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Golden
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RECOVERY IN A DAY OF FAILURE

Part 1

T. Austin-Sparks

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DEPARTURE FROM THE FULL THOUGHT OF THE LORD

Reading: Judges 4; 5:1-9.

Spiritual judgement

One of the greatest needs of our time is that we should know what are those factors which make for the recovery of the Lord's people to His full thought, in a day when that thought in its fulness has very largely been lost. You will, no doubt, understand and agree that one of the factors of greatest importance is that of spiritual judgement, or spiritual administration.

We might approach it by recalling the opening chapters of the prophesy of Isaiah. The early chapters have to do, on the one hand, with the judgement of the nations, including Israel, because of apostasy, idolatry and failure to recognise the rights of God; on the other hand, with the bringing into view of a remnant. Much is said about the remnant of the Lord's people who will come to the place where His full thought has an expression, who will be the vessel and means of the expression of His mind in greater fulness. When that is borne in mind as to the nature of the early chapters of Isaiah, you find connected therewith those remarkable Messianic prophesies, among them these familiar words: "And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:1-2). Just prior to that there are those other, even better known, words in chapter 9: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his

government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from henceforth even for ever” (Isa. 9:6-7).

You will recognise the connection. The Lord has been disappointed as to all that He desired and intended in this earth in and through a people, and failure marks everything here that is supposed to represent the Lord. The causes of the failure are brought into view for judgement. Out of the judgement there arises a new state in a purged remnant, and in connection with that new state this One is seen; the Child is born, the Son is given, and upon His shoulder is made to rest the government. Among His titles there is that of Counsellor, and then it is said that the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom, understanding and knowledge. Thus it becomes perfectly clear that administration by judgement is vested in Him as Head. What follows is that that judgement, that administration, is to be expressed by the same Holy Spirit in and through a spiritual instrumentality, a vessel, a remnant.

When we carry that away from Israel, and see the other side of that prophetic foreshadowing, this is what arises. Christ, invested by the anointing with the Spirit of government, judgement, counsel and might, is exalted to God’s right hand, and all rule and authority is made subject to Him. Then, by means of the same anointing an instrumentality — the church, His body — is brought into association with Him for the purposes of that spiritual administration.

Note that it is spiritual administration, or spiritual judgement. There is all the difference between natural judgement and spiritual judgement, between what we would call administering as here on the earth among men, and that which is by reason of spiritual understanding resulting in a ministry which is able to point out the difference between that which is man’s mind and that which is God’s. It is being able, by reason of spiritual understanding to check, arrest, and bring back those drifts, departures, declensions which are the result, not only of wilful and determined rejection of the Lord, but of the imposition of the mind of man into the things of the Lord. Look at the history of the things which bear the Lord’s Name, and you will see quite clearly that the departure from the full thought of the Lord, and subsequent failure and weakness on the part of the people of God, has this one thing as its cause, that man, with every good intention and desire to further the interests of the Lord, has become the Lord’s counsellor in His things, and the Lord has ceased to be His own counsellor.

Let us put that in another way. Man has sought to carry on God's work by his own (as he would call it) consecrated judgement, understanding, thoughts, ideas and intentions. And all unconsciously and imperceptibly, the Lord, as to the immediate and direct government of His own affairs, has been edged out, set back. In the course of time there comes a consciousness of weakness and failure, of paralysis, of arrest, of impotence, and the Lord's people awaken to the fact that other powers, with which they can no longer contend successfully, make it impossible for them to go forward triumphantly with the Lord's interests, and they are brought largely to a standstill. When the thing is investigated, what is the invariable result of such an enquiry? "We need a greater fulness of the Holy Spirit." That is how it is put. "We need the Lord to come in in a new way. We need to bring the Lord in more than we have been doing." These are only ways of expressing it, and these could be multiplied, but what is felt and recognised is this, that the Lord is not there in evidence, in fulness, as He ought to be. You ask, "Why?" If you are honest you will say, "He has been edged out. Man has taken His place. Man has become His counsellor."

Let the ultimate issue determine if that is so. When you come up against a situation of spiritual weakness, failure and defeat, against forces with which you cannot cope in the work, the interests and testimony of the Lord, what is the conclusion of the whole matter? What is the judgement that is passed? Well, we need the Lord in a way in which we have not had Him. That is a simple way of putting it. Why should we need the Lord in a way in which we have not had Him before? Why should that need exist? Is it because the Lord was not willing to be with us as fully as was necessary? Can we for a moment lay it to God's charge? Never! Then what is the cause? Somehow the Lord's place had been taken by something or someone else. How? What? We have been carrying on the things of the Lord with our own resources of mind, strength, and will, and it cannot be done. Sooner or later we are bound to come up against the fact that unless the Lord Himself is really on the Throne in full command, with all His resources being projected into His interests, deadlock is inevitable.

