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Chapter 56

PROMISED LAND OCCUPIED

THE end came for Jabin, king of Hazor, only minutes after he ordered the gates closed. The thousands upon thousands of Israelites swarmed up to the walls with their triple-hook ropes, hurled the heavy hooks over the walls and surged up and into the city in such numbers and force that the relatively few would-be defenders fell back in helpless fright.

No Protection in Walls and Gates

The gates were stripped of their bars by the wall-scalers, and Israelite soldiers thronged into Hazor to promptly slay every Canaanite. The king was found hiding in remote quarters. No mercy was given to this idolatrous man who had plotted the destruction of the Israelite army.

According to directions from Joshua, the Israelite soldiers set fire to Hazor. It wasn't God's will that this capital city of idol-worshippers, long the home of pagan rulers, should continue to exist as a temptation in the land where God's chosen people were to dwell. (Joshua 11:1-11.) God knew idolators would soon corrupt the morals of the Israelites. (Numbers 25:1-3; Numbers 31:14-16.)

From Hazor, Joshua's forces swept to the west, north and south to conquer the cities of the kings who had joined Jabin against Israel. They slew these kings and all their subjects and took for booty everything they could use except those things used in the worship of heathen gods. (Joshua 11:12-14.)

Although Canaan wasn't a vast land, it took much time to conquer enough of it that the twelve tribes of Israel could move into the respective areas they

were to take over. The army moved slowly because it was on foot. Careful planning often took days and weeks. Scouts were sent out to bring back information. They often didn't return for weeks. It was a long, drawn-out task to take over Canaan. (Verses 15-23.) After six years had passed, Israel had taken over the small kingdoms and cities of about thirty-three enemy rulers. (Joshua 12.)

Still there were more places to be conquered, and God made it known to Joshua just where those areas and cities were located. (Joshua 13:1-6.) For one example, there was the land of the Philistines, which was on the coast of the Great Sea, and southwest of Canaan. When Israel had set out from Egypt, God had purposely caused His people to give this region a wide berth because the people were war-like, and the Israelites at that time, being newly freed from slavery, were not trained or prepared to resist a large army by physical means. (Exodus 13:17-18.)

Land Given to the People

By the time most of Canaan had been conquered, God told Joshua that the time had come to partition the land to the various tribes, even though there were still many people to drive out of Canaan. (Joshua 13:7.)

A meeting was held in which Joshua, Eleazar the priest, and the heads of the tribes of Israel gathered to learn by lot which areas of Canaan should be occupied by the various tribes. Moses had already indicated how these matters were to be handled. A drawing of lots would make plain what God had planned.

The drawing of lots could be done in various ways, but in this matter of choosing areas for the tribes of Israel, it probably was a matter of writing the names of the tribes on pieces of wood or stone and shaking them together in a container. The names or numbers of the various sections of Canaan would be written on other pieces. Then, if Joshua were to draw a tribe name from one container, and if Eleazar were to draw from another container a number to indicate a section of Canaan, and so on, the future locations for the tribes could thus be determined.

However it was done, God caused the lots to be drawn according to the way in which He had already decided matters. Two and a half tribes had already been given their areas east of the Jordan, so nine tribes and a half were yet to receive their inheritance. (Joshua 13:7-33; Joshua 14:15.)

As it turned out, the determining what land would go to which tribe didn't progress very far. (Joshua 14:15; 16; 17.) For one thing, there was murmuring and dissatisfaction by the people of the tribes of Joseph -- Ephraim and the half tribe of Manasseh. Their elders claimed that because they were two large and powerful tribes, they should be given two tribal

allotments of land. Joshua then gave them an additional allotment in a timbered mountainous region. (Joshua 17:14-15.)

"Why have we, two leading tribes, been given a wooded mountain range in the north right next to a valley where the enemy Canaanites are armed with terrible iron chariots equipped with huge, protruding knives?" the elders of these tribes asked Joshua. "We will still be crowded for space."

"Since you are a great people, then you should be able to create a wealthy lumber industry in those mountains while you are clearing land for agricultural use," was Joshua's reply. "Also, since you are leading tribes, you will have the power to overcome the Canaanites who have chariots. By the time you clear your mountain land of much of its timber and drive the Canaanites out of the valley, your two allotments will be enough land. It is a fair and just God who has decided where every tribe shall dwell." (Verses 16-18.)

At that time lots were drawn only for two and a half tribes -- Ephraim, Judah and the half tribe of Manasseh. Various time-consuming matters continued to come up. One of many had to do with the request of a man who had been one of the twelve Israelite scouts who had been sent to Canaan over forty-five years previously. This man was Caleb, who had been Joshua's right-hand man on that excursion. When ten of the scouts had told lies about the strength and size of the people of Canaan, it was Joshua and Caleb who had insisted on the truth and encouraged the people to boldly go in and conquer Canaan, trusting God for the outcome. (Numbers 13; Numbers 14:1-10.)

Caleb Rewarded for Faithfulness

Caleb had been promised by God through Moses, because of his honesty and loyalty, a choice inheritance in Canaan. It wasn't too forward of him, therefore, to remind Joshua that he and his family should be given the land God had promised in the mountainous Hebron area. (Numbers 13:22; Numbers 14:24; Deuteronomy 1:35-36.)

Although Caleb was then eighty-five years old, he was still vigorous and healthy, and promised that he and his relatives who would share his inheritance would conquer the giant men who still remained in the region of Hebron. (Joshua 14:6-12.) Joshua honored Caleb's request and gave him what he desired in the territory given to the tribe of Judah. (Verses 13-15.) Later, when Caleb and his family moved into the area of his inheritance, he promised one of his daughters to any man who would lead a successful attack against the enemies remaining there. One of Caleb's nephews carried out an assault that overcame the local Canaanites, and he was given Caleb's daughter to become his wife. (Judges 1:12-15.) However, their marriage was not a loveless arrangement. They were so much in love that she inspired her husband to accomplish great things. Many years later he

became the first hero to deliver Israel from foreign oppression. (Judges 3:7-11.)

Other Israelite tribes later taking up residence in their respective domains were not all as courageous and enthusiastic as Caleb's nephew and his soldiers, and shamefully allowed some of the Canaanites to share their lands. This was not pleasing to God, who wanted them to gradually drive out all the Canaanites, and had repeatedly and plainly instructed Israel to completely rid the land of the heathen idol-worshipping enemy. (Numbers 33:50-56; Deuteronomy 7:1-6.) The only possible exception God would allow was that of the Gibeonites. They had asked for peace, and had at least mentioned God as being the Supreme Ruler, and had shown some willingness to live under His laws. (Joshua 9:24-25.)

Israelites Move Into Heart of Promised Land

On inspiration from God, Joshua told the people that the time had come to break camp and move on to a point more centrally located in Canaan. That place was Shiloh, about twenty miles north of Jerusalem. (Joshua 18:1.) There were mountains in that area, but there were also a valley and adjoining flat regions in which Israel would have plenty of room to set up their vast camps and flock-feeding areas.

There were mixed emotions among the Israelites when they learned that they were to travel on. Some had tired of living at Gilgal, and welcomed the opportunity to move. Others regarded Gilgal as a comfortable area they disliked leaving.

In six years the main body of Israel had almost forgotten what it meant to be on the move. It was considerably more difficult for the millions of people to get going with their millions of animals than it had been when they were more accustomed to be constantly on the go. Nevertheless, they managed to be ready to leave for Shiloh at the time Joshua had already indicated to them well in advance.

When the people arrived at the Shiloh region, most of them were content with their surroundings. The tabernacle was pitched at once in the middle area of the camp. There it remained for many, many years while the tribes went their respective ways and fell into all manner of trouble because of their disobedience.

A few days after the people were settled and camp life in the new site had become easier, Joshua summoned the elders for a meeting.

"I'm beginning to wonder just how anxious our people are to receive their inheritances," Joshua told them. "It's true that seven tribes haven't yet been shown what lands to take over. But few seem interested in doing anything

except camping together as we've been doing for so many years. Is it that you are afraid that if you divide into tribes your enemies will overcome you?" (Joshua 18:2-3.)

"We would like to know more about the areas we are to go to," some of the elders remarked. "The four tribes and two half-tribes that have already been given their lands have had a fair idea of where they were going, but little is known about the land that is yet to be divided among the remaining seven tribes."

Surveyors Map the Land

"I still think that most of us would rather stay together than separate as God wishes," Joshua replied. "But your point is one not to be neglected. It would be well to appoint capable men to survey the land to determine how it can best be divided."

Quick plans were made to look over the little-known areas of Canaan to find out just what the land was like and how it could most wisely be apportioned. Three leading men from each tribe were chosen for their ability in surveying and in simple geometry. A relatively small military force was sent along with these men to protect them from any straggling Canaanite soldiers who might attack them.

Weeks later the surveying Israelites returned to Shiloh with a book of maps and information about the part of Canaan yet to be divided among the Israelites. (Joshua 18:4-9.)

Joshua met with the heads of the seven tribes and with Eleazar the priest to study the information and mark the mapped territory into seven parts. There was no guesswork. The borders, cities, streams, valleys, mountains, plains and elevations were plainly marked.

Again, before the tabernacle in God's presence, lots were cast for the seven portions of land, and the seven tribes at last learned what their inheritances were and where they would go. (Joshua 18; Joshua 19.) The tribe of Levi, being supported by the tithes, offerings and sacrifices of the people, did not receive any land (Joshua 18:7), though they were later given cities to live in and adjoining fields for grazing their flocks. (Joshua 21.)

The last parcel of land to be given for an inheritance went to Joshua and his family. This wasn't a result of any demand made by Joshua, but was according to an unrecorded promise from God such as had been made to Caleb. Joshua had his choice of an area. He chose Timnath-serah, a small city in the land of Ephraim only a short distance west of Shiloh. There Joshua later planned and superintended the reconstruction of his city. (Joshua 19:49-51.)

Justice for the Helpless

God had already spoken to Moses concerning six cities of refuge that were to be chosen when Israel had taken over Canaan. These cities were to be places of safety for anyone who killed another accidentally or without plan or malice, though it was possible for a guilty killer to also obtain temporary safety in these places.

In those times it was lawful for relatives to avenge the willful killing of any of their kin by slaying the one obviously responsible. Some, of course, would like to take vengeance even when the killing was accidental. To escape such an avenger, one could flee to the nearest city of refuge, where he could plead his case with the elders at the gates and be admitted to stay at least until there could be a complete hearing by the city's magistrates. If a man were found guilty, he was to be expelled from the city or turned over to the avenger. If he were found to be innocent, he was to have the protection of the city as long as he remained within it.

Three of the cities of refuge were picked from the east side of the Jordan. They were Bezer, Ramoth and Golan. The other three were chosen from the land west of the Jordan. They were Kedesh, Shechem and Hebron. (Joshua 20.)

According to plans revealed to Moses, the Levites were to receive various cities in which to live, and closely surrounding areas in which to keep their livestock. This matter was next taken up by Joshua, Eleazar and the tribal heads. Lots were drawn having to do with the areas of all twelve tribes. The drawing determined which cities and how many should be given from the various tribes. From all the tribes the cities for the Levites totaled forty-eight, and included the six cities of refuge. The Levites received these cities as centers of living, along with the pasture lands surrounding the cities to the extent of less than a mile. (Numbers 35:1-5.)

During the six years since Israel had crossed the Jordan, the soldiers from the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh had faithfully fulfilled their duty. (Numbers 32:1-22; Joshua 4:12-13; Joshua 22:1-3.) There were still about 40,000 of them because not one of Israel's enemies were able to stand against them. (Joshua 21:43-45.) Now that the main wars were over, Joshua had a pleasant surprise for these men.

Chapter 57

THE SIN OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Now THAT Canaan was subdued, Joshua announced a pleasant surprise for the soldiers of the tribe of Reuben, the tribe of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh: "You have been faithful in remaining to work and fight with the rest of the Israelite army these six years, even though your families have been only a few miles east of Jordan.

"Now that Canaan is ours, you are dismissed from service with the army of Israel." (Joshua 22:1-7.) "You have obtained great wealth from the enemy, and now you should return to share these flocks, gold, silver, brass, iron and clothing with your brethren who stayed behind to care for your families. May the blessings of our God go with you and to your families, and may you serve God diligently by keeping all His commandments." (Verse 8.)

War-weary Soldiers Head Homeward

The happy thousands of warriors moved eastward from Shiloh with the cheers of their fellow Israelites ringing in their ears. (Verse 9.) They couldn't march as an army, however, because their share of the flocks, herds and loaded pack-animals taken from their enemies had to be herded in a very long caravan. In fact, their soldier friends remaining at Shiloh good-naturedly made fun of them by loudly addressing them as shepherders and cattle rustlers.

At Joshua's suggestion, some Israelite officers accompanied the soldiers as far as the Jordan River. At that time the river was not as deep and swollen as it had been when the Israelites had passed over westward six years before. It was no great problem, therefore, to ford the river at a shallow point the pack-animals could wade across. As for the smaller animals, it was as easy for them to cross the river as it was for the soldiers, what with animals being natural swimmers and generally not too afraid of water.

On their second or third night after leaving Shiloh, the soldiers of Reuben, Manasseh and Gad camped on the east side of the Jordan. The Israelites who had accompanied them camped on the west side of the river before starting their return to Shiloh the next day.

At dawn the Israelites on the west side of the river prepared to leave for Shiloh after a planned last salute to their brothers. Then someone noticed a peculiar thing. The soldiers across the river were working hard to haul stones and earth to form a swiftly growing box-like stack of stones which they were filling with earth. Instead of setting out for Shiloh, the Israelites on the west side of the river stayed to see what was going on. They were increasingly perplexed to note that the heap, in the course of the day, was developed into a large altar that was made after the pattern of God's altar in Shiloh. (Joshua 22:10, 28.)

"This is very strange," said one of Joshua's officers to the others. "It appears to me that our brothers are building a huge altar." Then these men began to draw hasty conclusions.

"Our God hasn't told us to build such an altar," another officer spoke out. "Perhaps our brothers are building this altar with the intention of sacrificing to idols!"

Is This REALLY Idolatry?

"If that's even a possibility, then we should report to Joshua at once," one of the men said. Rather than immediately find out what their brother tribes were doing, these men began to imagine things, and came to conclusions that SEEMED right to them. (Proverbs 16:25.)

It was only hours later that Joshua was told about these things. Unfortunately, word of these events, as these men interpreted them, also leaked out to the whole congregation of Israel. Reports became so repeated and exaggerated that it quickly became a common belief that the soldiers from the tribes east of the Jordan had suddenly fallen away from the true God, and were starting a new system of pagan worship in their own territory. A huge, murmuring crowd gathered near the tabernacle and around Joshua's tent. Some of the people from this crowd began to loudly criticize the tribes east of the Jordan.

"We should at once send troops across the Jordan to forcefully remind our idol-worshipping brothers that they must stop this terrible terrible idolatry immediately!" one man yelled.

Great cheers followed his remark. For a people who had been disobedient in so many ways for so many years, it seemed somewhat extreme to demonstrate such a spirit of supposedly spiritual criticism, that seemed to indicate a great love for God.

"We must clear up this matter now, even if it takes all the soldiers we have here at Shiloh!" another bellowed. "If we don't do this, our brothers to the east may all become pagans and turn against us!"

Joshua Acts Wisely

Joshua was dismayed at the conduct of some of the people almost as much as he was at the unhappy report. After all, it had not been proved just what this altar was for, though it was something that required looking into immediately.

"No troops should go now and risk starting a civil war in Israel," Joshua told the people. "If the tribes to the east are doing something contrary to God's will, then someone should be sent to point out their sins. Instead of soldiers, I am sending Phinehas, the priest, the son of Eleazar, and the heads of the ten tribes west of the Jordan. These men can determine what is happening and how to deal with any who are possibly falling into idolatry." (Verses 13-14.)

Hours later Phinehas, the heads of the ten tribes and their aides arrived at the west side of the Jordan at a spot opposite the altar. The soldiers of Gad, Manasseh and Reuben were surprised to see such a distinguished group, and hastily helped them across the river.

"Why are we honored with your presence?" smiling officers inquired of them.

Phinehas, spokesman for the group, pointed gravely to the huge altar of rocks filled with earth.

"The people of Israel at Shiloh have heard of this great altar you have built," Phinehas declared in a loud voice that could be heard by all the assembled officers of the armies of the three tribes east of the Jordan. "They feel that you have erected this thing as a sudden move to depart from God and become idol-worshippers. If this is true, can you do such a thing and still recall how close our God came to destroying all of Israel for such a sin in the Baal-Peor idolatry and in Achan's curse?" (Joshua 22:15-17, 20; Numbers 25:19; Deuteronomy 4:1-6; Joshua 7:1-5.) "Do you realize that all of Israel suffers tomorrow for the sins of a few committed today?" (Joshua 22:18.) "If you feel that this land east of the Jordan is, not right for you or that the pagan influences here are too great for you, don't rebel against God by building a pagan altar, but come over west of the Jordan and we'll make room for you and your people closer to the tabernacle where God's altar is located." (Verse 19.)

The Simple Truth

The officers of the armies of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh lost their happy smiles before Phinehas finished speaking. They appeared troubled, but not guilty. Their spokesman came out at once with an answer.

"There has been a misunderstanding," he explained. "Our God knows that rebelling against Him by building an altar to any other god is something that hasn't even entered our minds. We know that God wants sacrifices made only on the altar He has directed to be made in front of His tabernacle, and we didn't build this altar for offering sacrifice. If this is not true, may God destroy us today. We didn't build the altar for any religious functions, but rather as a duplicate of God's altar, to serve as a monument to the fact that our people east of the Jordan and your people west of the Jordan are one

people bound together by the sacred laws of God. This altar, being patterned after God's altar, will be a constant reminder that we serve the same God you serve. We hope that it will remain a monument for a long time so that we may point it out for what it means for many generations to come." (Joshua 22:21-29.)

There were moments of silence before anyone spoke. This truthful explanation from the soldiers of Gad, Manasseh and Reuben was as surprising as it was pleasing to Phinehas and the ten tribal heads.

"You have shown us just now that God is with all of us," Phinehas finally spoke out. "We at first feared that you were falling into idolatry and that God would deal harshly with all of Israel because of what we thought you had done. Now we know what you were intending to do, that you are loyal to God and that your righteous actions have spared us from any punishment God otherwise would have put on us."

After farewells, Phinehas, the heads of the ten tribes and their aides set out for Shiloh. When they arrived there with news of what had happened, those who had been most concerned about their east-of-Jordan brothers going astray were happy to learn that matters were not as they had imagined. Many of the people felt so relieved that they held a celebration in which God was loudly praised for keeping Israel together. (Verses 30-34.)

Although there were some among the Israelites who were too hastily inclined to point to their brothers east of the Jordan as being sinners, the real concern among most of the Israelites was that a part of them might break away and fall into idolatry.

Joshua was well aware of the kind of people who were always quick to point to the shortcomings of others so that they might seem more righteous by comparison -- which is really SELF-righteousness. Those were the ones he didn't like having any part in the somewhat feverish proposal that one part of Israel should take up arms against another part. In trying to make themselves look more righteous, those people can do great harm.

People who feel that they are next to perfect are often as evil in God's sight as those who feel just the opposite. Such people are generally unable to recognize their own shortcomings. Otherwise they wouldn't have a feeling of self-righteousness and near-perfection.

There is an interesting true story in the Bible about such a man, at this point it might be well to temporarily leave the Israelites in Canaan and flash back a few hundred years to the time just after the famine in Egypt.

The Story of Job

The main character of this story of the ancient past wrote one of the books of the Old Testament. It was titled "The Book of Job", because Job was the man's name. (Job 1:1.)

Job is often pictured as an Arabian who ruled a domain -- the land of Uz -- extending to the Euphrates River. Job was the greatest man of character in that eastern land. (Job 1:3.)

As for being a wizard, Job wasn't exactly that. Probably he earned that title because he was a very wise man and a skilled engineer. (Job 3:11-15; Job 29:21-25.)

The outstanding thing about Job was that he followed God's laws and used his power to protect the helpless. (Job 29:7-17.) He exerted his influence in favor of the one true God, at the same time working to destroy belief in the pagan gods. (Job 29:20-22, 25.)

The part of Job's life related in Scripture had to do with the maturing years of his life. He had become a more famous and respected man than he had been before. He was wealthier than ever, what with owning seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, a thousand oxen and five hundred donkeys. Job owned many buildings, and much land for his animals' grazing. He also had a very fine home, and buildings and tents in which his servants, hired hands and shepherds lived. (Job 1:3.)

Job's greatest treasure, however, was his ten grown children -- seven sons and three daughters. They had comfortable homes of their own in which they often gathered to hold dinner parties and birthday banquets. Job noted that they indulged so much in this pastime that he felt they might be sinning. Therefore he often made sacrifices in their behalf. His constant prayers to God were that the Creator would be merciful to his family. (Job 1:4-5.)

People have long been erroneously taught that there is a constant desperate, frenzied battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, with God as the champion of good and Satan as the champion of evil. Thus it would seem to be a long war between God and Satan, with each one taking turns at reeling under powerful blows from the other, and this process repeated century after century until God finally strikes a final, victorious blow that causes everything to turn out right.

God Limits Satan's Power

That isn't the situation. God is Ruler of the universe and everything in it. (Daniel 4:17, 25, 32; Job 38:1-19.) Satan is the god or prince of this world. (Ephesians 2:2.) He is under God's power and authority. He can do only what God allows him to do. In other words, God can and does allow evil to

occur by giving Satan permission to tempt people who need to learn lessons, but God lets Satan go only so far in doing certain things.

God keeps an eye on all the angels, including the fallen ones, or demons. If He calls them before Him to report, they must obey, including Satan.

At this time during Job's life Satan came with other angels to report to God, and was asked what he had been doing. His answer was that he had been roaming the Earth. He couldn't successfully lie to God. Roaming was what he had been doing for a long time with his demons, looking for opportunities to separate men from God. (Job 1:6-7.)

"If you have been everywhere on Earth, then you must have noticed that a man by the name of Job is one of my most obedient servants," God said to Satan. "What do you think of him?"

"I know the man," Satan replied. "I am aware that you have given him great ability, power and wealth. At the same time you have protected him and his family from trouble, disease and death. He knows that these blessings have come from you, so he works at being faithful to you. But take this prosperity and comfort away from him, and he will turn away from you. In fact, he will curse you!" (Job 1:8-11.) Notice how Satan admitted God is all-powerful and fully able to protect Job from him.

"You would like to destroy this man's faith," God remarked. "I'm going to give you the opportunity to test him. Deal with him as you choose, but don't do him any bodily harm." (Verse 12.) Notice how God set a limit on Satan's evil, and let him go only so far in tempting Job. What Satan didn't know was that God was using him to teach Job a much-needed lesson. But Satan thought he was getting a chance to destroy one of God's servants. Satan departed, anxious to bring trouble to one of God's most faithful followers. It wasn't much later that Job, examining a part of his orchard, was startled by the noisy approach of one of his plowmen.

Sudden Destruction Came

"We were plowing your fields on the east border," the man panted excitedly, "when suddenly a band of mounted Sabeans rushed at us! They killed all the men except me, took all the oxen and all the donkeys that were grazing nearby!"

Before the shocked Job could express himself, another of his men wearily ran up to blurt out that a series of tremendous lightning bolts had struck where all the sheep and shepherders had been gathered, that all the sheep had been killed and that he was the only man to escape.

This second man hadn't finished giving his discouraging news when a third man staggered toward Job, waving his arms and shouting.

"Three bands of Chaldeans attacked the camel grazing grounds!" the man panted. "They killed your men, then took all three thousand camels! I managed to escape to report to you!" (Job 1:13-17.)

These three reports left Job in stunned silence. He could scarcely believe that such a great loss could come so suddenly. Slowly and dazedly he sat down with his back to a tree trunk. Abruptly he was aware that a fourth man was standing over him, talking and gesturing wildly.

Job shuddered at the thought that shot into his mind. With all his livestock gone, any other evil report would have to concern his family!

Chapter 58

WHY MANY SUFFER

I KNOW who you are," Job told the man. "You are one of the servants from the household of my oldest son. What unhappy news have you to give me?"

A Grievous Tragedy

"You must not have heard what I just said, sir," the woeful-faced servant observed. "It grieves me to repeat that all your sons and daughters have just been crushed to death in the collapse of your oldest son's home!" (Job 1:18-19.)

This was the supreme blow to Job, though by this time he wasn't too surprised at the terrible news. Painfully he raised his gaze to meet the eyes of the trembling servant.

"How did it happen?" Job asked.

"All your sons and daughters were gathered for a dinner party at your oldest son's home," the servant explained. "All of them were inside, happily eating and drinking. Suddenly a whirlwind descended on the house, snatched it up from its foundation, then dashed it with such force that it was smashed flat. I was only a short distance from the house, bringing in some fresh fruit for the diners, and I was knocked to the ground. I struggled up, rushed to the wrecked home and tore away enough debris, with the help of neighbors, to find that your seven sons and three daughters were all dead!"

Job rose shakily to his feet and walked slowly toward his home. On the way he ripped his coat open. At that moment his wife looked out of the house to view this act, which in the ancient East was a sign of great grief.

"What's happened?" Job's wife called out as she ran to meet him.

When Job told her, she sobbingly accompanied him to the house. Job tried to comfort her, but he wasn't very successful. He left her by herself, shaved his head, went outdoors and prostrated himself on the ground. The headshaving was also an ancient sign of grief, though no more peculiar, perhaps, than our dwindling present-day custom of wearing black clothes and black armbands during and after funerals.

Job Refused to Grumble

"I came into this world naked and without possessions," Job murmured. "It's only fair that I should go out of it without possessions. While I have been here, God has allowed me many good things, and I thank Him and bless Him for all of them!"

Job had a good attitude toward God, even though God had allowed Satan to snuff out his wealth, his children, and his happiness. Satan had not been able to make Job commit the sin of complaining. (Job 1:20-22.)

Some time later, when the angels again came before God to report their activities, God questioned Satan as He had before.

"I am well aware of what you have done to my servant Job," God reminded Satan. "No doubt you have noticed that his grief at the loss you have caused him has not resulted in his cursing me, as you said it would."

"He has remained faithful only because you haven't allowed me to afflict his body," was Satan's reply. "If a man is suffering great physical pain, insomuch that he thinks that death might result, he will do anything to save himself. Allow me to bring sickness on Job and he will quickly give up his obedient ways and turn to cursing you."

"We shall see if you are wrong again," God said. "You may do what you choose with Job, except that you may not bring him to his death." (Job 2:1-6.)

Dismissed, Satan returned to Earth, pleased because he once more had been given an opportunity to see if he could turn Job against his Creator. He now had permission to take away Job's health and his last remaining source of income.

One morning when Job awakened he was alarmed to find that he was extremely sore all over his body. At first neither he nor his wife had any idea why he felt so lame, but within a few hours his skin was lumpy with swelling boils!

