

Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 36

Article 3

1-1-1965

Homiletics

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Recommended Citation

Roehrs, Walter R. (1965) "Homiletics," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 36, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol36/iss1/3>

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HOMILETICS

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

JUDGES 21:25

Today's Gospel reassures the people of God that even if it appears that the Kingdom faces defeat as the Messiah suffers (and Peter is tempted to say: "This shall not be to you"), yet the glory that He manifested means not defeat but victory.

The theological emphasis on the God-man, on the two natures of the Christ, is constantly before us in the witness of the Synoptics and John. A virgin whom a doubting Joseph planned to hide—but the Child she bears is the Son of God. Bethlehem had no room for Him whom the heavens cannot contain. A "Nazarene" (Could anything good come out of Nazareth?) rejected by men and raised by the Father.

He whose sweat was like drops of blood is He whose blood gives life. It always seems that the "human" must fail but the Divine is victorious. It is this theme which is strong in the Book of Judges. One illustration follows another as the book unfolds Israel's history and reveals that only by God's mercy are His all-too-human people delivered.

Introduction. Two passages in Judges (17:6 and 21:25) say the same thing: "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

Kings in other lands, areas of Canaan, but none for Israel. "In those days"—period from entrance into Promised Land after Joshua's death to the calling of the first king, Saul, approximately 1,500 to 1,000 B. C.

In Canada similar to period between colonization and confederation. In United States similar to period between individual colonies rebelling against England and the constitutional convention.

During this time it is evident that by His mercy and power they were—and so also are we—victorious.

God's People Delivered

I. *Humans fail.*

This is point at which we begin, for this we know; a familiar point.

A. The people of God did not clear the land. They became one with people and did not remain separated. God instructed them to clear the land of idols. They failed (Judg. 1:21, 27-33). They were no more a separated people.

When we blend in with our background, we carry on Israel's failure to be a separate people (1 Cor. 10:20, 21). God keeps asking us: "Why?" Why are we not separated? (Judg. 2:2). There is an area where we dare not live, in the land of compromise with the world, ignoring God's demand for sole worship rights.

B. The people of God accepted the "lords of the land." Because they did not remain separate from the gods of the land, it was not long before they served these gods. Who gives barley, corn, wine, oil? The answer of the people in the land was "Baal," and it became Israel's answer. A member of the tribe of Levi (Judges 17—21) sells himself as priest to a man named Micah; the tribe of Benjamin sports and mocks stranger and Levite. Not only is "Baal" accepted, but God and His ways are mocked.

Failure to stress honor and decency grows in our environment until they are nothing but targets for ridicule and laughter. (Cf. Rom. 1.)

"Each man was his own king." Benjamin had thrown morals aside; by stealing and plundering they were to be given wives and children. God punishes (Judg. 2:11) through

other nations. God runs history. Evil men can be used by God to accomplish His purpose for nations and people. Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate," and God used that wicked man and the "elders who rejected Him" for our salvation. Transfiguration is needed to remind us that Calvary becomes an Easter.

II. *Mercy is divine.*

Humans may fail, but God is merciful!

A. God delivers. In the midst of "no king" God raised up judges. Six invasions: northeast, Mesopotamia (Othniel); southeast, Moab (Ehud); north, Canaan (Deborah and Jael with Sisera); east, Midian (Gideon, the day of Midian, memorable day); east, Ammonites (Jephthah and his vow to sacrifice daughter); southwest, Philistia (Samson, who could master a lion but not himself). God raised judges to deliver.

Days of distress before us — human rights, civil rights. No nation on earth in which there is not some internal difficulty. Evil and iniquity abound. There is no time in which God does not show He is God and speak to us, if we but hearken to His voice. Above the clouds is the voice of Him who says, "This is My Son," even in the face of Jerusalem's cross.

B. Deliverance is divine and not human, as Abimelech (Gideon's son) discovered. Jotham's parable of the bramblebush trying to rule the forest—it doesn't work. Only God can rule.

C. God's mercy is by cross. God's Suffering Servant is Jesus Christ. Thus the world is redeemed. "Thorns in the flesh" (Judg. 2:3) — 40 years of slavery to the Philistines. Thus the people of God repent and return.

Jeremiah writes as if the only salvation for Israel is in destruction. Ezekiel sees no end to the evil goings-on of God's people. Hosea says the evil is too long to be endured. Failure, only failure, is seen. But God shows mercy.

Sins like scarlet, like crimson, become as white as snow, become like wool. (Is. 1:18). Sin that is the very "sting of death" (1 Cor. 15:56) is taken away that we may live. Sin that no man is without (1 Kings 8:46; Eccl. 7:20), that only Christ is without (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; John 3:5), that is abominable to God (Prov. 6:16-19), that no man can atone for (Micah 6:7), is atoned for by God Himself.

Each man in his own eyes a king, rebelling against the King of kings. But Christ was manifested to take away sin (John 1:29; 1 John 3:5; 1:7). He is the divine Mercy that covers our human failure.

