Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Judges

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

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Introduction

The subject of the book; its connection with Joshua

The Book of Judges is the history of the failure of Israel. Joshua sets before us the energy of God acting in the midst of the people, though there may be failure. In Judges we see the miserable state of the nation, now become unfaithful; and, at the same time, the intervention of the God of mercy in the circumstances into which their unfaithfulness had brought them. These interventions correspond with what are called revivals in the history of the church of God.

The people's sorrowful history and God's grace and compassions

In this book we no longer see blessing and power marking the establishment of the people of God. Neither does it contain the fulfilment of God's purposes, after the people had manifested their inability to retain the blessing they had received, that indeed is yet to come for them, and for the assembly; nor the forms and government which, in spite of the evil and internal unfaithfulness of the people, could maintain their external unity, until God judged them in their leaders. God was still the only leader acknowledged in Israel; so that the people themselves always bore the penalty of their sin.

The misery into which their unfaithfulness brought them moving the compassion of God, His mighty grace raised up deliverers by His Spirit in the midst of the fallen and wretched people. "For his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel." "And Jehovah raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them." "And when Jehovah raised them up judges, then Jehovah was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hands of their enemies, all the days of the judge; for it repented Jehovah because of their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them." But Israel was unchanged. "And yet they would not hearken unto their judges." "And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them, and to bow down unto them; they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn ways." This is the sorrowful history of the people of God; but it is also the history of the grace of God, and of His compassions towards His people.

Chapter 1

Increasing unfaithfulness

Thus, in the beginning of the book, we see evil and failure, and also simple and blessed deliverances. But alas! the picture darkens more and more. There are grievous features even in the conduct of the judges, and the state of Israel becomes worse and worse; until weary of the results of their own unfaithfulness, in spite of the presence of the prophet, and the express word of God, they reject the kingship of the Almighty to adopt human forms of government, and establish themselves on the same footing as the world, when they had God for their king!

God's omniscient wisdom

This unfaithfulness, indeed, foreseen of God, was the reason why God left some of the nations in the midst of His people to prove them. The presence of these nations was in itself a proof of Israel's lack of energy and confidence in the power of God, who nevertheless would have preserved them from their subsequent disasters. But in the wisdom of His counsels, God, who knew His people, left these nations in their midst, as a means of proving them. Israel will be fully blest only under Messiah, who by His might will bring in their blessing, and by His might will preserve it to them.

Decay of each revival marked by increasing evil and unbelief

Alas! this history of Israel in Canaan is also that of the assembly. Set up in heavenly blessing on the earth, it has failed from the beginning in realising that which was given to it; and evil developed itself in it as soon as the first and mighty instruments of blessing which had been granted it were removed. Things have gone from bad to worse. There have been revivals, but still the same principle of unbelief; and the decay of each revival has marked increasing progress in evil and unbelief in proportion to the good which has been thus forsaken. The revival never reaches to the extent of laying hold of what God is, what He revealed Himself as at first for His people, what the first power of revelation and action of the Spirit. When departed from, God is more and more lost. The part of His blessing afresh brought forward is neglected and abandoned, so that there is a more entire forgetfulness of Him, and nature and the world resume their place, but now not merely without, but to the exclusion of, God, and setting up of man and nature, by departing from the primitive source of blessing and strength.* {* It is a striking fact in man's history that the first thing that he has always done when God has set up something of His own on the earth has been to spoil it. Man himself eats the forbidden fruit; Noah gets drunk; Aaron's sons offer strange fire; Israel makes the golden calf; Solomon falls into idolatry; Nebuchadnezzar sets up his idol and persecutes. God's patience has gone on dealing with souls, all through, in spite of it.}

God's unfailing faithfulness and grace

Nevertheless God has always had His own people, and His faithfulness has never failed them, whether in secret, or manifesting openly, in His kindness, His grace towards His assembly in public power — a power that it ought always to have enjoyed. This sad succession of falls will have an end at the coming of Jesus, who will accomplish His purposes respecting the assembly in its heavenly glory; purposes, of which it should have always been the faithful witness here below.

God's power and presence always to be found

The power and the presence of God did not forsake Israel at the time of Joshua's departure. It was always to be found wherever there was faith to make use of it. This is the first truth which this book presents. It is what Paul said to the Philippians, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do."

Failure of faith, energy, sense of God's presence, and perception of evil

This presence of God with them in blessing to faith makes itself known at one time by victory over most powerful enemies (chap 1:1-7); at another by the obtaining of special blessing, "springs of water" (vers. 13-15), and in all the detail of their realisation of the promises. The Philistines even were driven out (ver. 18). But at the same time, the faith of Judah and Simeon, of Ephraim and Manasseh, and of all the tribes failed; and consequently their energy, and their sense of the value of God's presence, and of their own consecration to Him, failed also, together with their perception of the evil existing among their adversaries — a perception which would have rendered their presence in the midst of them insupportable.

Evil and corruption tolerated and spared

What dishonour to God, what sin, to spare, to tolerate, such people! What unfaithfulness towards God was this indifference; and what an infallible source of evil and corruption in Israel! But they were insensible to all this. They were wanting in spiritual discernment as well as in faith; and the sources of evil and misery dwelt beside the people, even in the land, the land of God and of Israel.

Chapter 2

The change from Gilgal to Bochim

Alas! if such was the condition of the people, and they were satisfied with it, chastening, as at Ai, was no longer in question. But the angel of Jehovah (the operative power of God in the midst of the people) quits Gilgal (that spiritual circumcision of heart, which precedes victory, and tempers the soul anew that we may overcome in conflict) and comes up to Bochim, to the place of weeping, in the midst of the people, declaring that He will no longer drive out the enemy whom Israel had spared.