What then does that mean? It means that which we said at the beginning, that the great need in such a time of weakness and failure, in a time when God's fullest thought concerning His people and His work is not found in expression, is a ministry of judgement, of spiritual administration. What is needed are those in such a relationship with Him as to be able to discern what is and what is not the Lord's thought.

You will not, of course, allow yourself to sit in judgement of one another, but there is such a thing as a people being clear in spiritual perception, who are very clear as to how the Lord would do things, and how the Lord would not do things; when the Lord would do things, and when the Lord would not do things. That is discriminating between well-intentioned activities of His people for Him, and what is the pure, original, immediate mind of God about His own things.

I believe that the book of Judges has to do with that whole matter, and I think the Lord will say something to us out of that book as we turn to it. Before we do so we must be quite sure that we see what we are getting at, because it is so easy for the Scriptures to become an interesting study and for us not to be gripped by the real issue on hand. Have we grasped what has already been said? It is difficult to express it in few words. Are we impressed, in a day like this, with the need for a ministry of discrimination in the things of the Lord for the people of God, so that they have available that discernment, perception and judgement of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 2 concerning “he that is spiritual” judging all things? That judgement, that insight, will deliver from the inevitable and subsequent failure of all that is done in the best of intentions for God, as over against God doing His own work in His own way. It is a very important difference. The Bible is full of that difference, and to provide Himself with an instrument for that purpose is a matter of very special concern and care on the part of the Lord.

If the Lord is to have a vessel like that, that vessel will have to go through the depths. The Word of God divides between soul and spirit. That division represents very largely this discrimination; what man does out of his own soul, reason, will, his feeling for God, and what man does in his renewed spirit as directed immediately by the Spirit of God. They are two entirely different realms, and the consequences of each are as different as two worlds can be. In the end, one is bound for failure, the other is bound to be effective.

The Lord needs an instrument, a ministry through a people, which is of this character, so that it can, because of its understanding in the things of the Lord, call back the Lord’s people to the true, pure basis of God’s own way of doing things. Such an instrumentality will go through the fire, through a very deep way in order that it may have such perception. It means that that which is of the natural life, its judgements and its ideas, will be pulverised. Attempts, efforts, activities, enthusiasms in the things of God will meet such a smiting that there will be no hope for those who

go that way to do anything more for the Lord. They will come to the place where unless the Lord does it, it is no use attempting it, and if they are going to be His instruments they will know what the Lord wants done and how He wants it done. We need spiritual understanding in the things of the Lord.

Dealings of the Lord

This will explain the Lord's dealings with those who will really put themselves into His hands. He will take them through experiences in which they are able, in their own history, to see the tremendous difference. He will allow them a history of the most utter devotion to Himself with the results of that devotion, but nevertheless springing from themselves. He will allow them a great deal of experience of work for Himself, activities in the name of the Lord, perhaps bring them into a very large place of what men would call "usefulness to the Lord", and then smash the whole thing, shatter it, like a potter's vessel, to smithereens. These people will see their work go, and all their capability to do any more, and then the Lord will begin to do something else, a different thing. It will not be anything that can be written up like before, or that can be talked about; nothing that men can take account of, nothing of a purely public character, but He will be getting right down to the place where every bit is of Himself, and they know it. While they may be used, nevertheless their deepest consciousness is of being spectators of what God is doing through them; it is God doing it, and not their doing it for God. There is a tremendous difference between those two things, and those two sides of a history are two sides which the Lord allows, in order to prepare such a vessel of spiritual understanding. We do not really spiritually understand without experience; we do not come into these things without going through something; we are battered into them. It is regarding this that the Lord wants to speak to His people, and we must listen to what He has to say.

Perhaps we shall get a little nearer to the matter if we turn to the book of Judges. We must first of all remember the connection between the books of Joshua and Judges, because the connection is maintained, and it is important to recognise that the connection is maintained, although the situation is so different.

Joshua — Ephesians

We may say that Joshua in the Old Testament corresponds to Ephesians in the New Testament. Joshua is the passing over Jordan and coming into the land, and going from strength to strength in victory, in the power and energy of the Holy Spirit. It is in the language of Ephesians, in the heavenlies in Christ, warring a mighty warfare by the equipment which God gives against principalities, powers and world-rulers of this darkness and spiritual hosts of wickedness. It is the people of God through union with Christ in death, burial and resurrection coming into the realm of His sovereign triumph. That is Joshua. It states the position of the Lord's full thought for His people; they have tasted of it, they have some experience of it, they know the meaning of it. In the beginning, before the Epistle to the Ephesians was written, the church was known, that is, it was expressed. In the first days, the days of Pentecost, there is this thing in a living expression. They had to have the explanation in doctrine as God's thought presented to them in a concrete and crystallised way, so that they should always know from whence they had fallen, and that to which the Lord would have them come. But in experience they knew Ephesians at the beginning, victory over the powers of darkness, a living in spirit in heavenly union with Christ, blessed fellowship, a Holy Spirit ordered ministry, and all else that is in Ephesians.

