out the broth. He then brought fire out of the rock which consumed the offering before disappearing from Gideon's sight (17–21). Gideon was awe-struck in the presence of the Lord who reassured him saying, *'Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die'* (22–23). A true experience of the Lord never leads to boasting nor to flippant behaviour, but rather produces reverence and godly fear (Isaiah 6:1–5; Hebrews 12:28–29). Gideon then built an altar to the Lord, calling it Jehovah-Shalom which means, 'the Lord is Peace' (24). To know God is to know and enjoy great peace!

Gideon's father was a leading idolater in the city and the custodian of the altar of Baal and the Asherah pole. God told Gideon, *'Tear down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the wooden image that is beside it'* (25). He was then to build an altar to the Lord and sacrifice his father's young bull. Gideon was understandably afraid of the consequences of such an action and he acted by night (25–27). Obedience is often costly, but to his surprise, Gideon had the support of Joash, his father against those who wanted to kill him for destroying the shrine of Baal. Joash rightly reasoned that if Baal was a real god, he could plead for himself and deal with the one who had attacked his image (28–32). It appears that Gideon's brave action led to his father forsaking his idolatry.

If we would be blessed and used by God, we must begin by honouring God in our homes. God was not prepared to use Gideon while there was idolatry in his own . He also had to prove his courage in his own home and city before the Lord sent him against the Midianites. It was after Gideon had honoured God at home that *the Spirit of the LORD came upon him* (34). Are you prepared to obey God, whatever the cost?