

# Lectures on the Book of Judges

## *First Lecture — Judges 1–2*

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The book of Joshua has shown the power of Jehovah in the conquests of His people, and this too distinguished from the measure of their practical taking possession of what was conquered. For as these are not the same things, so the line drawn divides the book into its two portions: first, the actual blow that was struck at the enemy; and, secondly, the measure in which they took advantage of their successes in order to enter on the positive enjoyment of their own possessions. The book of Judges stand in painful contrast — the inevitable lesson of the first man. In it we are given to see the failure of the people of God to retain even what they had actually conquered; still more to press on in the acquisition of that which Jehovah designed for them. In both we have what clearly answers on the one hand to the blessing in which God has set Christians, and on the other to the ways in which the enemy has contrived to rob them of their just portion in the enjoyment of the Lord. This no doubt is a humbling lesson; but it is unspeakably gracious that God has given it to us in His word. It would have been overwhelming, if the New Testament had consisted of nothing but the inspired testimony of divine grace to that into which the Holy Ghost introduced the Christian in Christ. Yet not less humbling undoubtedly it is as God has given it to us. But otherwise there had also been utter depression; for it would be to leave us without divine solace: it would expose us to every kind of uncertainty, and to the utmost danger from the enemy, if God had not given us in the New Testament itself our book of Judges just as much as our book of Joshua. In short the Spirit of God has set out very clearly in the New Testament the departure from their own proper privileges of those that had been brought into blessing. It has even shown us, with the greatest fullness and care, the ways in which Satan gained the advantage over those that bore the name of Christ. Who can fail to notice divine wisdom in the fact that the worst features that were afterwards to appear in Christendom should be then manifest before the eye not indeed of all saints but of the Spirit of God, that they should so far exist, at least in form, as to furnish the just and fitting occasion for the apostles to pronounce, more particularly in the general epistles or the later writings, whether of Paul or of Peter, of Jude or of John — above all, in the book of Revelation? For this simple reason it is now only unbelief or negligence of Scripture that can be surprised. Let the shadows of coming evil be ever so filled out by developing facts, still they

only verify the word of our God. Thus the confirmation of the word, being thus borne out not only in the good that God has imparted but in the havoc that the enemy has wrought among those that call on the name of the Lord, really turns when learned from God, into a very solemn warning, and the increasing vigilance of the saint, by making him feel the wisdom and the goodness of God in separating us — a thing always in its own nature repulsive, and naturally so to one who loves the saints unless there were an absolute call for it and confidence in His grace, whose will it is when unity is perverted to His own dishonour. Granted that there are those to whom separation is no trial. They are not to be envied. It ought to be a sore trial which nothing justifies but the stern and solemn sense that we owe it to Christ — nay, further (as is always the case, what we owe to Christ being the best thing for the saints of God), not only a necessary course for our own souls in allegiance to the Lord, but a warning due to those ensnared by the enemy. Do we truly desire the blessing of all the children of God? Who does not that loves the Lord Jesus? Must we not pursue, if it were only for their sakes, that which is most according to Christ? That which will be most salutary for them under such circumstances will surely be to show them the danger of desiring paths which they might too lightly tread — the paths of ease and yielding to the world, where Christ is unknown, forsaking what is true and holy to God's glory. "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments." Thus it is then that the discovery of the declension of the people of God is turned to serious but real profit, yet never unless our souls are kept simple and self-judging, grave yet happy, in the grace of God. Hence you will find, taking the epistle of Jude as an instance, the care with which the Holy Ghost exhorts them to "build themselves up on their most holy faith," to "keep themselves in the love of God looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." It is not only brotherly affection, but higher up the stream, if from the same source. It is divine charity which is pressed. Never does the love of God lead to forgetfulness of His holiness, never in any way or measure to yield to the influences of evil that are flowing with a constantly increasing tide. This too we shall find in the Old Testament as in the New. In fact, if there be the same material looking at man, there is the same substantial truth if you look at God. Not of course that there was equal development then as now; for unquestionably the time was not yet come for the fullness of that which was from God to be manifested; nor consequently for man to display his enmity, and hatred, and incurable evil. How could either be till Jesus was known? Still there was from the earliest day a new nature in the saints, and the testimony of the word and Spirit of God, who was always looking on to Jesus. But now that grace and truth are fully before us in Jesus, His