SEPTUAGESIMA

SAMUEL

1 SAM. 3:10-20

Proper for the Day. The "Gesima" season begins with the assurance that God hears our prayer, even as we read that He heard the prayer of Hannah and Elkanah (the Introit emphasis). In the Collect for today mercy is sought by God's people, the same mercy so often sought of God by Samuel on behalf of others. The Old Testament lesson (Jer. 9:23, 24) stresses knowing the Lord (a knowledge Samuel had). The Epistle speaks of choices and castaways, a sad note in the life of the prophet Samuel. The Gospel is the familiar Laborers in the Vineyard parable, which is climaxed with the distribution of the wages. All are blessed, none preferred, and this is the "good news" of the Kingdom. The chosen workers receive God's bounty not on the basis of economics or seniority but by His covenant of love and grace. Samuel was indeed one who led in the choice of workers, a choice by God's grace, whether it involved Eli or Saul or David.

Introduction. Questionnaires and opinionnaires are used to help choose employees and supervisors, even parochial school teachers

and pastors, deaconesses and directors of Christian education. The late Edward Reclin, widely known organist, said the first requirement for a church organist is: "Does he believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ?" What recommendation do we have for the position we hold in life? Have we been made Christians for nothing?

Samuel was involved in choosing workers. He brought to an end a decadent priesthood, founded a school of prophets, and was God's agent in anointing two of Israel's three kings, Saul and David.

Choosing Workers

I. *The call*

A. God calls. Jesus Christ, our Lord, called disciples in His day. Through His apostles and His church's program, the world, all nations, are summoned to hear God's Word and to believe in His Son, Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:20; Acts 13:2, 4; note Heb. 5:4). Faithfulness is required.

Samuel had a specific, special call (1 Sam. 3:4). God called him to announce the end of the priesthood, not because God had abandoned His people but because people and priest had abandoned God. God overrules evil men and replaces them when necessary, especially when they prove unfaithful.

B. God is heard. Samuel, directed by Eli, knew enough to listen to God. The Lord was no stranger (1 Sam. 3:10), for Samuel was "asked of God" (1 Sam. 1:20) and "lent to the Lord" (1 Sam. 1:28). Samuel at first mistook God's voice, as Eli at first misunderstood Hannah's voice. (1 Sam. 1:13)

Israelites did not always follow God's call (today's Epistle). In the Revelation of Saint John, seven times (Rev. 2, 3) the church is asked by the Spirit to hear what God says. That we hear, hearken, and obey God is His desire (Ex. 19:5; Jer. 7:23; 2 Cor. 10:5), and that we do it is better than sacrifice. (1 Sam. 15:22)

C. God comes. When God comes to ask us to do His will, He comes where we are stationed in life. Samuel had a peculiar task. Whatever our station or calling, parent or child, teacher or student; whatever our talents or gifts; it is where we are that our light is to shine, it is where we are that we find our duty. The duty pressed upon me in my specific case is mine and no one else's.

II. *The choice*

A. God's prerogative. It is God's right to make the choice of workers. It is His kingdom. It is His vineyard. It is His church. It is His bride. He is the Head. He has paid the price. He has purchased it with His own blood. We did not choose Him, but He chose us. The covenant was His testament, not our agreement.

B. God's preference. Qualifications for His public servants are listed in Paul's letters (1 and 2 Cor., 1 and 2 Tim., and Titus). God's attitude toward men does take into account man's attitude toward God (1 Sam. 2:30). (Cf. Matt. 12:30, "for or against Him.") But the mystery of God's love is the real basis of preference.

Samuel pleaded with the people to put away "foreign gods" (1 Sam. 7:3). He interceded with God for the people even if at times they made the wrong choice.

We must say "Ebenezer," that is, "hitherto the Lord hath helped us." God chose us (John 15:16) out of grace. We deserved to be cast out of His kingdom. Only by His mercy are we permitted to share in building His kingdom as His co-workers.

III. *The care*

A. Weight. The weight of the burden Samuel received from the Lord was heavy. The responsibility of informing Eli that a new worker was to be chosen was such that he "hid" it for a while.

God brings salvation, but God also chastens. Nationally and privately God deals

in this way. With us as total people and as individuals, God works in this way. Those whom He loves He chastens. He chastens us that we be more chaste. He purges us that we be more pure.

God's care for us brings a cross to us, but first brought a cross to God's own Son. There was expressed the fullness of God's care as salvation was the fulfillment of it all, fully and completely accomplished in Christ.

B. Watch. Samuel had a great concern for Eli, for Saul, for David, for God's people. He watched over them, interceding for them (1 Sam. 12:17, 18). But Jeremiah declares the intercession of Samuel, yes, even that of Moses insufficient: "Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My heart would not turn toward this people" (Jer. 15:1). Saul at the end cried, "Bring me up Samuel," hoping that Samuel would intercede.