Agony Added to Grief

This was how Satan had chosen to strike at Job, though Job had no knowledge of why or how the terrible agonizingly painful sores had so suddenly developed from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

The mere sight of the skin eruptions was so offensive that Job was embarrassed even in the company of his wife. And he was in such pain he could not even think of fulfilling his duties. And while another man ran the business, Job could not collect the revenues due him. Thus Job became completely destitute. He didn't want to sit or lie around his home and see his wife's expressions of disgust. He decided to leave his home and go to an ash dump not far away. Sitting in ashes in those days was a sign of humility, and Job had no intention of lacking for ashes. (Job 2:7 -8.)

Job and his wife now had a very bitter life, what with no children and no income -- and with Job's health gone. Whereas Job had previously been a very prominent man, he now found himself not only destitute, but also almost completely without friends. Even his relatives had nothing more to do with him. He had suddenly become a social outcast because his friends thought God had put him under a curse, and his acquaintances could no longer regard him as wealthy. True to his promise, God had allowed Satan to take EVERYTHING away from Job. (Job 2:6.)

In spite of his wife's arguments that he was being silly, Job continued to stay at the ash heap. Even on that soft mound he was miserable, because whether he sat or sprawled, the boils were intensely painful with the slightest pressure on them.

Late one night Job's wife went out to the ash heap. She was ashamed to go during daylight because Job had been such a prominent man and had suffered such great loss that it seemed to some that he might have lost his mind. Job's wife would have been distressed to know that neighbors were watching her. Instead of comforting her husband, she started railing at him.

And Now -- A Nagging Wife!

"Why do you insist on squatting there in the filth of this dump while I am at my wits' end wondering how to make ends meet?" she scolded. "Why must

you embarrass me this way? If you think that you are about to die, why do it in a place like this?"

Job continued to sit in silence, which was soon broken again.

"I should think you would have more consideration for me, the woman who gave you ten children," Job's wife went on. "What would you have done without me? Is this any place for a man, even though a lot of people have forgotten you by now?"

Job said nothing.

"You're hopeless!" cried his wife. "Go on with your prayers! You're only adding to your misery by being out here. And no matter how many days you sit here blessing God, you'll die! Why don't you curse God so He will destroy you and put you out of your misery?" (Job 2:9.) Job not only had lost his wealth, children, health, power, influence, honor, dignity and friends, but had now lost the respect of his wife.

Job's wife sobbingly turned to leave, but Job straightened up and spoke sharply.

"You talk foolishly," Job told her sternly. "You sound as shallow as a young woman who has grievously sinned while still in her father's house. Why should we complain when troubles come? God has done many wonderful things for us. Should we expect to go all through our lives without any troubles? Do we believe that God should shower us with nothing but the pleasant things? Should we shake our fists at our Creator whenever He temporarily takes back some of the many good things that belong to Him in the first place? No! We should be thankful and uncomplaining, no matter what happens!" (Verse 10.)

Job's wife realized that it would be a waste of effort to argue with a man with such a good attitude toward God, and she walked away into the darkness.

A Few Friends Remain

Because of his high office in life, Job had many acquaintances who were prominent, wealthy and well-educated. When word went around the land about Job's condition, most of these acquaintances of Job wondered why a man who was so obedient to his God should fall into such misfortune and misery. Almost all of them had felt obligated to desert him.

However, of the many who knew him well, three men from other lands, who were close friends of Job, planned to meet and visit him together. (Verse

11.) The names of these men were Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, and they came from territories not far distant.

The combined caravans of the three arrived at Job's rather neglected home to find that only his wife was there.

"You'll find my husband sitting or lying out in the city ash heap not far from here," she stiffly instructed the visitors.

The three friends of Job instructed their servants to encamp not far from the ash dump. Then they set out afoot toward the lone figure they could see in the distance. They were accompanied by a younger man named Elihu who was also well-educated and intelligent, and who, because of his great admiration for Job's well-known accomplishments, had asked to join the three friends. (Job 32:2.)

Even when the visitors were only a few yards from Job, they couldn't recognize him because of the boils on his face and the amount of weight he had lost. His condition was so much worse than they had imagined that they couldn't help but conclude that he was very close to death. They wept with grief at the sight of him. Now they could understand that there was more than one reason why Job had chosen to spend his time on an ash heap. His hundreds of very sore running boils made it almost necessary.

According to the customs of the times, the three men ripped their tunics and tossed dust on their heads. (Job 2:12.)

Elihu respectfully stood close by while Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad -- who were older men -- stepped close to Job. Job peered up through swollen eyelids at his friends. He could not touch them in welcome, and it was too painful for him to show his appreciation for their presence by trying to leap up. He was touched that they had come to comfort him, but all he did was lift his hands and nod to each. Then he lowered his head and sat in silence. Job's friends were so stunned to see how horrifyingly miserable he was that they sat down with him in shocked silence to share his agony.

That silence lasted a whole week, during which the men sat with Job both day and night. (Verse 13.) At the end of seven days and seven nights of no conversation, Job painfully straightened up and suddenly spoke from swollen lips.

"Let the day perish and be forgotten when I was born!" he cried out. "Let that day be cursed! Let not God include it in the days of the month or year!" (Job 3.)

Controversy Over the Cause of Job's

Job's friends were surprised at this sudden outburst, but they were also relieved to know that Job had at long last chosen to speak. Job continued to talk for several minutes, eloquently describing how death would be more pleasant than the bitter grief of his condition. Some of his remarks caused his friends to suspect him of some hidden sin, and as soon as Job had finished, Eliphaz spoke out.

"I must say what I think," he started out. "You have instructed my people in living and in building character, but now that trouble has come to you, you faint. If you are being punished because of some kind of trouble you have run into, turn to God. If God is correcting you, don't be unhappy about it. He will see you through adversity, and you shall be full of years before you die." (Job 4 and 5.)

Eliphaz had much more to say, some of which, in turn, roused Job to more speech.

"I thought you came here to comfort me," he declared, "but now you are reproaching me and charging me with being a wicked man!" (Job 6 and 7.)

Job continued for a time, and when he had temporarily finished, Bildad had much to say in reproving Job. As soon as Job had answered him, Zophar spoke out. He, too, reproved Job, who promptly defended himself. This ended the first of three series of unusual controversies. During the next two of these debate-type discussions there was more reproof from Job's friends and more defense from Job. These three friends insisted God was punishing Job for being sinful. Job insisted God was punishing him without a reason.

Job was like many people today who say they are so good they always do what is right just because they love God. The Bible says this is not true. (Jeremiah 17:9; Jeremiah 10:23; Proverbs 12:15; Psalm 39:5; I John 2:4; John 14:15.) Throughout these controversies between Job and his three friends, which were written in the Bible in a splendid poetic form, Job steadfastly contended that he was without sin and had no reason for repentance. (Job, chapters 8 through 31.)

At last the three older friends all gave up trying to answer Job because of his self-righteous attitude. (Job 32:1.) This gave young Elihu an opportunity to say what he thought.

"You have tried to justify yourself instead of God," he courteously and respectfully but bluntly told Job. "As for you three friends, you have condemned Job without being able to answer his self-justification." (Job 32:2-22.)

Elihu went on to disclose much wisdom for one so relatively young, reminding these older men that the Spirit of God, not human reason, gives us the true answers to problems. He continued to reprove all four men for being in error in some of the things they had said. Yet he did not deal

harshly with Job. (Job 33: 7.) His marvelous remarks, as written in chapters 33, 34, 35, 36 and 37 of the Book of Job make up some of the most profound sayings in the Bible. He showed these men that Job's error was not in some secret sin he was hiding -- as they supposed -- but in giving credit to himself, instead of God, for the righteous deeds God had inspired him to do, and in thinking he could EARN salvation by good works. Elihu knew that man's righteousness is no better than filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6.) The three older friends had spoken of God's right to punish men for sins. Elihu spoke of God's willingness to be merciful and give salvation to those who repent. (See also Psalm 103: 10-14.) There seemed no more to say or do, so the four men wearily prepared to leave.

Although it was daytime, the sky had been turning dark for some time. It was evident that some kind of rough weather was about to occur. Overhead the clouds began to whirl and boil. Then they dipped earthward with great speed. The mounting moan of whirling winds broke suddenly on the ears of the little group on the ash heap. Job looked up, and he didn't move. Realizing the futility of running, the other four men stood rooted, though not without fear. Curious onlookers who had gathered near the ash heap ran for their lives, however.

God Convicts Job

Somehow the winds seemed to envelop the five men -- not to harm them, but to gently cut them off from their surroundings. There was turbulence all around, but not on the ash heap. (Job 38: 1.)

Then a great voice clearly came out of the encircling wind. (Verse 2.) Startled, Job started to get up, but tremblingly fell with his face down when he realized that he was being addressed. The other four men also fearfully prostrated themselves.

"Who is it who pretends to speak about the most profound matters of God, but who lacks knowledge of such things?" the mighty voice asked. (Job 38; 39; 40:1-2.)

Job cringed under stinging words as the Creator of the universe went on to compare the puny learning and undertakings of man with the all-knowing wisdom and tremendous creative power of God. He reminded Job that only God is a great Creator. When God at last stopped speaking, Job cried out:

"I admit I am evil and defiled, God, and I don't have the wisdom to answer you!" (Job 40:3-5.)

God then reminded Job that he could not save himself -- that only God has salvation to give -- and that all of man's power comes from God, and man amounts to nothing. (Job 40:6-14.)

God continued to point out how much man has yet to learn, even about the creatures that exist on this planet, and that no one except the Creator has any real conception of what is required to create and control such creatures. (Job 40: 15-24; Job 41.) When God ceased speaking, Job finally saw himself as a very worthless sinner, who needed God's mercy just as much as anyone else did. Job then took the opportunity to express himself again, at the same time continuing to prostrate himself on the ash heap.

Job Finally Repents

"I repent that I spoke as I did, God," he said. "I realize now that you know everything and can do everything and that I said things I did not understand. I abhor myself for considering myself too wise, too creative and too righteous, when I am really nothing more than dust and ashes!" (Job 42: 1-6.)

God then spoke to Eliphaz, who was the oldest of Job's three friends.

"I am very displeased with you three," He said. "Job has made some wrong remarks and he has had a self-righteous attitude, but he has finally spoken more correctly of Me than you three did. You used false arguments to try to prove that he had committed great sins and that his suffering meant he was more evil than other men. Job accused Me of punishing him without a cause. Job saw his error and repented. You didn't. Now get seven bullocks and seven rams and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering. My servant Job will then pray for you. If you fail to do this, I shall deal harshly with you!" (Verses 7-8.)

The three men obeyed. The burnt offering was made, Job prayed for his friends and God accepted all that was done. (Verse 9.) As for Elihu, he had neither falsely accused Job nor misrepresented God's justice. He had spoken well, and God didn't require an offering from him.

Job's miserable condition left him as suddenly as it had come on. Immediately after he prayed for his three friends, the sore, itching, running boils dwindled away and were healed without scars. Job once more was comfortable and healthy. From then on, as though by a miracle, everything came his way. His brothers, sisters and friends who had left him turned back to him to visit and comfort him and brought gifts of money and jewelry. He bought livestock, and they increased so well that in time he was twice as wealthy as he had ever been before! (Verses 10-12.) Besides doubling the number of animals he had owned, an even greater physical blessing came upon him.

It was a new family.

God gave Job and his wife seven more sons and three more daughters, and his daughters were known as the fairest in the land. (Verses 13-15.)

Job had grown children when this great trouble happened to him, but after that he lived many more years to see his children's children to the fourth generation. (Verses 16-17.)

Down through the centuries Job has become known as the most patient man who ever lived. It would be more fitting, however, to recognize him for what the Bible points him out to be -- perhaps the most self-righteous man who ever lived. Being self-righteous doesn't always mean being pompously pious and looking down on others as being miserably low sinners. In Job's case, it meant that he was so conscious and proud of being obedient that he felt he was without sin, and that his great suffering came without a reason.

The happy ending to this story was that after much trial he was able to see in himself this hard-to-recognize sin and be willing to repent. It was his repentance that brought an end to his great trial.

This important human experience might have been totally lost to us today. But God instructed Moses, during the wilderness wandering, that Job's account of his suffering should become HOLY Scripture -- a vital part of the Bible's "Old Testament," for our use today.

Chapter 59

INTEGRATION IN ISRAEL

WE NOW MOVE FORWARD in time. It is a few years after the Israelites' conquest of most of Canaan. Joshua has become more than a hundred years old, and is aware that his life is nearing an end. (Joshua 23:1.)

Realizing that it would be wise to again remind the Israelites what their attitude toward God should be, Joshua requests that the elders, princes, judges and officers of all the tribes assemble at the main camp of the Israelites.

God Keeps His Promises

"Consider all the wonderful things God has done for you in the conquest of this land," Joshua addressed them. "God has proved that He does as He promises. If you will continue to be of strong courage and obey God, He will surely help you drive out the inhabitants who yet remain in the regions of

Canaan to which you are yet to move. In fact, God has said that if you are obedient, only one of you will be required to chase out a thousand of the enemy! (Joshua 23:2-10.)

"As one who is about to depart from this life, I warn you in the strongest terms that unless you faithfully keep the covenant made with God, Israel can look forward only to defeat and death!" (Verses 11-16.)

At another time Joshua again summoned the elders, princes, judges and officers of all the tribes to Shechem, the place where Joseph's remains were buried. It is a few miles north of Shiloh. (Joshua 24:1,32; John 4:5.) There Joshua spoke to the representatives of all Israel, briefly reviewing the history of the people since before the time of Abraham, and showing how God had dealt with them.

"There are those in Israel who regard sin lightly -- who still have regard for some of the false gods our forefathers fell to worshipping," Joshua told them. "There are others among us who secretly tend to revere the pagan gods of this land. No one can serve both the true God and pagan gods. (Matt. 6:24.) My God -- the God of Moses, the God of our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -- is a jealous God who will utterly consume all who fail or refuse to be faithful to Him. Today every Israelite should decide whom he will serve As for my family and I, we will serve the true God." (Joshua 24:2-15.)

"God forbid that we should forsake Him to serve idols or false gods!" the crowd chorused with enthusiasm. "We shall indeed serve and obey the one true God! Because His great miracles brought us out of Egyptian slavery, protected us from more powerful nations around us, and drove the idol-worshipping nations out of our land." (Verses 16-18.)

"Then you are indeed witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve our Creator!" Joshua called out.

Thus Joshua guided the thousands of leading Israelites and all that generation to renew the national covenant with God. He was pleased. The lessons of forty years wandering as children and young men and women had not been learned in vain. They responded in such a willing and sincere manner, that Joshua felt, as he dismissed them to return to their various tribes, the meeting had been well worthwhile, a fitting climax to his life. (Verses 19-28.)

Not long afterward Joshua died at the age of one hundred and ten years. He was buried at Mt. Ephraim in the property that had been granted him. The Bible honors Joshua by stating that Israel served God during Joshua's time of leadership and for a score of years afterward, until the deaths of all those leaders who had served under Joshua and were influenced by his good example and by seeing God's great miracles. (Verses 29-31.)

Eleazar the priest, Aaron's son, died shortly after Joshua's death. He, too, was buried at Mt. Ephraim. (Verse 33.)

Israel's rest from the labor of the conquest of Canaan developed into a period of several years. In the growing prosperity there was also a marked increase in population.

Canaanites Return!

During that time many of the Canaanites who had fled to neighboring lands were gradually moving back into some of the cities and sites from which God had removed them. There were also some cities and areas, especially west of the Jordan, that hadn't been reached by the Israelites. (Joshua 13:1-6.) All this meant that Israel's wars of conquest weren't yet over. If Israel had been fully obedient and faithful, Canaan could have been cleared of all the enemy in only a short time.

When at last Israel decided to again take up arms to continue to rout the Canaanites, there was the question of which tribe should move first. Phinehas, who had become high priest after Eleazar's death, consulted God at the tabernacle, and God made it known that the tribe of Judah should go first, and that He, God, would help the soldiers of Judah overcome their enemies.

Because the allotted land of the tribe of Simeon bordered on the south of that of Judah, the leaders of Judah suggested that Simeon accompany them. The idea was welcomed by Simeon. It meant a stronger and larger armed force to be used in both their territories. (Judges 1:1-3.)

The soldiers of Judah and Simeon didn't go far before running into action. Only a few miles southwest of Shiloh was a city called Bezek. It was bristling with thousands of rearmed Canaanites. Many of these Canaanites served their new king out of fear. He was a cruel tyrant who cut off the thumbs and big toes of any of his people who refused to submit to him. The Israelites were a little surprised to find enemy troops in such numbers so close to Shiloh. But they remembered God's promise to them, and lost no time in attacking.

In that one battle ten thousand of the enemy fell before Judah and Simeon. During the excitement the king of Bezek, Adoni-bezek, managed to escape and flee southward with a few aides. Having heard that he was a cruel warrior who would try to live to fight another day, the Israelites made a special effort to capture Adoni-bezek. Mounted Israelites managed to catch up with him in the mountains. Instead of killing him, they taught him a lesson he never forgot. They followed his custom of cutting off his enemies' thumbs and great toes. Deprived of these digits, he was taken to Jerusalem -- which Judah and Simeon had already conquered, but later deserted.

(Verses 8-9.) Here Adoni-bezek was displayed as a disgraceful example of what would happen to the enemies of Israel.

Adoni-bezek took his punishment bravely, however, and admitted that the God of Israel was dealing with him as he justly deserved. He claimed that one time or another his prisoners had included a total of seventy rulers, and that he had cut the thumbs and great toes off all of them!

Day after day the men of Judah and Simeon moved southward to mop up all opposing forces. They spread westward to the city of Gaza on the Great Sea and eastward almost to the southern tip of the Dead Sea.

God helped them to be almost completely successful in their campaign. However, some Canaanites managed to escape and refortify some of the conquered cities, such as Jerusalem. (Verse 21.) These few exceptions were only because the Israelites weren't all entirely obedient or didn't have sufficient faith in God. (Judges 1:4-20.)

About that time the tribe of Ephraim, sometimes called the house of Joseph, set out over its territory, especially to the southwest, which included Shiloh and the area around it. Ephraim found that the city of Bethel obviously had been remanned into a strong fortress, even though Joshua and his troops had slain Bethel's soldiers during the capture of the nearby city of Ai.

Knowing nothing of what Bethel was like now inside or how many soldiers were within the walls, the officers of Ephraim sent out a few scouts to try to discover these things. These men hid at night at a safe distance away, but close enough to keep a careful watch to try to determine where the city entrances were and how they might be used to get inside Bethel.

Unexpected Help

Opportunity came in an unexpected way one evening. Some figures emerged from the shadow of Bethel's walls and moved toward the general area where the spies were concealed. Moving silently, the men of Ephraim swiftly surrounded and trapped the oncoming figures. They proved to be a man and his family who claimed they were Hittites who had sneaked out through a small, poorly guarded, side entrance and were hoping to escape from Bethel and their Canaanite overlords.

The spies hustled the Hittites back to where Ephraim was camped, and officers questioned them further.

"We are Israelites, and you are too late to escape from Canaan unless you show us where we can get into Bethel and tell us all you know about the layout of Bethel and how well it is armed," the officers told the Hittite.

This man they had captured had lived in Bethel for some time, and he knew its defenses. As he foresaw that Israel would soon take over Bethel anyway, he disclosed its defenses to the Ephraimites. For the sake of his family he pointed out a small side entrance that could easily be forced and gave the Israelites the information they required. For this he was freed and sent on his way. (Later, when he reached the ancient land of the Hittites to the north, he founded a city and called it Luz, which had been the ancient name of Bethel.) (Judges 1:21-26.)

Perhaps God had purposely sent the Hittite to inform the Israelites. In any event, the information was used to good advantage, and the soldiers of Ephraim successfully forced their way into Bethel to overcome all within its walls.

What the tribes of Judah, Simeon and Ephraim did as their part of taking over Canaan was a fairly good example to the other tribes. But even though all the Israelites had God's unfailing promise to exert His tremendous power in helping them, some of the tribes failed to dislodge or overcome their enemies in various areas.

Instead of routing the Canaanites from some of the regions, Israel allowed the Canaanites to stay on certain conditions. Often it was with the understanding that their enemies would regularly give gifts or make some kind of payments to Israel in exchange for their being free from attack. (Verses 27-33.)

In other areas some of the Israelites tired of fighting against their enemies. They decided to integrate with them. (Verses 34-36.) Over the years this meant that many Israelites intermarried with the Canaanites. This is always the result of integration. So Israel fell to worshipping the pagan gods and idols of Canaan. God had repeatedly warned them not to integrate. (Exodus 20:3-7; Exodus 23:31-33; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Deuteronomy 6:4-7, 14; Deuteronomy 7:1-11; Joshua 23:6-8; Judges 3:1-7.)

By the time another generation had grown up since Joshua's death, much of Israel had taken integration lightly and had fallen into sin! The proposed last stages of the conquest of Canaan had bogged down to a stop. Prosperity was declining little by little as the Israelites began to live more and more like the Canaanites around them. Sex crimes increased. It was becoming unsafe to go out at night. The tribes lacked the pioneer spirit to move on and establish homes, farms, towns and cities in land that already was theirs. Israel had reached that disobedient state that comes just before God steps in to bring on painful chastisement.

The greatest number of Israelites in one area was still in and around the Shiloh-Mt. Ephraim area. Regardless of the crumbling condition of the tribes as a whole, there were people who still came to the tabernacle to offer sacrifices and consult with the high priest and his assistants. Shiloh was still

the nerve center of the nation, and it was there that a peculiar and awesome thing took place.

A Surprise Visitor

One day a strange man was seen walking toward Shiloh from the direction of Gilgal. There was nothing unusual about seeing a lone man approaching the Israelite camp, but there was something about this man that caused people to stare and wonder who he was.

He appeared as an ordinary-looking man, but the manner in which he strode along seemed to indicate one of great authority and confidence. His soldier-type attire was different only in that it was made of what appeared to be the very best quality of cloth and leather. The man's only weapon was an especially well-shaped sword that gleamed and glinted with unusual brilliance as it swung from his belt.

Before he reached the edge of the camp, armed guards stepped out to block his way. They were puzzled as to how he had managed to get past the sentinels stationed farther away.

"You can go no farther until you give your identity and state why you are here," one of the soldiers barked.

The stranger merely gazed at the soldier, who suddenly lost his feeling of authority, and stepped back in a gesture of respect.

Undetained, the man strode on. By the time he reached the center of the camp, Phinehas the high priest, elders and officers had been told of his coming, and they were on hand. Phinehas possibly realized who the man was. At least he bowed low in an attitude of deep respect. Others followed his example as the stranger paused before the swiftly growing crowd to hold up his arms and silence the increasing murmur from the throng.

"Listen Israel, and remember my words!" the stranger cried out in a voice so strong it startled the listeners. "I brought you up from Egypt and into this land I promised to your fathers. I made a covenant with you that I would help you conquer the land if you would do your part by obeying me. (Exodus 23:23-28.) You were to destroy all the pagan altars. You were forbidden to make any agreement of any kind with your enemies or to integrate with them. But you have not obeyed me! Why? Remember, I also said that if you were to fail in driving out the Canaanites, they would become as thorns in your sides and their gods would be as deadly traps! (Judges 2:1-3; Exodus 23:31-33; Deuteronomy 7:16; Psalm 106:34-40; Joshua 23:12-13.) Now, because you have broken my covenant, and intermarried with them, don't expect any more help from me in driving out the Canaanites! On the contrary, I shall allow them to prevail against you!" (Judges 2:1-3.)

When the stranger finished speaking, there was not a sound from the onlookers. All eyes followed the man as he turned aside and walked away. He spoke to no one, and no one tried to speak to him. Then somehow he was lost to the viewers.

Probably very few people realized that they had just seen and heard the same one whom Joshua had met alone just before the fall of Jericho.

Whatever they realized, all experienced an awesome feeling in the presence of this stranger. After he had so abruptly vanished, they began to murmur and mill about with a growing sense of foreboding and fear. Some wept and moaned. Others fell to their knees to pray.

Pressed by an awareness of guilt, many obtained the proper animals and flocked around the tabernacle, anxious to make sacrifices to acknowledge their sins. Word of the event quickly spread to Israelites everywhere in the land, and with a growing fear of terrible things that might come on Israel at any hour. (Judges 2:4-5.)

The expressions of repentance didn't last long. When days passed and nothing awesome occurred, many people began returning to their wrong ways. In fact, they slipped still further into the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites with whom they continued to intermarry. Many were the gods they foolishly and futilely worshipped along with their pagan enemies. (Verses 11-13.)

The woes of the Israelites began in a small way. The unfriendly Canaanites in various areas started to plague them with public demonstrations and with little attacks by small bands of soldiers. Marauders increasingly beset the Israelites at all hours, and they always succeeded in leaving much damage and death. Here and there the Israelites began to be pushed back, and in some instances even had to withdraw from cities they had captured, often at the cost of many lives. It was more and more evident that God had forsaken Israel, at least as far as protection in war was concerned. The tide of conquest had at last reversed in favor of the enemy. (Judges 2:11-15; 2:20-23; 3:1-7.)

A Foreign Invader!

The gradual, painful push-back by the Canaanites was only the beginning of troubles for Israel. One day an excited messenger rode into the camp at Shiloh with the shocking news that the king of Mesopotamia -- a land to the northeast -- was pushing southward with thousands of troops, and had already conquered the half-tribe of Manasseh east of the Jordan!

Feverish activity followed, but the Israelites didn't seem to be able to rightly organize for battle. Many of them were so excited and fearful that all they

could do was moan with fear. Others fell to their knees and shouted to God to save them from Chushan-rishathaim, the approaching ruler who was rumored to be unusually powerful, ruthless and cruel.

Chapter 60

WORSHIPPING GOD IN VAIN

IN THE face of danger from their enemies, the Israelites began to pray. But it was too late. The land was so full of sin that their prayers were in vain. God had no intention of answering them until they prayed in the spirit of repentance. Their many idols made their worship sinful. It was all in vain, because God does not hear the prayers of idolaters.

Equally useless were the frantically constructed barricades and other military preparations.

An Invasion of Israel

Three days later wave upon wave of invaders from the north pushed over and past Shiloh, leaving thousands of dead and wounded in and about the camp!

Within days the soldiers of Mesopotamia moved over all Canaan. They bottled up Canaanites and Israelites alike in a state of destruction and helplessness. It seemed to powerless Israel that God was helping the invaders more than He had previously helped Israel, though actually God had simply withdrawn His helpful power from the Israelites.

Wherever the Mesopotamians conquered large numbers of people, they left strong garrisons of soldiers to keep the vanquished people under their power. Valuables were stripped from the Israelites. A system of semi-slavery was developed by which Israel was forced to raise animals and crops for the conquerors. No tribes or areas were overlooked in this matter of constant contribution. The easy life of Israel was transformed in just a few weeks into one of misery and servitude. There was no outlook for anything but this unhappy condition for some years to come. (Judges 3:5-8.)