invariableness revealed cannot but invigorate the affections and brace the conscience, associating all with Him who came to do God's will in exercised hearts towards God. He therefore keeps back nothing that is profitable, but tells us of our danger. He shows us how the people of God have always slipped, and what is more, that they slipped from the first — that departure from His will and ways was by no means a result of centuries. Neither of old nor after Christ did it require ages to betray, though of course it always went on growing. Contrariwise the common law of the first man is immediate and invariable departure from God. It is not meant by this that there may not be fidelity exceptionally by grace; but it is unspeakably solemn to find the fact always in scripture, that God no sooner gives a blessing than man misuses it, that the departure is immediate and that this is true of individuals as well as of communities. Both have their importance. It is true, as all know, from the first. We see it in Paradise; we see it after the world was renewed; we see it now in the chosen nation. The same thing reappears in the Christian profession, as the apostle warns the Roman saints from the example of Israel. And their failure too the book of Judges shows us to have been not merely among some here and there, but alas! everywhere. There might be great differences between one tribe and another morally, as for instance relaxation was unquestionably more complete in Dan than in Judah; but the failure of Judah to rise up to the just recognition of Jehovah's glory on their part is plain from the beginning of the history in the land. All this appears to me to be of no inconsiderable importance as meeting a difficulty that perhaps all minds have felt who have been somewhat exercised about the church of God. In the New Testament the church we see set up in fullness of blessing by redemption, as associated with Christ. Not only did the Holy Ghost act in power for the soul, but He was ever the witness of superiority over all circumstances for body and mind, and these displays of energy not confined to apostles those chief envoys of the Lord and instruments of the work of God on earth, but diffusing the victory of Christ over the church as such. But it is not merely that in the history that man has made of the church we find departure. There indeed it is most manifest for those that have eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. But the salutary lesson is this, that the simple child of God had got it all in the word, so that he needs no ecclesiastical history to show the solemn fact. The New Testament itself is amply sufficient; and indeed for most readers the histories that even saints of God have made of the church would but mislead. They palliate, excuse, or even justify the general departure from the word of God. Where not? Who can tell me one history that vindicates adequately the word and Spirit of God? So widespread and deep became the departure, that the very worst can hardly defend

Christendom in the face of scripture. The grossest adulators of priestly power, those that sold themselves to the purposes of ecclesiastical ambition, have not been able to veil the heinous iniquity into which what was called the church of God sank before long; but it is an immense mercy that the simplest child of God has got in his Bible, not only the moral profit of all the ways of God, and the analogies of every previous dispensation of God, but what concerns himself. His own place and privileges, his own duty on the one hand, he cannot find except in the Bible; but even also the history of his failure he can find nowhere so clear, nowhere so simple, nowhere so rightly shown and proved as in that perfect word of God. And further, the familiarity with evil everywhere out of scripture tends to blunt conscience, if not to make us content with it, and therefore to settle down as if it were hopeless to find a path according to God in the midst of abounding iniquity. Whether it be the Old Testament or the New, the word of God never forms such a path, nor ever excuses it even for the weakest; and it is important to see that it is not weakness that goes astray: it is the subtlety of unbelief that can pervert even scripture itself to justify its own will. Undoubtedly there is nothing that man's will may not find a reason for, perhaps too on the surface of scripture. There is no limit to its perverse ingenuity. But when the word of God is read with conscience, this is quite another thing. There the Shepherd's voice is heard and known. Not that He fails to tell the truth in any case, for indeed He does in every case; but He makes the truth felt wherever there is a conscience open to hear. This no doubt is the great instruction of the book of Judges. It is not the only one, thank God. The same book shows us the slipping away, or defection, of the various tribes of Israel from the purpose of God in bringing them into the land — a purpose which, you must remember, will surely be carried out yet. No purpose of God ever fails in the end, whilst every purpose in man's hand fails for the time. These are two of the most prominent lessons of the word of God; and the reason is just this — all His purposes stand because there is a Second man: every purpose fails when entrusted to the first man. It is of the first man we read here; but at the same time we have the testimony of the gracious power of God, not now in conquest, but in lifting up from time to time, and in partial deliverances. Your attention is called particularly to this. According to the analogy of God, it is not to produce anything but a partial interference after the first failure until Jesus comes. Then indeed deliverance will be complete; but God will have the evil felt, and, whatever may be His gracious intervention, He does not work in such a sort or after such a measure as would tend to enfeeble the sense and the confession of sin, the humiliation, the self-judgment, which become the saint in view of the present state of things. I have no doubt therefore that, for those that really take the word of God as He has given it, so