Eli lost the priesthood, the ark was captured, but Samuel interceded for the people (1 Sam. 7:5). At the time of the Lamb's sacrifice, victory comes.

Christ ever liveth (not as Samuel), and He makes intercession for us. In His name we humbly but boldly approach the Father's throne. He never leaves nor forsakes us. He watches.

It is the sacrifice of the Lamb of God that assures victory. Through our Lord we are called, chosen of God and precious. By His grace we can bear the weight of care and find the strength to watch.

SEXAGESIMA SUNDAY

SAUL

1 SAM. 26:21

Proprs.—The *Epistle* for today (1 Cor. 11:19—12:9) urges us to rely on God's Word for strength in the midst of weakness. "Others will rule you," Kingmaker Samuel reminded Israel as they request a king. "Rely on God's Word," Prophet Samuel said to Saul as Saul rejects God's Word.

The *Gospel* has a similar emphasis, that we receive God's Word, which produces fruit. Saul heard but failed to receive the Word.

Introduction.

"I have played the fool," reminisces the ruler. Memories of the past may recall times that we played the fool: young, impetuous; old, know-it-all; perhaps showing little respect for purity, decency, authority; scorning advice; trusting man, not God.

The background scenery is the wilderness of Ziph. Preparing to battle the Philistines, sleeping Abner and Saul are unaware of David and his friend removing Saul's cruse of water and his spear. Awakened, Saul admits: "I have done wrong . . . I have played the fool."

Whenever God comes to us with His Word and we are blind to its offer of life, we play the fool. In the selection and rejection of Saul find an admonition on receiving the Word in "an honest and good heart."

Saul—Receiving God's Word

I. *Saul's Selection*

A. *The choice is the Lord's.*

The word of the Lord came to Samuel. The word of the Lord pointed out Saul. It was a choice made by a gracious God of a man who acknowledged his unworthiness. (1 Sam. 9:15-21)

Samuel judged wisely and well from his home in Ramah. No leader available to take the old man's place. Samuel's sons were rejected by Israel (1 Sam. 8:5). Israel's request for a king is acceded to by God, but God points out Israel rejected not Samuel but God (1 Sam. 8:7). Samuel anoints Saul (1 Sam. 10:1), who protested his was "least of the tribes" (1 Sam. 9:20, 21) and his family, "the humblest of all the tribe."

B. *The strength is the Spirit's.*

When the Word reaches us, we must join Saul in saying, "Why then have you spoken to me in this way?" (1 Sam. 9:21)

When the people of Jabesh-Gilead were attacked by Nahash, the right-eye gouger (1 Sam. 11), Saul hacked in pieces the field oxen and called for men to fight. "The Spirit of God came mightily upon Saul," and "the dread of the Lord fell upon the people" (1 Sam. 11:6,7). His determination united a people who regarded him as every inch a king.

When the Spirit moves us we must say with Saul, "The Lord has wrought deliverance." (1 Sam. 11:13)

C. *Salvation is from God.*

Samuel made it clear again to Israel as he reminded them of God's saving action in the Exodus and in the time of the Judges (1 Sam. 12:6 ff.). And he warned them not to "play the fool" (1 Sam. 12:14,15). The choice and the Spirit that is ours should make us mindful that in God alone is our salvation.

There is Another who was God's Anointed, whose beginning and ending were in humility, who was obedient unto death, to all the words of God. When He is not accepted by the people, they "play the fool." When He is rejected by His own, they reject God. But those who follow Him, who receive Him as God's "last Word" (Heb. 1:1 ff.), find salvation.

II. *Saul's Rejection*

Enthusiasm, decisive determination, united loyalty should have contributed to Saul's success, and yet failure came. Why? Saul's rejection reaches us as a warning.

A. *We are not independent.*

Saul acted independently as if he ruled apart from God. He would not "wait for the Lord" (Ps. 27:14). His confidence was in self. At Gilgal (1 Sam. 13) he would not wait beyond seven days and usurped the privilege of priest, excusing himself with the words, "I forced myself." (1 Sam. 13:12)

"Without Me you can do nothing," says our Anointed One. He has all power and all

authority. Aware that we are one with the Christ, we depend on Him.

B. *We cannot make our own interpretation.*

Saul failed not only because of his independence, but also because of his arrogant interpretation of the Word of the Lord. "I have performed the commandment of the Lord," (1 Sam. 15:13) is his answer to Samuel. God gave instructions that animals, Amalekites, and Agag the king be destroyed. Bleating sheep and lowing oxen told Samuel of Saul's interpretation of God's instructions. Samuel: "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." (1 Sam. 15:23)

Acknowledgment of the authority of God's Word and words is not only a recognition that God reveals but also that God is ultimately the interpreter (2 Peter 1:21 NEB). To *receive* the Word and not to twist its meaning is to respect the authority of the Word.

C. *We cannot plead ignorance.*

Saul was aware of his humble beginnings, aware of his anointing, but he acted as if he did not know. From 1 Sam. 8 to 31 we read many references by Saul to God, not "my God" but "your God."

