

**A.B. Simpson:**

"And what shall I more say? for the time will fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah, of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets; who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens." Heb. 11: 32-34. Compare with Judges 3: 31 and 4: 14, 15.

The night brings out the stars, and so the darkest times of national and church history are always the occasions for the development of the highest types of genius and character. The long, sad story of the Judges revealed a Deborah and Barak, a Gideon and Samson, an Othniel and a Jephthah. The times of Ahab and Jezebel were made illustrious by the ministry of Elijah and Elisha, the dark night of the middle ages was made luminous by the testimony of a Wyckliffe, a Luther and a Knox.

The story of divine mercy and Christian faith is written on the dark background of human sin and crime. We are to look at a few of these stars of the night as they shine in the firmament of the Book of Judges.

I. The story of Shamgar (Judges 3: 31) introduces us to a humble farmer in Southern Palestine, whose only weapon was the implement of his daily toil, and whose battlefield was a country road, but who stands forever illustrious among the heroes of faith and the saviors of his country. Following his simple plow and oxen, and carrying in his hand the rude ox-goad, which was just a long wooden shaft, with a sharp prod at one end, and an iron shovel at the other, to clean the plowshare, he suddenly found himself surrounded by a band of Philistines, the precursors of another invasion of the land. Seizing his ox-goad by the small end, and turning it into a formidable club, he suddenly charged his foes, and, as they turned and fled before his fierce attack, he pursued them with such resistless fury that before the day was over six hundred of them lay dead around him. Doubtless it was more than human prowess, but like David's battles, one of those times of supernatural inspiration, when God Himself took possession of His chosen instrument, and one was able to chase a thousand, and send dismay into the hearts of a host of enemies. Doubtless this battle was a crisis in the history of his country, and stayed some greater invasion, and as these men went back to tell the tale of their strange disaster, their neighbors began to think that if one man could do such wonders, it would scarcely be safe to meet an army of such men.

Now, Shamgar represents in some very striking ways the spirit of Christian faith and victory. Here we see a man standing in the ordinary walks of life, and meeting an emergency as it comes to him, without stepping aside from the path of ordinary duty. He does not need to mount a pedestal, and be placed in some illustrious position, to be a hero, but he just stands in the place where God has put him, and there becomes illustrious through the force of his own personal character and conduct. He does not go out of his way to find a mission, but he meets the events that come to him in the ordinary course of life, and turns them into occasions for faith and victory.

He represents the men and women who stand in secular callings, and who find a pulpit and a ministry just where God has placed them, amid the tasks and toils of daily life. He stands for the businessman at his counting house and in his office, and finds a thousand opportunities for fighting the battle of the Lord, and doing good to his fellow men amid the circumstances of his daily calling.

I know a humble shoemaker in a New England town who finds in his little shop every day a dozen opportunities for preaching Christ, as well as living the Gospel, and who has been used of God to lead scores of his visitors and customers to the experience and the blessing which has transformed his own heart and life. I know a captain on one of our coast lines of steamers who preaches the Gospel in his plain and modest way to tens of thousands of his passengers every year, and whose little cabin has been the birthplace of hundreds of precious souls for whom he lies in wait with ceaseless watchful tact and love. I know more than one businessman whose office is an object lesson of Bible texts and divine messages, and who never meets a caller without some hint of eternal things, and never writes a letter without some little enclosure which can speak for God and salvation.

Shamgar did not have to wait till he had a sword or spear or battle-bow from the armory, but he took the weapon that lay next at hand, and he turned it against the enemy, and so God wants your real resources just as they are, to be used for Him. He is asking thee, "What is that in thine hand?" and Moses' rod, and Dorcas' needle, and Shamgar's ox-goad, and David's sling and stone, and Joshua's ram's horn, and the lad's five loaves and two fishes, and the widow's little can of oil are all that he requires for His mightiest victories and His grandest ministries. Give Him what you have, be faithful where you are, do what you can, and He will do the rest.

"If you want a field of labor,  
You can find it anywhere."