Judges — Timothy, John's Epistles, Revelation

When you come to Judges you have a drop from the Ephesians plane, and come down to much that you find in Timothy, and in John's Epistles, and in the book of the Revelation at the beginning. The people of God have dropped out of their heavenly position and come down on to an earthly position spiritually, with disastrous consequences. That is how you find it in the book of Judges.

When we remember that, and then read this book of Judges, it is difficult for us to fail to be impressed with similarities between that time and our own time, this dispensation since the days of the apostles. The book of Judges is a long period of over three hundred years, and only with big gaps between do you find anything of Joshua or Ephesian conditions. If you study the technique of the book of Judges you will be very much impressed with that. It is difficult when reading such a short book, with the very brief accounts of things there, to realise the time factor. You have to

spread the thirteen judges over more than three hundred years, and have to crowd into a simple statement like this a period of probably forty years: “And the children of Israel did evil again ... and the Lord delivered them into the hands of ...”. The range of these times of subjection to other powers is from six to forty years and is very often crowded into a single sentence. Then when it says the Lord raised up a deliverer, a saviour, and these judges were instrumental in bringing them out of those conditions, it only lasted a little while or for a longer period of perhaps forty years, but you can see that the Joshua conditions were spasmodic over a long time.

Is that not true of this dispensation? At the beginning you have Joshua conditions, Ephesian conditions: victory, heavenly life, glory and power; the power of the enemy broken; then a change, and at intervals spread right over this age, a glorious break of recovery, and for a time the testimony glowing again, triumphant conditions, then a lapse again, and a long period of declension and paralysis. That is the story of the church through this dispensation. If we look at things today as a whole, how do they appear to us? Would the most sanguine and the most optimistic, and the one who wanted to say the best thing today, say that the church as a whole is in Joshua or Ephesian conditions? The most evangelical minded today are saying this is impossible. It is no use aiming at such a high standard as Ephesians today for the church. We had better content ourselves with things as they are, and make the best of a bad job. No one would argue that we are more in a Joshua state than in a Judges state in this time, and we are being pressed more and more to that position. Everywhere leaders among the Lord’s people are confessing to paralysis, defeat, arrest, to the impossibility of just going right on in glorious triumph. There is a state of defeat and weakness like that today, and we are going more and more to have to recognise it. We do not assume the role of prophet, but we do feel very strongly that the time is not far off when organised Christianity will have to own itself defeated before this world order. There will be retrenchment, there will come about in the heart of the mass of God’s people a cry for recovery of original conditions. And is not this cry already going out from so many parts of the world among the Lord’s people for a new visitation of the Holy Spirit coming from the consciousness that that, and that alone, can meet the need? Is it not a confession? It is a confession of failure. We need not force this thing, that the Judges condition is very largely the condition today; mainly weakness, mainly defeat, broken by periods of power and patches of victory.

Two glorious things from Judges

What does the book of Judges bring up before us for such a time? It brings up two glorious things. One is a very glorious thing, and the other is a glorious thing inasmuch as it is God's key to the situation. The first thing is this, that the Lord is always ready to give to His people the Joshua or the Ephesians state of things if they will turn to Him with all their heart. You are impressed as you read this book. It does not matter how far they have gone away. Terrible things are said about Israel in this book, about turning to idols, all that they did against the Lord, and it only says: "But when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised them up a deliverer ...". It seemed that God was standing right there ready to do it. Why? (Now this is why we said that the link between Joshua and Judges is maintained). Because God has secured that position for them. He has it, as it were, in His hand, and He is saying: I have that position. It is yours. You have only to come to it. Jordan has secured this. The cross has secured it. It is here already. I have not to do anything to give it to you, but you have just to come to it; it is ready for you. That seems to be what the Lord says. If His people come on to *His* ground, then His ground is that of Joshua conditions, victory at once.

See how these men led out their feeble, crushed, despised armies, things which were not of this world: Gideon and three hundred, Deborah and Barak and their little army compared with Sisera; and how mighty a victory. How much the Lord took of this matter in His own hands to see it through! That speaks for itself. Let us remember that there is no need to struggle towards what we call an Ephesian position. This is not something that has got to be achieved, agonised unto; it is ours. The life of heavenly union with Christ is ours; God has secured it by the cross for us. All we have to do is to come on to God's ground and we have it. What is God's ground? Well, that is just the whole purpose of the book of Judges.

