

# PROPHETS & JUDGES

IN THE PROMISED LAND

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“When differences arise among brethren as to the understanding of any point of truth, there is one Bible rule to follow. In the spirit of meekness and love for God and one another, let brethren come together, and after earnest prayer, with sincere desire to know God’s will, study the Bible with the spirit of a little child, to see how closely they can draw together, and not sacrifice anything but their selfish dignity.” {1888 Materials, p. 1008}

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## WEEK 5 - SLIDING STEPS

### I. One Wrong Step

1. What usually follows the successful completion of a great or difficult work for God? What mistake did Gideon make when this happened to him?

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2. After the church gains a special victory, what does Satan do?

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3. Gideon thought he could make God's service easier and more attractive, and thereby get more of the Israelites to worship God instead of their idols. What was his fatal mistake? Why is every requirement of God important?

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4. What's the harm in making religion easier?

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## II. God's Justice Vindicated

1. What is the result of casting away the fear of God?

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2. What happens when we rely upon the favor or support of men?

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3. What do people do who are controlled by policy ("the end justifies the means")? How are we in danger of doing that?

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- 4. What must we do to reach the Bible standard? What happens when we reach out after forbidden things?

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- 5. What impressed you from the story of Abimelech?

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- 6. How does the last paragraph of this section speak to you?

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**One Wrong Step****July 28, 1881**

The people of Israel, filled with joy and gratitude at their deliverance from the Midianites, proposed to Gideon that he should become their king, and that the throne should be confirmed to his descendants. His answer shows how true and noble were the motives by which he was actuated. "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. The Lord shall rule over you." At the divine command, Gideon had willingly gone forth to battle for Israel; he had not shrunk from duty, nor hesitated in the face of danger; but he nobly refused to accept from the people those honors which the Lord had reserved to himself the right to bestow. {1.1}

God had manifested special favor to Gideon, in selecting him as the instrument through whom to deliver Israel. While great responsibilities rested upon him in this important crisis, Gideon's course was marked with humility and faithful obedience. God accepted his work, and crowned his efforts with success. But now Gideon was assailed by temptation in a new form. When the reprove of wrong has done his work, in obedience to God's commands, the period of inactivity which succeeds the struggle, is often the most dangerous. This danger Gideon now experienced. A spirit of unrest was upon him. Hitherto he had been content to execute the commands given him of God; but now, instead of calmly waiting for divine instruction, he began to devise and execute plans for himself. He had not learned to wait as well as to labor—to suffer God's will as well as to do it. {1.2}

Satan is never idle. He is filled with hatred against God, and is constantly enticing men into a wrong course of action. After the armies of the Lord have gained a signal victory, the great adversary is especially busy. He comes disguised as an angel of light, and as such he endeavors to overthrow the work of God. Thus thoughts and plans were suggested to the mind of Gideon, by which Israel were led astray. {1.3}

The tribes on the east side of the Jordan were quite a distance from the tabernacle at Shiloh, to which all the men of Israel were required to repair three times a year, to attend the great annual feasts. This of course, required a considerable outlay of time and means. The thought was suggested to Gideon that it would be a great advantage to these tribes to have a place at home, for sacrifice and worship. {1.4}

Without waiting for the divine sanction, he determined to provide a suitable place and to institute a system of worship similar to that carried on at the tabernacle at Shiloh. He had refused the urgent solicitations to become king of Israel, but he now determined to take advantage of the popular feeling in his favor to carry out the plan he had devised. As his share of the spoil taken from the Midianites, he asked that all the ear-rings of gold might be given him, promising that he would put them to a wise use. {1.5}

As is natural, even at the present day, the people of Israel were more ready to ascribe the honor of the victory to Gideon than to the Lord. They readily complied with the request, and also collected many other costly materials, together with the richly adorned garments of the princes of Midian. {1.6}

The total value of the spoil thus contributed was not less than fifteen thousand dollars. From the material thus furnished, Gideon constructed an ephod and a breastplate of judgment in imitation of those worn by the high priest. <sup>[1.7]</sup>