Even if Saul is chosen of God, he does not recognize "holiness to the Lord," for he would kill priest (1 Sam. 22:17) as well as son or friend. "Saul among the prophets" was a joke. (1 Sam. 10:12; 19:24)

"Knowing God" and knowing His Son Jesus Christ is eternal life (John 17). If a person knows, fears, loves, trusts God, he loves God's name and all that His name is attached to—people, day, book, places, beings.

Jesus of Nazareth, God's Anointed, our Savior, knew God. By Him we know and we are known. Him we must acknowledge, Him we must follow.

QUINQUAGESIMA SUNDAY

DAVID

2 SAM. 5:1-10

Proprs.—The *Introit* keynotes the plea that refuge and strength is found in God alone. The *Introit psalm* (31) includes the Savior's dying word at Jerusalem, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit."

In what appears to be the tragedy of our Lord's crucifixion in Jerusalem there shines perfect love, so strongly emphasized in the *Epistle* (1 Cor. 13). It is this love (Love) which hears the cry of lame and blind, "Kyrie, eleison!" It is this Love which says to the disciples (*Gospel*), "On to Jerusalem!"

The parallels that can be drawn between this text and the events that concern us as we begin another Lenten season are not based on a typical or prophetic interpretation—but they *are* instructive. They remind us that God, who made of Israel a strong people under David, the conqueror of Jerusalem, has made us His people through David's greater Son, who "set His face steadfastly to go up to Jerusalem."

Background.—David was anointed king in Hebron (2 Sam. 2:4), where he ruled for seven years. Saul's son ruled in Gilead (2 Sam. 2:11). David's only desire was to serve God and His people. He did not rejoice in Saul's death or the death of his son, Ish-bosheth (2 Sam. 2:8-11). Through Abner the Kingdom of Israel (ruled by Ish-bosheth) was transferred to David. His choice of Jerusalem as capital united the nation politically, and his bringing God's ark of covenant to Jerusalem united the nation religiously.

Introduction

Jesus went up to Jerusalem, not to conquer the city as did David and not to restore David's kingdom. This entry into Jerusalem was a deliberate acceptance of suffering and death. But God, who was making Salvation history with David's conquest of Jerusalem, wrote the final climactic chapter of the

world's salvation in the events of our Lord's death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

On to Jerusalem

I. *Jerusalem Was a City for a King.*

A. The stronghold of the Jebusites was not conquered at Joshua's time (Judg. 1:21; 19:11). The city was "unconquerable" with Zion's hill on the west, Hinnom Valley on west and south, Kidron Valley in the east (text: even blind and lame could defend it). By way of the "gutter" (vertical watershaft which was used to bring water from a Gihon spring-fed cave) Joab conquered, and Jerusalem became the city of the king. David's tribe of Judah and Saul's tribe of Benjamin were not favored in the choice of Jerusalem as capital. It was a city for a king of the whole country. (2 Sam. 5:12 adds more)

B. On to Jerusalem, Jesus comes as David's greater Son, a greater King. He meets the blind and the lame, in city and before city. The blind see and the lame walk, and by miracles the Gospel is preached. Some men cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy!" Others see Him as only a potential king. "Will He restore the kingdom?" Pilate: "Are You a king?" "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews!"

He came not to establish earthly kingdom but to reestablish God's rule in our lives. He would be Lord of our life and our Savior from death. We cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy!"

II. *Jerusalem Was a City for a Priest.*

A. Shortly after the establishment of the city David declared his plans for the temple's building and the ark's return. Thus the people would reaffirm their priestly activity, and sacrifices for sin would be offered.

B. Christ, the great High Priest, goes up to Jerusalem to His temple. He brings in His body a new covenant of mercy and grace. His would be the sacrifice that would complete all that the old covenant sacrifices symbol-

ized of the high priests, the last and the greatest of victims—not for the citizens of that city alone but for us also.

III. *Jerusalem Was a City of God.*

A. The city was loved in God's eyes (Ezek. 16:8), for it was the Lord's very own. God dwelt there in temple and in worship. When the temple was dedicated by Solomon, God's presence filled it. In captivity (Ps. 137) God's people could not forget Jerusalem. The temple was God's glory and the city His strength.

B. God's act of redemption, of sacrifice, of salvation would take place in Jerusalem. David lived there and "became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him." (1 Sam. 5:10)

Would we be any other than the people of God? Would we dwell anyplace but where God is to be found? Will our future be any less than David's "greater and greater"? The Lord, the God of hosts, is with us!

INVOCAVIT, THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

DAVID

2 SAM. 8:6

Prophets in Today's Gospel (Matt. 4:1-11).

—The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Standing where Adam stood and where all Adams stand, Jesus was victorious for the whole world. David's temptation was such as is common to man. His victory could be gained only through the grace of God, who was in Christ reconciling the world.