After a time, when they could see no way out of their trouble, the Israelites fell into a state of sincere repentance. For many, life became a round of tears, forced labor and prayers. Still the years of servitude wore on.

Meanwhile a man by the name of Othniel felt quite strongly that something should be added to those prayers and tears. He was of the tribe of Judah, a nephew and son-in-law of Caleb. He had years before distinguished himself in leading troops to vanquish many Canaanites. (Judges 1:12-13; Judges 3:9.)

In their disorganized state the Israelites had little military strength to resist their conquerors. But Othniel secretly managed to establish an underground movement that grew with each passing month. When he decided the time was right for an uprising, secretly armed Israelites made a strong surprise attack on the Mesopotamian garrison at Shiloh. It was so sudden -- and successful -- that not one enemy soldier escaped to alert troops stationed elsewhere.

Repentance Brings Deliverance

Othniel distributed the captured arms to equip more Israelites for hasty assaults on other enemy barracks in other parts of Canaan. The result was that within a few days Israel enjoyed a surprising victory over all the enemy soldiers stationed in Canaan.

When news of what had happened finally reached the wicked ruler of Mesopotamia, he gathered thousands of troops together. They moved swiftly southward from the vicinity of Damascus to attack the Israelite camp at Shiloh. Meanwhile, the Israelites were so encouraged by their victory that Israelites of fighting ability swarmed from all parts of Canaan to swell Othniel's army.

Before the Mesopotamians could reach Shiloh they were ambushed by thousands upon thousands of Israelite troops desperately hungry for freedom. The enemy from the north slowly fell away -- until with God's help the main body of soldiers perished. The remnants of the occupation forces fled for their lives. Victory for Israel was complete. (Judges 3:10.)

At last, after eight long years as a captive nation, Israel abruptly emerged to freedom. God had listened to the prayers of the repentant. He had chosen the man Othniel to lead the people to victory and freedom. In fact, God chose Othniel as the first of a line of righteous men who were inspired to lead and guide Israel for many years to come.

The attitude of the people had changed so much during their eight years of servitude that they were quite willing to obey God now. They cooperated with Othniel in the reform he required to be carried out for the good of the nation. Intermarriage with the Canaanites and worship of strange gods were forbidden. Those who indulged in these things were harshly punished. There was a return to the ways of living according to God's laws. The result was an

Israel much happier and more prosperous than the nation had been for a long time.

Under the leadership of Othniel, God's chosen servant, Israel enjoyed forty years of peace. During those forty years Othniel was the first of the leaders - - since the time of Joshua -- known as JUDGES. They weren't the kind of judges who were instituted only as men who decided on cases of justice. They were more like rulers, and they headed Israel from Joshua's time until the time of Samuel. (Judges 3: 11.)

Lessons Soon Forgotten

Othniel maintained law and order in Israel. But soon after his death the people had no strong leader and again began to lapse back into their sinful ways. God's anger again was roused against them. Once more they were bound to fall under a curse, though they had no idea how God planned to punish them.

The nation of Moab, east of the Dead Sea, was then ruled by a man by the name of Eglon. Much of the territory occupied by Israel east of the Jordan had at one time been part of Moab, and Eglon was determined to recover it. He didn't realize that his strong desire had been planted firmly in his mind by God, who planned to use him to chasten Israel.

Besides building his own army into a strong fighting force, Eglon enlisted the aid of thousands of troops from the Ammonites and Amalekites, two small nations that hated Israel because of that nation's previous victories over them. (Judges 3: 12-13.)

Eglon's forces pushed westward across the Jordan with such strength that the main body of Israel in the central area of Canaan fell captive almost immediately to the Moabites and their allies. Not many Israelites were slain by Eglon, because it was his purpose to cripple Israel as a fighting force and then exact heavy tribute from the people.

Eglon established strong garrisons west of the Jordan to keep Israel powerless. To show that he had extended the ancient borders of his nation west of the river, he set up north-south rows of images in the area of Gilgal. Here he also built a palace for himself so that he might more closely exert control over the captured Israelites. For eighteen years the Israelites were in bondage to Eglon. (Verse 14.)

Again, as might be expected, the Israelites went into their state of repentance. They regretted, as usual, falling into such a sinful condition. Their tears, sufferings and prayers touched the ever-merciful heart of the Creator, who this time chose a sturdy, left-handed Benjamite named Ehud to help change the course of events.

Outwitting a Heathen King

Ehud's part started when he was chosen to head a group of messengers to bear a valuable tribute to the king of Moab. Irksome as it was to the Israelites, wicked Eglon required that the gifts of gold, silver, jewels and produce be brought to him with the pomp and ceremony only a king could demand. On this occasion, Ehud, who had great strength and skill in the use of his left hand, hid a sharp dagger beneath his clothes on his right hip. After the tribute had been presented to Eglon, Ehud and his bearers left and headed back toward Shiloh. Ehud went only as far as the nearby border that had been marked by the stone images. There he told the others to return to Shiloh without him. He quickly returned to the king's palace with the excuse that he had a secret message for Eglon. When guards told the king, he asked Ehud into his private quarters and dismissed his servants. (Judges 3:15-20.)

"Now what is this secret message you claim you have for me?" the king asked. "Would it surprise you to know that it is from God?" queried.

"What do you mean -- from God?" Eglon demanded, lifting his weighty body from his chair and moving excitedly toward Ehud.

"I mean THIS!" Ehud exclaimed.

His left hand slipped under his cloak and whipped out his dagger with such speed that the Moabite ruler didn't have time to shout for help. Ehud quickly thrust the dagger into Eglon's body, then hastily left the room and noiselessly locked the doors behind him. Justice had been done. He slipped out the private entrance leading outside, locked the door, took the key and set out for the area of Mt. Ephraim.

Later, when servants came to wait on their king and found the doors locked, they believed that Eglon didn't want to be disturbed. They left, but when they returned to find the doors still locked, they became concerned. At the risk of facing the king's wrath, they obtained a key and cautiously opened the doors. To their horror they found their ruler dead from a dagger that had been thrust past the hilt into the obese body. (Judges 3:21-26.)

God Is Wise and Just

At this point, as at other instances in past episodes of the Bible Story, a few readers will be inclined to shudder a bit. They will wonder why God would allow one of His chosen people to execute someone, and why the story should be included in a version written especially for younger people.

The Bible should be read by young and old alike. It is a frank description of the history of Israel, in part, describing the many woes brought on by human nature. In that telling there is no allowance for the delicate feelings of individuals.

God specifically chose Israel for a certain purpose, and a part of that purpose included ridding Canaan of the heathen peoples who lived there. In a later judgment these once-heathen people who have not had an opportunity for salvation will be given that opportunity by God. (Matthew 12:41-42; Revelation 20:11-12; Isaiah 65:19-25.) As far as God was concerned, it was no different for an Israelite to execute an idolatrous heathen king than it was for an Israelite soldier to slay an enemy soldier in battle. Israel, remember, was a fleshly nation, and unconverted -- except for a very few like the prophets and judges. Only God has the authority to tell anyone to kill. It is the responsibility of God, only, to decide when a wicked person should be executed for his own good and the good of those around him. Nevertheless, today it is not a Christian's duty to execute this kind of justice. God leaves that to the unconverted who run this world. Jesus said His kingdom is NOT of this world (John 18:36.), otherwise his servants would fight. Israel was of this world. But the Kingdom of God is of the world tomorrow. And Christ will fight to establish it when He comes again.

Ehud lost no time in reaching Mt. Ephraim, a few miles to the northwest, where he summoned many Israelite men to tell them what had happened.

"These Moabite soldiers stationed here to keep us captive are the choicest warriors of their nation," Ehud told them. "But when they hear that their leader is dead, they will lose their desire to keep guarding us, and will want to flee across Jordan to their country. It is according to God's will that you take up your hidden arms now and follow me!" (Judges 3:27.)

By the time news of their ruler's death reached the Moabite soldiers massed near Jericho, Ehud and the Israelite soldiers had come charging out of the Mt. Ephraim area and were well on their way toward the Jordan river.

As Ehud predicted, having been inspired by God, leaders of the Moabite troops in Canaan quickly decided to move their soldiers back to Moab when they learned that their king had been mysteriously slain.

They had a feeling that the God of Israel had something to do with the matter, and they feared it was an omen that Moabite troops might also meet death if they were to remain in Canaan.

Ten thousand Moabite soldiers of the Jericho region set off on the shortest route toward the Jordan -- a road that ran almost directly eastward. Ehud's inspired foreknowledge of how the enemy would retreat made it possible for the Israelites to know they should station themselves at the Jordan River to prevent the escape of the Moabite army.

Long before the Moabites could reach the river, the Israelites were ready and waiting in ambush. When the Moabites arrived, the Israelites closed in on them with such surprising fury that when the fray was over, every Moabite of the ten thousand was dead.

When the remaining Moabites at Eglon's palace and those stationed elsewhere in Canaan heard about what happened to the ten thousand picked troops, all fled eastward inside the true borders of their nation. Israel was free from the oppression of Moab.

Because of his ability in leadership, Ehud became the second Israelite ruler known as a judge. He remained in power for many years of peace and prosperity in Israel, which meant that during that time the people were obedient, for the most part, to God's laws. (Judges 3:28-30.)

A short verse at the end of the third chapter of the book of Judges names a man by the name of Shamgar as another man of leadership who was possibly a lesser judge in western Canaan during Ehud's time. The Philistines, a nation of city-states on the shores of the Great Sea, had joined with Moab in attacking the Israelites in that region and had kept them in servitude for many years as farmers. The servitude was abruptly ended when the husky crop producers turned on their conquerors with their soil-tilling implements. An unusual accomplishment of this encounter was Shamgar's wielding an ox-goad (a sharpened, metal-tipped hardwood pole) so swiftly and expertly that he killed six hundred Philistines, though possibly part of that number was included in the efforts of Shamgar's fellow farmers. (Verse 31.)

And Now a Northern Foe

It might seem discouragingly repetitious to report that after Ehud died, Israel again lapsed into a state of rebellion against God. But it happened! Once more God used a pagan king to punish the people. This time it was Jabin, a strong ruler in north Canaan. He was a descendant of that Jabin who had many years previously tried to attack the army of Israel with iron chariots. He had been overcome by Joshua and had lost his city in flames. This next Jabin had rebuilt the city of Hazor, and had become so powerful that he overcame the Israelites in the northern part of Canaan. Ironically, this later Jabin used nine hundred iron chariots as a means of victory. The general of his army was the dreaded Sisera.

For twenty drawn-out, unhappy years Israel suffered under the terrible domination of Jabin. (Judges 4:1-3.) Again, as usual, Israel cried out to God for mercy. The people showed proof of their repentance by departing from the evil ways they knew were forbidden by God.

As a means of rescuing Israel, God used a woman by the name of Deborah. She lived in Mt. Ephraim, and was one of such good judgment and fair thinking that many Israelites came to her for advice. This woman was not a judge in the sense that she was a ruler with authority, though God chose her to help Israel in several ways. (Verses 4-5.)

For one thing, God gave Deborah knowledge of what could happen in Israel's favor, but it was necessary for a man who was a military leader to carry out the plan. Deborah knew of such a man. His name was Barak. He came from his home in the north when she sent for him.

"God has disclosed to me that if a capable man such as you can succeed in gathering ten thousand armed Israelites on Mt. Tabor, then He will give them victory over the Canaanites who seek them out there for battle," Deborah told Barak. "With a promise such as this from God, is there any good reason why you should refuse to be the one who can be of such great service by gathering and leading those men against the Canaanites?" (Judges 4:6-7.)

"I can manage to organize the army," Barak replied, "but I would want to know more about what God has revealed to you. I'll go to Mt. Tabor with the men, but only if you will accompany me to advise me in the crucial moments."

Deborah agreed, but told Barak that since he was depending too much on a woman and was not showing enough manly leadership, God would allow a woman to destroy General Sisera.

Barak secretly organized the necessary troops. Most of them came from the northern tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, though many men from other tribes swelled the number. The army succeeded in getting to the flat area of Mt. Tabor, and there encamped. (Verses 8-10.)

When Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, learned about the Israelites being on Mt. Tabor, he gathered his men to go there. Included in his mighty fighting force were nine hundred chariots and thousands of trained warriors so feared by Israel. (Verses 12-13.)

Chapter 61

THE WAY TO PEACE

ON MT. TABOR the Israelite soldiers were able to see the Canaanite forces gathering on a plain several miles away to the southwest. An excessive amount of dust, such as would be raised by horses and vehicles, proved to

the Israelites that the enemy's dreaded chariots were being brought up. (Judges 4:10-13.) Only God's supernatural help could save Israel now!

The Canaanites moved to a part of the valley close to Mt. Tabor, then set up camp for the night. Sisera, the Canaanite general, wasn't concerned with the possibility of the Israelites attacking, even though they had some advantage by being on higher ground. He knew they had no desire to tangle with his chariots and his large army. His plan was to capture the lesser-equipped Israelites in their smaller numbers when they were forced to come down off the mountain for necessities. Sisera had no doubt that the small Israelite army would be easy to wipe out under any condition.

Not Enough Manhood in Israel's Men

Meanwhile, in the camp of Israel, Barak worriedly muttered: "If we go down the mountain we'll be wiped out by that huge number of men and chariots!"

"The time hasn't come yet to leave the mountain," Deborah said. "But the soldiers should be ready when that time comes."

The time came early the next morning, a while before dawn. Inspired by God, Deborah informed Barak that the Israelites should charge down the slope at once to attack, and that they would have God's supernatural help. (Verse 14.) Barak was inspired by Deborah's example and faith. He ordered the men to follow him down the mountain. Many of them, as they poured down off Mt. Tabor, were filled with dismay at the prospect of facing what was obviously a superior enemy. They approached the camp of the Canaanites quietly, but it wasn't possible to get beyond the enemy sentries without causing shouts of alarm. When the sentries sounded the alarm, the Israelites attacked with all the courage they could muster.

Bedlam reigned among Sisera's troops as their attackers caught them napping. Shouts, screams, the neighing of startled horses, the clash of metal against metal and the general confusion made it impossible for Canaanite officers to get their men organized. The chariot drivers, stationed at some distance from the infantry, managed to get their horses hooked to many of the chariots and to get moving. However, with men tumbling and scrambling and struggling in all directions, the chariots ran down many more Canaanites than Israelites. God was beginning to fight Israel's battle as He had promised. (Verse 15.)

After making a half-hearted initial attempt to fight off the oncoming Israelites, the whole Canaanite army turned and fled northwestward down the Kishon River valley toward the hoped-for refuge of their fort at Harosheth. By now it was dawn, and in their fright the Canaanites -- especially those in chariots -- might have outrun their Israelite pursuers had it not been that God had decreed otherwise.

Suddenly heavy rains fell in the region of the Kishon valley. The river rose rapidly. The closer the Canaanites moved to the stream, the softer and muddier the ground became. When the chariots ran into these spots they bogged down and came to a sudden stop. Chariots racing up from the rear smashed into them, resulting in a muddy mass of vehicles and struggling horses and men.

The men and horses that managed to get past the soft spots in the ground only plunged on to end up in the swollen waters of the Kishon as it broke over its banks into a flash flood which swept away many of Sisera's troops. (Judges 5:21.) The Israelites swept in close behind to cut off any attempted back-tracking and cut down the enemy with swords, slings, knives and spears.

God had again stepped in to rescue Israel by bringing Jabin's army to a swift end in a welter of mud, water and blood.

As for Sisera, he was among those who raced away in chariots. When his chariot became bogged in mud, he managed in the confusion to leap to safety and run north-eastward across the plain toward the hills. He had no way of knowing whether or not he had been observed, but he felt certain that the Israelites would make every effort to find him.

On the other side of Mt. Tabor, on a branch of the plain, was the dwelling of a Kenite named Heber, who Sisera believed was friendly to the northern Canaanites. After running a few hours, Sisera neared Heber's tent. The Kenite's wife, whose name was Jael, happened to see the fatigued Canaanite general staggering toward her tent. She knew who he was, and went out to meet him.

Sisera's Prophesied Doom

"Come rest in my tent," she told him as she helped him along. (Judges 4:15-18.)

Inside the tent, he wearily lay down, exhausted by his race for freedom. When Sisera asked for water, Jael gave him clabbered milk to quench his thirst and make him sleep more soundly, and then covered him with a blanket. (Judges 5:25.)

"If anyone comes to ask about me, don't mention that you have seen me," Sisera warned Jael. "You will be well rewarded to protect me from any of those fanatical, God-fearing Israelites!"

Those were the last words uttered by the pagan Canaanite general. He was so weary that he fell asleep almost immediately, though he wouldn't have

done so if he could have realized even to the smallest extent what was about to befall him.

In another compartment of her tent Jael listened intently until she could be certain, by Sisera's slow, loud breathing, that he was deep in slumber. Then she noiselessly moved outside, pulled up a sharp tent stake and reached for a mallet. Very careful not to make a sound, she entered the room where Sisera slept on his side. With a quick, strong blow of the tent stake mallet, she drove the stake through Sisera's temples, then into the ground, killing the general almost instantly. (Judges 4:19-21; Judges 5:26.)

God allowed Jael to take Sisera's life in this grisly, cold-blooded manner as a warning to us all. Those Canaanites were better off dead. They sacrificed many of their babies in the temples of Baal and filled adjoining graveyards with jars containing these tiny corpses. When building a new house, a Canaanite family would sacrifice a baby and put its body in the foundation to bring good luck to the rest of the family. Archaeologists who have found the many tiny skeletons of these sacrificed babies have wondered why God did not destroy the Canaanites sooner. He would have done so if Israel had obeyed His command to execute all the idolatrous Canaanites when they first conquered the land. (Deuteronomy 7:1-6.)

Because Sisera was an idolatrous Canaanite, he was one more to be purged from the land after he had been used for the purpose of punishing the Israelites and bringing them to repentance. As one who sought to destroy the army of Israel, he was denied the so-called honor of dying in action, as a high-ranking soldier would ordinarily prefer.

Only a little while after this unsavory incident, Jael looked out to see the victorious Israelites trotting across the plain. She ran out toward the men, waving frantically to attract their attention. When they reached her she told them that she had an important message for their leader, and Barak approached her to hear what she had to say.

"If you are seeking Jabin's general, Sisera, I can take you to him at once," Jael told Barak.

"Show us," Barak commanded.

Jael led Barak and a few of his men to her tent and into her private compartment, where she drew back a curtain to reveal the nailed-down Canaanite to the startled Israelites. Then Barak remembered Deborah's prophecy that a woman would destroy Sisera because Barak had at first depended too much on Deborah's faith. In humiliation, Barak realized his lack of faith was a sin against God. He fully repented and was forgiven by God in whom he now fully trusted. (Hebrews 11:13, 32, 39.)

Although Israel was victorious that day in becoming free, the one who had planned to defeat Israel was still safe in his quarters to the north. That was

Jabin, king of the northern Canaanites. On hearing of the defeat of his army, he quickly sought refuge, but within a few days he fell into the hands of his enemies and lost his life. (Judges 4:22-24.)

Deliverance from the Canaanites was considered such a happy accomplishment that a great celebration was held by Israel. Songs were composed, and Deborah and Barak led the people in praising God with loud, hearty enthusiasm. (Judges 5:1-31.) Most of them realized that their Creator was the source of their strength and power, though at times they forgot that important fact because every man insisted on doing what he thought best. (Judges 17:6.) God had specifically commanded His people not to do what they thought best (Deuteronomy 12:8) because that way is often wrong and leads to death. (Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25.) Most of the Israelites had not yet learned that man's conscience is not a reliable guide for conduct -- that man needs God's law to tell him how to live. (Deuteronomy 12:32.)

For forty more years after Jabin's overthrow, Israel was free from enemies. (Judges 5:31.) But before that many years passed, another generation came into being, and a large part of Israel again fell into living in a disorderly and lawless manner, each man following his own conscience -- doing what HE thought best -- letting his own opinion, instead of God's law, tell him how to live.

The Midianites Again

About two hundred years previously, when Moses was the leader, Israel had almost wiped out the idolatrous nation of Midian on their border east of the Dead Sea. Since that time the Midianites had greatly increased in numbers and, though several generations had passed since the fateful war with Israel, a fierce hatred of their victors still existed with the Midianites.

At this point God stepped in to cause Midianite leaders to fan that hatred so that Midian would be used to punish Israel. The result was that the vengeance-seeking Midianites swarmed up out of their land to end Israel's forty years of freedom, pleasure and sin!

The Israelites had become so disorganized and weak that the fierce Midianites chased them out of their cities and off their farms. By the thousands the Israelites ran for safety into the mountains. They hid in caves and even in the narrow, secluded canyons -- wherever they could hide or fortify themselves. (Judges 6:1-2.)

The Midianites kept on moving back and forth through all areas to rout the Israelites and rob them of their livestock and crops. On their return to each conquered area, the Midianites would attack any Israelites who had tried to return to their homes. Many Israelites were forced to flee outside Palestine

to the western shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the sparsely settled coastland of northwestern Europe.

In some regions the attacks by the Midianites were so frequent that the remaining Israelites moved into the wooded mountains to establish permanent residence. Their only homes were many caverns and canyons in the rugged Palestinian hills.

Living Like Animals

Between forays by the enemy a part of the Israelites secretly went back to their farms and grazing areas to try to continue raising crops and stock. Sometimes they were successful for a while. The Midianites couldn't be everywhere at the same time. When they did come, look-outs generally reported their arrival in time for the Israelites to move from the valleys to safety in the mountains hideaways and strongholds.

Despite all this, the Israelites stubbornly continued to live their own way, though they had to live in caves like animals, rather than repent and obey God and have His divine protection.

For two or three harvest seasons Israel managed fairly well on what food could be raised in the more secluded valleys. Then the Midianite soldiers began bringing their families and their herds. Furthermore, the Amalekites and other Arabian tribes began pouring into Canaan, and just at a time of harvest.

Cities were taken over, farms were stripped of their produce and herds and flocks grazing in the valleys were seized by the invaders before the Israelites could hide them in the mountains. The numbers of the enemy were this time so great and so spread out that the Israelites had little or no opportunity to go after food. They were forced to remain in their mountain refuges on the verge of starvation. (Judges 6:3-6.)

Being cooped up without a regular source of food became an increasingly more serious problem for Israel. Well-organized groups sneaked down at night to seize vegetables or fruit or meat, wherever it could be found, but this pursuit became increasingly more dangerous as the enemy became more watchful, and whole bands of Israelites lost their lives trying to get something to eat.

By the time seven years had passed, Israel was in a desperate, half-starved condition. Life in caves and hollowed-out places had reduced a large part of the people to an unkempt state verging on barbarism.

At this time a man whose name isn't mentioned in the scriptures was chosen by God to remind the Israelites that they had brought this one more

calamity on themselves by their disobedience to God. Some of the people had already been begging God for forgiveness and help, and now thousands joined them. (Verses 6-10.)

Repentance Brings Divine Help

The Creator's mercy again was extended to Israel, though as usual the people were required to act in helping themselves. It began in the mountain town of Ophrah, about midway between the site of Jericho and Mt. Ephraim in the territory of the half-tribe of Manasseh. A relatively young man named Gideon was one day threshing wheat in an out-of-the-way place near his father's old winepress, long unused because the Israelites no longer had grapes with which to make wine.

Although hidden from passers-by, Gideon commanded a clear view down the mountain so that he could watch for approaching Midianites. He was certain that he was alone as he hand-threshed the few small but precious bundles of wheat he and a few servants had courageously gleaned the night before in a field below.

Abruptly he was aware that a man was sitting in the shade of an oak tree only a few yards away. Gideon was startled by the strangely sudden presence of this man, who might well have been a Midianite spy. He started to quietly gather up his wheat and scamper for safety, but before he could sack it up and leave, the man got up and sauntered toward Gideon, who was relieved to note that he obviously wasn't a Midianite.

"I see that you are very careful not to let your enemies know what you are doing," the stranger remarked. "Why do you, a strong, courageous young man, seem to fear the Midianites so much? Don't you know that your God is ready and willing to help you?"

"I don't know who you are, sir," Gideon replied, "but if God is willing to help us, why hasn't He rescued us from these terrible conditions?" (Verses 11-13.)

"Because Israel has ignored My laws and our agreement," the stranger answered.

"YOUR laws?" Gideon queried, staring.

"MY laws," the stranger replied firmly and calmly.

Gideon was a bit shaken by this answer. He met the gaze of the stranger, and realized that the brilliant eyes were those of one far greater than a human being! He respectfully waited for the stranger to continue.

Gideon's Divine Commission

"If you will act with faith in your Creator, you can help rescue Israel from the Midianites, Gideon," the stranger told him.

Gideon could scarcely believe what he heard. Although he had always refused to take part in the idolatrous practice of other Israelites, he couldn't at the moment realize why he should be chosen to help liberate Israel. He had never considered himself an outstanding leader, though he had some reputation among the Israelites of his area as being quite active in the welfare of his people, even at the risk of his own life.

"How is it possible for me to help rescue Israel, my Lord?" asked Gideon. "I am not wealthy and I am the youngest of my father's sons. I do not command any fighting force. Why should I be chosen to do something that many other men are more qualified and better equipped to do?"

"Don't be concerned about such things," the stranger said. "Your God will be your strength, and you shall strike down the Midianites as easily as though their army consisted of only one man!" (Judges 6: 14-16.)

Gideon hardly knew what to do. He didn't feel that he could accept such responsibility without knowing for certain that this man was really divinity in human form. On the other hand, he couldn't risk refusing a commission from God.

He asked the stranger to continue resting under the oak tree, excused himself and hurried to his abode not far away to quickly prepare a sacrificial offering of food. When he returned he presented unleavened cakes, broth and a boiled young goat to the stranger, who looked pleased at the sight of the food.

"Place the meat and cakes on this flat rock and pour the broth over them," Gideon was told, and he did so.

The stranger then touched the offering with the end of his staff. Abruptly fire shot up out of the rock, rapidly consuming the food! When Gideon turned his startled gaze up from the spectacle, the stranger had vanished! (Verses 17-21.)

Chapter 62

GOD'S FANTASTIC ARMY!

WHEN Gideon saw fire spitting up out of the rock on which he had placed food for his strange guest, the young Israelite was quite startled. He stared in awe as the food was swiftly burned to cinders after his guest had merely touched the rock with his staff.

When he looked up he was even more startled to find that the stranger had miraculously faded from view! (Judges 6:20-21.)

Idolatry Must Go!

Gideon realized then that God, and not some man, had commanded him to lead Israel to freedom from the Midianites. (Judges 6:11-16.) He fell face down by the flaming rock, fearful that he might be struck dead because he had come so close to God.

"Do not be afraid," he heard the voice of God say. "You shall not die because of this close contact with your Creator. Go about your business, and tonight I shall speak to you again."

Gideon was so thankful and impressed that he built an altar there and dedicated it to God. (Verses 22-24.) That night Gideon slept by that spot to protect his wheat from the Midianites and to await God. Before dawn God spoke to him.