Another thing which the book says is that there must be this ministry of discrimination in the interests of the Lord's people, that they should come on to the Lord's ground of victory and heavenly fulness. The Judges represent those principles of spiritual recovery in a day of declension, and they are this inclusive principle, that they judge in the things of the Lord.

It is necessary to understand what these Judges were doing. It was not just to judge for man. That was not their business at all. When they gave judgement it was not just in the trivialities of ordinary daily life among people, to get them out of difficult and inconvenient circumstances.

Their business was to judge for God, not for men, in the first place. There was a revealed mind of God in existence, there were the statutes and the laws of the Lord governing the life of His people. That was laid down, and there could be no departing from that. That was to govern. Now the Judges sat to determine everything in the light of the revealed mind of God. They judged for God. They said: "That is not of God, it must go; this is what the Lord requires, it must be established." They judged for the Lord on the basis of a revelation of God's mind. That means that they had understanding in the things of the Lord, they had a spirit of judgement, a spirit of understanding, a spirit of knowledge, a spirit of counsel in spiritual things. They were able to say, "That is not the Lord's mind"; "The Lord would not have that"; "The Lord requires this, and in this way." That was the work of the judges. They were, in effect, spiritually minded people to judge all things. "He that is spiritual judges" (or examines; the word in the Greek cannot be fully translated into English, it is a word which means the ability to look into a matter, dissect it, and discriminate as to the right and the wrong of it, and pass the verdict). The spiritual person is divinely given a faculty for that. That is what Paul is saying in this passage from 1 Corinthians 2:15. The spiritual man has a divinely given faculty for looking into a matter and dissecting it, and seeing what is of God and what is not of God in that thing, and passing a verdict from God's standpoint on that matter.

These were the Judges in Israel, equipped by the Holy Spirit for that work, and they saved Israel in a day of declension. They were the deliverers of Israel in such a time. Now is not that an important matter? Does the Lord not need something like that in a day like this? That is what comes out in this book.

We close this meditation by mentioning one other general thing in the book. These judges were very ordinary people in themselves. They had no title to their position, they had no rights, status or lineage, it was not an hereditary thing. It seems the Lord went anywhere, and put His hand on anyone and the people taken up were usually the most surprised. Gideon said, "I am the least in my father's house". Jephthah was an illegitimate child, cast out by his people because of illegitimacy and driven away, then brought back and made judge. Deborah was a woman. That is not to despise her, but it was not the usual way of God, but something quite unusual. What was governing all this? These very ordinary people in themselves, out-of-the-way people, despised among men, were constituted the judges of the Lord's people upon a basis which was entirely spiritual,

nothing natural, not what they were in name or title or position. It was a purely spiritual thing, and the Lord dealt with them entirely upon that basis. The Lord never for a moment covered their natural and human weaknesses and defects, but told the whole story. We grieve to read of Samson the Judge of Israel, but God does not cover it up. He lets it be seen in clear light what they are by nature. It was their relationship to Him which determined everything. If they failed in their spiritual fellowship with God, they did not stand just because they were in office.

God does not spare Samson. You would say: "Oh, here is Samson, the judge of Israel, the one man in all the world representing God: surely God will cover Samson and all his defects. If Samson goes wrong God must be specially lenient with him because of the special responsibility resting upon him." Not a bit of it. If Samson goes wrong he will be caused to bear the results of his wrongdoing, and he will go out of his position. God is dealing with people this time entirely upon a basis of their spiritual relationship with Him, and that is spiritual government; it is never official. It is never given to anybody because of what they are in themselves, it is never by some official appointment of God. *Anybody* who among men may be worthless, outcast, rejected, who has a relationship with God spiritually becomes a part of His instrument for correcting the things which are wrong among the Lord's people, and bringing back to the full thought of God.

By this we are seeking to emphasise that God needs a *spiritual* vessel, not a great, public, official thing. He will pass by the traditional thing, He will pass by the official thing, He will look for spiritual men and women. He will take pains to make us spiritually minded, because of the value of this. There is a larger meaning than lies on the surface. Its full ministry is not going to be fulfilled here in this dispensation. These various judges (leaving out Abimelech, who was altogether wrong), represent aspects of that full-orbed government which is gathered up eventually in the king. The last of the judges, and the fullest of them, was Samuel, and it was as though he gathered up all these in himself and handed it all over to the king, brought in the king. It is remarkable that the end of the book of Judges is: "In those days there was no king in Israel ...". And Samuel brought in the king. But Samuel took up all these spiritual things in his own person. Samuel was a glorious judge.

The King is coming, and He is coming into His position of universal administrator. He will need an instrument through which to administer, and that instrument will have to have spiritual understanding, a spirit that

has been developed in the understanding of the Lord. So the Father of our spirits is busy with us now to bring us to a place where spiritually we understand for the purposes of administration later on.