God had been then at Gilgal! What a blessing amid those exercises and inward conflicts of heart, in which true practical circumcision is accomplished, in which the source and influence of sin are felt in order to judge it before God; so that, the flesh being judged, we may in conflict (and also in communion) enjoy the strength of God, who cannot grant it to the flesh and to sin.

The proper work of Gilgal; the difference at Bochim

This inward mortification is a work of no outward glory; it is unseen, or little and pitiful in the eyes of man; it makes us little in our own, but God and His grace great, and associates the heart with Him, giving the moral consciousness of His presence. Not as if we were strong; on the contrary there is the sense of entire dependence (compare 2 Cor. 12), but dependence on divine strength, which really does all that is done, though God may do it through instruments if He sees good, and then the responsibility of man comes in. At Jericho God did all, to shew, being without man, who was the doer — then at Ai, responsibility. The strength was not shewn at Gilgal. It was shewn against the Amorites of the

mountains, at Gibeon; but it was gathered at Gilgal. Historically it did not appear that the strength of God was at Gilgal. To have manifested it would have destroyed the proper work of Gilgal — the judgment in humbleness because of God, of everything in which flesh works. But, when forsaken, it was discovered that the angel of Jehovah had been there. It is exchanged for tears. But the tears are for lost blessings. God may be worshipped in Bochim: His relationship to the people was unaltered. He accepts these tears. But what a difference! The strength and the light of Jehovah's countenance are not there. But He is always the same for faith to count on, as when the sea fled from before His face, and Jordan was driven back. The sorrow of the position is felt, but alleviated by the sense that His grace cannot and will not fail (see Judges 6:13-14). This change from Gilgal to Bochim is the key to the book; it is so, alas! but too often, the condition of God's children.

The history of Israel that of the Assembly

The Holy Ghost, having laid these general foundations, goes on to the historical development of Israel's position.

All the days of Joshua and of the elders that outlived him, Israel walked before Jehovah. It is the history of the assembly. While the apostles were there, it was preserved; but Paul (Acts 20:29) and Peter (2 Peter 2) alike warned the saints that unfaithfulness and rebellion would unhappily follow their departure. These evil principles were already there. The intermixture of unbelievers (the enemy's work) would become the means through which the evil would unfold itself and gain ground amongst them.

The Lord had spoken of this (Matt. 13), not indeed as to the assembly, but as to the good seed which He had sown; and Jude develops its progress and results with solemn perspicuity and precision.

In their affliction, judges raised up by Jehovah

But when another generation arises in Israel, which has not known Jehovah, and has not seen all the great works of His hand; and when they serve the gods of the people whom Israel had spared, God no longer protects them. Unfaithful within, the Israelites fall into the hands of the enemy without. Then, as we have seen, in their affliction Jehovah, moved with compassion, raised up judges, who, acknowledging His name, brought back the manifestation of His power in their midst.

Chapters 3 to 5

The people's unfaithfulness turned into blessing

God, knowing what the people were, and what was their condition, had left within the borders of their land that which put obedience to the proof — the Philistines, the Sidonians, etc., that they might learn war, and experience the ways and the government of Jehovah.

Thus the wisdom and foreknowledge of God, who knows what is in man, turned the unfaithfulness of the people into blessing. Outward prosperity, without trial, would not have remedied unbelief, whilst it

would have deprived them of those exercises and conflicts in which they might learn what God was, His ways and His relations to them, as well as what their own hearts were.

We go through the same experience, and for the same reasons.

Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar raised up as deliverers

I will now go over the principal subjects presented in the history of this book. Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar were, in succession, the first instruments raised up by God to deliver His people.

First we have to remark the failure of the people, who begin to serve false gods; thereupon their servitude. In their distress they cry unto Jehovah. This is always the way in which deliverance comes (Judges 3:9, 15; 4:3). In this last instance Jehovah departs from His usual ways. The nation had lost its strength and energy, even as to its internal affairs. This is the effect of repeated falls; the sense of God's power is lost.

Deborah and Barak

At the period of which we speak, a woman judged Israel. It was a sign of God's omnipotency, for she was a prophetess. But it was contrary to God's ordinary dealings, and a disgrace to men. Deborah calls Barak (for where the Spirit of God acts, He discerns and directs); she communicates to him the command of God. He obeys; but he lacks faith to proceed as one who has had direct instruction from God and consequently needs no other. These direct communications give the consciousness of God's presence, and that He interposes on behalf of His people. Barak will not go without Deborah. But this want of faith is not to his credit. Men will keep the place which answers to the measure of their faith; and God will again be glorified through the instrumentality of a woman. Barak has faith enough to obey if he has some one near who can lean immediately on God, but not enough to do so himself. This is too often the case. God does not reject him, but He does not honour him. In fact, it is by no means the same faith in God. And it is by faith that God is honoured.

The recovering discipline of the people in war

We have, moreover, in this case, not the immediate destruction of the enemy, but the discipline of the people in war to recover them from the state of moral weakness into which they had fallen. They began with small things. A woman was the instrument; for fear does not honour God, and God cannot allow His glory to rest on such a condition as this. But little by little "the hand of the children of Israel prevailed against Jabin until they had destroyed him."

The usual effect of such a work of the Holy Ghost as this is to present the people as willingly offering themselves (Judges 5:2). Nevertheless the Spirit of God has shewn us that unbelief amongst the people had caused many of them to stay behind; and thus they lost the manifestation and the experience of the power of God. The judgment of God amounts to a curse where there was an entire holding back, a refusing to be associated with the people in their weakness.