"Gideon, you know now that it is indeed your Creator who has chosen you to lead Israel," God said. "Do as I instruct you. The people must cease their worshipping of idols before I free them. Go out tomorrow night and tear down the altar near your father's home dedicated to the sun-god called Baal."

In spite of all precautions by Gideon, someone had seen him coming from the direction of the altar before dawn. When the angry crowd heard of this, it moved to surround the home of his father, Joash. "Bring out your son or tell us where he is!" the people shouted. "He is guilty of tearing down our altar! We must kill Gideon to avenge the sun goddess!"

Joash scowled at the crowd. He was irked at what Gideon presumably had done, but he didn't want to see his son fall into the hands of these wrathful people.

"Why must you demand anything for avenging Baal?" Joash asked the crowd. "If Baal is a strong god, surely he will avenge himself before another day has passed. If my son is the guilty one, Baal will not let him live!" That is why Gideon was renamed "Jerubbaal" -- which means "let Baal do his own pleading." (Judges 6:28-32.)

This advice quieted the mob. None of the worshippers of Baal wanted to say that their pagan god lacked the ability to deal with his enemies by himself. Gradually the crowd dispersed.

Heathen in Fear

Gideon went into hiding. Meanwhile word had leaked out to the enemy that a champion was about to lead Israel to battle against Midian. The Midianites perceived that some strong underground movement was being organized, and they asked the Amalekites and other Arab tribes to come and stand with them against Israel.

Soon thousands upon thousands of soldiers mounted on camels moved into the valley of Jezreel, the place where King Jabin's forces had met miserable defeat several years previously.

Gideon blew a trumpet to assemble the people of Abiezer and sent messengers to the tribes of Manasseh, Asher and Naphtali to ask for men to come and fight against the Midianites. By night thousands of men from these tribes quietly moved into the mountain strongholds close to where Gideon was hiding. (Judges 6:33-35.)

When Gideon realized how many men were subject to his command, he began to wonder if he could successfully fulfill the tremendous task he had been given. Troubled and uncertain, he went to a private place to pray to God.

"I need assurance from you," Gideon prayed. "Please show me again that I am the one you have chosen to lead Israel against Midian. Tonight I shall spread a fleece of wool on the ground at the threshing floor. Tomorrow morning, if the wool is wet with dew and the ground and grass all around are dry, then I shall know for certain that you have picked me to help save Israel."

Early next morning Gideon hurried out to examine the fleece. It was heavy with dew. In fact, Gideon took it up and squeezed out enough water to fill a good-sized bowl. At the same time he could find no sign of moisture on the ground or grass nearby.

He was encouraged by this sign. But the more he thought about it, the more he reasoned that it was possible that the wool had naturally attracted more moisture than the grass would, and he decided to ask God for one more sign. Probably he didn't realize how much he was testing God's patience by this continuing doubt. That he was aware that he was carrying matters a bit too far, however, was evidenced in the manner in which he made his next request.

"I trust you won't be angry if I ask for one more sign," Gideon said to God. "Tonight I shall place the fleece on the ground again. If in the morning only the fleece is dry and the ground and grass around it are wet with dew, then I shall know without a doubt that you have chosen me to lead the Israelite soldiers against our enemies."

Next morning Gideon found that there was an exceptionally heavy dew on the grass and shrubs all around. Even the ground was soft with moisture. But when he picked the fleece up off the wet ground he discovered that it was completely dry! (Judges 6: 36-40.)

Gideon no longer had any room for doubt. His confidence lifted. Next morning he ordered all the Israelite soldiers to proceed into the valley of Jezreel. They were poorly armed, and many of them feared to enter the valley in the daytime, what with all the Midianites and their allies camped at the north side of the valley! They went nevertheless, and camped that night on the south side of the valley at the slopes of Mt. Gilboa. When they were numbered and organized into military units, it was found that there were thirty-two thousand of them.

God was ready to teach Gideon a much-needed lesson in faith.

Too Many Israelite Soldiers!

That many men would seem to have constituted a fair fighting force for those days. But when a report came by spies that the Midianite soldiers and their allies numbered over a hundred thousand, a great part of the Israelites feared it would be suicide to pit themselves against such overwhelming numbers.

God had a quite different opinion. He pointed out to Gideon that there were TOO MANY Israelite soldiers! He could better show His deliverance with fewer men in His way!

"If Israel should conquer the enemy with all the men who are gathered here now," God explained to Gideon, "then the people will brag of winning by greater strength, though with lesser numbers. If a much smaller number of Israelites is involved in a victory, then the people will have to admit, as will their enemies, that Israel's God alone made victory possible. Therefore reduce the number of your men by proclaiming to them that any who fear to battle the Midianites are free to leave this place. Thus you will also get rid of men who are fearful of failure."

Gideon sent officers to all his men to tell them that they could leave if they wished. To his great surprise and disappointment twenty-two thousand of them withdrew from the army. This left Gideon with only ten thousand men.

That meant one under-trained Israelite soldier for at least thirteen battle-trained enemy soldiers. (Judges 7:1 -3.)

At the very time Gideon was feeling dismayed because his army had been so reduced, God told him that it was still too large!

"You must trim your men down to the very best soldiers," God said to him. "Take them all to the nearest stream to drink. The manner in which they drink will determine how many men you shall take to overcome the Midianites and their confederates. I will tell you later which to choose."

Gideon led his ten thousand men to the spring and pool at the foot of Mt. Gilboa. When they reached the stream flowing from the pool, he gave orders for them to stop and drink. Although the men believed that they were going to meet the enemy, most of them dropped their weapons, got down on their hands and knees and put their lips to the water.

Those who tried to be alert in the event of a surprise attack by the enemy from a nearby ridge retained their weapons, quickly stooped down to scoop up the water with their free hands and to lap it up from their cupped palms. Then God told Gideon to place those who kneeled down on one side and those who drank from their hands on the other. The result was surprising!

Most of his ten thousand men had fallen down on their hands and knees to drink. Only three hundred scooped up water with their hands! (Judges 7:4-6.)

God's Shocking Promise

After all had returned to camp, God informed Gideon that by those three hundred men, He would deliver the enemy to Israel! All the other soldiers -- nearly ten thousand -- should be dismissed! God knew that it was difficult for Gideon to understand how a mere three hundred men could overcome such a great multitude. (Judges 7:7-8; Zechariah 4:6.)

"I want you to know that the Midianites, in spite of their numbers, are afraid of Me," God told Gideon. "Go over to their camp after dark and hear for yourself what the average Midianite soldier thinks. I will protect you, but if you are too big a coward to go alone, take your right-hand man, Phurah. When you learn of the state of mind of the enemy, you will be encouraged." So that night Gideon went with Phurah, his servant, across the plain of Jezreel to the camp of the Midianites. (Judges 7:9-11.)

It was so late that most of the guards were within their tents on the borders of the camp, and in the moonless darkness it wasn't difficult for the two Israelites to silently creep past the outer tents. Once within the camp, they

appeared in the faint light of the low fires like any other pair of Arabs. No one challenged them.

In passing one of the tents, their attention was attracted to a conversation within by two Midianite soldiers.

"I had a strange dream last night," they overheard one of the men remark. "I dreamed that a huge loaf of barley bread came tumbling down off that mountain across the valley. It rolled all the way over the plain and crashed into one of our tents with such force that it tore the tent to shreds and scattered it in all directions! Could such a dream have any meaning for us?"

"Your dream was an evil omen!" the other soldier exclaimed fearfully. "It meant that Gideon, the Israelite who is rumored to be a magically strong leader through the power of the God of Israel, will attack us with his men and wipe us out. If you ask me, we would be wise to get out of here right away, and I know most of our men feel the same way about it." (Judges 7:12-14.)

Gideon didn't stay to hear more. Now he was thoroughly convinced that God would keep His promise to destroy the invaders. He returned with his servant to Mt. Gilboa, very ashamed of having doubted, and thanked God for the assurance he had received. Now that Gideon had repented of his weak faith, God could use him.

The men rested next day. Well after dark the tiny band set out with Gideon to cross the valley to where the Midianites were camped. They arrived in the early hours of the morning, long before dawn. According to God's instructions, Gideon divided the men into three groups. They silently spread out around the camp, but instead of carrying weapons in their hands, each man carried a trumpet and a tall pitcher! (Verses 15-16.)

Chapter 63

GOD FIGHTS ISRAEL'S BATTLES!

IN THE deep darkness before dawn Gideon's three hundred men divided into three groups. Silently they spread themselves around the sprawling camp of the Midianites. Instead of weapons, the men had trumpets of rams' horns in their right hands and, in their left, earthen pitchers. Each man had a torch hidden in his pitcher.

Who Determines Outcome of Wars?

As soon as his men were in place, Gideon blew lustily on his trumpet made from a ram's horn. That was the signal for all the men to do likewise on their horns. Then Gideon broke his pitcher and held his torch aloft for all to see. Quickly the three hundred men also broke their earthen pitchers. Light was suddenly revealed from three hundred blazing torches! (Judges 7:16-20.)

The abrupt light and noise from all directions were confusingly startling to the Midianites. Even the guards were caught by surprise. In the darkness it seemed that a vast army was completely surrounding them. To add to their alarm, a multitude of shouting voices came from all around.

"THE SWORD OF THE LORD AND OF GIDEON!" were the loud words that rang over the plain from Gideon's men.

Bedlam resulted.

Believing that incredible numbers of armed Israelites were closing in all about them, the Midianites rushed excitedly out of their tents. Campfires were out or were very low. It was so dark that in their frenzy the men collided with each other. Thinking that the Israelites had rushed in among them, they attacked one another. Within the next few minutes thousands of Midianites died by the hands of their own brothers. God has intervened for Israel!

A little later, when it was evident that the Midianites, in their panic, were racing eastward in the direction of their homeland, Gideon thought of a way to make matters much worse for the enemy. Abandoned camels were wandering about. Some of them were caught. Gideon sent messengers on these mounts to various parts of the land occupied by the Ephraimites to tell the men of that tribe what had happened, and that the Midianites could possibly be cut off from escaping over the Jordan if the Ephraimites would move up quickly to meet them.

At the same time Gideon sent a messenger to the thousands of men he had dismissed from battle duty only a few hours before, informing them that the enemy was fleeing to the east, and that the Israelites could be of great service by pursuing them. (Verses 23-24.)

The messengers were instructed to rejoin Gideon as soon as their missions were accomplished.

It was dawn before the routed Midianites could reach the Jordan River. When finally it was possible for them to clearly see at a distance, they learned for a fact what they had only imagined at first -- that thousands of Israelites were pursuing them. They pressed on at increased speed along the west bank of the river, hoping for a shallow spot where they could quickly cross to the other side.

By then Gideon's messengers had reached the Ephraimites, who responded by hastily assembling many armed men and sending them off to the east to meet the oncoming enemy.

Later, as the weary Midianites plodded fearfully along the Jordan, still anxiously seeking a place to ford it, they were shocked to see a horde of men guarding every possible fording place.

It was at this point that Gideon and his men, having long since exchanged their trumpets and torches for swords, knives and spears, arrived in time to chase the Midianites into the river. In this fray two high-ranking Midianite generals had already been slain. Their heads were later -- on the other side of the Jordan -- brought to Gideon as tokens of victory. (Judges 7:25.)

Temporary Escape for a Few

"We haven't completely won the battle yet!" Gideon shouted to the Israelites. "A great part of the enemy has eluded us. We can't let them go free. I'm not asking all of you to go after them, because we don't have the food to sustain you. But my three hundred chosen men and I will cross the Jordan to pursue the fleeing enemy troops."

It wasn't long before Gideon and his picked soldiers were on the east bank of the river and in pursuit of the Midianites, who were fleeing down the Jordan valley. The enemy's trail wasn't difficult to find in the sands and soft soil. But sand made travel more difficult, and Gideon's men had walked and trotted many miles, and they were becoming weary from lack of food and rest. (Judges 8:4.)

They were still in Israelite territory, the region east of the Jordan that had been given to the tribe of Gad. When, several miles southward, they sighted the town of Succoth to the right of their route of travel, Gideon was greatly relieved.

"Don't be discouraged, men!" Gideon called out. "Our Israelite brothers in the town ahead should be able to give us enough food to restore our strength!"

When they reached the town, people scurried into their homes as though afraid of them. Hoping to allay their fears, Gideon stood on the main street and loudly announced the identity of his men and himself. He told the townspeople what had happened, why they were passing through and that they were in desperate need of food. (Verse 5.)

One by one doors opened and the chief men of the city slowly sauntered out to confront them.

"About two hours ago thousands of Midianites passed to the north of us on their way eastward," one of the leaders of Succoth spoke up. "Obviously you have only two or three hundred men. Do you expect us to believe you have wiped out most of the Midianite army as you claim, and that those thousands who passed by are actually fleeing from you? Do you take us for fools, that we should believe that your puny little group is actually pursuing an army of thousands? Do you expect us to risk our lives by giving food to reckless hot-heads while the Midianites are still in control of the country?" What contempt for God's sure promise! (Leviticus 26:3, 8.)

The grim expressions of the onlookers turned to sneers. Some of the people laughed and made taunting remarks.

"We don't expect you to have faith in us," Gideon answered. "But you should trust the God who has promised to deliver us from oppression! We're just asking you, as brother Israelites, to give us enough food so that we'll be able to gain strength to move on."

"Indeed you will move on!" another one of the leading citizens shouted angrily. "For all we know, you are only a band of beggars trying to wheedle food! Get out!"

After the splendid cooperation he had received from the other tribes, Gideon was shocked by this lack of brotherly concern and faith in God.

"You refuse to help the people of your own nation who are risking their lives struggling for your freedom. This is defiance of God -- and all because you fear what the Midianites might do to you instead of fearing God!" Gideon retorted. "Your greater fear should be of the punishment you'll receive from God at our hands because of your selfishness, when we return victorious!" (Judges 8:6-7.)

There were smirks and scowls on the faces of onlookers as Gideon's little army wearily moved on to the northeast up the Jabbok River valley to pick up the trail of the enemy. A few miles farther brought them to the town of Penuel, where there was a somewhat unusual stone tower that had long ago been built by the Moabites as a place for observation and as a fortress. The Gadites who lived there were quite proud that theirs was the only town in the territory with such a tower.

Gideon summoned the leaders of the town, related his situation to them and made a desperate plea for food for his men.

Another Town Rebels

"Don't ask us to believe that you intend to attack and defeat thousands of fierce desert soldiers with your miserably small group," the head man of the

town sneered at Gideon. "We have enough trouble finding food for ourselves without foolishly passing it out to any heedless band of would-be deliverers who come this way with wild schemes!"

"You mean you refuse to give us any help -- even any stale bread or scraps you may have?" Gideon asked.

Their answer was only a cold, emotionless stare.

"We'll be back this way after we have taken care of the Midianites," Gideon angrily told the Gadites gathered about him. "Then you will lose that tower you are so proud of. What's more, you are very likely to lose your lives!" (Judges 8:8-9.)

As at Succoth, Gideon and his men wearily departed amid hostile expressions and unfriendly murmurs from brother Israelites who showed nothing but derision as they viewed this small band in pursuit of an enemy fifty times as great in numbers.

Gideon and his men were exceedingly tired when they reached a refreshing mountain stream flowing southward into the Jabbok River. There they could have concentrated their efforts and their remaining strength on hunting birds and animals for desperately needed food. But precious time would have been consumed in searching and cooking, and Gideon preferred to keep moving.

It was dusk when the band exhaustedly topped a rise to look down into a ravine. What the men saw caused all of them to almost forget their hunger and weariness. Below them, camped for the night in supposed safety among their own people, were the fifteen thousand Midianites they were seeking! Was the ninety-mile chase over?

"Keep out of sight!" Gideon commanded his three hundred weary, hungry, but determined men. "We'll stay here till dark, then attack!"

God Fights Another Battle

There was still enough light for the Israelites to spot the positions of the Midianite sentries. Later, when Gideon and his men silently moved down into the ravine from all directions, the sentries fell noiseless prey. God had again intervened on behalf of the greatly outnumbered Israelites. Most of the rest of the Midianites were already deep in slumber after their exhausting day. Suddenly they were caught completely by surprise when the Israelites fell upon them. Hundreds died as they slept. The others, unnerved by the fearful events of the past hours, were in no condition to defend themselves.

Strengthened by God, Gideon and his men rushed in to slay most of the Midianites while they darted around in a state of fear and confusion. Some of the enemy escaped for the third time in recent hours. Among them were two Midianite kings whom Gideon had especially hoped to capture. Their names were Zebah and Zalmunna. The reason Gideon wanted them was that for the past seven years they had led very destructive and murderous forays against Israel.

Mounted on camels, these two men rode off in the dark to the east in the direction of their native land. They didn't get too far, however. The east side of the ravine was steep and sandy. They were so long getting toward the top that the Israelites overtook them and seized them alive. Gideon felt elated in being able to bring them back westward as prisoners, though he was more thankful that God had miraculously helped his weary men conquer the fifteen thousand fleeing Midianites. (Judges 8: 11-12.)

The destruction of the Midianites having been accomplished, Gideon and his men were hungrier and wearier than ever. Happily, small amounts of dried dates, dried figs and dried meat were found in many Midianite knapsacks and saddlebags. It all added up to more than enough food to satisfy the Israelites for the time being and to sustain them on their return journey.

Besides food, Gideon's men found many valuables belonging to the enemy. Desert men of that time often wore golden earrings, and thousands of earrings were taken from the corpses. There were other costly metal trinkets among their possessions, as well as valuable weapons, leather, blankets and robes. These things were loaded on camels for the return to the Mt. Ephraim area.

The refreshed Israelites then set out during the early night toward the west. (Judges 8: 13.) The two Midianite kings were strapped to their own richly bedecked camels.

When they arrived back at the town of Penuel, the people came out to jeer. Gideon had given them the impression that he and his men would return after being victorious over the Midianites, but the fact that they returned so soon, and with only a few camels and two prisoners, indicated to the Gadites that Gideon had far from accomplished what he had said he would do. The Gadites refused to believe that, by a miracle from God, three hundred men had slain so great a number of the enemy, as Gideon claimed, though the women and children of Penuel were later to find out that it was true.

"The enemy must have said something to offend you that you should return so soon!" one man yelled at them.

"They were pretty hungry when they last went through here!" another one shouted. "Maybe they ate all those Midianites!"

"They still look hungry!" someone else quipped. "Now we know how they're going to wreck our tower! They're going to eat it!"

There were many more insults heaped on Gideon and his men. Gideon was filled with disgust. He might have passed through Penuel without chastising these rebellious people who had refused to aid a chosen servant of God in the carrying out of a very important mission. But not now! Rebellion is as bad as witchcraft. (I Samuel 15:23.)

Knowing these Gadites had not repented of their rebellion, Gideon signaled his men to action. By now they were very near the tower Gideon had said he would destroy. About two hundred of Gideon's men swarmed toward it. Within minutes, using swords to hack beams, and beams to pry loose the wall stones, they leveled the tower the Gadites looked on with such pride.

At first the men of the town could scarcely believe what was happening. Then they rushed to arm themselves for attack, but by this time it was too late. These wicked Israelites were no different from Midianites. Gideon's men fell on them, and the men of Penuel, according to God's will, lost their lives all because of their willful rebellion against the government God had established for their good. (Judges 8:17.)

Chapter 64

GIDEON'S TROUBLED PEACE

FROM the town of Penuel, Gideon and his men moved homeward with the spoils from the Midianites, including the two Midianite kings as prisoners. On the outskirts of the town of Succoth they captured a young man from whom they learned the names of seventy-seven of Succoth's leading men, the ones who had refused food to Gideon and his men when they were trailing the Midianites. (Judges 8:11-14.)

"Seek out from the town all the men whose names this fellow has written down and bring them to the main street," Gideon told his soldiers.

Some Were Repentant

Although the adult males of the town were considerable in number, they were cowed by the quick and decisive action of Gideon's men. The leaders were quickly rounded up and brought to the town center.

"You refused us food because you were faithless. You were more afraid of what the Midianites might do to you than what God might do to you for rebelling against Him," Gideon reminded the sullen Gadites. "You refused to believe that God would make it possible for a small number of us to overcome a much greater number of heathens. You will remember that I told you that you should respect and help us, as God's servants, rather than fear the enemy. Now look upon the two kings of the Midianites who were actually fleeing before us with their thousands of troops when we wearily passed through here. We slew all their men, but spared these two men to bring back as evidence we had defeated their army." (Judges 8:15.)

The Gadites stared in amazement at Zebah and Zalmunna. It was plain that they didn't wish to believe what they could plainly see to be true.

Gideon continued: "You are going to suffer, according to God's will, for your miserable attitude toward your Israelite brothers!"

A few of Gideon's men cut limbs from thorny bushes and briars nearby. Then the seventy-seven Gadites, struggling and loudly and angrily protesting, were bound and forced to the ground, face down. They were then chastised with those thorny bush limbs and briars as Gideon had promised. (Verses 7,16.)

The rest of the people of Succoth, gathered not far away, watched in fear and trembling, regretful that their city had so stubbornly and hatefully refused food to their Israelite brothers, and thankful to God that only the leaders had to be punished for their city's shameful misconduct.

When the punishment was finished, it was a repentant, remorseful and silent group that got up from the ground as soon as their bonds were cut. They limped away to their homes, thankful that they had come to their senses and that their punishment wasn't as severe as that of the men of Peniel.

God's Swift Justice

Gideon and his group moved on to the west, crossed the Jordan River and entered the central part of their country. There Zebah and Zalmunna were brought to trial as the two chief leaders of the Midianite oppression of Israel in recent years.

In the course of the questioning, Zebah and Zalmunna admitted they had murdered several of Gideon's brothers.

"If you had spared my brothers then, I would spare you now," Gideon told them. "Since you unmercifully put to death many Israelites, including my blood brothers, you can hardly expect to escape the death penalty for murder." (Verses 18-19.)

There was a rule among the Israelites that the first-born male of a family should be the one to execute anyone who murdered any of his kin. Gideon was the youngest son of his parents (Judges 6:15), and therefore he felt that it wasn't his place to personally execute the two Midianite kings, although their fate was more than a family matter.

Gideon's oldest son, Jether, was only a lad in his teens, but according to Israelite procedure, he was the proper one to avenge the deaths of his uncles. Jether was present at the trial, and like all young Israelite men of that time, he was armed to protect himself from attack by the enemy.

"Come here, my son," Gideon said to Jether. "It is your duty and honor to draw your sword and do away with these two pagan murderers."

Young Jether was startled by his father's decree. He understood why his father spoke to him as he did, and he had been taught that God had commanded Israel to use the sword to slay or drive out all enemies from Canaan. But he had never executed a man. His boyish sensitivity in such a situation was far greater than any desire to try to be a national hero.

"I -- I can't kill these men!" Jether finally spoke out.

Gideon wasn't disappointed in his son's reaction. He understood the feelings of a friendly young man who had no desire to execute criminals. Gideon knew that it was up to him to do what his son couldn't do, but even before he could step forward to perform the wretched task, Zebah and Zalmunna fearfully called out for him to deal with them and put them to instant death. (Judges 8:20-21.)

"A Soft Answer Turneth Away Wrath"

After the bodies of the two Midianite kings had been hauled away and their camels stripped of their valuable trappings, the Israelites felt that the struggle with their ancient eastern enemy was officially over. Gideon realized, however, that the struggle to keep the people from idolatry was never over, and he continued his efforts against pagan worship.

Just when he was feeling thankful that matters were going especially well, elders of the tribe of Ephraim came to him to angrily ask why Ephraimite soldiers hadn't been asked to join in the first encounter with the Midianites.

Gideon could have answered in his defense that all the people were aware of the situation, and that the soldiers of Ephraim could have volunteered. He also could have reminded them that he was carrying out explicit orders from God. Instead, he chose to soothe their offended feelings with a soft answer as God commands His servants to do. (Proverbs 15:1.)

"If you feel that your tribe didn't have the opportunity to do enough in this campaign," he told them, "then I must remind you that your soldiers were the ones who showed up just in time to defeat most of the fleeing Midianites at the Jordan River. Without your men there, what would we have done? It was there that God delivered into the hands of your soldiers the two mighty Midianite princes, Oreb and Zeeb. This alone was a great accomplishment compared to what my men and I did!"

Before Gideon had finished talking, the attitude of the elders of Ephraim went through a great change. Obviously they wanted most of the credit for victory to go to their tribe. When they heard Gideon praising their soldiers, they were quite pleased, and departed in a very friendly mood. (Judges 8: 1-3.)

A Stumbling block LOOKS Innocent

Not long after that, a great crowd of Israelites gathered before Gideon's home. When Gideon went out to learn why so many were there, there were loud cheers.

"Because you have saved us from the Midianites," a spokesman for the crowd shouted, "we have come to ask you to be our king! We think you should rule Israel, and that the kingship should remain in your family down through the generations!"

Loud cheering broke forth again, finally to subside after Gideon held up his hands for silence.

"I am not the one to rule over you!" Gideon exclaimed to the crowd. "Neither is my son nor his son. If I am chosen by God to be your leader, so be it. But your RULER is God!" (Judges 8:22-23.) There was another burst of cheers. Gideon continued speaking.

"I have a request. Many golden earrings were recently taken from slain Midianites. Unless those who possess them prefer to keep them, I ask that they be contributed for making ornaments by which we will be reminded of God's delivering us from the Midianites."

"We will willingly give them!" several Israelite soldiers shouted.

Someone spread out a coat on the ground, and hundreds of men filed by, in the next few hours, to drop their booty on it. By the time the last trinket had been given, there were thousands of dollars worth of gold on the coat.

Later, Gideon hired men to melt the gold down and re-shape it into a costly vestment to be used and displayed by him and future leaders of Israel as a symbol of their office as judge. Unfortunately, this thing came to be revered

so highly by the people that it eventually became an object of idolatrous worship. (Judges 8:24-27.)

Only Forty Years ...

For the next forty years, as long as Gideon was their leader and law-enforcer (referred to in the Scriptures as a judge), most of the Israelites enjoyed the blessings of peace and prosperity. (Verses 28-29.) Since most people don't know how to wisely use peace and prosperity, such a period can be dangerous. During that time Gideon had several wives. The practice of having more than one wife was tolerated in those times, especially by men who could afford to feed many children. But God punished those who practiced polygamy, though sometimes that punishment befell the children. The Bible doesn't state how many children Gideon had, though it speaks of his having at least seventy-two sons. (Judges 9:5.)

As soon as Gideon died, many Israelites began to abuse their prosperity and turn to idleness and ease. They immediately began to fall away from worshipping God and turn again toward the worship of Baal and Easter, the pagans' chief god and goddess. That false religion had been developed into different names and forms among various nations since the ancient times of Nimrod and his motherwife Semiramis. Soon most of the nation had lost respect for what Gideon had accomplished and what God commanded. It was evident that Israel was once more heading for a downfall, this time to plunge into the misery of civil strife. (Judges 8:30-35.)

