

THE BOOK OF JUDGES - PART FOUR - CHAPTERS 9-16

The next enemy to trouble the people of Israel was Midian. Whereas the previous two enemies were remembered for their kings, Eglon, whose excessive appetite could be a picture of the flesh, and Jabin, who might represent the Devil, the Midianite kings are not even named until near the end of the story. The Midianites were a threat simply because of the sheer weight of their numbers.(6:5) They regularly descended on the unfortunate Israelites in their hordes to rob them of their harvests after all the hard work had been done. They could well be seen as picturing the world of people without God who intimidate us simply because there are far more of them than there are Christians. The world has a way of forcing us into its mould of thinking and behaving just because they are the majority. Like Gideon, we fear the world who bully and ridicule us, and so rob us of the best in Christ.

When finally the Israelites once more cried to God for help, He had a solution as usual.(6:7) Before sending a saviour, the Lord sent a prophet who reminded them of their salvation from Egypt described in the book of Exodus, and of the warning God gave them about what would happen if they turned to other gods. First God sends us back to the Bible, the gospel and the warnings of the consequence of going our own way.

Preparing their new saviour, Gideon, was a difficult task because of the multitude of fears he had which paralysed him and prevented him standing up to the 'world', Midian. When the angel of the Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, appeared to Gideon he was hiding for fear of the enemy.(6:11) The name he was given seemed a joke. He was far from being 'a valiant warrior', the translation of 'Gideon'. First the Lord promised His presence, but Gideon was afraid that what God had done in Bible times He did not do any more.(6:13) The Lord gave him a task, but his next fear was that he was not strong enough.(6:15) The Lord promised him strength but Gideon needed proof that the Lord accepted him.(6:17) The answer came as it always does in a powerful picture of the cross where God accepts us, as the Lord Jesus identified Himself with the sacrifice.(6:21,22) Gideon's next fear was of God Himself. The Lord promised him peace.(Jn.16:33) Peace gets rid of fear.

His commission from God was to begin at home where other gods had crept into the thinking of his family. Fearing his family Gideon tried to get rid of the false gods at night but was soon found out.(6:27) To his surprise his father stood up for him.(6:31) It is always a delight when our families follow our example, and stand with us against the world. Encouraged by family support Gideon finally came into the open and took a lead, in the strength of the Holy Spirit.(6:33) Even now he had second thoughts fearing that perhaps he had imagined God's call to him. God in His love and patience met Gideon in his doubt as He does us.(6:36-40)

Gideon still had to learn that the victory God would give him would in no sense be his doing. First he had to tell his army that anyone who was afraid could go home. Most of them did!(7:3) Next he was told to dismiss any soldier who did not stay prepared for the enemy at all times. His fine army of 35,000 was reduced to a mere 300.(7:8) To remove his remaining fear, God let him into a great secret; the enemy knew he was defeated before even the battle began.(7:14) For all its brave show, the world without God is made up of people who know they have not got what it takes. What followed was not a battle but a celebration as the Israelite trumpets announced victory. Torches hidden in pots until they were broken pictured Jesus, the light of the world, hidden in us until we admit we are nothing of ourselves.(Jn.9:5; II Cor.4:7; Jn.15:5)

Chapter 8 illustrated some of the sad reactions that often come after Christians have been victorious in Christ. One group of God's people were jealous of Gideon's success.(8:1) Another group were sceptical as to whether victory would last.(8:6) We will meet the same discouraging responses. After having proven them wrong, Gideon took unnecessary revenge, a hint of the wounded pride which would soon be his downfall.

Wisely Gideon declined to be made king of Israel, but unwisely he accepted a reward which would be worth several million dollars in today's values. He forgot that not only was God to be their king, but that to God alone belonged the glory.(8:26) His reward became an ephod, an idol, as our achievement in Christian ministry can easily become a god to which we expect others to bow down. Finally Gideon retired home to a private life which showed anything but victory, as he ignored God's plan for one man to marry one woman.(Gen.2:24) No wonder the minute he was dead, his ministry was forgotten.(8:33)

9:1-6 Q.1 Abimelech means 'father of the king'. What do you suppose was in Gideon's mind when he named this son? How did Abimelech live up to his name? To what terrible measure did he resort to achieve his ambition? How can we make the same mistake about Christian leadership?