That is a little extra word. It does not come immediately into our consideration, but otherwise it is difficult to explain why, when we reach any little measure of spiritual maturity, the Lord takes us to glory. Just at the time when a saint has become mature and is needed by the church, has insight and perception, then he is taken home, and the church here says, "Why did the Lord take all those pains to get a man there, and then take him away?" Because his ministry is yet to be fulfilled. The King is coming, and the King will need those who are around Him sharing in His counsel, also clothed with a spirit of counsel and understanding.

This is all very general and imperfect, but it may help us to begin to see why the Lord deals with us as He does, and perhaps what the Lord is after in a day like this.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE LORD'S TESTIMONY

Reading: Judges 2:16-23; 5:10-23.

Following the general survey of the book of Joshua which we made in our previous meditation, we come to something more particular by looking at fragments of this book as the Lord may lead. First of all, however, we must recognise the cause or the nature of the history which is in the book of Judges. We have seen that there was a deplorable state of affairs, so completely other than in the book of Joshua. Looking for the reason, we find it in the second chapter, in verses 1-4 and 21-23. In those passages there is a statement of great importance and value which can be broken up into one or two things.

Failure to enter the Lord's plan in fulness

In the first place the terrible period of over three hundred years was the result of a failure on the part of the Lord's people to go on into all that He had revealed as being His will for them. That is where we begin.

If you look into the tragic state of the history of God's people at any time you will find that the cause is the same. Wherever there has arisen a state like this that we find in the book of Judges, it can be traced to this, that at some point those concerned ceased to go on with energy into all that the Lord had set definitely before them as His will for them. It is always a most perilous thing not to go on with energy into anything that has been presented to us as the Lord's will for us, which He has made possible for us, because it will not be long before other forces take advantage of that stopping short to press in, and then it becomes a question as to whether we can go on when we want to. That which at one time was a clear way — while always fraught with a measure of conflict, nevertheless in a

sense of victory, with a knowledge that the Lord was there, committed to the thing — has now become a most onerous thing, marked by struggle, stress, and a conflict which is not characterised by the Lord being in it as at one time He was. There is a sense of having given the enemy an opportunity. There is all the difference between the kind of conflict and progress which is straight on with the Lord in the light, and that recovering kind of conflict which is the result of our being stopped short somewhere, having given the enemy an opportunity to encamp on the ground.

When Israel was in the first movement, the enemies in the land were all in a state of looseness. It seems that their very heart was loosed out, and it was not going to be such a terrific task to move them out; they were already in heart moved, very largely expecting to have to go. You know that once you expect anything like that you may as well go. If ever you accept the idea of leaving, half the battle is over for the person who is going to eject you. These enemies were very largely expecting to have to quit, and so there was not a hundred per cent resistance. But when Israel stopped these enemies dug themselves in, thus, the removal of them was a much greater challenge afterwards.

The Lord's reactions

Then there was the Lord's side of it. The Lord while in the first instance fully with them, now let them feel something of the tremendous range of not having gone on with Him, and it came back upon them. We all know something of that in spiritual experience. Whereas there was a time when it was comparatively easy to go on in some step of obedience, because we did not go on, it has become infinitely more difficult when we come to face the matter, and we find the situation has become far more complicated. We must remember that the history of God's people through all ages speaks loudly of the tremendous peril of failing to go on in the light when the Lord presents it to us.

Then there is the Lord's side again. Whenever a people has failed to go on to God's end, and other forces have taken hold, the reaching of His end becomes, by His own permission or appointment, a matter of far more conflict. In connection with the children of Israel God said that He would not drive out their enemies, but would leave them to prove Israel.

Now you can see the difference between what took place in the early days of the church and the apostles, and what has obtained since in the matter of conflict in driving out the enemy. In the first place it was really,

although with cost and suffering, a stepping on. God was there mightily in evidence. Then the church stopped; it ceased to go on; and ever since, progress of that earlier kind has been fraught with terrible conflict. It has been a matter of difficulty raising the biggest questions, even the question as to how far the Lord is with His people. There has always been an enemy. That enemy was defeated at Calvary. The victory was given to the church. They entered into it, and carried it forward, and then stopped. Ever since, they have been trying to take it up again, and what have they found? They have found that it is not so easy, and that the Lord has not come in in the same way as He did at the beginning, but has let them feel the brunt of this thing. The church has felt the terrific strain of this matter of overthrowing the enemy. Why is that? Well, that brings us back to the book of Judges, and the very point that we want to emphasise. Let us see how true that has been in all of human history.