An Evil Man Lusts for Political Power

Abimelech, one of Gideon's sons, was very desirous of being king of Israel. He started his ambitious scheme by going to his mother's family in Shechem to persuade them that one of Gideon's sons should reign over the nation.

"Someone has to determine which of my father's sons should rule," he told his relatives. "Now would you prefer about seventy of them to reign over you, or would you choose just one? I am of your flesh and bone, so why should you prefer anyone except me?" (Judges 9:1-2.)

Abimelech's relatives quickly perceived the advantages of having a king from their family. They launched a campaign in and around Shechem to promote the idea of how worthwhile it would be to have a leader of Israel from Shechem, so that their city might be established as the capital of the nation.

Shechem had lately become one of the cities where the worship of Baal was most active. Some of the contributions to Baal were turned over to

Abimelech, who used the money to buy the services of the kind of evil men who would do anything for a price. (Verses 3-4.)

Appalling Treachery Afoot

Abimelech's next move was shockingly cold-blooded and barbarous, proving that he would stop at nothing to gain what he wanted. He led his hired band of cut-throats to his father's home in Ophrah, about seven miles northwest, where Gideon's other sons were gathered. The hired hoodlums surprised the sons, and managed to overcome them and tie them up. At this point Abimelech arrived on the scene. He carefully examined and counted all the bound men.

"There should be seventy-one here!" he barked at the leader of the gang he had hired. "You have bound only seventy!"

"We took every man we found in this house," the leader explained. "We saw no one else."

"I wanted you to get ALL of them!" Abimelech snapped. "But go ahead with the job. Use that large stone in the back court."

The stone to which Abimelech referred was a part of the architecture in the backyard, but within the next few minutes it became a gruesome chopping block! (See Judges 9.)

Chapter 65

THE FIRE THAT FAILED!

AFTER GIDEON was dead and Israel had again started slipping into idolatry, one of Gideon's many sons schemed to become king of Israel. He was Abimelech, an overly ambitious young man who went to violent extremes to push himself into power.

One of his first moves was to pay a band of vicious characters to capture his seventy-one brothers and line them up at a chopping block. One of the brothers escaped, but all the others were beheaded. (Judges 9:1 -5.)

As soon as the dreadful act was finished, the murderers fled, careful to leave no evidence as to who had committed the ghastly crime.

Gideon's youngest son, Jotham, was the one who had escaped being murdered. He had hidden himself when the assassins had first appeared, but when he heard later what had happened, he almost wished he hadn't. He left Ophrah right after that, realizing that Abimelech's men would be looking for him for a long time.

While the search for Jotham was going on, Abimelech wasn't too worried about him. He felt that the youngest son would fear to make any move against him. He went ahead with his plans to become ruler of Israel by obtaining the backing of influential men, families and priests of Baal in Shechem, which resulted in a few days in a celebration and a ceremony in which Abimelech was declared king of Israel. (Verse 6.)

When Jotham learned of this he was quite angry. Even though a son of Gideon, who had been Israel's leader, he didn't yearn to become Israel's king. But he wanted to expose his half-brother for the murderous, power-seeking politician he was, and to help promote in Israel the conduct his father had enforced and practiced against pagan worship.

By night Jotham went up Mt. Gerizim, which towered close above Shechem. Next morning, when the people were up and about, he appeared on the top to call down to them. This wasn't such a tremendous feat as one might imagine, inasmuch as Joshua had successfully addressed hundreds of thousands of people in that same area. Mt. Ebal was close by to the north, and between the two peaks a strong voice could clearly be heard over an unusually large expanse. (Joshua 8:30-35.)

Jotham couldn't have chosen a better place to talk to so many people at the same time and say what he had to say before Abimelech's hired murderers could get to him. It isn't known how many people lived in and around Shechem at the time, but there must have been at least a few thousand residents, including people from the neighboring villages and countryside who were gathered at Shechem for a festival.

"Listen to me, men of Shechem!" Jotham shouted down to them. "You are headed for misery and trouble. But if you will hear what I have to say, and move to correct matters, God will help you!" (Judges 9:7.)

Jotham's Amazing Prophecy

"Let me tell you a story!" he called down. (Judges 9:6-7.)

The people listened with tense excitement.

"There was a time when all the trees decided that they should have some kind of tree rule over them. They agreed that the olive tree was best fitted as a leader, so they asked the olive tree to be king. The olive tree refused,

saying, 'I honor God and man by the oil I produce. Why should I forsake my outstanding service even to be king?'

"Then the trees said to the fig tree, 'Be our king.' But the fig tree answered, 'Why should I give up producing my special sweetness and flavor just to be promoted over all other trees?'

"The trees next asked the grape vine to rule over them. The grape vine replied, 'I cannot be your king. It would mean that I would have to stop yielding the juice from which comes the wine to cheer God and man.'

"The trees finally turned to the bramble to ask it to be their king. The thorny bush answered quite differently. 'If you really want me to be your king,' it said, 'then leave all matters entirely up to me. If you fail to put your trust in me or disagree with what I want to do, I shall spew out fire to burn up everything, even the cedars on the snow-clad peaks of mount Lebanon!'" (Judges 9:8-15.)

People below who listened to Jotham realized that when he spoke of the bramble he was referring to Abimelech, and that when he mentioned the cedars of Lebanon he was referring to the elders and chiefs of Israel.

"If you people think you have done the best thing for Israel in making Abimelech your leader," Jotham continued, "and you really believe that your murder of my seventy brothers was a fitting tribute to Gideon my father, who risked his life for you, then be happy with Abimelech and let Abimelech be happy with you!

"On the other hand, if you have allowed a scoundrel and a murderer to become your king, Abimelech will soon have his differences with you people who have helped him into power. You will eventually destroy him. But he will also destroy you!" (Verses 16-20.)

Momentary Sorrow but not Repentance

Many of the people who listened below were greatly impressed by what Jotham had to say. Some of them were ashamed that they had not united to protest Abimelech's being made their leader, but most of them did not repent of their part in Abimelech's treachery. They waited to hear what more Jotham had to say, but no more words came down to them. God's warning to them was finished. They had no more excuse for remaining on Abimelech's side.

As Jotham finished speaking, he sighted men creeping toward him around the shoulders of the mountain. He realized that they had been sent to take his life, so that no son of Gideon could possibly be left to be set up as leader

of Israel in opposition to Abimelech. Before the assassins had time to reach him, Jotham fled.

Jotham's pursuers were weary and winded from their hurried ascent of Mt. Gerizim, and when Gideon's son suddenly bolted down the side of the mountain opposite the one facing Shechem, they were unable to catch their intended victim.

By the time he reached the base of the mountain, Jotham was out of sight of his pursuers. He sprinted toward the south, carefully keeping out of sight in the gullies and defiles until he was well out of the region of Shechem. After traveling about twenty miles, he succeeded in reaching safety in the town of Beer, about eight miles north of Jerusalem. (Verse 21.)

How God's Law Operates

Perhaps Jotham's efforts to remind the local Israelites that they were headed for trouble weren't entirely wasted. Abimelech was leader of the northern Israelites around Shechem and Arumah for three years, but at the end of that time a feeling of dislike and suspicion developed between him and many Israelites, especially those in the Shechem area. Former partners in murder now became enemies. This was the natural result of building a government on murderous plots, evil schemes and unholy religious propositions. Even so, God stepped in to cause differences to develop more quickly in order that Abimelech and his hired murderers and fellow conspirators might come to faster justice. Abimelech probably was aware of God's laws, but he wasn't convinced that the dreadful penalty for breaking them was certain to fall on him. (Romans 15:4; II Timothy 3:16.)

Some of the same men who had helped Abimelech become a ruler hired men to watch for him and his friends as they traveled about in the more wild, mountainous regions around Arumah and Shechem in upper Canaan. They hoped to assassinate him in some out-of-the-way spot, but their attempts were unsuccessful because he had been told of the plan.

All that was accomplished was the injuring and robbing of many other people who were moving through lonely areas. (Judges 9:22-25.)

Meanwhile, a Canaanite named Gaal, who wished to see the Israelite driven out, organized a band of soldiers and went to Shechem to suggest to Abimelech's enemies that they band together against their leader. Gaal volunteered to head the movement.

Abimelech wasn't in Shechem at the time, so many of the men of Shechem felt free to join Gaal. There was a great celebration in the temple of Baal. There, inflamed by much drinking of wine, Gaal loudly announced that the Israelites should turn to the Canaanite leaders if they wished to be free of

Abimelech, an Israelite, and that he, Gaal, would remove Abimelech from power if only the people would back him up with fighting men.

Political Confusion Worsens

Many men in Shechem rallied to join Gaal. He was so encouraged that he became certain he could lead a revolution without any danger of failure. He went so far as to send messengers to challenge Abimelech to return to Shechem and fight for the right to be ruler. (Judges 9:26-29.)

This development troubled Zebul, governor of Shechem and one of Abimelech's right-handmen. He knew where Abimelech was, and sent a swift messenger to him to warn that Gaal had taken over the city and was fortifying it. He suggested that Abimelech quietly bring in an army by night, hide in nearby fields and then wait to see what Gaal would do.

That night Abimelech quietly moved his army into the vicinity of Shechem, concealing it in four companies in gullies and behind hills and rocks.

Next morning Gaal strode out through the city's main gate with some of his men. Zebul accompanied them.

"The mighty Abimelech must have heard of my challenge long before this, but I don't see any sign of him," Gaal loudly remarked in a sneering tone. "Perhaps he decided to lead the Israelites back into Egypt!"

Gaal's men laughed at this comment. Zebul smiled, too, but not because of the remark. He was aware that Abimelech's troops were all around. Suddenly Gaal squinted his eyes as though trying to make out something in the distance.

"Look!" he barked, pointing. "Do I see people moving down from the tops of those hills?"

"People?" Zebul echoed. "Aren't you looking at just shadows and rocks?"

Gaal hardly heard what Zebul said, so engrossed was he in staring in other directions. (Judges 9:30-36.)

"Those are people," he exclaimed. "They're coming toward us through the valley and across the plain! We're surrounded!"

"How true!" Zebul remarked with a grim smile. "Now let's see how you'll go about destroying Abimelech as you boasted you would do! And you'll have to hurry, or the opportunity -- if any -- will soon be gone!"

"You seem pleased!" Gaal barked angrily at Zebul. "Probably you've had something to do with this!"

One of his men saw him move threateningly toward the governor, and quickly stepped up to ask what the trouble was. "Look around you!" Gaal snapped. "We're about to be attacked, and for some reason Zebul seems to be happy about it!"

The man looked about, but he saw no attackers because the approaching soldiers had moved behind a hill in one direction and had marched out of sight into a depression in the plain in the other direction.

"I see no attackers," he said to Gaal.

Gaal stared quickly about, perplexed that no one was in sight. He glanced uneasily at Zebul, then went back to scanning the horizon. "I guess you were right about shadows and rocks," he told Zebul.

"The heat makes them look as though they're moving. But why did you say what you did about my boasting that I would destroy Abimelech?"

"If you have the courage to stand up to Abimelech," Zebul answered, "then you're entitled to boast."

Gaal didn't know whether he was being complimented or insulted, but that wasn't his concern at the moment. He continued blinking at the horizon and hoped that somehow Abimelech would never show up to give him any trouble. His fleeting belief that he had been surrounded had worn the sharp edge off his desire to fight with the man he had challenged to battle. Besides, he had lost a little confidence in himself because of what he thought he had seen.

"If Abimelech comes," Gaal remarked, "I'll meet him in a fair fight in the open, but there is no point standing here all day in the hot sun waiting for something that perhaps won't happen. I'm going back inside the gates."

"If Abimelech should suddenly show up and catch you in the city, we could be besieged for weeks," Zebul observed.

"If he accepts my challenge, we'll see him long before he gets here," Gaal answered.

"Then you'd better start looking!" Zebul pointedly commented.

Gaal glanced around. To his sudden surprise and dismay, he saw men pouring out from behind a nearby hill and more swarming up from a depression in the plain. There was no doubt that they were Abimelech's men, and they were closing in fast. Gaal realized then that he had actually

seen them when they were at a greater distance, and that Zebul had also seen them and was silently waiting for them to get much closer.

"It appears that you'll soon have to decide to fight or run," Zebul grinned.

Gaal wasted no time with counter remarks. He yelled to the men who were with him to sound a call to arms. The closest of Abimelech's men were only a few hundred yards from the city by the time Gaal and his men rather hesitantly stomped out to meet them.

Canaanite Ambition Thwarted

Minutes later the two armies closed in battle, but not for long. Abimelech's men cut down the foremost of Gaal's soldiers, and the sight of the slaughter unnerved the rest of Gaal's men. They turned, including their leader, and fled back toward Shechem's main gate. Abimelech's men rushed in behind them, killing and wounding many before they could reach the city. Gaal was among those who managed to race through the entrance to Shechem before the gate was slammed shut. (Judges 9:37-40.)

Satisfied that he had put down the revolution, Abimelech led his army to the town of Arumah, about eight miles southeast of Shechem. There the men rested and took on provisions.

Meanwhile Zebul, the governor of Shechem, who hated Gaal, managed to round up a sizable band of Shechemites who shared his feeling. These men pounced on Gaal and the remnant of his army, and thrust them out of the city.

Because there had been so many people in Shechem in recent days, there was a serious shortage of food. Regardless of the threat of attack by Abimelech, who now regarded Shechem as an enemy stronghold, hundreds of people went out next morning to the surrounding fields, orchards and vineyards to obtain vegetables and fruit. Spies reported this to Abimelech, who immediately led his army back to Shechem. About one third of the soldiers dashed to the main gate of the city.

The Shechemites' Penalty for Murder

The remainder of the army was divided into two companies, and closed in on the Shechemites in the fields and orchards. The victims tried to race for safety in the city, but were either cut down as they ran or were killed by Abimelech's men when they reached the gate.

All of Abimelech's soldiers then converged on the city. They battered down the gates and poured inside, but it wasn't a matter of a quick victory. The Shechemites were prepared to fight, and they put up stiff resistance by showering spears, stones and arrows down from the walls and the buildings. By late afternoon, however, it was evident that the defenders were running out of arms and missiles. From then on the victory swiftly went to Abimelech, whose men slaughtered or chased out all the people. There is no record of what happened to Zebul, governor of the city.

It was a custom at that time that a home, city or village should be strewn with salt if for any reason it was considered a disgraceful or abominable place. To show his contempt for Shechem, Abimelech ordered his men to fling salt all about the city. (Judges 9:41-45.)

While this was going on, fugitives of the Shechem area were fearfully gathering not far away at a tower-like structure built on a mountainside. It was the place of worship of one of the Canaanite gods, and was considered a strong refuge. More than a thousand people swarmed into it. They hoped that Abimelech, who had shown a strong leaning toward pagan gods would spare the place in the event he found them hiding there.

Their period of concealment was short. Again Abimelech's spies informed him what was going on. Abimelech took his men into a nearby region where there was a heavy growth of trees and brush. There each man cut down as large a branch as he could comfortably carry, and took his load to where the people were hiding.

The branches were piled around the base of the structure, then ignited. The tremendous fire that followed speedily destroyed the tower. The hundreds of people inside, unable to escape, were burned to a charred mass for having helped Abimelech murder Jerubbaal's sons, just as Jotham had prophesied. (Judges 9:19-20; Judges 9:46-49.)

From Revenge to Conquest!

Night had arrived, and as the flames died down in the darkness, Abimelech considered it a successful day. He gave orders for his men to camp for the night where they were. Abimelech's God-given victory made him so conceited and greedy he wanted to conquer innocent cities. Next morning he started them on a march to the city of Thebez about ten miles to the northeast. He had received reports that most of the people there were not in favor of his leadership. His vengeful, bloody desire was simply to wipe them out, just as he had done to others who had stood in the path of his political aims. Abimelech didn't realize that God had allowed him to wipe out Shechem only because of its part in his treacherous murders.

When he reached Thebez late that morning, the people there were so frightened that they fled to a high, walled stronghold within the city. This pleased Abimelech.

"We have them bottled up without so much as having to throw a spear!" he exultantly told his officers. "Spread our men out to camp around Thebez so that no one will escape during the night. Tomorrow we shall take their stronghold and everyone inside it!" Abimelech's army closed in on the city, converging on the high fortress within. The stone structure was large and strong, but the gate was made of timbers. Brush and branches were piled against it so that it could be burned open.

People gathered on the open top floor of the fortress fought hard to keep the attackers away by hurling all kinds of objects down on them. Many invaders lost their lives in showers of heavy missiles from the tower. Abimelech's men countered with arrows, spears and stones, but they realized that they could make little headway until the gate was burned. (Judges 9:50-52.)

The Fire That Failed!

In his eagerness to accomplish a break-through, Abimelech moved closer to the wall. It was a foolish thing to do because he became the intended object of a number of missiles. A heavy chunk from a broken millstone struck him on the head. He thudded to the ground, blood oozing from his scalp. His young armorbearer rushed to him, noting that he was still conscious.

"It was a woman who threw it, sir!" the young man exclaimed. "We'll get her as soon as we get inside!"

"I know," Abimelech muttered, "but don't let it be said that a woman sent me to my death! Thrust your sword through me! Now!"

The armorbearer was hesitant. One of Abimelech's officers nearby, realizing that his leader was dying, shouted at the armorbearer, at the same time motioning for him to do what his superior commanded.

God Restores Peace

The young man obeyed. Abimelech died by the sword, but he would have died only a little later from the head wound. Thus died Abimelech, who had refused to profit from the sad experiences of others who had rebelled against God's laws. Only those who want to obey God can learn from such tragic events. (Romans 15:4; II Timothy 3:16.)

When his men realized that he had been killed, they ceased fighting and withdrew from Thebez. Within minutes the army became disorganized. The men started back to their homes, many of them ashamed that they had taken part in the slaughter of their own people. Their neglected fire, like their war, died. (Judges 9:53-55.)

Jotham's prediction of grief in Israel wasn't an empty one. God had brought destruction upon the destroyers. (Verses 56-57.) All the trouble and misery could have been avoided if the people had shunned pagan gods and had been willing to learn the right and happy way to live by obeying God's laws. God had promised that all would go well with those who obey. (Deuteronomy 6:3.) But Satan has suggested that it would be better to choose any way of life that seems easiest and most pleasant and wait to see what develops. (Genesis 3:4-6.) Unfortunately, almost every generation of Israel preferred to go along with the latter way and learn life's principles in the most difficult and miserable manner. Most of mankind continues to believe that delusive old adage that experience is the best teacher. Experience is really the worst teacher because of the wretchedness and grief that accompany it.

Chapter 66

COURAGE WITHOUT WISDOM

AFTER the death of Abimelech, the next man to become a judge in northern Canaan was Tola. He was from the tribe of Issachar.

Tola led northern Israel twenty-three years. During that time there was peace in that part of the land because the worship of pagan gods and idols was almost completely stopped. (Judges 10:1-2.)

From Obedience to Idolatry

After Tola died, a man by the name of Jair came into power in eastern Israel. He had thirty grown sons who helped him maintain control as the mayors or rulers of thirty towns in northern Canaan. Jair and his sons chose to rule by God's laws, and for twenty-two more years matters went well for the Israelites in that region. (Verses 3-5.)

Meanwhile, other judges ruled over the Israelites in southern Canaan, but that is another facet of the history of Israel.

Jair's death triggered the return of the Israelites of northern Canaan to idolatry. The pagan nations all about them considered them curious or odd because they observed laws that didn't allow religious orgies and wild festivals. Rather than be thought of as religious oddballs, the Israelites -- who wanted to be well thought of by their neighbors -- gradually fell into worshipping foreign gods.

Their desire to conform to the ways of the people about them wasn't the only reason Israel went over to idolatry. The belief grew that pagan religions offered more freedom because there were less laws to observe. Israel forgot the many wonderful blessings that obeying God brings -- peace, health and prosperity.

This was foolish reasoning, but Israel today reasons the same way. Those who are of a religious bent generally join the largest most Popular churches with a careful eye to conformity. Some of these people are being called out of such worldly churches to become part of God's Church. Those find that God's ways are much different from what they thought, and that the churches from which they came are based on many pagan beliefs.

Because of the disobedience of the Israelites, God became increasingly angry. He allowed two nearby warlike nations to send soldiers into the land. They were the Ammonites, whose country was to the east, and the Philistines, whose nation was on a portion of the southeast shore of the Great Sea west of Canaan -- the Mediterranean.

At first the Ammonite movements in the east consisted only of forays by small bands of soldiers who attacked the Israelites' homes and villages in Gilead, east of the Jordan river, then hastily retreated with any booty they could seize. Gradually the attacking bands grew larger and bolder until they were setting up armed camps well inside Canaan. It wasn't long before the camps were growing into large garrisons from which enemy soldiers crossed the Jordan river into southwestern Canaan to kill and plunder. (Judges 10:6-9.)

Death, disease and poverty moved over Israel in a black cloud of misery. It appeared that if the wretched conditions continued, Israel would be entirely wiped out or fall into permanent slavery.

It was then that the people began to cry out to God. They admitted their sin of bowing down to other gods, and begged for forgiveness and help.

God's reaction was far from hopeful. His reply was probably given through the high priest or someone chosen as a prophet.

Did I not save you previously from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Zidonians, the Amalekites and the Midianites?" God asked them. "You pleaded for help when you were in danger, and I delivered you from all these enemies. Then you turned around

and forsook me! Why should I save you again? Cry to your pagan gods to save you!" (Verses 10-14.)

The Israelites knew better than to waste their prayers on heathen gods in a time of trouble. They were aware that only the God of Israel could help them, and they continued their pleas for deliverance.

And Finally -- Repentance!

"Do whatever you will to us!" they pleaded. "But for now, we beg you to spare us from our enemies!"

If God felt that the Israelites failed to show their sincerity, He didn't have to wait long for evidence of it. All over Canaan the people swiftly turned from the heathen gods, destroyed their idols and temples and eagerly sought to learn God's ways. To many the knowledge of their Creator's laws was quite obscure, because it had been almost a generation since the nation had fallen into idol worship. When God witnessed the smashing of their little "good luck" objects, tearing down images of the national gods of foreign nations and earnestly seeking to find the right way, He felt sorry for Israel.

Again, after eighteen years of oppression, the ever-merciful Creator moved to deliver His chosen people. (Judges 10: 8.) He made it known to them that as many as possible should gather to meet the enemy in the land east of the Jordan, and that He would help them.

The Israelites were disorganized, but this wonderful news spurred them to action. During the next weeks thousands secretly came at night -- especially from eastern Canaan -- to gather at Mizpeh, a city in the southern portion of the land allotted to the tribe of Gad. Assembling wasn't easy. Many who wanted to go found it impossible to leave home without being seen by enemy soldiers. Some fought their way free. Others died trying. Most of them had to leave home at the risk of being discovered and having their families taken by the enemy. It was all part of the price they were still paying for breaking the First, Second and Fourth Commandments, which generally lead to breaking the other seven.

It wasn't long before the news of this great gathering reached the Ammonites, who were already bringing up heavy forces along the east side of the Jordan to their main garrison in Gilead. They were about ready for a last mass attack on the half tribe of Manasseh and the tribes of Reuben and Gad in eastern Canaan. Israel's move stepped up the action of the Ammonites, who hadn't expected any mass resistance. If they had also learned another startling fact, they would have acted with even more haste.

God Chooses Whom Man Rejects!

That fact was that the quickly-organized army of Israel as yet had no leader or captain! (Verses 17-18.)

Meanwhile, near the eastern border of the territory of Manasseh in Gilead, there was a rugged man by the name of Jephthah, who was the head of a desert band made up of trained fighters who made a living by somewhat questionable means. They probably raided and looted poorly protected Ammonite settlements and hired themselves out as guards and protectors. Jephthah's father was one of the tribe of Manasseh, but because his mother was not his father's legal wife, his half brothers (whose mother WAS the legal wife of their father) wouldn't allow him to share in their inheritance. Spurned by his own family, Jephthah had left home when a very young man to seek a living elsewhere. (Judges 11:12.)

He had journeyed off to the desert country to the northeast, where he established himself well in the ways of life in the wilderness. (Verse 3.) He became well-trained in riding, hunting and fighting. Eventually he built himself up as a tribal leader, the builder of a small private army that was the fear of fierce nomadic tribes and the protector of the weak and the poor. Jephthah was actually a kind of captain of men little better than cunning desert pirates, but he became respected and famous in his part of the country. He had a reputation for seizing booty only from bands of vicious robbers and killers, especially Ammonites.

In Mizpeh there was growing concern as to who should be chosen to head the army of Israel. Outside of a few men who had been officers of minor rank years previously, there was little choice. It was soon recognized that none of these men were able enough to lead the army. The elders of Israel realized that the leader must be one whom the soldiers would respect in knowledge, resourcefulness, patriotism, courage and experience.

When the name Jephthah was brought up, there were yells of derision, although it was well known that he was a mighty leader and had kept his private band free from Ammonite oppression. (Judges 11:1.) The more the elders discussed him the more seriously he was considered. They now realized the man they had self-righteously cast out was their only hope. The discussions ended with several men riding swiftly out of Mizpeh in the direction of Jephthah's home far east of the Jordan. They were now ready to ask Jephthah to lay down his life for those who formerly would not have given him a piece of bread if he were hungry.

Jephthah was surprised to be visited by chieftains of Israel. He was more surprised to recognize some elders of eastern Manasseh -- and some of his brothers!

"This is quite a gathering," he remarked coldly. "What business could you have with me? And why are my brothers here? To them I am a non-deserving outcast!"

"We realize that this must seem very strange to you," an elder explained, "but all of us are here to ask your help against the Ammonites. We have a large army, but no general. Would you consider leading our newly formed army against them?" (Judges 11:4-6.)

Jephthah could hardly believe his ears. There were almost countless able men in Israel, he realized, yet here were representatives come to ask an outsider to lead their army! He stared at his brothers, who eyed him uneasily.

"I suppose you know my brothers forced me out of my inheritance in disgrace years ago," Jephthah addressed the elders. "They hated me and pushed me out of my home because my mother was a harlot. They caused others to hate me. The elders did nothing to protect me. Why should I now be the one to help you in your time of trouble?"

This time it was the brothers who answered. They stepped forward beseechingly.

"We did wrong, and we are sorry!" they exclaimed. "Forgive us! We beg you to go with us now to Mizpeh to help get our army moving. If you do, we'll see that you shall become leader of all the people of your home region, the land of Gilead!" (Verses 7-8.)

The brothers were so convincing in their sincerity that even Jephthah, a hardened soldier, couldn't help but believe them. He regarded them intently for a few moments, then turned to ask more questions of the elders. He didn't wish to make up his mind without trying to find some underlying motive in this astonishing overture. After the plan had been laid out to him in more detail, and after he had sat before them for a time in thought, he asked them this last question:

"If I take your army against the Ammonites, and God makes me victorious, will the heads of the tribes east of the Jordan actually give me full direction and power to help change the lives of the people?"