The *Gradual* echoes Ps. 91, quoted in the temptation narrative. The *Introit* summons us to invoke God for help. The *Epistle* (2 Cor. 6:1-10) urges us not to receive the grace of God in vain.

Background. — Kings Saul and David both have early success followed by grievous sin. Saul reacts in resentment, David in re-

pentance. This is basically why David succeeded and Saul failed.

City after city is conquered by David. Jerusalem is made "the place of peace." During the Rabbah siege David stays at home. It is at home that David is unable to conquer self. Bathsheba is partner in sin with the great saint.

Introduction

"The Lord gave victory to David wherever he went" (2 Sam. 8:14). In David's life, in our life, victory comes only through the mercy and goodness of God.

I. *In Victory*

A. David often confessed that God was full of mercy and goodness. Not among the great tribes or families, yet he is chosen king ahead of Saul's sons. God's goodness and graciousness is extended to all of us if we could but see.

B. David's talents of singing helped Saul overcome the evil spirit. His psalms still soothe our troubled hearts, directing us to God to overcome tension and fright.

C. Against great odds, as against the giant Goliath, David tasted victory "in the name of the Lord." Greatest odds are God's opportunity to reveal His blessings.

D. Saul was jealous, hunting David as a partridge (1 Sam. 26:20). David was victorious over his own personal desire for revenge. God stands by us in Christ Jesus, who overcame all temptations, and helps us in our trials.

E. Many cities and tribes were overcome for David. "A man of war," he knew victory. Constant skirmishes with our enemies of sin, death, and the devil reveal to us that victory can be ours in Jesus Christ.

F. David was loved and admired by Michal, Israel's elders, Prince Jonathan, even by heathen Hiram, Tyre's king, for all knew that Saul slew thousands, but David ten thousands. To taste victory and to have it

made obvious to heathen and to enemies is joyous. Even the unbeliever and enemy will see that God cares for His own.

II. In *Temptation*

A. Israel's army battled at city of Rabbah. David stayed at home. Temptation springs up out of the common ordinary circumstances of life—"in the spring," "late one afternoon," "David was walking" (2 Sam. 11). "Out of the heart"—the common, all-too-ordinary heart, come the deadly temptations. When his adulterous act reaped fruit, he requested Uriah of the Hittites to return, "for he is profitable to me." Refusing to be "at home," Uriah was ordered to the front line and there killed. "Sympathetically" David married the widow. Lust conceives and brings forth sin, and sin brings forth death. The mighty weaken, the saints sin, leaders follow, kings serve, success fails.

B. "But"—and this makes the difference—"but the thing which David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Sam. 11:27). God undertakes to cover up our weaknesses and sins—to uncover weaknesses and sins is also God's task. Him we cannot deceive even though others may be deceived.

Life's most critical hours come when we fail in our duties where we are—a king, a father, a child. Every man has his own ladder down to hell. What's yours? In your station in life you find your calling and the danger of failing.

C. Still "the Lord gave victory to David" even when he went wrong. Nathan must say, "It is wrong," as did John the Baptist to Herod. God calls men to repentance and announces good news. Nathan's parable of a lamb has just begun with "Thou art the man!"—its climax is "God hath put away thy sin!"

Another Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. This is Lent—the season to recall, repent, remember redemption.

D. Punishment follows, adultery upon

adultery, one child dies, another child rebels. Woman of Tekoah pleads that King David allow second son, Absalom, to return. David's unforgiving attitude causes rebellion. When Absalom dies, David's cry, "O my son, my son," brings Joab's taunt that enemies are destroyed and David should speak of love and mercy. The victory that is given us in Christ does not mean a life in which there is no longer temptation, trial, and testing. But the Lord gives victory wherever we go. Our sins are forgiven by God's sacrifice in Christ. He bore our guilt and shame. God in Christ does not make us "pay what thou owest," for He has paid.

In Christ find victory and forgiveness, victory because God delivers in Christ and forgiveness because God forgives in Christ.

Elmhurst, Ill. GEORGE W. BORNEMANN

JUDGES 21:25

Exegetical Study

By WALTER R. ROEHRS

EDITORIAL NOTE: Only one verse has been selected from the Book of Judges for use in the homiletic program "This Year with the Bible." Judg. 21:25 is the text chosen for the Transfiguration of Our Lord. Obviously the verse selected is meant to suggest the theme and the spirit of the entire book. To supply background material, Walter R. Roehrs has provided a survey of the entire book's content, highlighting its principal theme.

The Book of Judges

The tone and outlook of the Book of Joshua is bright and optimistic. Israel was well on the way to claiming full possession of its inheritance. Faithful to God and obedient to His covenant representative, the twelve tribes had broken the power of the vastly superior forces of the Canaanites. What had been achieved by united action and the power of a common faith could be expected to be completed when now each tribe, in the unity of that faith and trusting in the promises of the covenant, made its way into its allotted territory. For each tribe

it remained an act of obedience of faith. The obstacles facing each group were as formidable and insurmountable as the opposition in the days of Joshua. Walls as high as those of Jericho would have to give way; chariots of iron like those of Jabin (Josh. 11:1-9) had to be overcome by an army lacking even "shield and spear" (Judg. 5:8). Encouraged and fortified by the experience of the miracles of faith in the past, Israel, however, could be expected to march on to complete victory.