great is His grace that a time of ruin may be made a season of special blessing. It is not a day of great prosperity that brings out the truth of things most before God. Do you forget that He gives grace to the humble now? Do you suppose that there was not ignorance in the day of Pentecost? I am persuaded that you mistake the character of that wondrous day and of this if you doubt either. In presence of their then power the reality of the condition of individuals was not felt, as at Corinth, till gross evil came in, and party spirit began to divide the saints; and those who ran well grew less vivid in their sense of Christ, and the preciousness of His grace and truth was dimmed in their souls, so that some went to law, and others to idol temples. Then the real condition of souls became manifest. How fared it with those that clave to the Lord? Did they necessarily go down in such a day? Far from it. It made the fidelity of Chloe's household, or that of Stephanas, more distinct; and more prayer, more groaning, more crying to God, would be surely the result in those that had the sense of Christ's love and glory. How sad the state of those so near and precious in His eyes as are the saints of God? I have no doubt accordingly that it is a total mistake to suppose — if we take, for instance, the apostle Paul, or even persons far inferior to him, those labourers that were his companions, and who shared his sorrows as well as his joys — a great mistake to suppose that Peter or the others had juster feelings, or were more truly in communion with the Lord than he; yet, as we know, it was not given to him to be found in that wondrous scene where the Holy Ghost was first poured down from heaven. But assuredly the apostle drank more deeply into the sense of what man was in presence not merely of law but of grace, as well as of what God is as now putting honour on Christ. No doubt this is deep work; for there is a breaking to pieces of every thought and feeling of the human heart; and there results such a depth of experience, both of anguish on the one hand and on the other hand of confidence in the grace of God, as must thoroughly repay and fit the individuals concerned for such service as is according to God's own mind for a day of grief and ruin. In short, it matters little what the time is on which one may be cast if there be faith in God, who is above all circumstances; for faith finds Him out and glorifies Him, whatever the circumstances may be. This, it may be observed, is rather a general way of applying the book of Judges; but these remarks have been made for the very reason that we may read the word of God as a whole, allowing for differences (one need not say,) and, while we may seek to enter into and understand the just application of the Old Testament, that we may also avail ourselves of what lies everywhere before us, those great and divine and ever precious principles of divine truth which we want, and which God has given us to meet us in the circumstances where we are now. We need not therefore dwell on the minute particulars of

the first few verses. I will only make a remark on one point; namely, the blessing which confidence in grace always receives from God. We know how Caleb was blessed; but we find also that God's grace developed in his daughter the same confidence in grace. She looked for good, and failed not to get it; and we do well to cherish the same spirit. It glorifies God to expect great and good things from Him. Why should we doubt Him? Would we abridge Him to the pettiness of our own thoughts? He had brought His people into a goodly land, and His honour was pledged to bless them there. And yet not many there looked for the blessing. They thought of the difficulties, and they were discouraged. Such discouragement constantly leads to the dishonour of God. For if to complain of what God gives grieves Him on the one hand, on the other hand the enemy is most sensitive, and gathers encouragement to oppose from the want of faith that is thus soon, too soon, manifested in our gracious God. Nothing indeed so disturbs the world as to see a man thoroughly happy in the Lord. It is not finding fault with the world that rouses its feelings, but the certainty that you have got a blessing to which they do not even pretend. And this, my brethren, is not best attested by strong expressions about it. The most effective testimony on every subject may be indirect; nor is anything of greater power than the simple unaffected expression of our heart's satisfaction in a worthy object. Even the men of the world are sensible of this. There is nothing that so forcibly proves or disproves as that which does not lie on the surface, and is not said to serve a purpose. You are in trial, or difficulty, poor, persecuted, in prison, or dying; yet you are thoroughly happy. What can the world do with a man that nothing can conquer? It may oppose, insult, punish; but he only gives God thanks, and rejoices the more, and this without in the least making light of what is done. What can the world do with such a man? "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." It is refreshing therefore to see that, when God must give us many a failure, it is not all failure. Nor should it be so with us. It is an unhappy spirit that always dwells upon the dark side; but at the same time it is never a truthful spirit that does not take full account of it. Has not grace brought us, beloved brethren, into such a place that we can fairly look at anything and any one in the face? We have no reason to fear, except that we should not confide in our God, and that we should not also dread the letting slip ourselves — the letting in self to anything that concerns the Lord. Then I grant you there are weakness and failure at hand.