Take Adam for instance. Adam had light. We do not know how long he walked in the light, but while he did so everything went on blessedly, and there was the exercise of dominion. Then Adam ceased to walk in the light. The result was that the Lord made it necessary for Adam to exercise his dominion through terrible stress. A new element had come in. The Lord told Adam that in the sweat of his face he should eat bread (Gen. 3:19). Before that God had said to man that he was to have dominion (Gen. 1:28), and he had it, and we read of no conflict in it. Afterwards the dominion was to be expressed through great cost and suffering, agony and hard labour. A new element had entered in.

Take Israel, as we have already seen. We sum them up thus: at one time going on in dominion, then stopping; afterwards discovering that new elements had entered in, thus progress and conquest was fraught with a very great deal more suffering, agony and conflict than before.

As we have just pointed out, it was the same with the church. In the beginning there was a triumphant marching on. If the church had continued as it started, I suppose the whole world would have been subdued, or something immense would have happened. Take the first week or so after Pentecost and multiply that over a year or two, extend it for a decade. Take the life of Paul as an example of conquest, of getting out into the world, into the nations. There was a world bigger than Paul knew, but if things had been carried forward on the same scale for another period of three or four generations, the world that is now known would have been reached. What we mean to say is that there was a tremendous going on at the beginning. The Lord did not want it otherwise. The Lord

did not call a halt; it was the Lord's people who stopped. When they tried to resume they found there were new elements. When ground has been forfeited, the recovery of that ground is far more difficult than the possessing of that ground in the first place. That is the history of everything in relation to God's purpose in this world. Of course, God sovereignly permits that for a very good reason, and as the Lord enables we want to see that sovereign reason.

Spiritual Responsibility and Understanding

We read in the book of Samuel, the last of the judges, that these judges were those who judged for the Lord in a day when there was no open vision (as we read in the book of Samuel, the last of the judges). The great demand in that time was for someone to take spiritual responsibility for the Lord's full thought. It is this matter of spiritual responsibility which is the focal point of the book of Judges, and is to be our focal point now. It can all be gathered up into two words: spiritual responsibility.

In order to take spiritual responsibility, spiritual understanding is necessary. When once the Lord raised up vessels with spiritual understanding, the one issue is that of taking responsibility for the Lord's testimony, the Lord's full thought for His people. If you look at this book and read it with this one word in mind, you will see that a very great deal of the spiritual history was focussed upon this matter of responsibility.

The most outstanding and classic illustration is seen in Deborah's song. Many of the judges are only mentioned by name, and by one act which led to the deliverance of the Lord's people. These men judged Israel over a series of years. As far as I can see the shortest was seven or eight years, the longest about forty years, but in many instances only their names are mentioned and the act which led to deliverance. But even in the mention of the name and the telling of that one thing, you find that in these cases there is a deliberateness in the matter of responsibility. All that is known about one is that he was left-handed and made himself a sharp two-edged sword which he hid under his cloak and surreptitiously slew the enemy. It is all told in a few words, but the atmosphere speaks of deliberateness. Here is a man who takes the whole responsibility of the Lord's interests for His people upon himself, and it seems in a few clear-cut movements he brings about an open way for the Lord's deliverance; he goes straight to the business.

This question of responsibility comes up in various ways. In some it

was deliberate, clear-cut, and direct; in some it was under constraint, as, for instance with Barak. Deborah almost had to thrust Barak into it. "Up Barak!" was what she said to him, and he told her that if she went with him he would go, but if she did not go then he would not. Deborah did not let Barak off, and he eventually had to take responsibility.

Take the case of Gideon. In his meekness of spirit he was rather slow to respond to the call when the angel of the Lord came and spoke to him. It was his sense of humbleness of life that held him back, but eventually the Lord laid it upon him, and Gideon had to take responsibility; and when once he took responsibility he did so thoroughly. That night he destroyed his father's idols and rid the place of false worship. Then, having cleared the ground in his own domestic circle, he pursued the Lord's interests in a public way, and was no longer lax in the matter of responsibility.

In the case of Abimelech the responsibility was usurped in a fleshly way, and that led to disaster. It is an instance full of instruction. Responsibility must be in the Lord and in the Spirit, otherwise it only leads to the undoing of the one who usurps it.

In one case there seems to be a holding of responsibility in a loose manner, and the Lord demonstrates in that case the terrible perils, and how important it is in a day like this that anyone called by the Lord to take responsibility should take it seriously. We refer to Samson; he seemed to play with responsibility. We know the terrible shame which covered his life because of this and the Lord did not allow this side to be hidden, but revealed that this matter of responsibility is exceedingly serious.

The song of Deborah divides between those who did and those who did not take responsibility. She speaks of a number of tribes which did not come up for various reasons. These reasons are very interesting to note, and pointed in their application.