But in the Book of Judges we see these bright prospects vanish and dark disappointment settle over Israel. No tribe succeeded in settling in its assigned and full territory. Instead of permanent occupation of the inheritance, there was loss of territory. One tribe is entirely dispossessed (Ch. 18:1-3). What had brought on this tragic reversal?

There are ominous forebodings of such a future already in the Book of Joshua. In connection with the fixing of the assigned area of several tribes, we read the disappointing sentence, "They did not dispossess the Canaanites." The Book of Judges is an elaboration of these brief statements of fact in terms of cause and effect. When Israel "cannot" do what God can do and has promised to do for and through them, then the reason for the debacle must be sought in Israel's lack of faith in the covenant promises. Here we are given a picture of the progressive corrosion of covenant obedience. When Israel does not act aggressively in the assurance of faith, it does not merely stand still; the sin of omission inevitably leads to sins of commission. Israel slides downhill into committing every vice against God and man. "Where there is no prophecy [KJV: vision], the people cast off restraint" (Prov. 29:18). So it was: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Anarchy prevailed. Religious, social, political, moral principles disappeared. Civil war broke out. Dark ages indeed!

These evil days came upon Israel soon after Joshua's death. He is mentioned four times in the introductory chapters (Ch. 1:1; 2:6, 21, 23). Two of the few successful tribal leaders mentioned were Caleb, Joshua's fellow spy under Moses, and Othniel, Caleb's younger brother. (1:11-20)

God did not provide a successor to Joshua in the person of a leader; "there was no king in Israel." The cohesion of the tribes consisted in their spiritual allegiance to the Lord, the one God. Families made up clans; clans made up tribes; the tribes made up a united congregation of worshipers. Family heads, chiefs of clans, tribal leaders—in this chain of command the Mosaic provisions for national life were to be implemented. The covenant was Israel's constitution, unifying its religious and national life. So long as there was faith in God, the governmental functions would be executed. Lack of faith dissolved the bond of unity and resulted in confusion and defeat.

God gave Israel a long time—the period of the Judges—to be a covenant nation without a personal representative of its unity. Four times in the last chapters we read the phrase "There was no king in Israel in those days" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Time after time God called Israel back to orderly covenant living. He chose men from various tribes to correct the disorders that had arisen and to give them an opportunity to make a fresh start. But neither severity nor kindness succeeded. After such attempts "the Children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord." The Book of Judges is the episodic recital of Israel's failures to respond to God's promptings to live up to the challenge and responsibility of a theocratically governed people.

We marvel at God's patience. We tire of even reading the recurring pattern of gross infidelity, repentance under chastisement, relief from disaster after repentance, and then the inevitable relapse into the same evil.

Can the plot of history be so monotonous, unimaginative, and unvarying? But no formula or recapitulation of history is true unless it is based on the perversity of the human heart and the realism of the unending justice and mercy of God.

"A covenant with the inhabitants of this land" (2:2). In this innocent phrase lurked Israel's downfall. Failing to act on God's promise of help in acquiring full possession of the land, they lapsed into direct disobedience of His commandments. The covenant with the Canaanites was a direct violation of their covenant with God—"you shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land." This stipulation was not a bit of caprice or narrow-minded racism on the part of God. Israel was to be His arm and instrument of justice upon peoples whose measure of wickedness was full and overflowing. Fraternization and intermarriage with idolaters led to idolatry. The chain reaction of "unfaith" continued: "They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, they went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples round about them . . . the Baals and the Ashtaroth (2:12,13), . . . the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, the gods of the Philistines" (10:6). Baalism proved attractive to Israel, particularly at this point of her history. When the nomadic way of life was giving way to a sedentary agricultural economy, this religion of fertility rites seemed to offer the techniques to assure an abundance of crops, increase in flocks, and even human offspring in desired numbers. Doubt arose whether the Deliverer from Egypt had jurisdiction also in Caanan, or whether the land belonged to a local Baal, whose special prerogative it was, the resident farmers asserted, to grant the necessary grain and cattle.¹

¹ The technical term for this restriction of a god to one country is henotheism. For an example of this view compare the words of

No doubt the first phase of this idolatry was a rationalizing of the First Commandment. The people would continue to worship the Lord, but would do so under the forms of Baalism. But such syncretism was a denial, in theory and in practice, of the oneness of God. A plurality of places of worship and a secondary form of worship eliminated the One, the First and Only One.

Israel's idolatry was of a practical and materialistic kind. It was literally a "grass roots" movement to assure them of a livelihood. Once it had taken root, however, it was difficult to eradicate. Centuries later the prophets condemned Israel for the same kind of idolatry. In addition, the sensual and sensuous ingredients of this Baal worship made it very seductive and enticing in comparison with the austere and imageless rites of Israel.