Chapter 6

Delivered into the hand of Midian

But again the children of Israel did evil in the sight of Jehovah, and He delivered them into the hand of Midian. And the children of Israel cried again unto Jehovah. God reveals the cause of their distress to the consciences of the people. This was indeed an answer; but, for the moment, He left them as they were. He did not act in their midst by delivering them at once; but He acted for them in the instrument whom He had chosen to effect their deliverance. God glorified Himself in Gideon: but the concentration of this work in one man proves the people to be in a lower condition than before. Nevertheless, in these humiliating circumstances, God chooses means which display His glory in every way. Where He works, there is strength; and faith also, which acts according to that strength in its own sphere.

Gideon and his exercises as to Jehovah

We will examine a little into the history of Gideon, and the features of the Spirit's work in this deliverance, as well as in the faith of him whom He raised up. It is evident that many thoughts had occurred to Gideon, many serious reflections, before the angel spoke to him. But it was the angel's visit that caused him to give form and expression to the thoughts with which his heart was occupied. Gideon suffered with the rest from the oppression of God's enemies; but it led him to think of God, instead of making up his mind to endure the bondage as a necessary evil. The angel says to him, "Jehovah is with thee, thou mighty man of valour."

That which preoccupied the mind of Gideon is now manifested. It was not his own position, but the relation between Jehovah and Israel.* "If Jehovah," said he, "be with us, why then is all this befallen us? And where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not Jehovah bring us up from Egypt? But now Jehovah has forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites." {* Not the elevation of Abrahamic promises, but the manifestation of redeeming power in Jehovah in favour of Israel. Something like Moses, to whom Jehovah had said, "thy people," but who ever said, "Thy people." So Gideon cannot separate himself from all Israel — God's people. "Jehovah is with thee," said the angel. "If Jehovah be with us," says Gideon, "why then is all this befallen us?" But this is an immensely important principle of faith and its activities. Note, too, what was passing in the heart of faith was the ground Jehovah took in testimony (ver. 8), only adding the charge of disobedience.}

Gideon's faith and Jehovah's command

Faith, indeed, was the source of all these reasonings and exercises of mind. Jehovah had wrought all these wonders. He had brought the people up from Egypt. If Jehovah was with Israel, if such was His relation to His people, why were they in this sorrowful condition? (Oh, how applicable would this reasoning be to the assembly!)

Gideon acknowledges, too, that it is Jehovah who delivered them into the hands of the Midianites. How the thought of God raises the soul above the sufferings one is enduring! While thinking of Him one recognises, in these very sufferings, the hand and the whole character of Him who sent them. It was that which lifted up this poor Israelite, labouring under the weight of oppression. "And Jehovah looked upon him and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel." The visit and the command of Jehovah imparted their form and their strength to that which before was only heart-exercise.

The development of faith

Nevertheless it was this heart-exercise which gave him strength; for it was the inward link of faith with all that Jehovah was for His oppressed people, in the consciousness of the relationship existing between them.

We will look now at the development of this faith, and see it employed for the deliverance of God's people. Gideon experiences at first the sense of his own littleness, whatever may be the relationship between Jehovah and the people (chap. 6:15). Jehovah's answer shews him the one simple means, "Surely I will be with thee." Precious condescension! Sweet and powerful encouragement to the soul! Gideon's faith was weak. The present state of the people tended, by its duration, to blot out the remembrance of the wonders which Jehovah had wrought when they came out of Egypt, and to weaken their consciousness of His presence. The angel of Jehovah condescends to tarry with him in order to strengthen his faith.

The revelation of Jehovah humbles and strengthens

Gideon, who had addressed him with a secret consciousness that it was Jehovah, now knows indeed that he has seen the angel of Jehovah, of Elohim, face to face. It was a positive revelation, sufficient to annihilate him in himself, as was indeed the case; but also mightily to strengthen him in his walk amongst others, who had not known Jehovah in the same way. Although not with similar visions, yet it is always thus when God raises up a special instrument for the deliverance of His people.

Jehovah had made Himself known, and now he reassures Gideon: "Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die."

A man who is humbled by the presence of God receives strength from God, if that presence is in blessing. Gideon recognises and lays hold of this for himself: Jehovah is with him in peace and in blessing. The word Shalom, translated "Peace be with thee," is the same as that used in the name of the altar.

Gideon's worship

When God acts powerfully on the heart, the first effect shews itself always in connection with Himself. Gideon's thoughts are occupied with Jehovah, they were so before this manifestation. But being taken up with Jehovah, it is by worship that he expresses his feelings,* when he receives an answer from Jehovah to all his thoughts.** He builds an altar to the God of peace. The relationship of peace is thus

established between God and His servant; but all this is between Gideon and Jehovah. {* We observe a similar feeling in Eliezer (Gen. 24:27). It is very interesting to notice the different circumstances in which altars have been built to Jehovah. I will name a few passages: Genesis 8:20; 12:7; compare 13:4; see 21:33; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:7. We may also remark Exodus 24:4; Joshua 8:30; and here Judges 6. It appears even that Gideon built two altars; the one for himself in worship, and the other by command as a testimony. 1 Samuel 7:17; 14:35; 1 Kings 18:32. We may add 2 Samuel 24:25; Ezra 3:2. ** It is instructive to observe here the difference between the exercises of heart which are the result of faith, and the answer of God to the wants and difficulties which are caused by those exercises. In verse 13 we have the expression of these exercises in a soul under the weight of the same oppression as his brethren, but who feels it thus because his faith in the Lord was real. Then we have the answer which produces peace, and, with peace, worship. It is the same, when, after having suffered death, the risen Jesus reveals Himself to His disciples with the same words that God uses here, and lays down the foundation of the church gathered together in worship. In Luke 7 we find the same experiences in the woman who was a sinner. She believed in the person of Jesus. His grace had made Him her all; but she did not know yet that one like her was pardoned and saved, and might go in peace. This assurance was the answer given to her faith. Now this answer is what the gospel proclaims to every believer. The Holy Ghost proclaims Jesus. This produces conviction of sin. The knowledge of God in Christ, and of ourselves, casts down (for sin is there, and we are in bondage, sold under sin); but it produces conflict, perhaps anguish. Often the soul struggles against sin, and cannot gain the mastery; it cannot get beyond a certain point (the greater number of the sermons from which it expects light go no farther); but the gospel proclaims God's own resources for bringing it out of this state. "Peace be unto thee," "thy sins are forgiven." "Thy faith" (for she has faith), says Christ to the poor sinful woman, "has saved thee." This was what she knew not yet. Compare Acts 2:37, 38.}