Gideon led the people to look upon this ephod and the breastplate as possessing special sacredness in themselves. In this he erred. All that could make them sacred was the fact that they were employed in the solemn service of God as he had directed. The high priest alone was authorized to wear them when he went in before the Lord. <sup>[1.8]</sup>

Because he had been commanded to offer a sacrifice upon the rock where the angel appeared to him, Gideon concluded that he had been divinely appointed to officiate as a priest, and that by instituting a service there, he might save the people the trouble and expense of their journeys to Shiloh. <sup>[1.9]</sup>

The Lord was not pleased with this arrangement, for it was contrary to the order which he had established. It was an assumption of authority on the part of Gideon which proved disastrous to himself and to all Israel. God designs that his people shall place a high estimate upon every provision for their salvation. He desires them to appreciate his great mercy and condescension, and to manifest gratitude and zeal proportionate to the value of the great gift of the Son of God. But we are disposed to shun sacrifice and self-denial for our eternal interest, while we readily devote time and strength to seeking temporal advantage. Thus our conduct too often shows that we place a higher estimate upon earthly things than upon the heavenly treasure. <sup>[1.10]</sup>

It is the work of God's true people to advance his glory in the earth. Through connection with him, they will be imbued with divine wisdom, which will lead them to place a right estimate upon eternal things. The Lord desired his people to go up to the tabernacle at Shiloh, at the stated seasons, even though it might require considerable sacrifice. That very effort would lead them to place a higher value upon their religious privileges. <sup>[1.11]</sup>

In seeking to bring the worship of God nearer home, Gideon was but providing to indulge the people in their indolence. This would have no beneficial influence upon them. All plans based upon human reasoning should be looked upon with a jealous eye, lest Satan insinuate himself into the position which belongs to God alone. The course pursued by Gideon proved a snare, not only to himself and family, but to all Israel. The irregular and unauthorized worship led the people finally to forsake the Lord altogether, to serve idols. The ephod and the breastplate were regarded with pride, because of their costly material and exquisite workmanship; and after a time were looked upon with superstitious reverence. The services at the place of worship were celebrated with feasting and merriment, and at last became a scene of dissipation and licentiousness. Thus Israel were led away from God by the very man who had once overthrown their idolatry. <sup>[1.12]</sup>

If men could foresee the result of their course, if they could realize the influence which they exert upon their own families and upon society, they would move with greater caution, and would maintain a firmer reliance upon God. The misconduct of parents frequently produces the most ruinous effects upon their

children and associates, after the actors themselves have been laid in the grave. There is no evil which man should so much dread, as being given up to his own lusts. This was the fate of Israel. After Gideon's death, the people, especially his own house, plunged into the grossest idolatry. {1.13}

Thus the snare which Gideon had so unwittingly set, entrapped the unwary feet of thousands. A snare—how many snares are to be found in our path today! There is need that light from above be constantly shed upon our way, that we may see the snares laid for our feet. Oh, that fathers and mothers could realize the dangers that beset their path and the path of their children! {1.14}

Those who are placed in the highest positions may lead astray, especially if they feel that there is no danger. The wisest err; the strongest grow weary. Excess of caution is often attended with as great danger as excess of confidence. To go forward without stumbling, we must have the assurance that a hand all-powerful will hold us up, and an infinite pity be exercised toward us if we fall. God alone can at all times hear our cry for help. {1.15}

It is a solemn thought that the removal of one safeguard from the conscience, the failure to fulfill one good resolution, the formation of one wrong habit, may result not only in our own ruin, but in the ruin of those who have put confidence in us. Our only safety is to follow where the steps of the Master lead the way, to trust for protection implicitly to Him who says, "Follow me." Our constant prayer should be, "Hold up my goings in thy path, O Lord, that my footsteps slip not." {1.16}

The Israelites needed the benefits of assembling for worship and entering into covenant together to serve the Lord. In separating themselves from the place of worship divinely appointed, they lost much. God had servants whose lips he unsealed to speak words of warning, encouragement, and reproof, so that the light received from Heaven by one shone not for himself alone, but to lighten the path of others. God knows best what his people need. His words come down to us, in warning and instruction—"Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as ye see the day approaching." {1.17}