As God is one, so faithfulness to this covenant affects the whole man. When God is rejected, His former worshipers usually sink to the level of the idolaters. The way down to a plane lower than that of brute animals is precipitous. From the refusal of one tribe to come to the help of the other to the dismemberment of the abused body of an Israelite woman seems a long way. But the Book of Judges teaches that it can be a very short step. If only Israel had remembered the words of Moses "Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, is One God"!

"The Lord, the Judge" (11:27), and the
Judges of Israel

In spite of Israel's infidelity, God kept His promise "I will never break My covenant

Jephthah to the Moabites (11:24 ff.). It is possible that Jephthah is here accommodating himself to such a henotheistic point of view with a dash of sarcasm (cf. Elijah's taunt regarding the sleeping Baal). He goes on to say that the Lord controlled the destiny of Moab as well as that of Israel. On the other hand Jephthah was also guilty of serious aberrations in the worship of God and may have lapsed into this popular view of God.

with you" (2:1). He inflicted chastisements upon Israel in the attempt to reestablish covenant relations with His people. When Israel was brought to her senses by these afflictions, God "raised up judges who saved them out of the power of those who plundered them" (2:16). It seems strange to call the men judges through whom deliverance from foreign oppression came. This name, however, describes their activity as judicial in its broadest aspect. One of these judges (Jephthah) pointed out that he was merely the instrument to carry out the decision of the Lord to redress the grievance of Israel: "The Lord, the Judge, be judge this day between the children of Israel and the children of Ammon" (11:27, KJV). Every external interference with Israel, when it attempted to live as the covenant people, was an infringement of its God-given rights. By their military campaigns the judges of Israel put into effect what the Supreme Judge had established as the rightful prerogatives of His covenant representatives.

The covenant also granted each Israelite rights as an individual within the nation. In some instances the task of the judges is specifically mentioned as including the application of justice to violators of the social and moral code of the covenant. Of Deborah we are told, "She used to sit under the palm of Deborah, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment" (4:4,5). So they judged Israel by executing judgment on the evildoer and by freeing the innocent from injustice at home and abroad. Therefore they could also be called "deliverers" (3:9). Their office was not to be hereditary. One of them (Gideon) declined steadfastly the request "Rule over us, you and your sons and your grandsons also" (8:22). When the emergency had passed and order in foreign and domestic relations had been restored, the administration of justice in this wider sense could revert to the application of regular covenant procedures.

The selection and calling for their task is expressly mentioned as the result of the prompting of the Spirit of God. As in the case of Moses, there is at times a hesitant response, and the request is made for a miraculous demonstration of the validity of their call. (Ch. 6)

Major and Minor Judges

The judges are classified for convenience as minor and major,² according to the amount of space devoted to the account of their activity in the book. Minor judges may have performed as many and as great deeds in the deliverance of Israel, although the book furnishes only their names and, in some instances, their exploits in a sentence or two. These notices of the minor judges are inserted into the account of the major judges according to the following outline:

Major Judges

1. Othniel (3:6-11)
2. Ehud (3:12-30)
3. Barak-Deborah (4:1—5:31)
4. Gideon (6:1 to 9:57)
5. Jephthah (6:6 to 12:7)
6. Samson (13:1 to 16:31)

Minor Judges

1. Shamgar (3:31)
2. Tola (10:1,2)
3. Jair (10:3-5)
4. Ibzan (12:8-10)
5. Elon (12:11,12)
6. Abdon (12:13-15)

² The number of minor judges is sometimes given as five, since Shamgar is not explicitly referred to as a judge. Other scholars retain Shamgar under this classification and add Abimelech, the son of Jephthah, chosen by the Israelites as king without divine sanction. In this case the total number is 13. Some also increase the number of major judges by giving this title to both Barak and Deborah.

The Judges Judged

As in the case of other Old Testament heroes, the account of these judges, or saviors, of Israel does not hesitate to let us see their clay feet. Some of them are reported as lapsing into moral and religious aberrations as reprehensible as those they had been raised up to correct. Samson inflicted losses on the Philistines, but fell victim to his own passions (chs. 13—18). Gideon pulled down the altar of Baal in his father's house and cut down the ashera beside it (6:25-27), but later perverted the worship of the Lord. Of the booty taken from the enemy he "made an ephod . . . and all Israel played the harlot after it there, and it became a snare unto Gideon." (8:23-27; cf. 17:5; 18:14-20)³

Jephthah vowed "to offer . . . up for a burnt offering . . . whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet" him on his victorious return from doing battle with the Ammonites. When his only child, a daughter, met him, he "did with her according to his vow" (11:29-40). Because of the reference to bewailing her virginity (11:37 ff.) some interpreters believe that Jephthah commuted the death sentence to lifelong celibacy.