Gideon's public service preceded by obedience and faithfulness

Now comes his public service, which is also fulfilled by re-establishing, first of all, in the bosom of his own family, and in his own city, the relationship between God and His people. Israel must put away Baal before God can drive out the Midianites. How could He do so, while the blessing might be ascribed to Baal?

Gideon is therefore commanded to give a striking testimony, which calls the attention of the whole people to the necessity of casting out Baal, in order that God may intervene.

Faithfulness within precedes outward strength: evil must be put away from Israel before the enemy can be driven out. Obedience first, and then strength: this is God's order.

Satan's power in superstition despised by faith acting in obedience

When Satan's power in superstition (in whatever way it may be outwardly manifested) is despised, it is destroyed; supposing always that God is with him who pours contempt on it, and that he is in the path of obedience.

Gideon overthrows Baal; and, on the anger of the people fearful through superstition — What can this god do? he cannot defend himself, said even he to whom the altar belonged. The power of God acted on their minds, for faith was there. But the opposition of the enemy did not cease on that account. There is nothing so despicable as a despised god. But if Satan cannot be a god amongst men, he is not at the end of his resources, he will incite them to open hostility against those who overthrow his altars; but if we are standing on God's side, the only effect of this will be to bring him thereby into the presence of God's power, and to give us victory, deliverance, and peace.

Faithfulness followed by power

The Midianites come up against Israel. All is ready for the Lord's intervention. The Spirit of Jehovah comes upon Gideon. This is a new phase in the history; not only faithfulness, but power. Gideon blows the trumpet, and those who shortly before would have slain him now follow in his train. He sends messengers to all his tribe. Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali come up also. The power of the Spirit, which sways the minds of men, is with the faith that acknowledges God, that acknowledges Him in His relationship to His people, and faithfully puts away the evil which is incompatible with that relationship.

God condescends to grant signs to strengthen Gideon's faith

God gives another proof of His great condescension, by granting a sign to strengthen the weak but real and sincere faith of Gideon; who feels, whilst repeating his request (ver. 39), that God might well chasten him for his lack of faith. Nevertheless the Lord grants his petition.

Chapter 7

Jehovah alone must be glorified: Gideon's followers are too many

Thirty-two thousand men followed Gideon. But Jehovah will not have so many. He alone must be glorified in their deliverance. Their faith was indeed so weak, even while the Spirit of God was at work, that, when in the presence of the enemy, twenty-two thousand men were content to return at Gideon's invitation. The movement produced by the faith of another is quite a different thing from personal faith.

But ten thousand men are still too many. Jehovah's hand alone must be seen. Those only may remain who do not stop to quench their thirst at their ease, but who refresh themselves hastily, as opportunity offers, more occupied with the combat than with their own comforts by the way. This was what was needed for Israel — that Jehovah should have His place in their hearts and faith; and it suited the just judgment of God in Israel that they should, as to their place in the work, be left out of the glory of it.

Gideon's mistrust changed to assurance

Gideon now displays entire confidence in God. Previously, the weakness of his faith had made him look too much at himself, instead of simply looking to God. His deep sense of Israel's condition prevented his hesitating for a moment because the people were not with him; what could be done with this people? In the mistrust which arose from a disposition to look too much to himself, what he needed was the certainty that Jehovah was with him. But, having now the assurance that Jehovah will deliver Israel by his means, he trusts entirely to Him.

Jehovah's work: His care to give His servant confidence

Jehovah throws terror and alarm into the midst of the enemy; and acquaints Gideon with this. It is affecting to see the care which God takes to impart confidence to His servant, suitably to the need which the state of things had created. Already the name of Gideon resounded with dread in the numerous army of the Midianites. Then, terror-stricken, they destroy each other. The confidence of the Midianites, founded only on Israel's want of power, melted away before the energy of faith; for the enemy's instruments have always a bad conscience. It is Jehovah who does everything. The trumpets and the lamps alone announce His presence, and that of His servant Gideon. The multitude of Israel pursue the enemy, profiting by the work of faith, although without faith themselves: the usual result of such a movement.

Chapter 8

The righteous indignation of faith

Nevertheless, they did not all unite with Gideon in pursuit of the Midianites. But, for the moment, Gideon despises the cowardice which disowns him through a remaining fear of the oppressor's power. On his return he chastises, in the righteous indignation of faith, those who at such a moment had shewn themselves favourable to the enemy, when the servants of God were "faint yet pursuing" (Judges 8).