There was an affirmative chorus of solemn promises. (Verses 9-10.)

Jephthah turned to his brothers with a nod and a slight smile. The Israelite elders tried to restrain their cheerful shouts. Jephthah's brothers rushed forward to bow before him, but he pulled them up to embrace them.

Days later at Mizpeh, after Jephthah had been made leader of the northeastern tribes, he sent messengers to the king of Ammon, who was camping with a large army south of the Jabbok River in the territory of Gad.

Although warfare was the thing Jephthah knew best, he loved peace and had long since learned that avoiding war was more often the wiser course. He was determined to at least try to resolve matters by diplomatic means. He courteously inquired of the king why he had come to fight against the tribes of northeastern Israel.

The messengers returned promptly with the Ammonite king's curt reply:

"The Israelites took away my land when they came up from Egypt. I am here with my army to demand that you return it to me. It is all the territory east of the Jordan between the Armon and the Jabbok rivers." (Judges 11:11-13.)

Jephthah sent messengers back to the king, this time with a clarified piece of information he hoped would give the Ammonite ruler food for thought and perhaps a change of mind:

"You claim that the Israelites took your land when they came up from Egypt. We know, as well as you do, that this is not true. Neither did Israel take away the Moabites' land.

"When Israel came up from Egypt by way of the desert, the Red Sea and Kadesh, messengers were sent to the king of Edom asking permission to pass through his land. He refused. Permission was asked of the king of Moab to pass peacefully through Moab, and he also refused. After the Israelites had camped at Kadesh for a time, they set out to the northeast, careful not to trespass into the lands of Edom and Moab, or disturb those people as they passed by.

"Israel sent messengers to Sihon in Heshbon, king of the Amorites, asking permission to pass through his land. His land is this land now in question. The Amorites had formerly taken it from the Ammonites, and Ammon was never able to recover it. Instead of granting the request to let Israel pass through his land, king Sihon tried to wipe out Israel by the sword. But he was defeated. The God of Israel then turned possession of the land of the Amorites over to Israel. It included the territory from the Arnon river to the Jabbok river, and from the Jordan River eastward into the desert. These are the boundaries of the land you claim as yours, but why do you claim it? (Judges 11:14-23.)

"Our God took that land from the Amorites and gave it to us. If your god Chemosh were to give you something, wouldn't you feel that you should be the rightful owner? Whether it is the land you speak of or any other land, if our God drives out the inhabitants before us, we shall possess that country!

Ammonites Reject God's Decision

"Do you feel that you are better than Balak, king of Moab, who knew better than to fight with Israel over the towns and territory he knew Israel rightfully owned? Did he ever claim we should give him the land Moab had lost to the Amorites? If you have felt that these places you lost to the Amorites should be recovered from Israel, why didn't you do something about it long before this?"

"Considering all these things, you honestly must admit that Israel has done nothing to cause you to threaten the nation or to wage war. On the other hand, you are doing the wrong thing to threaten war against Israel!"

"Let the God of Israel, who is the Supreme God, judge this matter between Israel and Ammon!"

Again the king of the Ammonites was quite prompt with an answer. It consisted of very few words, and left little doubt in Jephthah's mind as to what would be the next turn of events.

"I say the land I designated belongs to me," the return message read. "Why leave it to your God to prove anything? Prove it yourself!" (Judges 11:24-28.)

Jephthah was through sending messages. He and his officers immediately passed through all of eastern Israel recruiting more soldiers and even sent messengers across the Jordan to ask the tribe of Ephraim to help. He told his officers to get the Israelite army ready to move. While preparations were being made, Jephthah foolishly uttered a very unusual and improper vow, thinking that his chance for victory would be greater if he could promise something to God in return. (Judges 12:1-2; Judges 11:29-31.)

"If you will give us success in battle and if I am allowed to return in peace, then I will dedicate to you whatever first comes out of my door to meet me," he said to God, "and, I will prepare it as a burnt offering!"

God did not approve of this foolishly spoken vow and would have helped Jephthah just as surely if he had not made it. But regardless of what God thought of the vow, He helped Israel charge into the Ammonites with crushing strength. The battle raged over a thirty-mile area that involved twenty towns. When it was over, the Ammonites were completely defeated. (Verses 32-33.)

But the pleasant flavor of victory was soon to turn bitter for Jephthah. His courage and integrity had brought victory but his lack of good judgment was bound to bring grief. As he approached his home on his return from the battlefield east of the Jordan, his young daughter -- his only child -- came dancing out of the house.

He stood speechless, remembering that he had vowed to dedicate to God whatever came to meet him! (Judges 11:34.)

Chapter 67

THOSE INFAMOUS PHILISTINES

WHEN Jephthah returned to Mizpeh after his victory over the Ammonites, he approached his home to see his only child come out of his house to meet him! (Judges 11:34.)

Doing What Seems Right

He remembered then the vow he had made to God before the battle. Jephthah was so upset that he tore his coat to shreds. As his daughter rushed to meet him, he seized her in a fond embrace. Then he told her of the vow he had made. It was a shock to her, but she didn't complain.

"If you have made a vow to God," she told her father, "then you must keep it. God has given you a victory over the Ammonites, as you asked, so do with me according to your promise in this matter."

A vow to God is something that should be made very seldom -- if ever. Jephthah began to realize that he had been very foolish in making such a rash vow. But, thinking any vow was binding, he was determined to carry it out, even though God certainly disapproved of such an act. The lesson God wants us to learn from the book of Judges is recorded in the last chapter: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25.) God had for bidden them to do what was right in their own eyes. (Deuteronomy 12:8.)

"Before I go," Jephthah's daughter told him, "I should like to take two months to visit my friends who live in various places in the nearby mountains, as I shall never see them again!"

Jephthah readily agreed. (Judges 11:35-38.) At the end of two months she dutifully returned home. The Bible doesn't explain the details of what happened. It merely concludes: "... she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed ..." (Judges 11:39.) Though some commentators have thought Jephthah kept his daughter a perpetual virgin, the Jews and most commentators have understood this tragic story as it is explained in the Authorized Version of the Bible.

Jephthah learned a mighty lesson. He discovered, through this tragedy, the real lesson of faith -- that one does not have to vow to God in order to have Him perform what He has promised. What God expects is that we learn to

trust Him in everything. When Jephthah finally learned that lesson, he became an outstanding example of faith. Paul even referred to him in Hebrews 11:32 as one of the outstanding examples of faith in the Old Testament.

It later became a custom in Israel for the young women to spend four days of every year in expressing sorrow for Jephthah's daughter. (Judges 11:40.)

When the other tribes of Israel heard that their brothers east of the Jordan had freed themselves from the Ammonites, they reacted in various ways. It should have been a cause for happy celebration, but the people of Ephraim didn't see it that way. They were offended because they hadn't been given part of the glory Jephthah's army earned in fighting the Ammonites. In fact, they were so irked that they formed an army and marched northward to a spot where they crossed the Jordan river and then headed eastward to confront Jephthah.

"Why didn't you let us in on your battle with the Ammonites?" they angrily asked. "Were you trying to take all the glory of winning for yourself? You have acted in an unbrotherly and selfish manner, and for that we should set fire to your home and burn it down on you!"

This was an unfair charge and a ridiculous threat, but Jephthah didn't lose his temper.

"There was no time to lose in preparation against the Ammonites," he explained. "If you had wanted to help, you could have volunteered whatever number of men you might have quickly gotten together when I asked you for help. But you sent no one. So now you have no good reason to complain. Thousands of men, including myself, risked their lives against the enemy, but God delivered us and the matter is over. What, therefore, is your reason for bringing an army to fight me?" (Judges 12:1-3.)

Jephthah's words only served to stir the Ephraimites to greater anger. They began shouting childish insults at the eastern Israelites.

Where Brotherly Envy Leads

"You men of the Gilead area have no national pride!" they yelled. "You are trying to establish a country all of your own, but you won't succeed because you are only the outcasts and the scum of Israel!"

These groundless affronts stung the Gileadites, and though Jephthah tried to keep them under control, the continued yells of contempt soon developed into the action of attack. It wasn't long before a battle was raging.

The Ephraimites had come as the angry ones, but Jephthah's men, after all those insulting remarks, had greater anger, and they fell against their brothers with such power that they quickly defeated the men of Ephraim, who broke ranks and fled in fear and confusion in all directions. Jephthah knew that eventually they would all move to cross the Jordan westward to get back to their home territory to the south, so he ordered his men to rush to the places at the river where it was possible to ford it. He felt that people who had such a miserable attitude should be punished, and God allowed him to do just that.

At first the Gileadites had difficulty in identifying people because there were so many crossing the Jordan. To get safely across, the Ephraimites tried to pose as people from the east of the Jordan so that they wouldn't be attacked. Then someone thought of a good way to determine which were Ephraimites. Each man, as he approached the river, was asked to pronounce the word "shibboleth." Persons who were east of the Jordan could pronounce it correctly, but Ephraimites, because of their particular manner of speaking, couldn't bring themselves to say "shibboleth" but insisted it was "sibboleth." All those who mispronounced the word were slain. By the time the matter was finished, forty-two thousand Ephraimites were dead! (Judges 12:4-6.)

As the elders of Gilead had promised, Jephthah was made judge of northern Israel. He died after being in power for six years. During the next twenty-five years three other judges ruled that part of Israel. None of them did anything particularly eventful, but in those years there was a degree of peace and prosperity in that region. (Judges 12:7-15.)

While all this was taking place, the state of affairs in other parts of Israel varied from fair to miserable. When the Ammonites, years previously, had moved in from the east, the Philistines had come into Canaan from the southwest. All during the time the northern Israelites were troubled by the Ammonites, and during the time of peace that followed Jephthah's victory, most of the rest of Israel was suffering from the inroads by the Philistines. By the time Gideon had died, the people of northern Israel had begun again to fall toward idolatry. Soon northern Israel had fallen away from God's ways to a great extent, and curses were beginning to fall on them. With southern Israel almost completely in the hands of the Philistines, all of the Israelites were once again embroiled in calamity of their own making.

In those days there was a Danite named Manoah who lived in the town of Zorah, which was in the territory of Dan near the border between Dan and Judah. It was about twenty miles west of Jerusalem, and in the land occupied by the Philistines.

Christ Was No Nazarite

Manoah had been married for several years, and though he hoped to rear a large family, his wife had no children. As time went on, the couple had to face the discouraging possibility that Manoah's wife was incapable of bearing children.

One day when Manoah's wife was alone, a strange man came to speak to her. She was startled at the sight of the stranger because of his outstanding appearance. He had unusually expressive and piercing eyes, and gave the impression that he was a man of exceptional and even terrible power.

"I know that you haven't been able to have children," he said to Manoah's wife, "but I want you to know that soon you shall give birth to a son. Listen to my instructions. This son of yours shall be under the vow of a nazirite from the time he is born till his death. Therefore you should not drink wine or strong drink while your son is on the way. And don't eat any food that is unclean. This son of yours shall grow up to be a very special person who shall start to deliver Israel out of the power of the Philistines!" (Judges 13:1-5.)

What Manoah's wife did then will be related a few paragraphs later. The vow of a nazirite should first be explained. When the Israelites camped at Mt. Sinai and received from God complete instructions on how to conduct themselves rightly, those directions included what should be done if one decided to give himself or herself over to special service to God for any chosen period of time, whether it was for a month, a year, or several years. This promise to go into such special service was known as the vow of a nazirite.

Anyone who made such a vow was to do three things: Drink no alcoholic drink nor consume grapes or any product of grapes such as vinegar or raisins; touch no dead body; refrain from cutting the hair. (Numbers 6.) Manoah's son was to observe these rules all his life, and Manoah's wife was to observe them until her son was weaned.

Because Christ was reared in the town of Nazareth in the land of Galilee, the word "nazirite" is sometimes erroneously connected with the place where Jesus lived. For this reason Christ is sometimes referred to as a nazirite. Inasmuch as the Son of God led a perfect life while in human form, there was hardly any necessity for his making a vow to be of special service. And not having made such a vow, there was no reason for Him to observe the three rules that a nazirite was obliged to follow.

Nevertheless, some insist that Christ lived the role of a nazirite. The truth is that Christ didn't have long hair as he is so often pictured. He wasn't averse to drinking wine or grape juice. The New Testament several times mentions the fact that Christ drank wine. (Matthew 11:18-19; Luke 5:29-30.) He also had no aversion to touching a dead body. He was a Nazarene, reared in Nazareth, but never a nazirite. Christ did not live by the rules of the nazirite vow, for these things Jesus did would have broken the nazirite

vow. That would have been sin. If Christ had sinned, He could not have become our Savior. (II Corinthians 5:20-21.)

The stranger who had appeared to Manoah's wife left as suddenly and mysteriously as he had arrived. When Manoah returned, his wife immediately went to him and excitedly told him what had taken place.

An Amazing Visitor

"I asked him for his name but he neither answered my question nor told me where he came from!" she exclaimed. "He was such an unusual man that I felt as though I were in the presence of someone holy!" (Judges 13:2-7.)

Manoah was at first inclined to believe that his wife's imagination was a bit overactive, but the more he thought about what she had told him the more he came to believe that some person sent by God had spoken to his wife. The matter began to weigh so heavily on his mind that he prayed that God would again send the mysterious man to give them further instructions as to how they should rear the son who would come to them.

A few days later, when Manoah was working in his fields at a distance from his home, his wife was at the same time working in an area close to their home. She stopped to rest, and it was then that the mysterious stranger suddenly appeared again to her. She was greatly startled, and ran to her husband to tell him that the person who had predicted she would have a son was again present. Manoah hurried back with his wife to find a man who exactly fitted the description she had given him days before.

"Are you the one who spoke to my wife a few days ago?" Manoah asked a bit hesitantly.

"I am the same," the stranger answered.

"You predicted we would have a son," Manoah went on. "We would like to learn in more detail how we should rear him."

"I have already given your wife instructions," the stranger replied. "If you hold to them, you will do well." He then repeated those instructions to refresh their memories. (Judges 13:8-14.)

Manoah believed that this man was some kind of a prophet in whom he could rely, and he was so pleased to know that his wife would have a son that he asked the man to stay until a young goat could be broiled for a special feast. The stranger told Manoah that he wouldn't stay to eat, but that if he wished to cook meat, it should be offered as a sacrifice to God.

The more Manoah talked with the stranger, the more curious he became about his identity.

"What is your name?" he finally inquired boldly. "We would like to know so that we may rightly honor you when your predictions come true and our son is born."

"By now you should realize that my name should be kept secret," the stranger replied. "Therefore you shouldn't ask about it."

Manoah still didn't understand who the man was, but he did as suggested and placed a dressed young goat on a nearby large flat-topped rock. As he stepped back to pick up some sticks to make a fire, the stranger pointed at the rock. Flames shot up out of it! Then, as Manoah and his wife stared, he stepped onto the rock and miraculously shot upward with the flames and smoke!

Manoah and his wife were so startled at the sight and by the sudden realization that this man was a visitor from God that they fell fearfully on the ground. When finally they looked around, they saw no sign of the stranger. (Judges 13:15-20.)

"We must have seen God!" Manoah muttered. "No one can look on God and live! We'll surely be struck dead because of this!"

His wife wasn't so alarmed about the matter. She comforted him by pointing out that if God intended to strike them dead, He wouldn't have accepted their sacrifice and He wouldn't have told them that they would soon have a son. (Judges 13:21-23.)

The couple had not actually seen God the Father. The stranger was God's Messenger, Jesus Christ, in human form. If it had been Christ manifesting Himself in His natural spirit state, Manoah and his wife would not have been able to look and live.

Eventually a son was born to Manoah's wife. He was named Samson. He grew up to be an exceptionally strong young man who felt very forcefully that something should be done to free his people from the control and influence of the pagan Philistines.

One day when he was in the town of Timnath a few miles south of his birthplace, he met a Philistine woman and, after becoming better acquainted, they fell in love and decided to marry. He immediately returned home to tell his father and mother that he wanted them to visit the Philistine woman's parents and arrange for his marriage to their daughter.

Manoah and his wife were shocked and disappointed that their only son should choose to marry a foreign woman instead of one of his own people. They did not realize God was using this situation to begin delivering Israel

from the Philistines. Samson was so insistent that they finally went to Timnath.

Samson went with them. At one point he went on ahead for some distance to see if the trail was safe. Suddenly a large lion came roaring out from behind a boulder! Unarmed, Samson quickly turned to face the fierce beast with his bare hands as it lunged upon him! (Judges 14: 1-5.)

Chapter 68

SAMSON AND THE PHILISTINES

SAMSON, the young Danite who insisted on marrying a Philistine woman, was on his way with his parents to where the woman lived. Suddenly he was attacked by a full-grown lion.

Samson Slays a Lion

When he saw the beast coming for him from among the rocks that lined the trail (Judges 14: 1-5), Samson deftly moved off his mount. Instead of trying to escape, he deliberately lunged toward the lion. Just as it leaped for him, he dodged. The mighty cat landed on the ground instead of on Samson, who swiftly leaped on the lion the moment it was confused by its failure. Samson straddled the animal's back, locked his arms around the shaggy neck and squeezed hard against the lion's throat. The beast emitted a short roar of rage that trailed off to a gasp as its wind was cut off. It struggled over on its back, frantically pawing the air with claw-extended feet, pinning Samson to the ground.

The thumping weight of the lion might have fatally crushed an ordinary man, but Samson was far from ordinary physically. He hung on, constantly tightening his grip. His head was buried in the beast's thick mane, and breathing was difficult. Summoning all his strength, Samson jerked the massive head backward. He heard the bones snap, and felt the great body go limp. The lion rolled off him, and he lay for a few moments renewing his breath. He staggered to his feet to stare at the dead beast. Samson was a little surprised that he was able to overcome such a powerful animal. He didn't fully understand that he had been given special protection and a great amount of extra strength by a loving God. (Judges 14:6.)

Not wishing to startle or concern his parents with what had happened, Samson dragged the dead lion back from the trail before they rode into sight. He regained his mount and continued with them to the town of

Timnath, where arrangements were made for his marriage to the Philistine woman whom God had put in Samson's life so that he would have a necessary closer association with the Philistine oppressors. (Verse 7.)

In those days it was a custom for a period of time to pass after a couple formally decide to marry till the time of the wedding. It was many months later, therefore, that Samson and his parents set out for the marriage ceremony at Timnath.

When they arrived at the place where Samson had slain the lion, the young Danite went aside by himself to the spot where he had left the carcass. Animals and insects had long since consumed the flesh of the animal. Only the bleached skeleton remained. Samson discovered that bees had built their comb inside the rib cage, and that there was honey inside. Although bees were swarming about, he surprisingly managed to get some of the honey to eat without being stung. Neither did the bees attack him while he filled a leather bag with honey. He brought some of the honey also to his father and mother, but he told them nothing about the lion. (Judges 14:8-9.)

Samson's wedding turned out to be quite a social event in Timnath. It included a seven-day feast to which thirty young men were invited as friends of the bridegroom.

Young women were also invited as companions of the bride. Besides these, there were friends and relatives. Most of the people were Philistines, a fact that caused Samson's parents to be rather uneasy, what with some of the Philistine overlords acting unfriendly and suspicious.

At that time riddles were a popular form of conversational entertainment. In the course of the festivities, Samson posed a riddle to his thirty companions, basing it on his experience with the lion and the honey.

A Riddle Spells Trouble

"If you men can give me the answer to a certain riddle before this feast is over," Samson told them, "I'll give each of you a fancy shirt and costly robe. Here's the riddle: 'Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet.' Now if you fail to give me the right answer before the feast is over, then you shall give me thirty expensive shirts and thirty fine robes. Agreed?"

The thirty men nodded in agreement. They welcomed any opportunity for something that might develop into an argument or trouble for Samson. They acted friendly toward him, but inwardly felt just the opposite. Some of them resented Samson's marriage to a woman with whom they had been more

than friendly from time to time, and who had no intention of changing her ways. (Judges 14:10-14.)

The thirty men had no intention of providing shirts and robes for Samson. They therefore went to his wife to force from her the answer to the riddle.

"I would tell you if I knew," she told them. "Samson didn't give me the answer."

"Then find out before this feast is over!" they said to her. "Otherwise we'll burn you together with your parents' home!"

Fearful of what would happen, Samson's wife tried to get the answer to the riddle from her new husband. At first he refused to tell her. She wept bitterly, complaining that it wasn't fair of him to start out their married life by keeping secrets from her. Samson finally was so moved by her tears, pleas and feminine wiles that he told her all about the lion and the honey. Although she didn't believe the story, Samson's wife disclosed to the men who had threatened her, at the first opportunity, all that had been told to her.

"Your husband's story is ridiculous," they told her. "No man could kill a full-grown lion with his bare hands. Possibly he told you this tale to avoid giving you the right answer. And if you're not providing the right answer, we'll carry out that threat we made!"

That afternoon, only two or three hours before the feast ended, the men approached Samson to inform him that they at last had an answer to his riddle. Samson noted that some of them looked very confident. Inasmuch as only he and his wife supposedly knew the answer to the riddle, he could think of only one reason why the men should display such an expression.

"Give me your answer," Samson said to them. "If you have it, I'll stick to my offer to reward you."

"We gave your riddle much thought," one of the men told Samson, "and we were really stumped for days. After some time in conference, we believe that we have the answer. Here it is: 'What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?' "

Samson wasn't too surprised by such an accurate answer. He realized that it was as he had lately suspected -- that his wife was overly familiar with these men, and that she didn't care for him much more than she cared for them.

"Your answer is right, and I congratulate you on your cleverness," Samson informed them. "You mentioned how hard you worked to find the answer. That was a lie! You found the answer only because you forced it from my wife, whom you have known too well!" (Judges 14:15-18.)

These accusations, though true, would ordinarily have brought men swarming over the accuser. Not one man, however, moved against Samson. None was inclined to tangle with this broad-shouldered, powerful man in his time of anger. There was an awkward silence as Samson surveyed the crowd.

"I'll now go and get those thirty shirts and thirty robes I promised you!" he muttered as he stalked out.

"All those clothes would cost him too much," one man remarked with a grin as Samson disappeared. "That's the last we'll see of him!"

But Samson did return. It was a few days later. He was carrying a large, bulging bag. He called the thirty men together and emptied the contents of the bag -- thirty shirts and thirty robes!

"Where did you get these?" the men inquired as they picked them up and admiringly examined the fine material.

"What does it matter to you?" Samson replied tartly. "I took them from thirty well-dressed Philistine men I met on the various streets of Ashkelon. But they don't need the clothes any more because they're all dead now!"

Jaws dropped in consternation at the same moment the men dropped the pieces of clothing as though they were sizzling hot potatoes. Samson walked away, leaving the Philistines wondering if he were a muscular monster or merely a purveyor of tall tales -- or both.

Later they learned that the bodies of thirty Philistines had been found one morning in various parts of their city of Ashkelon, about twenty-four miles southwest of Timnath. All thirty of the bodies were found to be without shirts and robes.

On hearing this report, the so-called companions of the bridegroom were convinced that a monster had indeed been in their midst. They had no way of knowing that Samson's violent actions had been inspired by the God of Israel, who was directing the young Danite in a move for freedom for the southern tribes of Israel against their Philistine oppressors. After delivering the shirts and robes, Samson returned in anger to his home at Zorah without making any effort to visit his bride. (Judges 14:19.)

As the weeks went by, his anger and disgust diminished, and he decided to return to his wife. Taking a young goat as a gift, he went to the home of his wife's father, who was surprised and uneasy when he opened the door and saw Samson.

"I've come to see my wife," Samson said firmly to his father-in-law. "I trust she is here."

Samson's Wife Stolen

"She -- she is," the father answered hesitantly. "But weeks ago you gave me the definite impression that you would have no more to do with her, and consequently I gave her in marriage to the man who was your chief companion at your wedding!"

Samson was stunned by this news, though he might have known that anything could have happened among Philistines during his long absence.

"I should have expected something like that," he murmured bitterly. "She seemed to like him and the other twenty-nine more than me."

"Forget her!" the father exclaimed in an attempt to pacify Samson. "As you know, I have a younger and prettier daughter. If you would take her for your-bride, I would be greatly pleased -- and so would she!"

But I wouldn't!" Samson retorted. (Judges 15:1-2.)

Burning with anger, he returned at once to Zorah. On the way he devised a plan to chastise at least some of the Philistine overlords because of their unjust treatment to him and to most other Israelites.

Within the next few days, with the help of several friends, he trapped three hundred foxes. These animals were especially abundant in Canaan and were a specially great nuisance in raiding the vineyard areas.

Samson and his helpers took the caged animals, by night, down into Philistine farming territory where various grains were raised. It was the dry harvest season. Some of the corn, oats, wheat and barley was still standing. Some of it had been cut and stacked or stored.

Samson and his men took short cords and tied the foxes together in couples, with one end of a cord tied to each animal's tail. Then they fastened a firebrand to each cord midway between the tails, and freed them in various areas. The result was that each pair of foxes rolled, raced and struggled all over the fields, dragging their torches and setting fire to the tinder-like grain shocks and uncut fields for miles around. Dry breezes spread the many fires over wide territory, insomuch that there was a tremendous loss of crops to the Philistines during the next several hours. (Judges 15:3-5.)

After the fires were finally put out, the leaders in that area investigated to find out how the fires had started. When they discovered that Samson was responsible, and that he had done it because his father-in-law had given Samson's wife to another man, the Philistines became even more alarmed. Samson had become an object of their fear and respect in recent weeks because of his unusual strength and daring. No one, even in groups, wished

to oppose him. The natural thing to do, therefore, was blame Samson's wife and her father for the loss.

It wasn't long before an angry mob converged on the home of Samson's father-in-law, loudly demanding the appearance of the man and his daughter. The two feared the crowd too much to come out. After a while the house was set on fire. The occupants still refused to come out, and perished when the house burned to the ground. (Verse 6.)

When Samson heard what had happened, he boldly appeared before the Philistine leaders. He told them that he was well aware that their actions were in vengeance against him. Then he shouted to them that he wouldn't cease his violent actions toward them until he considered the score settled. This statement greatly disturbed the Philistine oppressors. They decided that they should speak out against Samson so that they wouldn't lose face in the estimation of the oppressed Israelites.

"You've had your way around here too long!" someone shouted.

This was the signal for the Philistines to choose what should be done. Some, though they disliked Samson, feared him too much to oppose him. Those tried to quiet others who wanted to make a stand against him. They quickly found themselves outnumbered as feeling against the Danite welled up within minutes.

One man, certain that he would have plenty of backing, and wishing to become a hero by opposing Samson, walked up to him and shook his fist in his face.

"We've had enough of you!" he screamed indignantly. "After all, you're only an Israelite who should realize that we are your masters!"

The unfortunate fellow couldn't have made a poorer choice of words. Samson stared at him while all looked on in expectant silence. Like a cat leaping for a bird Samson pounced on the speaker, then snatched him up as though he were a light bundle of rags. Before anyone could move to interfere, he hurled the fellow into the knot of men grouped before him. There were grunts and howls of pain as the Philistines were floored under the impact of the hurtling body.