³ The term "ephod" is a transliteration of a Hebrew word and seems to be applied to various objects in the O. T. In Exodus 28:6-14 and Chapter 39:2-7 it designates an upper garment of the high priest. A linen ephod is also worn by the priests (1 Sam. 22:18, cf. 1 Sam. 2:18; 2 Sam. 6:14; etc.). Gideon's and Micah's ephods (17:5 and 13:14-20) were made of metal and therefore appear to be molten images expressly forbidden by God. In Hebrew the word "ephod" and the word for "ark" are very similar, and scribes may have confused them in copying the texts. Recently the word "ephod" has been found in Ugaritic texts. Gideon's act therefore was at best a worship of Yahweh by means of idolatrous rites. The expression "played the harlot after other gods" is used to characterize the apostasy of Israel during the whole period of Judges. Now a judge himself became the instigator of this spiritual (and perhaps physical) adultery. (2:17)

In view of Gideon's ungodly action, it cannot be ruled out a priori that this judge may have lapsed into the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice. Such a candid and unvarnished portrayal of the judges witnesses to the historical veracity of these narratives.

One Purpose and Many Reasons

God had one purpose in creating Israel and giving them Canaan as an inheritance. In His covenant with the patriarchs and with Israel at Mount Sinai, He had made it clear that Israel was to be a means to an end: to bring the blessing of salvation to all nations. God had His own inscrutable reason for the election of Israel as the chosen nation, but He tells us some of the reasons why He directed the course of Israel's history at the time of the conquest of Canaan as He did to achieve His purpose.

He would first of all give Israel physical possession of the land in a way most advantageous to the conquerors: "The Lord, your God, will clear away these nations [the Canaanites] little by little . . . lest the wild beasts grow too numerous" (Deut. 7:22, cf. Ex. 23:29, 30). This pattern of gradual conquest also committed Israel to learning to be true spiritual heirs of the land. In the extended operations during a protracted period they could conquer only by faith and in obedience to the covenant. Only as "a kingdom of priests" were they to displace the kings of Canaan.

Israel had ample opportunity to learn this lesson during the campaigns under Joshua, but they failed. Counter to God's purpose, they did not carry on after Joshua's death to dispossess the Canaanites. Thus they created for themselves a situation that led to their undoing; "Their gods shall be a snare unto you." (2:3)

God did not deviate from His announced program for Israel. As long as the Canaanites remained, they served "for the testing of Israel, whether Israel would obey the

commandments of the Lord which He commanded their fathers by Moses" (3:4). This situation obtained for a long time, as we can see from the Book of Judges. Even a new generation which "had no experience of any war in Canaan" was not permitted to possess the land without learning to wage war as God's people, that is, to conquer by faith in Him and for His ends. (3:1-3)

Joshua — Judges — Jesus

"Time [and space] would fail me to tell [more] of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah . . . who became mighty in war [and] put foreign armies to flight" (Heb. 11:32 ff.). We must conclude by pointing to the place and significance of the judges as a group in the forward thrust of God's Old Testament deliverance to bring about "that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us." (Luke 1:71)

Joshua, whose name means "Yahweh saves," is not called a judge, but the judges are called saviors. They did their part to keep open the channels of the covenant for the flow of divine grace through Israel. But all they did merely paved the way for the coming of *the* Joshua, *the* Savior, Jesus of Nazareth. More wonderful in birth than Samson, perfect in obedience beyond the imperfections of all these men of Israel, He did not merely lead the fray against the enemies of all mankind but directed the full brunt of their attack upon Himself to His own death. But it was no futile act of desperation like that of Samson. Our Lord rose from the grave in triumph over the vanquished foes. The result: not salvation merely for a generation or two but endless salvation.

Judges 21:25

Victorious Living

I. *Impossible if Man Is His Own King*

- A. What man does as "good in his own eyes" brings defeat and the negation of life's values and purpose (the

Book of Judges and the history of man in general).

- B. When later there was a "king in Israel," there was at times some order. But kings also did what was good in their "own eyes" and brought disasters upon Israel and finally complete defeat and exile.

II. *Possible Only Under the King of Kings*

A. He *can* give victory:

1. In spite of apparently insurmountable obstacles.
 - a. No "walled cities" remain unconquered.
 - b. No "chariots of iron" can inflict defeat.
2. In spite of the strong forces of innate evil that war against the soul.
3. In spite of the onslaughts of principalities and powers, spiritual wickedness in high places.

B. He *does* give victory:

1. If we acknowledge our failure and inability to do what is right in His eyes.
2. If we penitently seek His forgiveness for everything that is wrong with us in His eyes.
3. If we draw on His power and grace to do what is right in His eyes and to live as His redeemed people.

C. He *has given* us the victory:

1. He was on the march in the days of the judges; through Israel He was carrying out His eternal plan to bring us victory over all our enemies.
2. He was not deterred by the unfaithfulness of Israel.
3. In the fullness of time He gave us the victory through "The King of the Jews," our Lord Jesus Christ; this is the victory that overcomes the world.