At the present day, as in ancient times, the people of God plead their own ease or convenience as an excuse for neglecting divine service. They will devise means to preserve the Christian name without making any sacrifice of time or means. God requires his people to maintain his worship. And those who are burdened with care and responsibility, should be the last to excuse themselves from religious privileges. They need wisdom from above. They need to be constantly reaching upward to lay hold on the divine arm, lest they stumble and fall. They can walk safely, only as they fear God, and obey his voice. Those whom God has burdened with a place in his work, need not be left to their own judgment, as was Gideon, to lead men away from the right path. The feet that God is guiding will press on in a way which leads straight forward, ever ascending, and ever brightening, until it reaches the brightness of eternal day. {1.18}

All wrong-doing is forsaking the path where Jesus leads, turning aside to the crooked ways of darkness. Those who are determined in the strength of Jesus

to make the most of their opportunities, seizing every ray of light that Heaven sheds on their pathway, will go straight forward, fulfilling their duty to God and to their fellow-men. They will not fall, nor stumble. A divine Guide goes before the faithful, encouraging them with his voice, aiding them with his hand, and they need never mistake the way. {1.19}

### God's Justice Vindicated

August 4, 1881

The course of Israel, after the death of Gideon, is thus described by the sacred historian: "The children of Israel remembered not the Lord their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side. Neither showed they kindness to the house of Jerubbaal, namely Gideon, according to all the goodness which he had shewed unto Israel." {2.1}

When men cast away the fear of God, we need not be surprised to see them departing from the path of honor and integrity. They are following another guide. They hurry on in the journey of life, heedless, presumptuous, yet ever fearful and dissatisfied; for they have left the only one who can give them rest and security. When once started in a wrong path, many press on as if infatuated, although every step leads them farther from the Source of light and the Tower of strength. {2.2}

The great sin of Israel had ever been that of departing from God, forgetting his matchless love and his mighty power as revealed again and again in their deliverance. An appreciation of the Lord's mercy and goodness will lead to an appreciation of those who, like Gideon, have been employed as instruments to bless his people. The cruel course of Israel toward the house of Gideon was what might be expected from a people who manifested such base ingratitude to God. {2.3}

The calamities which had constantly threatened them being past, the selfishness of Israel now became apparent. The men so grateful after that glorious victory over Midian, now forgot their offer to place Gideon and his sons upon the throne. They had been filled with wonder and admiration by the noble, unselfish, unambitious spirit which prompted him to refuse the honor, both for himself and for his sons. But the impression wore away as other influences were brought to bear upon them. Gratitude died out of their hearts, and after Gideon's death, the people treated his sons with the basest neglect and cruelty. The human heart is fickle. It is not to be trusted. All who rely upon the favor or support of men will sooner or later find themselves leaning upon a broken reed. {2.4}

Yet Gideon himself had sowed the seeds for that baleful harvest, when he performed that one wrong act by which Israel were led away from God. Now they had become blinded by the sophistry of Satan, and they were wandering away from Him who was their light, their strength, and their glory. The Lord withdrew his restraining Spirit from them, and gave them up to their own base passions. {2.5}

According to the evil custom of those days, Gideon had taken numerous wives, and at his death he left no less than seventy sons. Besides these, there was another, Abimelech, "the son of a strange woman." This person had no right in



the inheritance with Gideon's lawful children, and his debased character rendered him still more unworthy to be numbered with the descendants of the illustrious leader. The sons of Gideon had concurred in their father's refusal to accept the throne of Israel, but Abimelech determined to secure the position for himself. Being a native of Shechem, where his mother's relatives dwelt, he induced them to influence the Shechemites in his favor. He endeavored to advance his own interests by basely misrepresenting his brethren. He accused them of designing to seize upon the government and unite in its administration, and he sought to convince the people that it would be much better for them to be ruled by one of their own number than by such a band of tyrants. {2.6}

Had the Israelites preserved a clear perception of right and wrong, they would have seen the fallacy of Abimelech's reasoning, and the injustice of his claims. They would have seen that he was filled with envy, and actuated by a base ambition to exalt himself by the ruin of his brethren. Those who are controlled by policy rather than by principle are not to be trusted. They will pervert the truth, conceal facts, and construe the words of others to mean that which was never intended. They will employ flattering words, while the poison of asps is under their tongue. He who does not earnestly seek the divine guidance will be deceived by their smooth words and their artful plans. {2.7}