9:7-57 Q.2 How did different people challenge Abimelech's position? With what result? How should we expect the same thing to happen if we adopt the same approach to leadership? Was there anything glorifying to God about the

events of chapter 9? Did anyone benefit from what happened? Will anyone benefit today when we make the same mistakes? What was the fate of Abimelech? How did it again illustrate the principle of Gen.3:15 that had been demonstrated in Judges 4:21?

10:1-18 Q.3 This chapter pauses to repeat a, by now, familiar message. What is it? Why did God not rush to provide another deliverer as soon as Israel cried to Him? What was the value in giving His people time to reflect on the results of the same mistake yet again? How does He do the same now?

11:1-28 Q.4 An old enemy, Ammon, rose yet again to challenge Israel. Who was the deliverer this time? What had been his family background? How did this shape his attitude to leadership? Whose choice was he? What conditions did he seek for his service of his people? Is there a picture of Jesus in this? What argument did Jephthah use in his dispute with the king of Ammon?

11:29-40 Q.5 Once again the Holy Spirit took a rather unpromising man to accomplish His purpose. Couldn't God have found a better man? What can we learn from God's use of Jephthah? What terrible mistake did he make in his relationship with God? Who else made a similar mistake? (Gen.28:20; I Sam 14:24) What was the consequence of his mistake? What warning is there in his mistake and its consequence?

12:1-15 Q.6 What was the attitude of the people of Ephraim to Jephthah? How had they reacted in a similar way before and with what result? What does this teach us about people? How did Jephthah deal with them? Was this Christ-like? What can we learn from the succession of judges who followed Jephthah?

13:1,2 Q.7 Who were the conquerors of Israel this time and for what reason? How long did Israel put up with defeat on this occasion? To what kind of couple did God entrust the birth and upbringing of the next deliverer? Of what other Bible stories does this remind you? What important message is this principle giving us about being parents?

13:3-23 Q.8 Who announced the coming birth of Samson? What did He reveal about Himself in the course of His relationship with Manoah and his wife? What instructions did He give about the upbringing of Samson? What was the significance of a Nazirite vow?(Num.6) Were Jesus and John the Baptist Nazirites? What problems did Manoah have with the news he was to become a father? How did the Lord answer them?

13:24-14:9 Q.9 How was Samson as a young man drawn in two directions at the same time? What got him into trouble the first time? What role did his parents try to have in helping him to choose wisely? What means did God use to warn Samson of the danger into which he was moving? How is this a familiar picture to us?(I Pet.5:8) How did God enable Samson to deal with the lion?

14:10-20 Q.10 How did Samson's victory over the lion turn to defeat by his enemies? How does victory for us so easily turn to defeat?

15:1-8 Q.11 How did Samson again get himself into trouble? Was the solution to his new problem God's idea? What was the outcome of Samson's revenge? What does this story teach us about habit and consequence?

15:9-20 Q.12 After a series of failures did God still have a purpose for Samson as a leader? How in this story is there a picture of Jesus Christ in the life of Samson? Consider particularly the actions of his own people, the high place of the jaw bone and the rock out of which water came.

16:1-3 Q.13 After 20 years as a leader how could Samson make the same mistake again? How did God rescue him once more? Why did He bother?

16:4-22 Q.14 What problem did Samson have this time? How did each occasion represent a step downwards? What does this teach us about why we continue to sin? What were the consequences this time to Samson personally?

16:23-31 Q.15 What were the consequences of sin on Samson's leadership and the people who looked to him for example and teaching? What was the final solution to the problem of the flesh in the life of Samson? How did he again at this point become a picture of Jesus?