

A.B. Simpson:

"And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and He delivered them into the hands of the spoilers that spoiled them, and He sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies. Nevertheless, the Lord raised up judges which delivered them out of the hand of those that had spoiled them, and yet they would not harken unto their judges, but they went a whoring after other gods, and bowed themselves unto them. They turned quickly out of the way which their fathers walked in, obeying the commandments of the Lord; but they did not so. And when the Lord raised them up judges then the Lord was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For it repented the Lord because of their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them. And it come 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 way." Judges 2: 14-19.

This, in a few sentences, is the story of the whole Book of Judges. It is a story of sinning and repenting. It is a picture of the Church and the Christian in a state of deep declension, and it is a declension all the more deep and dark because it followed a condition of the highest spiritual blessing. It came, not as the wandering in the wilderness did, after their deliverance from Egypt, but it came after their victorious entrance into Canaan, and their enjoyment of the life of victory and the fulness of God's blessing.

Its historical parallel is the story of the Dark Ages in the history of Christianity, when for centuries the Church sank into apostasy and worldliness, and for a thousand years the light of truth and holiness was almost wholly blotted out; and this after the story of Pentecost and the light of apostolic days. It has its individual parallel in the experience of a child of God, when, after the baptism of the Holy Ghost, he falls back into spiritual declension and disobedience, and returns to a life of sinning and repenting. It is a far sadder experience because of the light and the power he has known before, and the lessons of this book may well warn every one of us to give all diligence to "hold fast the beginning of our confidence and the rejoicing of our hope firm unto the end."

Let us look at the two first examples of God's dealing with this sinful people.

The first is the story of Othniel (Judges 3: 7-11): "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and forgot their Lord, and served Baalim and the groves. Therefore the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Chushanrishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. And the children of Israel served him eight years. And when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel who delivered them, even Othniel, the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel and went out to war, and the Lord delivered Chushanrishathaim, king of Mesopotamia, into his hand, and the land had rest forty years, and Othniel, the son of Kenaz, died."

The next is the story of Ehud (Judges 3: 12-30): "And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened Eglon, king of Moab, against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord, and He gathered unto him the children of Ammon and Amalek, and went and smote Israel, and possessed the city of palm trees. So the children of Israel served Eglon, the king of Moab, eighteen years. But when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised them up a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, a Benjaminite, a man left-handed, and by him the children of Israel sent a present unto him, and he was sitting in a summer parlor which he had for himself alone. And Ehud said unto him, I have a message from God unto thee. And he arose out of his seat. And Ehud put forth his left hand, and took the dagger from his right thigh and thrust it into his bowels . . . And Ehud escaped while they tarried, and passed beyond the quarries, and escaped unto Seraith. And it came to pass when he was come that he blew a trumpet on the mountain of Ephraim, and the children of Israel went down with him from the mount, and he before them, and he said unto them, Follow after me, for the Lord hath delivered your enemies, the Moabites, into your hand. And they went down after him, and took the fords of Jordan toward Moab, and suffered not a man to pass over. And they slew of Moab at that time about ten thousand men, all lusty and all men of valor, and there escaped not a man. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel, and the land had rest fourscore years."

These two incidents, following each other in direct succession, illustrate the progression of evil, and at the same time the progression of grace on the part of God.

We cannot fail to notice here the aggravation of repeated sin. We read in the seventh verse, "That the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord;" and we read in the twelfth verse, "That the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord." But the effects of their repeated sin were much more serious than in the first

instance. After their first disobedience we are told that God sold them into the land of the enemy, and they served him eight years. But in the second instance the Lord not only gave them into the hand of their enemy, but we are told "that the Lord strengthened Eglon, the king of Moab, against Israel." And this time they served the enemy, not eight, but eighteen years.

Here we find God working on the side of their enemies, and giving them power to afflict His people, and we see that the effect of continuance in sin is to prolong the period of our chastisements and to fix the habit of evil until it becomes almost permanent. It is an awful truth that evil men wax worse and worse, and the power of sin to hurt us and to hold us increases with every repetition. It was not merely that God prolonged their captivity by His arbitrary will, but it seems as if they themselves have been so paralyzed by their sin and judgment that they did not even think of turning to Him for eighteen years.

It would seem as if God always listened to them when they cried unto Him, but the saddest effect of their sin was that they even forgot His former mercy, and failed to lift up to Him their penitent cry. But over against their sin how marked the mercy of their longsuffering God. The moment they turned to Him in prayer and penitence, He heard their cry and sent them help. How striking is the expression, "And when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord He raised them up a deliverer." His mercy was instant, and His deliverance was complete.

And then when He restored them from their captivity, the duration of the blessing was in proportion to the length of the judgment. When He saved them from the captivity of Chushanrishathaim eight years long, He gave them rest for forty years, and when He saved them from the captivity of Eglon, eighteen years long, He gave them rest for eighty years. It would seem as if His mercy was graduated in a scale of progression in contrast with their sorrows and their sin. The days of blessing were more than four times as long as the days of punishment and pain.

Is there one who reads these lines who is looking back to some dark chapter of backsliding and spiritual loss? Take comfort even from the story of Israel's sin. Only turn to God in truehearted repentance and obedience, and He says, "I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the canker worm, and the palmer worm (My great army that I sent against you)."

How beautiful to observe in the story of Simon Peter, that when the Lord restored him after his threefold sin, He gave him a threefold blessing, and commission as if he would put a mark of honor over against every scar that the disciple had brought upon himself. "He will make us glad according to the days wherein He has afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil."

Yes, such is the mercy of God, but, oh, how much better and sweeter the grace of God which is able to keep us from stumbling, "to preserve us blameless unto the coming of the Lord," and "to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy."