There are many who would scorn the appellation of policy men, yet who will stoop to concealment, evasion, and even misrepresentation, to accomplish their purposes. He who, in a matter of right and wrong, remains noncommittal that he may retain the friendship of all; he who seeks to secure by evasion of truth what should be won by courage; he who waits for others to take the lead, when he should go forward himself, and then feels at liberty to censure their course—all these are in God's sight numbered as deceivers. {2.8}

Abimelech was successful in his schemes, and was accepted, at first by the Shechemites, and afterward by the people generally, as the ruler of Israel. But while thus exalted to the highest position in the gift of the nation, he was utterly unworthy of the trust. His birth was ignoble, his character vicious. The higher and nobler qualities—virtue, integrity, and truth—he had never cherished. He possessed a strong will and indomitable perseverance, and thus, by the most unscrupulous measures, he accomplished his purposes. {2.9}

The Israelites, blinded by their own sinful course of apostasy, were acting directly contrary to God's express commands, and he left them to reap the results of their own folly. It was not God's will that Israel should have a king. But in case they desired to be thus governed, the Lord, understanding the pride and perversity of the human heart, had reserved to himself the right to appoint a king over them. God had brought Israel out from Egypt to be a peculiar people, especially devoted to himself, and unlike any other people. Israel's great ambition to imitate the idolatrous nations around them was the result of separation from God. {2.10}

Pride and ambition similar to that which cursed ancient Israel, exists in the church of God today. They are unwilling to be a peculiar people, distinct and separate from the world. To reach the Bible standard requires self-denial, a crucifixion of the affections and lusts. The unsanctified heart reaches out for



forbidden things, but these very objects of desire will prove now, as anciently, a source of weakness and corruption. Christ “gave himself for us, that he might cleanse us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” Those who seek the honor which comes from men are ever ready to adopt the customs and practices of the world. They gain their position by the exercise of traits of character which should lie dormant. If only those were exalted who had gained their position by fidelity to God and to man, the standard of morality and religion among the people would be elevated. The sin of which we are guilty in acting contrary to God’s expressed will is as much greater than was that of ancient Israel, as our light and privileges have been greater than theirs. [2.11]

The Shechemites sealed the compact with their new king by presenting him with a sum of money from the treasure which had been dedicated to their god, Baal-berith. By accepting the gift, Abimelech covenanted, at the very commencement of his reign, to use his influence and authority to promote the worship of this god. Thus he publicly pledged himself to counteract, as far as possible, the work which Gideon his father had done in overthrowing idolatry. Such has ever been the history of the world since the fall of man. God will use those who give themselves wholly to his service. And Satan not only marshals his host of evil angels and arrays them against God, but he employs men to execute his plans and to defy the King of Heaven. [2.12]

Abimelech now proceeded to execute his power as suited his cruel character. With the money he had received, he hired a set of unprincipled men who were ready for any crime. At the head of this company he marched to Ophrah, where Gideon’s family still dwelt, and basely murdered them all, except one brother, Jotham, who escaped. Abimelech well knew that these men were far better qualified than himself to stand at the head of the kingdom; and he felt that while they lived, his throne would not be secure. Hence he conceived and executed this fiendish crime, that he might undisturbed enjoy the coveted honor, being the first who had borne the name of king among the descendants of Jacob. Returning in triumph to Shechem, Abimelech was immediately anointed king. [2.13]

When Jotham was informed of this, he immediately repaired to Shechem. Burning with a sense of the horrible injustice and cruelty heaped upon his family, he determined at all hazards to present it before the people in its true light. While the multitude were engaged in festivities in honor of their king, celebrating the occasion with hilarious mirth and sensual gratification, Jotham ascended Mount Gerizim to a position where he could be seen and heard by all the people, and addressed them in words of keen reproof. [2.14]

In a most fitting and beautiful parable, he presented before them the folly and injustice of their course. He represented the trees as seeking to make one of their number king over them. But the olive refused to leave its oil, the fig-tree its fruit, and the vine-tree its wine. The worthless bramble, however, readily appropriated the honor and at once stated the conditions of its acceptance: “If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.” [2.15]