In a day of weakness, when the Lord is not being glorified as He should be, when conditions are not as the Lord would have them, there must be those of the Lord's people who with spiritual understanding and discernment, will take responsibility. The enemy would, of course, do everything he can to stop the Lord's people who should be taking responsibility from doing so. He would cause them to be preoccupied. Preoccupation is a favourite method of the enemy to destroy responsibility. Preoccupation takes many forms and has many directions. It may be the preoccupation of the multitude of things with which we are kept constantly on the move, diverting or distracting us, keeping us from direct concentration upon the things that matter most.

It may be preoccupation with a personal problem. Oh, how the Lord is losing and how the Lord's people are losing because of this! Many of us, if we were only free from our own problem, would be counting for the Lord, making a contribution to the Lord's people, could be bringing the Lord's people into the fulness of His thought for them. We ought to be doing that, but we continually go round in that vicious circle of our own personal trouble. We are not able to take responsibility, we are not free to do so, because of this problem. We will have a problem to the end, unless we begin to take an attitude towards the cause of their problem. In nine cases out of ten the cause is a perfectly natural thing, such as a physical defect or disorder of the nervous system, although we think it is a spiritual thing. So you find us introspective and always needing to be helped out of ourselves in some way. If only somebody can get us out of ourselves for five minutes we are different people, but unfortunately we drop back again immediately we are on our own.

What is to be done about it? How can we help ourselves? Nerves are nerves we know, and a problem like that is a very acute one, but why should we not face it before God, and say what David said, "This is my infirmity; but I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High" (Ps. 77:10). It is as well for us to have a reckoning with this thing, and get it weighed up and labelled. What is it? What is behind it? When it has been measured and labelled we can say, "That is what I am, but God is other than that; God is not what I am when I am in a bad nervous condition; God is not such as I am as the consequence of my poor physical state! God is other than that, whatever it may be, and He has come to dwell in me by His Spirit. I have to take sides with God against myself!"

Until we get there we shall be useless to God and it is a loss to the Lord in a day like this and loss to the Lord's people. Get free from the personal problem by taking sides with the Lord against yourself. Look it squarely in the face. So often we try to struggle out of our bad state, out of some slough of despond, some miry pit, and we fall back more often than not. The Lord never comes and reaches out a hand to pull us out of it. We are waiting for the Lord to pull us out, crying to the Lord to pull us out, and He does not do it. In effect the Lord is saying: Get victory inside, and then you are able to get on top of your difficulty and I can help you. Look at it in the light of the need of the Lord for men and women to take spiritual responsibility for the Lord's interests, for the Lord's testimony.

There are those who are always leaning on others who will never take the initiative with the Lord themselves. They are always submitting things

to someone else for their mind on it, their judgement about it, and really seeking to get a push or a pull into the thing before they will move themselves. The cases of failure in the matter of responsibility are legion, and the difficulties numerous.

What about responsibility in your case? Are you really taking responsibility before the Lord as though you were the only one in the land to take responsibility? That perhaps wants safeguarding. We are talking about taking responsibility, not about independent action, self-assertiveness, setting yourself up as an authority. That aggression is just individual aggression. We are meaning this, that you take on your heart before the Lord as a personal thing those larger interests of the Lord which have been shown to you to be the Lord's mind for His people and give yourself to its realisation, as far as it is possible. You really take position that now, although there may be many others better fitted than you are, nevertheless you are responsible before the Lord for some measure of Christ in His people. You are not to leave that with other people; it is your business. The Lord's people are desperately in need, and a tragic condition obtains among the Lord's people. What can we do before the Lord in meeting that need? Are we really taking the matter to heart? Are we regarding ourselves as being responsible in relation thereto? I am convinced that a great deal of breakdown, failure and subsequent confusion in the lives of the Lord's people individually, and in their domestic life, is because somewhere responsibility is not taken in the place where it ought to be taken.

Perhaps a husband has not taken responsibility in his home spiritually, and consequently there is a bad state of things there, and a great loss to the Lord. That home might have meant very much for the Lord, a great deal more than it does mean. Not only is there loss, but there is confusion. There are many problems; the enemy is always getting advantages and striking hard blows, and it is all because things are not as they should be in the matter of responsibility there. He puts someone in a certain place — it may be in business — and there are those there for whom that one is responsible. That responsibility is not taken seriously; that one has not shouldered the responsibility of the Lord's will in that place, and the result is disorder and eventually a breakdown. Because of this the enemy would become strongly entrenched and would drive out the interests of the Lord from that place. We may be speaking about what may seem ordinary, commonplace things, but these are true to life.

Every one of the Lord's children must take responsibility, must take this thing up personally and ask, "What is my responsibility before God

where I am, in my home, in my business, in my place of serving the Lord, in the company of the Lord's people?" Have you taken seriously the matter that you have a responsibility? See what Deborah has to say about those who did not take it: "Curse Meroz ... curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof. Because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty" (Judges 5:23). That is one side, a terrible side of not taking responsibility. The other side is found in verse two. The Revised Version reads: "For that the leaders took the lead in Israel ...". Here is initiative and responsibility.