Most of those who were able to get up left the vicinity as quickly as they could. A few joined forces to try to stand up against Samson, coming at him from all sides. This was a foolish move. The Danite beat them off with a fury that spelled death for several.

The sound of the fight quickly attracted other men. Samson planned to get away before the Philistines could attack him in greater numbers, but it appeared that the opportunity had slipped by. From all directions he saw men moving menacingly toward him, men who were determined that his

trouble-making for them was about to cease. Some of them carried knives and swords. Others carried clubs. There seemed to be no way of breaking out of the tightening circle of aggressors. The panting, sweating Danite realized that this could be the end.

As the crowd closed in tightly, one over-anxious Philistine leaped at Samson. He proved to be the needed weapon for the man at bay. Samson caught him, flipped him upside down to seize him by the ankles and swing him around and around with such force and speed that those closing in on him were mowed down in a senseless heap.

The violence of Samson's action, which left dead and dying all around, was a quick convincer to the Philistines that they were dealing with a man of super-human strength, and that further opposition would result only in more death and injury. They melted away in retreat, giving Samson the opportunity at last, to get out of that region.

More Trouble For Samson

Instead of going to the home of his parents, where the Philistines would be certain to look for him, Samson went eastward into the land of the tribe of Judah. The Philistines were in power there, too, but he found refuge near Jerusalem in a cave-like fortress named Etam, where some Israelites had gathered to defend themselves against their oppressors. (Judges 15:7-8.)

The Philistines immediately formed an army which marched eastward into the territory of Judah, where the soldiers camped in a rugged area of limestone cliffs in Lehi, near where Samson was hiding. When the leaders of Judah inquired why an army had come against them, they were told that it had come to insure that the men of Judah would find Samson and deliver him, as a bound captive, to the Philistine army.

The men of Judah had no choice in the matter. They knew that the Philistines would attack them if they refused. They bowed to the wishes of their tyrants by promising that they would bring Samson back as a helpless prisoner.

Later, at the fortress of Etam where Samson was staying, a messenger excitedly rushed in with the news that an army was approaching from the north.

"There must be at least three thousand!" he panted. "They've come down to try to capture Samson, the long-haired nazarite!" (Judges 15:9-11.)

Chapter 69

SAMSON VEXES THE PHILISTINES

EVEN before a messenger arrived to warn Samson at the fortress of Etam that thousands of soldiers were coming to take him, the young and powerful Danite spotted the army of three thousand from atop the fortress. He could tell by the dress and insignia of the soldiers that they were of the tribe of Judah. He could think of no valid reason why fellow Israelites would be a threat to him or the men with him.

Samson Is Arrested

When the leaders of the army of Judah met with Samson and the other men at the fortress, the reason for the presence of so many men was soon made known.

"We admire your great strength and we have marveled at the ways you have used it and your sense of humor in making the foxes set fire to the Philistines' crops," the captain of the army of Judah told Samson. "However, you seem to have forgotten that the Philistines are ruling over us, and that no one man can change that unhappy situation. Your violent actions against them and your insulting ways and remarks have only made them more hostile toward us. Why have you caused so much trouble?"

"They are our enemies," Samson replied. "They treated me badly, and I did the same to them. And I might as well enjoy my revenge by having a good laugh at their expense." (Judges 15:1-11.)

"What you did has resulted in more grief than you realize," the captain continued. "Now we have had to promise the Philistines that we will deliver you to them bound and alive! Otherwise, their soldiers will overrun the land with a terrible slaughter!"

Samson silently surveyed the three thousand soldiers below. He was beginning to understand the seriousness of the situation.

"Who figured that so many men would be required to capture me?" he laughed. "I am only one man."

The captain's face turned a little red, but he had a reasonable answer.

"We didn't know how many men would be in and around this fortress."

Samson knew that he would have to submit then and there to the men of Judah or fight against his own people in an attempt to escape. He loved all Israelites and didn't want to hurt any of them.

"I'll willingly go with you if you'll promise to keep me alive," Samson finally said.

"We'll have to bind you," the captain told him, "but I promise you that otherwise you will receive only the best treatment from us."

Samson was free to do as he wished until the soldiers of Judah had eaten and rested and were ready to start back northward. Then the husky Danite's mighty arms were securely bound behind his back with two lengths of strong, new rope. Knots were made especially secure and the rope was bound very tightly over his cloth-wrapped wrists so that there would be no opportunity for leverage or slack by which the binding might gradually be worked loose. (Judges 15: 12-13.)

When the army of Judah started out, Samson was carried on a litter between burros. The captain wished to make certain that nothing happened to the Danite before he could be delivered to the Philistines, who were still waiting to the north in the rugged region of Judah where their army had moved on.

It was not many miles from the fortress of Etam to where the Philistines were encamped. Just before the men of Judah reached the place, the captain gave orders to his three thousand men to disband and return to their homes. He was fearful that the army of the Philistines might have formed a trap ahead for his men. A handful of men were ordered on to guide the burros carrying Samson, and these men were advised to escape, if they could, as soon as Samson was in the hands of the Philistines.

A Surprise for the Philistines

When the Philistines learned from look-outs that Samson was being brought into their camp, they became very excited. They grabbed up their arms and rushed southward to seize the man who had troubled them so much. When they saw him being carried toward them, they began shouting in triumph. It was quite satisfying to them to view him being borne to his apparent doom in their midst. Instead of seizing him immediately, they stood back and shouted taunts and insults. At this point the men who were guiding the burros felt that they had accomplished their mission, and they turned to flee.

Samson made no effort to do anything. Officers sent men to approach him to examine his bonds to make certain that they were real and sufficient. They reported that the ropes were new, strong and well knotted, and that Samson was truly helpless. Assured, the Philistine officers boldly gathered around Samson.

"So this is the mighty Israelite called Samson!" a Philistine officer haughtily addressed the prone Danite. "You have caused us some trouble in the past,

but now you should know that your future is going to be full of a lot more trouble, even though it will be a very short future!"

A great cheer rose from the Philistines. This was too much for Samson, who had been trying to wait for some kind of opportunity. Anger can result in increased strength, and so it was with the muscular Danite. At the same time God imbued him with a special power because he had kept the requirements of a nazirite.

The laughter and hoots of the Philistines increased as Samson jerked himself up and strained at his ropes. In his bound state Samson's bulging muscles, rising veins and expression of anger and agony were a combination to cause great mirth to his enemies. All this was changed within seconds when the bonds snapped and the Danite leaped to his feet. Laughter abruptly faded. Grinning expressions turned to those of surprise and disbelief. Those who stood close to Samson swiftly moved away from him. (Judges 15:14.)

This was a crucial moment for Samson. He knew that he needed more than his fists to protect himself. There was no club, sword, spear or knife within his immediate reach. There were stones, but they could only be thrown, and were awkward to use.

Only the Jawbone of a Donkey

His darting eyes at last focused on the nearby skeleton of a donkey that had died recently and had been freshly picked clean by scavengers. Samson leaped to the bones, jerked the head from the rest of the skeleton and yanked the lower jawbone from the head.

By this time the bolder of the Philistines were beginning to close in on him. Grasping the jawbone by its smaller end, Samson started slamming away all about him, cracking the arms, heads, chests and backs of those who were courageous enough, however unwise, to come close to him. Some of the officers who had taunted Samson were pushed up to him by their surging soldiers, insomuch that they were included among Samson's victims.

When Philistine soldiers at a distance at last realized what was happening, they tried to rush in and overcome Samson by their very numbers. Men were rammed up to the Danite by the hundreds, but Samson swung the jawbone so swiftly and fiercely that no man was able to seize him or even touch him without being severely wounded or slain. Even so, the Philistines continued to pour in to their deaths.

What with Samson being surrounded with Philistines, soldiers more at a distance hesitated to use spears and arrows, lest they kill their own men. The sight of the slaughter of their fellow soldiers by a man crushing their

skulls was too unnerving for the Philistines. The rest of them disappeared into the hills, bringing the strange battle to a quick end.

There was silence to take the place of the shouts of fighting men. And on the arid ground lay a thousand Philistine corpses brought to that state because of Samson's swift, strong use of a donkey's jawbone -- and God's help. (Judges 15: 15.)

It was a ragged, sweating, weary Danite who looked warily about for more Philistines to rush in. He was breathing hard after his long, fatiguing struggle. He listened for the approach of more attackers, but the only sounds were the groans of the wounded and dying. As Samson uncertainly stood there amid the hundreds of corpses, it was difficult for him to realize what had happened.

"I can scarcely believe it," he muttered to himself. "God must have helped and protected me, or I wouldn't have been able to overcome all these men with the jawbone of a donkey!"

Finally he realized that the fingers of his right hand were still wrapped tightly around the jawbone. Then he tossed it away. He named the place "Ramath-Lehi", which means "Hill of The Jawbone." (Judges 15: 16-17.)

Until that moment he hadn't realized how tired and thirsty he had become. He looked around for some source of water, but there appeared to be no brook or spring in the vicinity. None of the dead Philistines had canteens, having excitedly rushed out of their camp with only their weapons.

Samson realized he would be risking death if his enemies should attack him in his tired condition. He fell weakly to his knees in the dry soil, then forward on his face.

God Sends Water

"You have helped me through many great dangers, God!" he muttered wearily. "Surely you didn't spare me to this moment just so I would die of thirst and my body at last fall into the hands of my pagan enemies! Please give me water!"

He lay motionless on the hot ground. His throat began to burn as though he had swallowed hot coals. He was too miserable and worn out to go any farther.

Above his labored breathing he heard a faint sound like the soft gurgle of bubbling liquid.

Samson then raised his head up to see clear water flowing up out of the ground only a few feet away! He stared at it unbelievably. It took moments for him to realize that God had granted his request and had by a miracle made a spring in a low spot, or hollow place, there at Lehi, called "the jaw" in the King James version. Spurred to action by the sight and sound of the water, he crawled slowly up to it and dropped his head into the cool spring to gulp in the life-giving water!

Soon Samson's strength returned. He was so thankful for the miracle God performed to save his life that he named the place En-hakkore, which means "Well of the Implorer." (Judges 15:18-19.)

He had no difficulty in returning to his home town. The Philistines feared him more than ever. Some believed that he was possessed with a demon, while others thought that the Israelite God he worshipped had something to do with his unusual strength. They decided to leave him alone until some circumstance favorable to them would result in his death.

It was a long, long time, however, before that circumstance developed. After his victorious encounter with the Philistine army, God made Samson judge over southwest Israel. He continued in that office for the next twenty years. During that time, however, the Israelites were still under subjection to their oppressors. (Judges 15:20.)

One day near the end of that twenty-year period, Samson rashly went to the Philistine capital city of Gaza near the Mediterranean, or the Great Sea. This city had been captured by Judah many years previously, but had fallen back into Philistine hands at one of the times Israel had forsaken the Creator.

Samson's reason for going to Gaza isn't mentioned in the Bible, but it was unwise for him to move about in the land of his enemies. To make matters worse, he went into one of Gaza's leading inns. It was impossible that such a powerfully built man -- with the uncut hair and beard of one under a nazirite vow -- should go unrecognized. Since Samson's peculiar features were well known, word spread swiftly that the mighty Danite was in town. Military officials were quite excited when they heard the news. They immediately ordered men to close the gates of the city so that Samson could not leave. Excitement mounted when it was later reported that Samson had been so attracted by the proprietress of the inn that he had decided to stay there till the next day.

Are Gates and Bars Enough?

"This is even more to our advantage!" a Philistine officer exclaimed. "He'll surely stay all night, and we'll better be able to cope with him in the daylight. Then, when he tries to get out, we will have the last laugh. At that time I want every man to come out of hiding and set upon him with every

kind of weapon. This time that Israelite, Samson, will come to his death by our hands!" (Judges 16: 1-2.)

Some Philistines who were aware of the plot against Samson quickly went to the inn to inform him. Of course they hoped that the Israelite judge would reward them handsomely. Samson realized that this could be a plan to get him out of the place right away and into the arms of his enemies, but he took a chance and left the inn about midnight.

Carefully keeping in the deep shadows, he silently went to the double gates of the city. He thought it strange that no guards were in sight. He hurried to remove the bar that held the gates locked and rigid after dark. To his surprise, after he removed the bar, the gates were still rigid. He pushed and pulled on them, but they wouldn't open. He realized then that another bar had also been fixed to the outside of the gates -- undoubtedly to keep him escaping to safety among his own people.

There was no way out except over the wall. It was too high for him to scale. And in those places where structures were built high against it, it might have been possible for him to get up on the wall, but it would have been too much of a drop on the outside.

Samson was as angry at himself for having blundered into this predicament as he was at the Philistines for trapping him. His first impulse was to step back and hurl himself at the double door in an attempt to crack the outside bar. Then a vengeful notion came to him. He seized the post to which the left gate was fixed and yanked it loose from the wall. He did the same with the right post. The gates and posts, held together by the bar that had been bolted across them from the outside fell to the ground as a solid mass. Samson was free again! Just for a joke -- to have a laugh on the Philistine oppressors -- Samson decided to make them look ridiculous again.

Lifting one edge up, Samson squeezed under the gates and hoisted them onto his shoulders. After balancing them to the best position, he walked away with the gates of Gaza -- posts, bar and all!

But Samson wasn't content just to remove the gates. They were found a few days later on top of a high hill several miles to the east. (Judges 16: 3.)

With all his strength and his virtues -- his faithfulness to his nazarite vow, his patriotic love for God and the Israelites -- Samson seemed to have a weakness for pretty Philistine women. To him their pagan culture seemed very charming. Not long after the episode at Gaza, he was attracted to a Philistine woman by the name of Delilah.

There were five main Philistine rulers, and when they heard that Samson had chosen a mate, they found out who she was and sent agents to talk to her.

"We have been instructed by our superiors to ask you to do a great favor for them," the agents secretly told Delilah. "It is something that should be easy for you, but we are willing to reward you well."

"Of course this has to do with Samson," the wily Delilah remarked casually.

"Why -- yes. It does," the spokesman for the agents replied.

"And you would like me to find out what makes him so strong so that the rulers of Philistia will know how to deal with him," Delilah went on.

The agents were a bit taken aback by this statement, but at the same time they were relieved that they wouldn't have so much to explain.

"I expected something like this." Delilah told them. "What makes you think, gentlemen, that even a great reward would cause me to betray Samson?" (Judges 16:4-5.)

Chapter 70

THE POWER OF A WOMAN

SAMSON fell in love with a beautiful Philistine woman named Delilah. (Judges 16:4.) The five representatives of the five rulers of Philistia had come to offer a reward to Delilah if she would discover for them the secret of Samson's strength. When Delilah asked them why they presumed that she could be paid to betray Samson, they felt that she was about to refuse.

Delilah Makes a Deal

"You should do this for the good of our great nation and all your Philistine friends," they anxiously told her. "You would be aiding in keeping down trouble and bloodshed!" Delilah eyed them quizzically for a few moments.

"I suppose you are right," she finally said, casually running one hand over her hair to push it into place. "If I find out what you want to know, how much are you willing to give me?"

"We'll give you a total of 5,500 pieces of silver, and no more," the relieved spokesman for the agents replied. "This money will be delivered to you just as soon as Samson is in our hands!" (Judges 16:5.)

"Be prepared to pay me very soon," Delilah quipped as she smiled at the five men. Although Samson didn't realize it, the woman he loved was proving to be a greedy opportunist who would do anything for enough money.

That same night she began to question Samson about the source of his strength.

"One reason why I admire and respect you so much," she fondly whispered to him in a time of intimacy, "is that your enemies have never been able to overcome you because of your great physical power. I know that you must have some secret source of such unusual power. It would please me if you would tell me that secret."

"I can think of no worthwhile reason why you should know such a thing," Samson replied. "You are a bit too curious to be pleased."

"I suppose so," Delilah tactfully sighed. "I merely hoped that you would share with me the knowledge of what great thing it would take to overcome such a strong man as you."

Samson fondly surveyed Delilah. He had such an ardent affection for her that he didn't wish to refuse her some kind of answer. Yet, he did not completely trust her with the secret of his great strength. And Samson did not want to risk unnecessary danger. So he decided to use his sharp wit again so that, if Delilah talked too much to the wrong people, he might have another good laugh on the Philistines.

"If my enemies were to carefully bind me with seven strong, green strips of bark twisted together," Samson said, "then my special strength would fail me, and I would be no stronger than any other man of my physical development." (Judges 16: 7.)

"Samson, why do you tell me such a tale?" Delilah gently scolded him, thereby trying to cause him to think that she didn't believe him.

"Why don't you try binding me with such a cord and see what happens?" Samson asked. "I think I shall do just that, my darling," Delilah replied.

Hours later, Delilah contacted the representatives of the rulers of Philistia to tell them what Samson had told her.

"It could be that Samson made up a story to test your loyalty," one of the men observed.

"I realize that," Delilah answered, "but you'll agree that we'll have to take a chance. Furnish me with the seven strong, green strips of bark braided together, and I'll manage somehow to tie Samson up with them. I'll have men hiding in another part of my home to leap on him if he cannot break the cord!"

"Excellent!" exclaimed the spokesman for the five agents. "We'll send you the cord right away! The rest is up to you!"

Another Laugh for Samson

Later, when everything was in readiness, Delilah produced the cord and playfully wound it about Samson.

"I took you at your word," she told him smilingly, carefully knotting the cord at his wrists behind his back. "Now, if you are as helpless as you said you would be. what if I should call for your enemies to come and take you?"

"This little game of ours wouldn't be very interesting if you already knew what would happen," Samson teased. "If you have some way to get in touch with my enemies this very minute, I'll face them!"

Samson was quite unaware that a number of picked Philistine soldiers were hiding only a few yards away, ready to pounce on him at the expected moment of his helplessness. He was quite surprised when Delilah began shouting.

"Samson is bound!" she called out excitedly. "Come after him, you men!"

The hidden men, peeking through small slits in a curtain, failed to move or make any noise. They first wanted to see what the Danite would do. They had been told that he probably would struggle quite fiercely with his bonds if they proved to be too much for him, and the soldiers were taking no chances.

Suddenly Samson broke the cord as though it were made of cobwebs, causing the Philistines to fall back and quietly flee through a rear entrance. Delilah was relieved that the soldiers hadn't rushed into the room. She quickly regained her composure and concealed her disappointment by smiling and applauding. (Judges 16:8-9.)

A few nights later, when she felt that enough time had passed so that Samson wouldn't guess how anxious she was to betray him, she again brought up the subject of his strength.

"Why did you jest with me about the wonderful source of your great power?" she asked in a hurt tone. "I don't think it was fair of you to tell me something that wasn't true."

"I didn't think you had a good reason to be serious," Samson explained, "so I put you off with a light answer."

"But I was serious!" Delilah insisted. "Why shouldn't you tell me what a wondrous thing it would take to overcome such a man as you?"

Again, because of his deep feeling for Delilah, Samson felt that he should give an answer, but he was too wary to tell her all she wanted to know.

Samson Still Cautious

"All right, Delilah," he sighed. "Here's what could prove my undoing. If I were bound tightly with strong, new ropes that have never before been used for any other purpose, then would I be only as strong as any other man of my size and development."

Delilah realized that this wasn't necessarily so, but there was nothing to do but obtain the new rope and again hide the Philistines in her house while she once more went through the rather childish procedure of playfully binding Samson.

"I can't imagine why tying me up seems so fascinating to you," Samson commented, "but if it makes you happy, I don't mind."

By this time Delilah had bound Samson very thoroughly with the heavy, strong, new rope. She believed now that he would have great difficulty in getting free, what with the manner in which she had wound the rope around and around his arms, wrists, waist and neck. After tying a last knot, she abruptly backed away.

"Samson is bound!" she shouted. "Come out and seize him before he can loose himself."

Again the peeking Philistines held back until they could be doubly sure that it was safe to expose themselves. When they saw Samson flex his muscles and break the ropes as though they were fine threads, they once more fled for their lives. (Judges 16:10-12.)

Delilah could well be thankful for the second time that the Philistines left instead of exposing themselves. She repeated her performance of the time before, to try to cause Samson to believe that it was all a little game, however silly, to show him how much she admired his unusual physical power.

For the third time, several nights later, Delilah launched into another attempt to uncover Samson's secret.

"You have mocked me twice in this matter," she told Samson in a wounded voice. "Don't you love me enough to share your greatest secret with me?"

"Of course I do," Samson answered. "Now listen to this. As you know, I often divide my hair into seven different tresses. I'll lie here on the floor in front of your loom. If you can weave my seven locks with the web of your loom, the main source of my strength will depart from me."

For the third time Delilah halfheartedly arranged for Philistines to be hidden in the next room while Samson submitted to having his seven plaits of hair being put through Delilah's loom. Delilah purposely took so much time that Samson fell asleep. When she had his hair woven with the web and securely fastened to the pin of her loom, she cried out to the hiding men to leap out and seize Samson. Awakened, he sat up suddenly, jerking the pin and the web loose from the loom by the strength of his hair and muscles. As before, when the Philistines saw that he was free, they fled. (Judges 16:13-14.)

"How can you say that you love me after mocking me three times about your great strength?" Delilah asked in a slightly displeased tone.

"I can love you without having to answer all your questions," Samson replied with some irritation. "If you really care for me, you won't bother me any more with this subject!"

The Temptress Finally Wins

Nevertheless, from then on, Delilah kept badgering him with questions. Every day and every night she would ply him with questions about the source of his strength. He began to feel that the risk he would run by exposing his secret wasn't worth what he suffered by her nagging. In fact, he felt that he would rather risk death than continue to put up with such nagging.

"All right! ALL RIGHT!" Samson finally exclaimed in desperation, clamping his fists against the sides of his head. "I'll tell you anything you want to know! After that I never want to hear any more from you about why I am as I am!"

Assuming an expression of compassion, though she was really quite elated, Delilah rushed to Samson and threw her arms about him. It appeared that this unprincipled temptress whom Samson unwisely loved was about to succeed where a whole army had failed.

"I'm sorry, my darling!" she murmured. "I guess I didn't realize that I was being so troublesome. If it will help you to get anything off your mind, sit down and tell me all about it!"

"You Philistines probably don't know much about such things," Samson began, "but at the moment I was born I became a nazirite, which meant that I was dedicated to service for the God of Israel for my entire life."

(Judges 13: 1-25.) There are several special things that a nazirite must do. One of those things is to let his hair and beard grow without any cutting or trimming. (Numbers 6: 1-21.) If my hair and beard were to be cut off, my nazirite vow would be broken and God probably would not give me the special protection He has given me all my life. Neither would He give me the special strength I have at times when I am to perform unusual feats!" (Judges 16: 15-17.)

Delilah was certain that at last Samson had told her the truth. Later, she contacted the agents of the rulers of Philistia to tell them that Samson was about to become their prisoner. She arranged for the usual men to go into hiding in her house that night.

When Samson returned from business elsewhere, Delilah met him with unusual warmth. Because it was quite late, she sat on the floor and suggested that Samson lie with his head in her lap. She sang to him softly, gently running her fingers through his great mass of hair. Soon he was asleep, but she didn't try to rush matters.

She waited until his heavy breathing indicated that he wouldn't be easily awakened.

It was then that she silently signaled to one of the men in concealment, who hesitantly appeared and fearfully moved toward the sleeping Danite. This man was a barber whom Delilah had hired to join the Philistine soldiers.

Samson's Nazirite Vow Broken

It took time for this timorous fellow to get up courage to apply his razor to Samson's flowing locks, but once he got off to a start, it didn't take him long to deftly crop the sleeping man's hair and beard off short. When his task was done, he lost no time in leaving.

During this most unusual haircut, Samson had at times moved restlessly. Delilah continued singing to him softly, hoping that he wouldn't spoil everything by awakening.

But as soon as he was shorn, Delilah didn't care how soon he awoke. She signaled to the Philistines to come out of hiding, but they didn't dare until they could believe that he was too weak to overcome them.

"Wake up to face your enemies!" Delilah scoffingly muttered to Samson.

Samson moved, but didn't awaken. Delilah pushed his head off her lap and prodded him with her foot. (Judges 16: 18-19.)

"Get up, Israelite!" she smirked. "You have company!"

Only half awake, Samson slowly got to his knees, at the same time sleepily rubbing his head.

When he felt the absence of hair, his eyes popped open and he lurched to his feet. Because he reeled slightly due to coming out of deep slumber so suddenly, the hiding Philistines believed that he had suddenly become very weak. At last, after running from Samson several times, they had the courage to charge out and swarm over him.

Samson at first tried to beat them off as they came on, but suddenly realized he no longer had his great strength. He began wondering how he had lost his hair and if God had completely deserted him because of his breaking his nazarite vow. The answer was plain when it became apparent that he was powerless against the group of brawny Philistine soldiers. Samson's love for a pretty pagan had been his undoing, just as God had warned the Israelites. (Exodus 23:31-33; Joshua 23:12-13.)

The Philistines hauled Samson to the floor, then pinned him down and bound him. By this time Delilah had disappeared. She had slipped out to collect the 5,500 pieces of silver from the agents who were close at hand.

From then on, for the next hour or so, Philistines closed in from all directions. Samson was dragged outside and confronted by a growing number of enemy officers who were most jubilant about the great victory over one man -- a victory it had taken them more than two decades to accomplish because God had planned it that way.

Amidst the shouts and cheers of the Philistines, Samson realized that he had been betrayed by a woman he should have shunned, and that God was punishing him. Bitter indeed was the distress of this mighty man who had just been outwitted and overpowered by a woman of very low character.

To add to his misery and apprehension, the bound Samson suddenly was aware that someone was shoving two red-hot pieces of metal directly toward his eyes! (Judges 16:20-21.)

Chapter 71

FROM REBELLION TO IDOLATRY

HAVING lost his special God-given strength when his hair was cut off during his sleep, Samson finally fell into the hands of the Philistines. They didn't choose to kill him, because they wanted to show him off around the country. To make certain that he wouldn't continue to give them trouble, they intended to deprive him of his sight. (Judges 16:15-21.)

Samson's Tragic Penalty

When Samson saw the red-hot irons being pushed toward his head, he threw every ounce of his vigor into trying to snap the thick leather cords binding his arms and legs. Although his natural strength was most unusual, he couldn't even begin to break his bonds without God's help.

In that awful moment when the hot iron took away his sight, the Danite realized that it was his punishment because he had fallen for Philistine women. Too late, he finally realized he had fallen for their good looks -- their eye-appeal -- and not for character. God had warned the Israelites that they should not intermarry with the people of surrounding pagan nations, because they would lead the Israelites away from following God. The Israelites were to be a special, holy people. (Deuteronomy 7:1-6.)

Amid growing crowds of yelling Philistines, the wretched, degraded, pain-ridden Israelite was paraded out of town and southward to the city of Gaza, the gates of which Samson had previously carried away. There he was bound with chains and imprisoned. Later his chains were loosened just enough so that he could be put to work at the menial task of pushing a millstone in the grain-grinding room of the prison. (Judges 16:21.) Ordinarily several men were required to keep the heavy stone turning, but the Philistines often forced Samson to move it all by himself until his strength gave out.