The unselfish, unambitious conduct of Gideon and his sons was then forcibly portrayed, and also the ingratitude of the Shechemites. Jotham then concluded in words which proved to be a prophecy: "If ye then have dealt truly and sincerely with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice ye in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the men of Shechem and the house of Millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem, and from the house of Millo, and devour Abimelech." [2.16]

After delivering this speech, Jotham, fled and dwelt in a part of the country beyond the power of Abimelech. [2.17]

The transaction of making Abimelech their king, shows how low Israel had fallen. What a contrast between their humble, God-fearing leader, Moses, who had felt wholly unworthy to occupy his position, and this upstart king, who had secured the throne by treachery, and established himself by violence and bloodshed. It should send terror to our souls when we reflect to what lengths men may go in crime, when they have rejected the influence of God's Spirit. A despot, a murderer, was placed as commander-in-chief of Israel. Satan was now exultant. He had gained control of the mind of Abimelech, and through him he hoped to rule the people. [2.18]

Truly what a striking contrast between the self-sacrificing, devoted leader whom God appointed, and the monster of ingratitude and cruelty whom Israel had now placed upon the throne. By the olive, the fig-tree, and the vine, in Jotham's parable, were represented such noble, upright characters as Moses and Joshua, who had been a living illustration of what a leader of Israel should be. Such men claimed no kingly honors. It was their work to bless their fellow-men, and they did not aspire to rank or power. [2.19]

The worthless bramble, grasping for honor, and destroying that which was better than itself, was a fitting symbol of the vile and cruel Abimelech. Millo was the name of the senate-house, or townhall, and by the house of Millo are meant the chief men of Shechem, who had united in making Abimelech their king, but who, according to Jotham's prophecy, were to destroy Abimelech, and to be destroyed by him. [2.20]

For three years this wicked man's reign continued, and then the Lord sent trouble among those who had united in an evil course. The very men who had made Abimelech king became disgusted with his demoralizing rule, and his heartless tyranny. By treachery he had gained the throne, and now by treachery they determined to remove him. The words of Jotham were fulfilled. Discord, strife, and hatred prevailed between Abimelech and his subjects. The king's cruelty had not ended with the sons of Gideon. Everyone who opposed his will was summarily put to death. But the time of retribution, both for Abimelech and for the Shechemites who had sustained him, was at hand. [2.21]

The city of Shechem having rebelled, it was attacked by the king's forces, the inhabitants were slain, the city itself was reduced to ashes, and the ground was sown with salt, as a token of perpetual desolation. [2.22]

A neighboring city united with Shechem in the insurrection, and Abimelech proceeded next to attack this place also. Having gained possession, he deter-

mined to burn the inhabitants with the tower, as he had done at Shechem. But the wicked king had passed the limits of divine forbearance. He had been permitted to execute the vengeance of God upon Israel, and his career of crime was now to be cut short. {2.23}

As they were about to burn the tower, the king approached too near for his own safety. A piece of millstone hurled by the hand of a woman, struck and fatally wounded him. To avoid the disgrace of dying by a woman's hand, he was, at his own request, immediately slain by his armor-bearer. Thus ended the career of Abimelech. A vile murderer no longer lived to execute his tyranny. {2.24}

Thus the justice of God punished both Abimelech and the Shechemites. This terrible history should teach us the lesson that sin will never go unpunished, and it should impress upon our minds the danger of entering upon the path of disobedience. {2.25}

All true greatness of character, all peace and joy of soul, must come from entire conformity to the will of God. The path of cheerful obedience is the path of safety and happiness. Messages of mercy are sent from Heaven, to teach us the right way. Strength for the conflict of life is ever awaiting us. With the help of God we may gain the victory. {2.26}

### Answer Hints

Section 1: | 1) 1.2 | 2) 1.3 | 3) 1.10, 1.11, 1.16 | 4) 1.10, 1.12, 1.18 |

Section 2: | 1) 2.2 | 2) 2.4 | 3) 2.7, 2.8 | 4) 2.11 | 6) 2.26 |

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