Shamgar's may seem a little victory compared with Gideon's, and so it was, so far as numbers were concerned, but doubtless it was used of God to prevent some greater invasion, and render needless some more costly victory afterwards; and so the little things we sometimes do, the faithfulness with which we meet some trifling opportunity may prevent some greater disaster, or be the occasion of some mightier blessing than we can at the time foresee.

It may seem but a little thing for a brave woman in a dark and stormy night to dash along the railroad track and signal the rushing train to stop before it reaches the broken bridge, but that single act of heroism saves a hundred lives. It may seem a little thing for a little band of heroes to hold a pass against an army, but that was the key to the whole situation. It may be a trifling thing for a quiet English girl to find a ragged street urchin, and induce him to go to Sunday school by giving him a suit of clothes, and then, when he played her false, to hunt him up weeks afterwards, and give him another suit of clothes, and yet again the third time to refuse to be discouraged by his deception, until at last her patience triumphed, and that boy was won for Christ; but the day came when that little act of tireless love was God's first step in the evangelization of the millions of China, for that boy became Robert Morrison, the pioneer of modern missions in the East, and the first in that glorious line who shall yet come with their trophies from the land of Sinim.

Ah, these are the little things that God loves to glorify! God help many of us to watch for these wayside opportunities and win these battles of faith and fortitude while we may.

II. Our next illustration is the story of Deborah and Barak. Here we are introduced at once to a new instrumentality in the work of God, namely, the ministry of woman.

Deborah stands before us in strong contrast with the customs and prejudices of her time -- a woman called to lead in a great national crisis, and to stand in the front both of statesmanship and war as the head of the nation. It goes without saying that this is an unqualified recognition of the ministry of woman, and with such an example backed up by so many honored successors, let no man deny the place of woman in the history of nations and the ministries of Christianity.

At the same time the story of Deborah is as clear in limiting as it is in permitting the ministry of woman. It gives no encouragement to the "new woman" in her absurd attempt to usurp the place or the appearance of man. A mannish woman is an outrage upon her own sex and a caricature of the other sex. She falls between two fires, for she falls short of manhood, and she falls out of womanhood. Christ Himself has established the natural and spiritual law that the head of every woman is the man, and the head of the man is Christ, and the head of Christ is God. This is the type of womanhood that Deborah represented.

While she knew that she was called by her spiritual qualifications to lead her people to deliverance from the enemy, yet she took particular pains to find a man to be the executive officer of her plans, and the leader of God's hosts in the divine campaign. Her chief business was to put Barak in the front, and then stand by him with her counsels, her prayers, her faith, and her wholesome reproof, for Deborah was a practical and sensible woman. Her name signifies "the bee," and she was well provided with the sting as well as the honey, and knew how to stir up Barak by wholesome severity as well as encourage him by holy inspiration. He is a very foolish man who refuses to be helped by the shrewd, intuitive wisdom of a true woman, for while her head may not be so large, its quality is generally of the best; and her conclusions, though not reasoned out so elaborately, generally reach the right end by intuitions which are seldom wrong. Woman's place is to counsel, to encourage, to pray, to believe, and preeminently to help. This was what Deborah did, and in this Deborah was the type of woman's sceptre, which is that of yieldedness and love rather than dogmatism and defiance.

Again, we see in the story of Barak a man of weak and timid faith, losing much by his diffidence, and yet used of God and lifted to a diviner faith by the inspiration of Deborah. Barak shrank at first from the unexpected call to lead a little army of ten thousand men against the myriads of Sisera, and he only consented at last on condition that Deborah should go with him. By his timidity he lost not a little of the honor that he might have won, and his sharp and penetrating mistress plainly told him that the victory should not be wholly to his credit, for God should deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman; and so there were really two women in this case, and Barak was sandwiched in between them. With Deborah in front, and Jael in the rear, and Barak in the midst, even poor, weak Barak became one of the heroes of faith who shine in the constellation of eternal stars, upon which the Holy Ghost has turned the telescope of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews.