That strikes a very important note; the application is many-sided. The Lord is ready and willing to bring us into a knowledge of His mind, and He must have a people of spiritual wisdom and revelation, who will take responsibility in this day. Let us bring it down to this simple thing: Are we taking responsibility in relation to all the light that we have? It does not matter about the light beyond that; we all hold responsibility for the light that we have. Let us pray most earnestly that the Lord will bring us into that clear place where we really have the spirit of understanding as to the mind of the Lord, so that the Lord has in us those whom He can put into a position of responsibility. Let us pray that we would be able to discriminate in a spiritual way as to the things which differ.

The Lord's people are confused. Go out among them and speak to them about the things of the Lord, the ways of the Lord, and you open a new world to the multitude of His people. They have never seen it like that; all they know is that they are saved, and they want to serve the Lord and are doing it to the best of their ability. But as to spiritual guidance, as to knowing any inward sense of what the Lord would have and would not have, and how He would have it, and the means to be used for it, that is quite unknown to them. They go on in a more or less mechanical way with very little light indeed, and the Lord needs that His people should be enlightened. He must, therefore, have enlightened instruments as to His thought in greater fulness. The Lord takes some of His people into strange experiences in order to teach them these things. He would educate them deeply and thoroughly as to His way. He wants educated people in that sense of having the spirit of understanding, able to judge all things; the faculty of seeing with God's eyes what God's way is, resulting in them taking up the responsibility made possible by that education to speak to the Lord's people in this day of need. There is no doubt that the Lord's people are in great need today, and their greatest need is of spiritual understanding, that they might understand the way of the Lord. They are groping,

they are crying for understanding. How is the Lord going to give it? The Lord would raise up these instruments, vessels, individuals, and a company of people who can judge for Him and interpret in the light of God's will for the Lord's people.

Has it ever occurred to you that the Lord's way of deliverance is always enlightenment? Initially and all the way through it is enlightenment. Paul was given a commission, and it was this: "... unto whom I now send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God ..." (Acts 26:17-18). Just open their eyes, and everything else follows. The Lord's way of deliverance for His people is spiritual enlightenment. We shall come out into a free place of spiritual enlightenment if our eyes are opened, and the Lord, in turn, will use us for the opening of other people's eyes for their deliverance. In a time like this the Lord wants judges to deliver His people. The Lord could have come in in sovereign acts, but He raised up judges, and the judges were what the Lord's mind was, and when the people were open to receive the mind of the Lord through the judges then the judges drew the people into oneness with themselves in that enlightenment, went out to battle with them, and deliverance was wrought.

Before we conclude, let us go back to that point which we did not quite clear up, concerning the subsequent difficulty after having stopped. Do you recognise that the Lord must have people morally responsible? That is why He did not drive out their enemies. When they ceased to drive them out, the Lord did not come in and drive them out, but left them there as thorns in their sides. He did that to draw these people out into definite, deliberate exercise at great cost, so that they themselves became morally responsible people. They had got into that state, and if the Lord had come in and sovereignly acted to drive these enemies out, what would have been the result? There would have been a people in a bad moral state in possession of the land. God put the onus upon them in this matter and called for an extra exercise on their part, because He allowed them to feel the extra acuteness of their failure.

When they did rise up things were very glorious indeed. You have one man slaying six hundred men with an ox goad; another man causing devastation among the Lord's enemies with the jawbone of an ass; three hundred men putting a mighty host to flight. These things bring a great deal of glory to God when once there is a recognised responsibility towards Him for the conditions, and a taking up of that responsibility. Then the Lord does come in. But in the first place it means facing terrible

odds which were not there in the same way originally. The Lord is calling out a people into a position of strong moral responsibility in relation to the conditions which obtain.

All this has revolved around that one word, and the Lord must apply it to our hearts. We can be passive, wrongly dependent upon others, preoccupied; we can be engrossed with our own, even spiritual, matters. The Lord wants us to turn from everything like that and take responsibility for His testimony. I am sure that the words addressed by Mordecai to Esther sum all this up in an excellent manner, and in a conclusive way: “For if thou altogether holdest thy peace (remain silent, NAS) at this time, then shall there enlargement (relief) and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14).

That is something to take to heart. It sums up this whole matter of spiritual responsibility. The Lord would call us “for such a time as this” to take responsibility for His interests. So Deborah would say to the reluctant Barak, “Up Barak!” The Lord would say to us, “Up, this is your responsibility, take it!” Be sure that you are not failing the Lord in the matter of your measure of responsibility for His full thought among His people!

The Lord strengthen us with might by His Spirit in the inward man for this.

To be continued