While the work was yet to do, they were taken up with the work and passed on: there is time enough for vengeance when the work is done. Gideon has also the prudence to set himself aside, in order to allay the jealousy of those who felt their pride wounded, because Gideon had had more faith than themselves. They did not boast of their own importance, or request to be called, when Midian had power over the land of Israel. It would be wrong to contend with such persons. If you are satisfied with having done the work of God, they will be satisfied with the spoil they find in pursuing the enemy; they will make a victory of it to themselves. It must be allowed them; for in fact they have done something for the cause of God, although tardy in espousing it. They came when they were called, and willingly, as it appears; they followed Gideon's directions, and brought him back the heads of the princes. The secret of faith and of Jehovah was with Gideon. It was useless to speak of it to them. The people did not know their own weakness. Gideon must be strong on Jehovah's side for Israel, since Israel could not be so with him. But for that very reason they could not understand why they were not called before. It had to be left unexplained; a proof of the sad state of Israel. But the danger was removed, and the difficulty set aside, in that Gideon wisely contented himself with calming their minds, by not insisting upon his

own importance, which arose from a faith of which they did not feel themselves incapable, and the difficulties of which they could not appreciate, since they possessed it not. We must be near God in order to feel what is wanting in His people's condition as to Him: for it is in Him we find that which enables us to understand both His strength, and the exigencies of our relationship with Him.

During the lifetime of Gideon, Israel dwelt in peace.

God alone accomplishes the deliverance

Although the details of this deliverance have an especial interest, it appears to me to mark a lower condition of the people than at the period of the preceding ones. It then seemed quite a natural thing that some servant of Jehovah, trusting to His arm, should deliver the people from the yoke that oppressed them. Or else the people — awakened by the words of a prophetess — released themselves, and, by the help of God, obtained the victory over their enemies. But in this case even the sense of Jehovah's relationship to His people had to be restored. That is what God does with Gideon, as we have seen, and that with touching condescension and tenderness. But it was requisite to do it. Therefore God alone accomplished the deliverance of His people. The people must not be employed in it, lest they should attribute it to themselves; for the farther off we are from God, the more ready we are to ascribe to ourselves that which is due only to Him.

Chapters 9 to 12

Internal struggles

After Gideon's death we see the results of this distance from God in the internal struggles which took place between the children of Israel. They are ungrateful to the house of Gideon, and war breaks out amongst them through the leader whom they set up, and who, instead of fighting with the enemies of God, only seeks dominion over the people who are now at peace (Judges 9).

Temporary peace followed by idolatry and chastisement

The overthrow of the men of Shechem and of Abimelech is followed by temporary peace, after which the people fall again into their idolatrous iniquity, and Jehovah sells them into the hands of the nations whose gods they serve. Sorely distressed by their enemies, the children of Israel cry unto Jehovah, who reproaches them for their past conduct, and sends them back to the gods they had been worshipping. Then the people put away the strange gods from among them. Jehovah is moved with compassion (Judges 10).

Jephthah as God's deliverer

Israel, without a leader, have recourse to the captain of a troop of "vain men," and promise to obey him if he will put himself at their head. Jephthah consents. But although this was a deliverance, yet we see

in it all how deeply Israel had fallen. Jephthah himself suffers cruelly from his rash vow; and, moreover, when the pride of the Ephraimites led them to complain that they had not been treated with due respect, the calmness and wisdom of one who knew Jehovah as Gideon did, were not found in Jephthah. What a difference between these days and those of Joshua! God multiplies His deliverances; but this has no effect on the unbelief of the people, and their condition continues to grow worse and worse (Judges 11, 12).

Israel's return to sin: new and bitter enemies, the Philistines

After Jephthah, Israel again enjoys an interval of peace under the guidance of several judges whom God raises up. But they soon return to their former course of sin, and Jehovah delivers them into the hand of the Philistines. Samson's history gives us the commencement of Israel's relationship with these bitter enemies, which only ceased when David had subdued them. The Philistines at this period were at the height of their power. But the important thing here is the history of Samson (Judges 13-16).

Chapter 13

Samson as a type

Samson, as a type, sets before us the principle of Nazariteship, entire separation to God, the source of strength in conflict with our enemies, looked at as enemies who seek to gain the upper hand amongst the people of God, within their own limits and in their own heart.

The Philistines, in the land, assume dominion over God's people

The Philistines were not a scourge, a chastisement sent from without; they dwelt in Israel's own territory, in the land of promise. Undoubtedly, before this, other nations whom the faithlessness of the people had left in the midst of Canaan had been a snare to them, leading them to intermarriage with idolaters, and to the worship of false gods; and Jehovah had given them up into the hands of their enemies. But now, those who had been suffered to remain in the conquered land assume dominion over Israel.

The principle of Nazariteship

Here, then, that which can give victory and peace to the heirs of promise is the strength imparted by separation from all that belongs to the natural man, and entire consecration to God, so far as it is realised. This Nazariteship is spiritual power, or rather that which characterises it, when the enemy is within the land. For Samson judged Israel during the dominion of the Philistines (Judges 15:20). Afterwards Samuel, Saul, and above all David, entirely changed the state of things.

Christ as a Nazarite

When the Canaanite, when the power of the enemy, reigns in the land, Nazariteship alone can give power to one who is faithful. It is a secret unknown to the men of the world. Christ exemplified it in its perfection. Evil reigned amongst the people. The walk of Christ was a walk apart, separate from evil. He was one of the people, but, like Levi (Deut. 33:9), He was not of them. He was a Nazarite. But we must distinguish with respect to this.

Morally, Christ was as separate from sinners while on earth, as He is now. But, outwardly He was in their midst; and, as the witness and expression of grace, He was spiritually in their midst also. Since His resurrection He is completely separate from sinners. The world sees Him not, and will see Him no more save in judgment.

Separation from the world

It is in this last position, and as having put on this character of entire separation from the world, that the assembly, that Christians, are in connection with Him. Such a High Priest became us. The assembly retains its strength, Christians retain their strength, so far only as they abide in this state of complete separation, which the world does not understand and in which it cannot participate. Human joy and sociability have no part in it; divine joy and the power of the Holy Ghost are there. The life of our adorable Saviour was a life of gravity, always grave and generally straitened (not in Himself, for His heart was a springing well of love, but because of the evil that pressed Him on every side): I speak of His life and of His own heart. With regard to others, His death opened the flood-gates, in order that the full tide of love might flow over poor sinners.