There are some further lessons in connection with these incidents that are well worthy of our careful attention. You will notice how all through this period the people were dependent

upon human leaders. Indeed this seems to have been their bane all through. They were faithful to God as long as Joshua lived, but they have no direct dependence on Joshua's God. Theirs was a reflected goodness, derived from the circumstances and the people that surrounded them. And so they were true to God while their judge led them on to victory, and ruled over them afterwards, but when he died their heart, like the sapling that has been only bent, sprang back again to its natural willfulness, and as the writer has so well expressed it: "They ceased not from their own doing, nor from their stubborn ways; they went a whoring after other gods, and turned quickly out of the way their fathers walked in."

Here we see the whole root of bitterness, a superficial experience, influenced by persons and circumstances, while our natural heart still remains, and we are not personally united to the Lord Jesus Christ and filled with the Holy Ghost, for ourselves. The promise of this dispensation, thank God, is not that we shall have Othniels and Ehuds, Joshuas and Calebs to lead us, but that the Holy Spirit shall be "poured out upon all flesh," and we "shall not need to teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother saying, Know the Lord; for all shall know Him from the least even unto the greatest."

We are therefore to look for our spiritual types not in the condition of the people at this time, but in the spirit of the leaders. These men were patterns of what each of us may be today in the power of the Holy Ghost.

In Othniel we see, according to the literal meaning of his name, The Lion-hearted man, the man of faith and holy

courage. We have heard of this man before. It was he who, at Caleb's challenge, had dared to assault the stronghold of Kirjath Sepher, chapter 1, verse 12, and as a reward for his victory won the hand of Achsah, the daughter of Caleb, whose name means "Grace." And with her he received a dowry of special grace and blessing. Othniel stands for the faith which in the very first teachings of our Christian life dares to take the victory and receives the fulness of grace for ourselves, and then, later, when others need our help, we are prepared to lead them into the same victory which we have won.

There is a story back of every story. There is a life behind every public record of triumph and distinction. The Othniel who led Israel to victory against the mighty emperor of the East was not the creation of a moment, was not the accident of a great occasion; but was the outgrowth and development of a long-past history, when as a young man he met the crisis hour of his own life, and dared to believe God and overcome his enemies in the strength of God and to win the blessing which enabled him now to meet the greater occasion, and to stand as the first of Israel's judges and conquerors. And so there comes to each of us a moment when we meet life's issues all alone, and as we stand true and triumph over self and sin, God's mark is placed upon us, and He puts us aside for the day when He will need a brave leader and a chosen instrument for some of the great occasions of the world's history; and it will be found true again, as it ever has been true, "that the Lord hath set apart him that is godly unto Himself."

The other incident of Ehud and his deliverance of Israel is not quite so clear at first sight. For Ehud stands before us, apparently, in the light of a secret assassin. By deep subtlety and in the disguise of a friend he gains access to the presence of Eglon, the oppressor of his country, and, asking a private audience, he whispers in his ear the awful secret, "I have a message from God to thee," and then, swift as the lightning flash, he pierces him to the heart with the hidden dagger, and strikes down the life of his country's oppressor. Indeed, a good many commentators have tried to excuse Ehud's act, or at least to exonerate God from all responsibilities for it by calling attention to the fact it is not said, as in the case of Othniel, that the Spirit of God came upon him. They seem disposed to apologize for him, or at least to make him responsible for his own act, and leave it as at least a doubtful thing. But a candid reader cannot fail to notice that the inspired writer makes no such attempt to evade responsibility, but frankly speaks of Ehud as the deliverer that God raised up to save His people, and recognizes his whole career as that of a divine leader and judge.

How then shall we justify his act of apparent murder? Surely, the answer is plain. It was not Ehud's act, it was not an act of private vengeance or even patriotic fervor; but he gives us the explanation himself in his awful message to Eglon. He was acting as a divinely appointed judge, and the executioner of God's sentence against a wicked and condemned man. "I have a message from God to thee," is his solemn word as he suits the action to the word, and strikes down the bold and impious transgressor at his feet. He was simply acting as the judge upon the bench when he sentences the murderer to his doom, or as the public executioner when he fulfills the decree of the state and takes the life that has been forfeited by law for public crime. Ehud in this acts by divine command, and in the divine name, so that his victim stands before us as the type of our spiritual oppressor, and Ehud as the example of that faith which meets the enemy, not in our own name or strength, but in the name and strength of Jehovah, and triumphs even as He.

Is there not for us an inspiring lesson in this attitude? Is it not our privilege to identify ourselves with God in all we say and do, and to go forth to lives of victory in His name? Is not this the very meaning of that strong expression, "Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus?" Is it prayer? Let us identify ourselves with Him, until it shall not be our prayer, but God's prayer in us, and we shall know that the answer must be given. Is it temptation, let us meet the devil as a conquered foe, and standing in the very person of our victorious Lord, let us say to Him, "I have a message from God to thee. He bids thee fly." Get thee hence, Satan, in the name of Jesus; and in that mighty name we shall cast out demons, and tread upon serpents and scorpions, and upon all the power of the enemy. Or is it service? Are we called to speak for our Master or our fellow men? Again, let it be not our message, but His; not our ideas; and opinions, and pleadings, but the very word from the throne, delivered to men with the authority of God, and let us look into their conscience and say in the name of our Master, "I have a message from God to thee," and our words will be clothed with power, and the Holy Ghost will convict men of sin and righteousness and judgment, and seal our messages with precious souls and lasting fruits.

This is the true spirit of ministry. "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracle of God. If any man minister, let him do it as the ability that God giveth, that God may in all things be glorified through Jesus Christ."