Yes, God can use the weakest instruments, and He generally does choose the poor in spirit, and the temperaments that are naturally the opposite, to clothe them with His supernal might, and use the foolish things of this world to confound the wise, and the weak things to confound the strong, and the things that are despised, yea, and the things that are not, to bring to nought the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

Look at Isaiah, when God called him to his splendid ministry. How little he thought of himself, as he cried, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips!" and yet God used him to unfold the majestic visions of Messianic prophecy.

Look at Jeremiah, as he shrank back into his conscious nothingness, and cried, "Lord, I am a little child," and yet God took that trembling reed, and made him a pillar of strength and a fenced brazen wall of resistance against the kings, the prophets, and the priests of Israel, and the grandest figure of the last days of Jerusalem. Yes, He can take us in our weakness and nothingness, and make us strong in His might to the pulling down of strongholds.

Barak was not always weak; there came a time when he responded to the inspiring call of faith and became a hero. Deborah's message to him is all alive with the very spirit and innermost essence of the faith that counts the things that are not as though they were. "Up!" she cries, as she rouses him by a trumpet call from his timorous inactivity; "for this is the day," she adds, as she shakes him out of his procrastination, "in which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hand." She goes on to say, as she reckons upon the victory as already won, "Is not the Lord gone out before thee?" She concludes, as she commits the whole matter into Jehovah's hands, and bids him simply follow on and take the victory that is already given.

Is it possible for faith to speak in plainer terms, or language to express with stronger emphasis the imperative mood and the present tense of that victorious faith, to which nothing is impossible?

Again, we have here the lesson of mutual service. This victory was not all won by any single individual, but God linked together, as He loves always to do, many cooperating instruments and agents in the accomplishment of His will. Here was Deborah representing the spirit of faith and of prophecy. There was Barak representing obedience and executive energy. There were the people that willingly offered themselves; the volunteers of faith. There were the yet nobler men of Zebulun, and Naphtali that jeopardized their lives unto the death, the martyrs of sacrifice who are the crowning glory of every great enterprise. And there was Jael, the poor heathen woman away out on the frontiers of Israel, who gave the finishing touch, and struck the last blow through the temples of the proud Sisera, while high above all were the forces of nature, and the unseen armies of God's providence; for the stars in their courses fought against Sisera, and the flood of the Kishon rolled down in mountain torrents and swept the astonished foe away.

Still again, we see the curse of neutrality, and the pitiful spectacle which seems always to be present -- the unfaithful, ignoble and indifferent ones who quietly looked on while all this was happening, and not only missed their reward, but justly received the curse of God's displeasure and judgment. And so, in the Song of Deborah, we hear of Reuben's enthusiastic purposes, but ultimate debates and doubts, and he does nothing. We see her fiery scorn for those who stayed among the bleatings of the sheepfolds, rather than the trumpet of the battle. We see her sarcasm strike the selfish men of Gilead who abode beyond Jordan; the careless Danites, who remained in their ships, and the men of Asher who, secure in their naval defenses, lingered yonder on the seashore, and took refuge in their ports and inland rivers, while, above all the echoes of her denunciation, rings out the last awful curse against the inhabitants of Meroz, a little obscure city that probably had taken refuge in its insignificance, because its inhabitants had refused to come up to the help of the Lord against the mighty.

Beloved, God's mighty warfare is raging still. Let us beware lest we, too, shall hide in vain behind our littleness and meet at last the same tremendous curse, because in these last days, when millions are dying without the Gospel, and the coming of our Master waits but a few short years of heroic faithfulness, we perhaps shall hear Him say, "Curse ye the servant who refused to use his single talent and his single pound, just because it was so small, and came not up to the help of the Lord against the mighty."

Finally, this scene is a pattern page, from God's book of remembrance. Some day we shall read the other pages, and find our names recorded either with inhabitants of Meroz and Reuben, or with the victors of faith who stood with Deborah, Barak and Jehovah in the battles of the Lord. Oh, shall we shine like stars in the night now, and then like the sun in the kingdom of our Father?