The two joys

Nevertheless, whatever may have been the Lord's habitual separateness, He could say, with reference to His disciples, "These things I speak in the world that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves." It was the best of wishes, divine joy instead of human joy. The day will come when these two joys shall be united, when He will again drink wine, though in a new way, with His people in the kingdom of His Father; and all will be His people. But at present this cannot be; evil reigns in the world. It reigned in Israel, where there ought to have been righteousness. It reigns in Christendom, where holiness and grace should be manifested in all their beauty.

The only means of enjoying God's strength

The separation unto God, of which we have been speaking, is under these circumstances the only means of enjoying the strength of God. It is the essential position of the assembly. If it has failed in it, it has ceased to manifest the essential character of its Head, in connection with itself, "separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens"; it is but a false witness, a proof among the Philistines that Dagon is stronger than God; it is a blind prisoner.

The judgment of God

Nevertheless it is remarkable that, whenever the world draws away, by its allurements, that which God has separated from it unto Himself, this brings down the judgment of God upon the world, and leads to its ruin. Look at Sarah in the house of Pharaoh; and in this instance, Samson, blind and prisoner in the hands of the Philistines; and again also Sarah in the house of Abimelech, although God, on account of the integrity of his heart, did but chasten the latter.

The Nazarite represented in Christ, the assembly and an individual Christian

The Nazarite then represents Christ, such as He was here below in fact and by necessity; and also such as He now is completely and in full right, seated on the right hand of God in heaven, hidden in God, where our life is hid with Him. The. Nazarite represents the assembly or an individual Christian, so far as the one and the other are separated from the world and devoted to God, and keep the secret of this separation.

This is the assembly's position, the only one which God recognises. The assembly, being united to Christ who is separate from sinners and made higher than the heavens, cannot be His in any other manner. It may be unfaithful to it, but this is the standing given it with Christ. It can be recognised in no other.

The neglect of Nazariteship shown in Samson

Samson represents to us also the tendency of the assembly, and of the Christian to fall away from this position, a tendency which does not always produce the same amount of evil fruit, but which causes the inward and practical neglect of Nazariteship, and soon leads to entire loss of strength, so that the assembly gives itself up to the world. God may still use it, may glorify Himself through the havoc it makes in the enemy's land (which ought to be its own); He may even preserve it from the sin to which the slippery path it treads would lead it. But the state of mind which brought it there tends to yet lower downfalls.

Chapters 14 and 15

Samson's marriage with a Philistine

God makes use of Samson's marriage with a Philistine woman to punish that people. Still, in the freshness of his strength, his heart with Jehovah, and moved by the Holy Ghost, Samson acts in the might of this strength in the midst of the enemies he has raised up against him; and, in point of fact, he never marries this Philistine woman.

I have said that God used this circumstance. It is thus He may use this spiritual strength of the assembly, so long as in heart it cleaves to Him, although its walk may not be faithful or such as He can approve. For it is evident that Samson's marriage with a daughter of Timnath was a positive sin, a

flagrant infringement of Jehovah's ordinances, which is in no wise justified by the blessing which the Lord bestowed upon him when wronged by the Philistines. It was not in his marriage he found blessing, but quite the contrary.

Accordingly Samson has not Israel with him in the conflicts occasioned by his marriage; the Spirit of God does not act upon the people as He did in the case of Gideon, of Jephthah, or Barak.

Opposition to Nazariteship to be expected

Moreover, when Nazariteship is in question, opposition must be expected from the people of God. A Nazarite is raised up in their midst, because they are no longer themselves thus separated unto God. And this being the case, they are without strength, and will allow the world to rule over them, provided that outward peace is left them; and they would not have any one act in faith, because this disquiets the world and incites it against them. "Knowest thou not," said Israel, "that the Philistines are rulers over us?" Even while acknowledging Samson as one of themselves, the Israelites desire to give him up to the Philistines in order to maintain peace.

But in the part of Samson's life now before us there are some details which require more attention.

Counsel from God unsought

His marriage was a sin. But the separation of God's people had no longer that measure of practical application which the mind of God had assigned it. The fact itself was inexcusable, because it had its origin in the will of Samson, and he had not sought counsel from God. But, owing to the influence of circumstances, he was not conscious at the time of the evil he was committing, and God allowed him to seek peace and friendship with the Canaanite world (that is to say, the world within the inclosure of God's people), instead of making war against them; so that, as to the Philistines, Samson had right on his side in the contentions which followed.

Samson's riddle

Before his marriage Samson had slain the lion, and had found honey in its carcase. He had strength from God while walking in his integrity. This is the "riddle," the secret of God's people. The lion has no strength against one who belongs to Christ. Christ has destroyed the strength of him that had the power of death. By the might of the Spirit of Christ our warfare is victory, and honey flows therefrom. But this is carried on in the secret of communion with the Lord. David maintained this place better in the simplicity of duty.

Samson did not keep himself from those connections with the world to which the condition of the people easily led. This is always a Christian's danger. But whatever may be their ignorance, if the children of God make any alliance with the world, and thus pursue a line of conduct opposed to their true character, they will assuredly find disappointment. They do not keep themselves apart for God; they do not keep their secret with God, a secret which is only known in communion with Himself. Their wisdom is lost, the world beguiles them, their relationship with the world becomes worse than before,

and the world despises them, and goes on its own way, regardless of their indignation at its behaviour towards them.

Linked with the world: its consequences

What had Samson to do there? His own will (Judges 15) is in exercise, and takes its share in the use of that strength which God had given him (like Moses when he slew the Egyptian). We always carry a little of the world with us when, being children of God, we have mingled with it. But God makes use of this to separate us forcibly and thoroughly from it, making union impossible by setting us in direct conflict with the world even in those very things which had formed our connection with it. We had better have remained apart. But it is necessary that God should thus deal with us, when this union with the world becomes an habitual and a tolerated thing in the church.* The most outrageous circumstances pass unnoticed. Think of a Nazarite married to a Philistine! God must break off such a union as this by causing enmities and hostilities to arise, since there is no intelligence of that moral nearness to God which separates from the world, and gives that quietness of spirit which, finding its strength in God, can overcome and drive away the enemy, when God leads into conflict by the plain revelation of His will. {* In this union, when it takes place between the world and true Christians, or those at least who profess the truth the world always rules; when, on the contrary, it is with the hierarchy that the world is connected, it is then a superstitious hierarchy that rules, for this is necessary in order to restrain the will of man by religious bonds adapted to the flesh.}

But if we are linked with the world, it will always have dominion over us; we have no right to resist the claims of any relationship which we ourselves have formed. We may draw nigh to the world, because the flesh is in us. The world cannot really draw nigh to the children of God, because it has only its own fallen and sinful nature. The approximation is all on one side and always in evil, whatever the appearance may be. To bear testimony in the midst of the world is another thing.

The exclusive privileges of God's people

We cannot therefore plead the secret of the Lord, the intimate relationship of God's people to Himself, and the feelings they produce; for the secret and the strength of the Lord are exclusively the right and the strength of His redeemed people. How could this be told to his Philistine wife? What influence would the exclusive privileges of God's people have over one who is not of their number? How can we speak of these privileges when we disown them by the very relationship in which we stand? We disown them by imparting this secret; for we then cease to be separated and consecrated to God, and to confide in Him as we can do in no other. This experience should have preserved Samson, for the future, from a similar step. But in many respects experience is useless in the things of God, because we need faith at the moment; for it is God Himself whom we need.

Nevertheless Samson here still retains his strength. The sovereign will of God is fulfilled in this matter, in spite of very serious faults which resulted from the general state of things in which Samson participated. Once in the battlefield, he exhibits the strength of Jehovah who was with him; and in answer to his cry Jehovah supplies him with water for his thirst (Judges 15).

The danger of unfaithfulness in Nazariteship

It is here that this general history of Samson ends. We have seen that the people of God, his brethren, were against him — the general rule in such a case. It is the history of the power of the Spirit of Christ exercised in Nazariteship, in separation from the world unto God; but in the midst of a condition entirely opposed to this separation; and in which he who is upheld by the power of this Spirit, finding himself again in his habitual sphere, is always in danger of being unfaithful; and so much the more so (unless he lives very near to God in the repose of obedience) from his consciousness of strength.

The perfection of Christ's heavenly walk

Christ exhibited the perfection of a heavenly walk under similar circumstances. We see that no one understood the source of His power, or His authority. He must have given up all hope of satisfying men with respect to the principles by which He was guided. They must have been like Him to comprehend Him, and then they would not have needed to be convinced. To walk before God and leave His justification with God was all that could be done. He silenced His enemies by the well-known principles of God and of all good conscience; but He could not reveal the secret between Him and the Father, the element of His life, and the spring of all His actions. If the truth came out, when Satan pushed things so far that nothing else could be said, His enemies treated Him as a blasphemer, and He openly denounced them as the children of Satan. We find this particularly in John's Gospel (see chap. 8). But at that time Jesus held no longer the same relationship to the people. Indeed, from the beginning of this Gospel, they are treated as rejected, and the Person of the Son of God is brought forward.

Christ the obedient Servant in perfect separation to God

From the commencement of His ministry, He maintained the place of an obedient servant, not entering on public service until called of God, after having taken the lowest place in John's baptism. This was the point at issue when He was tempted in the wilderness. The tempter endeavoured to make Him come out of His place as the obedient man, because He was the Son of God. But the strong man was bound there: to remain in obedience is the only way to bind the adversary. Christ ever walked in this perfect separation of the inner man, in communion with His Father, and entire dependence upon Him in obedience without a single moment of self-will. Therefore was He the most gracious and accessible of men: we observe in His ways a tenderness and a kindness never seen in man, yet we always feel that He was a stranger. Not that He came to be a stranger in His relationship with men; but that which lay deepest in His own heart — that which constituted His very nature, and consequently guided His walk by virtue of His communion with the Father — was entirely foreign to all that influences man.

He abode emphatically alone. It is striking that not once His disciples understood what He said. The one only trace of a heart going with Him was Mary at Bethany; and that had to be told to the whole world. In Him, sympathy for every sorrow; for His, none.

Christ separated by entire communion with His Father

This spirit of self-denial, entire renunciation of His own will, obedience, and dependence upon His Father, is seen throughout the life of Jesus. After John's baptism He was praying when He received the Holy Ghost. Before calling the apostles He spent the whole night in prayer. After the miracle of feeding the five thousand with five loaves He went up into a mountain apart to pray. If the request is made to sit on His right hand and on His left in His kingdom, it is not His to give, but to them for whom it is prepared of His Father. In His agony of Gethsemane, His expectation and dread of death is all laid before His Father; and the cup which His Father has given Him, shall He not drink it? The effect is that all is calm before men. He is the Nazarite, separated from men by His entire communion with His Father, and by the obedience of a Son who had no other will than to fulfil the good pleasure of His Father. It was His meat to do the will of Him that sent Him, and to finish His work.

Christ in Heaven the true Nazarite

But it was when man would not receive Him, and there was no longer any relationship whatever between man and God that Jesus fully assumed His Nazarite character, separate from sinners, made higher than the heavens. It is Christ in heaven who is the true Nazarite, and who, having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, has sent Him forth upon His disciples, in order that, by the power of the Holy Ghost, they might maintain the same position on the earth, through communion with Him and with His Father; walking in the separateness of this communion, and capable therefore of using this power with a divine intelligence that enlightens and sustains the obedience for which they are set apart unto the glory of Christ, and for His service. "If ye abide in me," said He to His disciples, "and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." They were not of the world, even as He was not of the world. The assembly, which was formed of His disciples, should walk as separated from the world and set apart unto Himself in a heavenly life.

Christ the Antitype of Samson as to principle

Christ is then the antitype of Samson's history, as to the principle it contains. But its detail proves that this principle of strength has been entrusted to those who were alas! but too capable of failing in communion and obedience, and thus of losing its enjoyment.

Chapter 16

The secret of Samson's strength

Samson sins again through his intercourse with "the daughter of a strange god"; he connects himself again with women of the Philistines, amongst whom his father's house and the tribe of Dan were placed. But he retains his strength until the influence of these connections becomes so great that he reveals the secret of his strength in God. His heart, far from God, places that confidence in a Philistine which should have existed only between his soul and God (Judges 16).

To possess and keep a secret proves intimacy with a friend. But the secret of God, the possession of His confidence, is the highest of all privileges. To betray it to a stranger, be he who he may, is to despise the precious position in which His grace has placed us; it is to lose it. What have the enemies of God to do with the secret of God? It was thus that Samson gave himself up to his enemies. All attempts were powerless against him so long as he maintained his Nazariteship. This separation once lost, although Samson was apparently as strong, and his exterior as goodly as before, yet Jehovah was no longer with him. "I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that Jehovah was departed from him."

Samson's folly and his loss

We can scarcely imagine a greater folly than that of confiding his secret to Delilah, after having so many times been seized by the Philistines at the moment she awoke him. And thus it is with the assembly: when it yields itself to the world, it loses all its wisdom, even that which is common to man. Poor Samson! his strength may be restored, but he has lost his sight for ever.

But who has ever hardened himself against the Lord, and prospered? Job 9:4.

Sharing the judgment of the world

The Philistines ascribe their success to their false god. God remembers His own glory, and His poor servant humbled under the chastisement of his sin. The Philistines assemble to enjoy their victory and glorify their false gods. But Jehovah had His eye on all this. In his humiliation, the thought of the Lord had more power over the heart of Samson; his Nazariteship was regaining strength. He makes his touching appeal to God. Who would fear a blind and afflicted prisoner? but who amongst this world knows the secret of Jehovah? A slave and for ever deprived of sight, his condition affords an opportunity, which his strength had not been able to obtain, before his unfaithfulness deprived him of it. But he is blind and enslaved, and he must perish himself in the judgment which he brings upon the impiety of his enemies. He had identified himself with the world by hearkening to it, and he must share the judgment which falls upon the world.* {* There was something of this, though in a very different form and manner, in Jonathan. His faith was not perfect. He held the world with one hand and David with the other, though the excuse of natural relationship might be there.}

If the unfaithfulness of the assembly has given the world power over it, the world has on the other hand assailed the rights of God by corrupting the assembly, and therefore brings down judgment upon itself at the moment of its greatest triumph: a judgment which, if it puts an end to the existence, as well as to the misery of the Nazarite, destroys at the same time in one common ruin the whole glory of the world.

In the details of prophecy this applies to the closing history of the Jewish people.* Only there the remnant is preserved, to be established on a new base for the accomplishment of the purposes of God. {* As to the professing church it is somewhat different, because the saints are taken away to glory, and the rest, being apostate, are judged; but the fact of judgment on the world is identical.}

Chapters 17 to 21

Iniquities which required discipline

The chapters that follow (Judges 17-21) are not comprised in the historical order of this book. They lift the veil to disclose some incidents of the inner life of this people whom the patience of God bore with so long, touched with the afflictions of His people in the sufferings occasioned by their sins. Had they been obedient when Jehovah was their King, their prosperity had been secure. Self-willed as they were, the absence of restraint — when they had no king — gave room to all kinds of licence. The last event, related in this book, shews to what a height disorder had risen in Israel and how they fell away immediately from God. But it affords a very important lesson. If the state of God's people collectively gives rise to iniquities which require discipline, the whole people are involved in the chastisement that follows; the effect of which is to make them take their condition to heart. That condition had prevented the repression of iniquity, or its immediate punishment when committed. But the people are set in the presence of God, who judges the whole matter, and all the people must have to do with it.

Defeat allowed and victory given

Israel at first did not even take counsel with Jehovah to learn how the sin should be dealt with. They acted from natural indignation (which was nevertheless quite righteous). Jehovah allowed all this in order that the people might learn where they were. The evil which required chastening had so blunted their spiritual state that they had not the thought of waiting in the first place on Jehovah to know what was to be done. Their course of action is determined before they consult Him, for they were far from Him. They merely ask who is to go up first. Jehovah points out Judah, but Judah is defeated. Twice beaten when they expected an easy victory, the people humbled and in tears have recourse again to Jehovah, and inquire if they shall go up. Jehovah then gives them the victory. Gibeah well deserved this discipline; but, to execute it, Israel itself needed discipline, and God allowed all to take part in it in order to make it take effect upon all.

God's patient dealings in His omniscience

But what a state were they all in, when the whole tribe of Benjamin joined the men of Gibeah, when guilty of such enormities! And observe, that Phinehas was still high priest, although he had already grown to manhood in the wilderness. How patiently God dealt with this people, delivering them when they had so quickly fallen into sin and into such depths of sin! What does God not see in this world, and even in His people? It is important to note this bringing to light of that inward state which, in the general history, is not done. It sheds a much fuller light on the ways of God. But it must be remarked that this is disaster and shame within, and from within, and under God's hand, but not judgment by enemies without through departure from God Himself.