In the months that followed, the Danite was a great object of interest and ridicule for his enemies. Thousands, a few at a time, came to the prison to watch him struggle with the millstone. At various times he was taken to important public gatherings so that more people would be able to see the pathetic figure who for so long had been their mighty enemy. Meanwhile, Samson's hair was again growing to an unusual length.

To show their thanks to their pagan god, called Dagon, for helping them win out over Samson, the Philistines planned a special meeting at a large temple in Gaza. The temple contained a huge image of their idol, to which they intended to make unusual sacrifices. It was to be a most extraordinary event at which all the Philistine leaders were to be present. (Judges 16:22-23.)

When the time arrived for the celebration, about three thousand spectators were gathered, including all the rulers, military leaders and other dignitaries and their wives or women friends jammed into the best viewing area. (Verse 27.)

The idol Dagon was a towering monstrosity with a human-like head and torso. From the waist down it resembled the rear half of a fish. Before it was a wide stone altar on which sacrifices were to be made. Pompous Philistine

priests stood by to await their part in the ceremonies, some of which were disgustingly lewd.

Debauch and Degradation

Because the emphasis was on pleasure in this special celebration, wine flowed freely all day. By noon so many people were in some stage of drunkenness that there arose a chant for Samson to be brought before them. As the hours passed, the demand became louder and louder.

The priests of Dagon were greatly discouraged by this turn of events. They felt that the high point of the celebration should be the sacrifices and exciting ceremonial rites, and they realized that an appearance by Samson would probably upstage their part of the show. Accordingly, they sent word to the Philistine rulers present, requesting that the loud demands of the crowd be squelched.

The priests were the ones who were squelched, however. It developed that the ones who were most loudly demanding Samson's presence included the wives and companions of the Philistine leaders in the balconies, and it wasn't the wish of the leaders that their ladies should be disappointed. An official order soon went out to bring Samson to the temple.

When the Danite appeared before the crowd, a mighty surge of derisive remarks and laughter broke out. Most of the people expected their prisoner to be dragged out by several strong guards. Instead, he hesitantly came on stage with a small boy who led him by the hand!

This piece of showmanship to degrade Samson and please the audience resulted in such drawn-out clamor that a high official finally had to appear on the altar to quiet the crowd.

"Let us proceed with the ceremonies to show our thanks to our great god Dagon for what he has done for us!" he shouted. "Then we shall bring back the blind Israelite to perform a few feats of strength for us!" (Judges 16:24-25.)

This pacified the crowd. The speaker motioned for the boy to lead Samson out of sight, and festivities continued.

Samson had been in the temple once before he had lost his sight. He remembered that it was built in such a way that the main structural strength of the building depended on two huge columns.

"Lad, lead me to the two main pillars of the temple," Samson said to his young guide.

"I can't do that," the boy replied. "I was told to stay right here with you until the sacrifices are over. Then I am to take you out in the sight of the people again."

"But I am weary from working at the mill," Samson explained, "and these dangling chains on my ankles are very tiring. If I could prop myself between those two close pillars for a few minutes, I would be a bit refreshed for what I am to do later before the people." (Judges 16:26.)

Samson's Desperate Plan

Samson was hoping the boy would find that the attention of all officers and officials nearby was directed to what was happening out on the altar, so that his young guide would find it easier to do as he was asked.

"Well -- " the lad faltered, "it's really only a little way to the pillars, and I don't see anyone watching us. Maybe I could get you over there if you'll tell anyone who asks that it was your idea and not mine."

"I promise," Samson said. "And I think I can give you some very important advice in return for your favor."

The moment Samson was led within touch of the pillars, he quickly felt the distance between them. It turned out, as he remembered, only a few feet. This suited the plan Samson was devising for getting revenge on all the great Philistine leaders.

"Thank you for doing this for me," Samson said to his youthful guide. "Now I'm going to give you that important advice I promised you. I want you to leave me at once and run out of the temple as fast as you can!"

"Why must I do that?" the lad asked unhappily. "It's my duty to stay with you. If I don't, I'll be beaten!"

"It could be worse for you if you don't leave now!" Samson whispered harshly to the boy. "Go before it's too late!"

The Israelite realized the value of every second. He spent no more time talking. He bowed his head and silently and fervently asked God to once more strengthen him to the extent that he could perform a feat by which he might be avenged for the loss of his sight by the Philistines. It was God's plan that Samson should feel strongly about this personal request, so that he would make the effort and sacrifice He had in mind. (Judges 16:27-28.)

After his prayer, Samson groped out quickly for his young companion, but he felt nothing.

"Where are you, lad?" he called out.

There was no response. The boy, realizing something was afoot, had quietly scampered out.

Samson waited for a few moments, then stepped back between the pillars. He spread his hands and feet out and pressed them against the columns on either side so that he was firmly wedged between the two columns. From that point he squirmed his way upward until he was several feet above the floor.

Excited shouts suddenly came to him above the rising babble of the roused crowd.

"Get Samson!" someone suddenly yelled. "He's trying to escape!"

The Danite heard the sound of frantically approaching footsteps. He knew that he had been discovered. Momentarily he expected a spear or a knife to thud into his body. He had hoped to work higher up the pillars to a point where pressure would be more effective, but there was no more time left for maneuvering. Time was fast running out for a try at one final great feat of strength.

"God of Israel, help me to bring death to these Philistines, even though I have to die with them!" Samson prayed.

A Tragic Success

Using all his natural strength, Samson strained desperately against the two pillars. He was at first unable to move them, and relaxed himself a moment for a second try. It was then that God imbued him with superhuman power. Just as some Philistine soldiers were about to reach him and jerk him down, Samson managed to move the pillars. They bowed away from each other, then buckled, the stone blocks slipping out of place to allow all that was above to come thundering to the floor. Samson and the men who were about to seize him were crushed and buried.

The two main columns having been connected directly with and supporting the rest of the structure, the whole temple crumpled and came crashing down within a matter of seconds. The wild shouts of drunken celebration abruptly turned to screams of terror as three thousand people plummeted to their deaths on hundreds more people below. Pagan priests at the altar lost their lives at the same time as the idol Dagon crashed face downward in the dust of destruction.

In those few seconds when so many of the leaders of Philistia were wiped out along with Samson, the Israelites of southwest Canaan were freed for a

time from their oppressors. Without their leaders, the Philistines could do little against the Israelites. In spite of his weakness, Samson's life and his death were not in vain. God used him in a mighty manner for the benefit of his people. (Judges 16:29-30.) Word of the great destruction quickly spread, and the Israelites realized they no longer need have such great fear of the Philistines.

Inasmuch as the Israelites suddenly lost their fear of the Philistines, Samson's relatives boldly went down to Gaza to find and claim his body. They took it back to the territory of the tribe of Dan, where Samson was buried next to his father in the family cemetery near his home town. (Judges 16:31.)

Because God spoke in the Bible so plainly about Samson's weakness for pretty Philistine women, some people have misunderstood the meaning of Samson's life. Samson's accusers have forgotten that God Himself said He allowed Samson to fall prey to this weakness in order to bring Samson into conflict with the Philistines. Read it in Judges 14:1-4. Samson's accusers have also forgotten that Samson was a man of extraordinary faithfulness to God in every way except for this one major weakness -- and in a time when most of the Israelites were steeped in idolatry.

Out of his great love for God and for his fellow Israelites, Samson faithfully kept God's commandments and fulfilled all of the requirements of his nazarite vow -- except for that one major weakness which God knew he had. Because of the grief brought upon him by his love for Philistine women, Samson struggled even harder to deliver his people from oppression than he would have if no trouble had befallen him.

Samson cheerfully, without complaining, accepted the life of trouble and heartache that came upon him in God's service. He laughed at grief and made a joke of disappointment. Who among us has so cheerfully borne grief?

Samson wasn't concerned about his sufferings, because he, like Abraham and God's other faithful servants of old, was concerned about God's salvation and the heavenly city made by God, in which they shall have an inheritance after being resurrected. (Hebrews 11:10, 14-16, 32, 35, 39-40.) These men had faith that God would establish that great city on earth as the eternal home of His children. (Revelation 21:1-4.) Samson's great faith in God enabled him to overcome most of his temptations -- and he very likely overcame his fondness for pagan Philistine women and repented of that sin while he was in prison.

How Idolatry Starts

Samson was one of the last of the judges. In the period when these leaders were in and out of power in various parts of Canaan, Israel was never quite right with God. After Joshua's death the people went so far into idolatry that God gave them no leaders or deliverers for many years. Without leadership or punishment, people degenerated to the point where each person lived as he thought best (Judges 17:6), a condition which led to all kinds of trouble. God had commanded the Israelites for their own good not to do what they thought best, but to obey Him. (Deuteronomy 12:8.) The Israelites repeatedly disobeyed, doing as they pleased -- as they thought best -- to their sorrow.

For example, to go back to an era before the first judge appeared on the scene, there was a man by the name of Micah, in the tribe of Ephraim, who had stolen a sizable sum of silver from his elderly mother. Considering herself of a religious nature, Micah's mother had in her own way decided to dedicate the eleven hundred shekels to God. She was so upset when she found the money missing that she pronounced a curse on the thief, whoever he was.

When Micah heard his mother pray that some evil thing should overcome the thief, he was quite worried. He, too, in a superstitious way, feared the God of Israel, though he didn't know too much about how to please God. Because his parents had not trained him to obey God, Micah was a thief and a scoundrel. Afraid that some evil thing would befall him, however, he confessed the theft to his mother, and gave all the money back to her. She was saddened to learn that her own son would rob her, but at the same time she was so pleased to realize that her son was conscience-stricken that, still doing as she thought right, instead of obeying the scriptures, she offered the money back to him. (Judges 17:1-3.)

"I dare not take it," Micah said. "You pronounced a curse on the one who took it, and I don't want that curse to fall on me. You should use the money as you first intended -- doing something for God!"

Micah's mother agreed. Micah and his mother weren't earnestly looking to God to learn how to live. They didn't obey Him, but lived as they pleased and convinced themselves their way was all right with God, as long as they did some little physical thing religiously. Their religion had degenerated to the level of superstition -- a man-made idolatry. Micah's mother had spent hours designing a certain kind of image, or idol, that she thought would be pleasing to God, and her first act was to use some of the silver to have such a carved image heavily coated. The metal worker she hired also melted more of the silver down into a solid metal idol for her. Eager to help in this misguided project, Micah carefully created several small idols such as were found in most pagan homes. He also produced a vestment of the type he fancied should be worn by an Israelite priest.

Micah then chose one of his sons, who was full grown, to be a priest. (Judges 17:4-6.) This was another wrong thing to do because only those of

the family of Aaron were to be priests in Israel. (Exodus 28:1-5; Leviticus 8:35-36; Numbers 3:10; Deuteronomy 21:5.) No one can appoint himself to God's ministry. (Numbers 16; Numbers 17; Hebrews 5:4.)

Idolatry Caused by Spiritual Neglect

What Micah and his mother were attempting to do, in their superstitious zeal, was to set up their own temple of worship, patterned slightly after what they had heard or supposed it was like at the tabernacle at Shiloh. The farther they got into idolatry, the more religious they felt. The religions of the surrounding pagan nations had been so mixed in with God's laws over the years that very few Israelites could remember what God expected of them. It was somewhat as it is today with so many church denominations that try to decide for themselves how to worship God. Most of them teach and promote ancient pagan beliefs gotten by hearsay and tradition, as in Micah's case, mixing them with a few true Christian principles -- something the Bible repeatedly states is loathsome in God's sight. (Deuteronomy 12:29-30; II Kings 17:15.)

Micah and his mother had no Bible to instruct them and made little or no effort to learn God's laws on the Sabbaths and during the festival assemblies as they should have. (Deuteronomy 6:1-12; Acts 15:21; Deuteronomy 31:9-13; Nehemiah 8:1-3.) Otherwise, they probably would have done things much differently. As it was, Micah in his paganized way felt that he was fairly successful in doing his part to revive respect for God in his part of Israel just as people in false churches do today. He wasn't aware of how wrong he was.

One day a young Israelite stranger stopped at Micah's house, explaining that he was a Levite looking for work. When Micah heard this, he became very excited.

"I've heard that Levites make the best priests!" he exclaimed. "How would you like to work for me as my priest?" (Judges 17:7-10.)

Chapter 72

A MINISTER FOR HIRE

THE wandering Levite who had come to the home of Micah, an Ephraimite, was warmly welcomed. Micah immediately learned from which tribe the stranger had come and that his name was Jonathan. (Judges 17:5-8.) He had heard that Levites were especially suited to be priests, though he didn't know exactly why.

Had he known God's laws, he would have realized that God had chosen them for a special purpose. In the days of Moses, God chose out of the tribe of Levi the family of Aaron to be His priests. (Exodus 28: 1, 40-43.) The other Levites were to do the physical work of caring for the tabernacle. (Numbers 1:47-54.) They were all to be teachers.

A Grandson of Moses

"My son is now my priest here at our humble little shrine," Micah enthusiastically told the stranger. "If you, a Levite, would consent to replace him, I shall provide all your clothes, priestly vestments and objects, food and lodging! Besides, I shall give you ten shekels of silver a year!"

The Levite should have been terribly shocked to find such apostasy in Israel. But he wasn't. In fact, he was wandering about because he had been thrust from his office for his sins.

The stranger realized that this offer was more profitable and more to his liking than what he had been doing, even though ten shekels of silver was only a very small amount. Since most Israelites were failing to pay God His tithe, many Levites had no income. They had apparently failed to teach the people tithing. Being one who was inclined to make the most of a good thing, Micah's guest acted for a time as though he couldn't make up his mind. At last, realizing Micah wouldn't raise the offer, the Levite slowly nodded his head in silent agreement. (Judges 17:9-10.)

"Good!" Micah exclaimed happily. "Let us lose no time in consecrating you as my priest. From then on you will be the one who will conduct ceremonies and talk to God for me. Certainly your prayers will be honored more because you are a Levite, and therefore God will surely prosper me!" (Judges 17:11-13.)

This remark made it obvious why Micah was so anxious to be considered a very religious man. He superstitiously believed that the combination of images, priest and God would surely bring him material wealth. Many people today put the same superstitious confidence in using statues, beads and rituals in church services, thinking they are serving God.

As for the young stranger, whose name was Jonathan, his motives weren't any better than Micah's. He was stepping into a false office. He should have known better. The original inspired Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament tell us he was the grandson of Moses! At a much later date the Jews tried to hide the identity of Jonathan. They thought that by doing so they were honoring Moses. So they inserted above the line the letter "n," changing the original word from Moses to Manasseh! That change has crept into the Authorized Version. (Judges 18:30.)

At this time many of the families of the tribe of Dan were discouraged because most of their share of Canaan was still held by the powerful Amorites. (Judges 1:34-35; 18:1.) The mountainous area around Zorah and Eshtaol, which was all they had been able to conquer, did not give them enough land. They were unhappy because their small area was hemmed in so solidly by their enemies. In the broad valley below them, to the west, the many Amorite chariots had been able to hurl back every Danite attack.

The Danites didn't trust God to fight their battles as He had promised. (Deuteronomy 7:1-2.) Out of fear they decided to go somewhere else and take some weak people's land.

In an effort to learn more about territory in distant areas, Danite leaders sent five, strong, well-trained scouts from their towns of Zorah and Eshtaol. It was an expedition somewhat like the one sent many years before into Canaan by Moses. They were in search of land that would be easier to conquer.

On their way northward they came to the Mt. Ephraim region and by chance arrived at Micah's somewhat secluded home as night was coming on. When Micah saw they were Israelites, he invited them to stay until morning. (Judges 18:2.)

One Sin Leads to Another

Suddenly they heard the voice of Jonathan, whom they already knew. When they went in, they met Jonathan, who by then had become established as Micah's priest. Jonathan told them how he had come into such an office. These Danites and their whole tribe had strayed far from God. They probably didn't realize the seriousness of Jonathan's sins. When the Danites discovered that they were at a place where divination was used, they wanted Jonathan to get in touch with the god of this world.

"Find out for us if our expedition will be successful in the direction we plan to take," they eagerly asked. This is a sad example of how far the Israelites had strayed from God's law into fortune-telling. They should have remembered that God commanded them to go to only the High Priest to inquire as to whether or not they should go to battle. (Numbers 27:21.)

The Levite obligingly donned his priestly vestments and went alone into the room where the idols and other religious objects were. After a while he returned to announce to the Danites what he thought would please them. They would be safe in their journey, and God would lead them to a place such as they sought. (Judges 18:3-6.)

The five scouts were greatly pleased by this report -- which of course was something Jonathan had made up to gratify Micah's guests in the same

manner that an astrologer or palm reader would seek to please patrons. Jonathan felt sure his guess was a good one because the Israelites were successful in most of their efforts.

Assured of success, the Danites continued northward for several days. Eventually they arrived at a very fertile region near the southwest corner of Syria. It was north of Lake Huleh -- which is also called the "Waters of Merom" -- and southwest of Mt. Hermon. There they noted that the people were prosperous and seemingly were not fearful of raids or attacks by neighboring nations. The inhabitants had little contact with the outside world. They carelessly enjoyed their prosperity without maintaining an adequate defense system.

The city in this area was Laish. When the scouts saw how unprotected it was, they were doubly certain that Micah's priest was indeed a sound oracle of God. This part of the land, they reasoned, was surely meant for at least some of the Danites.

They hastily returned southward to their people in the Danite cities of Zorah and Eshtaol, about fifteen miles west of Jerusalem.

"We found a spot far to the north that is a paradise!" the scouts told their people. "The inhabitants are well off and are peaceful and at ease. A surprise attack by a well-equipped force would mean quick victory. We feel sure that God intends us to take the area. Let us prepare at once to go there!" (Judges 18:7-10.)

Many Danite families decided quickly to go. Since they had not yet settled into permanent homes, because of the scarcity of land, they were able to pack quickly. When they moved out next morning, six hundred Danite men, armed as soldiers, marched northward with their families and livestock. At the end of the first day they camped by Kirjath-jearim, only a few miles to the northeast, and named the spot "The Camp of Dan." On the second day they approached the home of Micah near Mt. Ephraim. The five scouts had deliberately guided them there.

"We are near the place where the priest lives who consulted God and told us that we would be successful in this venture," the scouts told the leaders of the journeying Danites. "In that house you see in the distance are valuable sacred objects that we should own to help insure our future success and protection. If our procession will stay by the gate, the five of us will make a hasty visit to the priest to make him an offer." (Judges 18:11-14.)

"You Shall Not Steal"

The leaders agreed, and the scouts went at once to Micah's home and greeted the Levite. They then took him out to the gate and introduced him

to their leaders. While he chatted with the crowd at the gate, the scouts returned quickly to the chapel. No one was there. Without waiting for anyone to show up, the scouts seized all the objects and clothing they considered sacred. The Danites were very superstitious. They thought pillaging a chapel of these silly little idols would bring success. As Jonathan stood at the gate chatting with the leaders, he turned to see the scouts running toward him with the objects of his chapel in their hands.

"What does all this mean?" the Levite anxiously inquired. "Why have you returned to steal these things? Micah is away, but if I should call for help his neighbors will come after you!" (Judges 18:15-18.)

"Don't be foolish!" the scouts warned. "A shout for help could spoil your chance to better yourself."

"What do you mean by that?" Jonathan demanded.

"We mean that we want you to come with us!" they explained. "All these people you see are our fellow Danites going to a better land north of here. Why be a priest to just one man when you can be a priest to all of us? Go with us this minute, and we'll make it worthwhile for you!"

Jonathan needed no more urging. With hardly a glance backward he gladly picked up his belongings and joined the hundreds of Danites. They placed him in a position of safety in the middle of their lengthy column. Then the Danites moved on to the north. (Judges 18:19-20.)

Shortly after they left, Micah returned to his home. He was informed by a neighbor that during his absence many people had marched up to his gate, that Jonathan had joined them and that the people had moved on.

Micah was perplexed by this report. He rushed to Jonathan's quarters to find that the Levite's belongings were gone, which seemed to indicate that the priest didn't intend to return. And when Micah discovered objects missing in the chapel, he was quite upset.

"My sacred things have been stolen!" he excitedly announced to his family and servants. "Call all our neighboring men together! Tell them to come armed to help pursue a band of thieves!"

By this time the Danites were quite a distance away. But because most of them were moving afoot with their children and livestock, it didn't require long for the mounted Ephraimites to catch up to them. Micah shouted at them to halt. The Danite procession stopped, and some of the soldiers in the rear guard turned to confront the Ephraimites.

"What reason do you have to pursue us with so many armed men?" they grimly demanded. (Judges 18:22-23.)

"You have stolen my priest and my images!" Micah shouted as he rode toward them. "Why do you ask why we have been pursuing you while you are fully aware that we have come to rescue them from you?"

At a motion from their leader, all three hundred soldiers of the rear guard moved back to surround Micah and confront his men.

"Don't raise your voice against us!" the Danite leader snapped. "If you shout at us again, some of our men will probably be irritated to the point of attacking you. And after doing away with all of you, they might decide to turn back and wipe out all your homes and families. I trust this will end our conversation unless you decide to talk about matters that are more pleasant to us."

With this statement the Danites deliberately turned their backs on the Ephraimites and continued on their journey. Micah realized that his lesser number of men couldn't stand against them. There was nothing to do but return home without the priest and the images in which he had put so much confidence for a wealthy future. (Judges 18:24:26.)

The Trail of Dan

When the Danites came within sight of the city of Laish, they stopped. That night they camped behind a rise so that their campfires couldn't be seen from the city. A little before dawn the six hundred soldiers crept up on Laish. While it was yet dark they made their surprise attack. The inhabitants perished while they were still in bed. Fire was set to everything that would burn -- except valuables.

The Danites attributed their success to their priest and the little images. But their success in battle was not due to either. Success came to them because a well-trained army caught a defenseless small town sleeping.

In the months that followed, the Danites rebuilt the city and named it DAN, after the father of their tribe. (Joshua 19:47.) A chapel was built for Jonathan and his so-called sacred objects. The religion of the Danite conquerors continued permanently on this basis to the fall of the House of Israel. Jonathan, and the sons he had later, carried on as priests until many centuries afterward when God sent Assyria to take over all Israel because of idolatry. (Judges 18:27-31.)

One might think today that a half-pagan, half-Christian religion is better than none at all. God doesn't look at it that way. A half-pagan religion is really all pagan. The Israelites very quickly forgot God's Commandments. Each did what he thought was right -- or did as he pleased (Judges 17:6) -- instead of obeying God. That is the way of pagans -- the way of sin and death. God had commanded them for their own good to obey Him instead of

doing what they thought was right. (Deuteronomy 12:8.) God allows people to go their own way now, but soon He will do away with all heathen religions and all the competing church denominations that observe pagan ways. (Daniel 2:44-45; Revelation 11:15; Zechariah 13:2; 14:9; Ezekiel 22:25-31.)

The "New Morality"

In that era when Israel was without a national leader, with everyone generally doing as he pleased as long as he could get away with it, another episode occurred that brought tragedy. Misery and death came to thousands because the people were living apart from their Creator. This event started near Mt. Ephraim, where another Levite lived with his common-law wife. They believed in the "New Morality" of that day. They, like so many couples throughout history, lived in sin. They didn't obey God's laws that would bring family happiness. The woman then began to live with other men. Later she left to return to the home of her parents in the town of Bethlehem in the land of the tribe of Judah. (Judges 19:1-2.)

After she had been gone four months, the man decided he couldn't get along any longer without her -- and hoped she would now be ready to come home. He and a servant set out on burros for Bethlehem, about twenty miles to the southwest. When they neared the home of the woman's parents, the man was pleasantly surprised to see his common-law wife coming out of the house and happily rushing out to meet him.

"I am sorry I left you," she told him, "and I am glad you came after me. I should be pleased to return with you to Mt. Ephraim!"

She led him into the home of her parents, who welcomed him cordially. In fact, because they were happy to see him and because they wanted their daughter to stay with them as long as possible, they kept the couple as guests for three days.

On the fourth day the Levite intended to leave for home, but the father-in-law prevailed on him to stay a few more hours. Time slipped by, and then it was too late to set out. (Judges 19:3-7.)

On the fifth day the couple prepared to leave early, but again the woman's parents treated them so well with food, drink and pleasant conversation that they were delayed into the late afternoon.

"Why start out at this hour?" the Levite's father-in-law asked. "You can't get very far before dark. It would be wiser to stay here one more night and plan to start out in the morning. Meanwhile, relax and enjoy yourselves."

"No, we must start out this afternoon," the Levite said, realizing that if he continued to give in, they would never get home.

The woman's parents knew that they had kept their daughter as long as possible.

Tearfully they saw the couple off on their trip northward.

By the time the Levite, his common-law wife (called a "concubine" in the Bible), a servant and two burros reached Jerusalem, about four miles away, it was almost sundown. (Judges 19:8-10.)

"I suggest that we stop here for the night, sir," the servant remarked. "If we travel after dark, we'll risk being robbed."

"I don't prefer to stay here in Jerusalem," the Levite said. "The people here are Canaanites, and I don't trust them. It is better to spend the night among our own people. I would rather go on into Gibeah or Ramah where the people are Israelites."

It was about two and one-half more miles to the Benjamite city of Gibeah. The sun went down just before they got there. (Judges 19:11-15.) They sat down in a prominent place to wait for someone to invite them into his home for the night, since a small town like Gibeah probably didn't have an inn. Soon an elderly Ephraimite, returning home late from working in the fields, walked up to the little group.

"You look like strangers here," the old man said to them. "Where have you come from and where are you going?"

The Levite explained that he and his concubine and servant were traveling from Bethlehem to the Tabernacle at Shiloh. He mentioned that they had plenty of food and wine for themselves and feed for the animals, but no place to sleep. (Judges 19:16-19.)

Is Anyone Safe?

"Ah, but you're welcome at my home!" the old man declared enthusiastically, motioning them to follow him. "And I have plenty of food for all and provender for your burros, so keep what you have. Otherwise you might run short. Come! Let's get off the street. It isn't safe here at night!"

Later, when all of them were comfortably eating and conversing in the old man's house, there was a loud rapping on the door. The host opened it, only to be jerked outside by a group of mean-looking young men.

"We know that you have a stranger in your house!" one of them growled menacingly "Send him out here at once to us, or you'll be in for plenty of trouble! And don't tell him anything! Just get him out here!"

Chapter 73

THE "NEW MORALITY"

THE old man, who had invited the three strangers to spend the night at his home in Gibeah, was pulled outside by hoodlums. They demanded that he send out the Levite guest. The old fellow shook his head in fear and disbelief when he realized what these vile men wanted to do. (Judges 19:16-22.)

Willing to Compromise

"Please go away and leave us alone!" he pleaded. "This Levite is my guest along with his wife and servant! It would be a terrible disgrace to let anything happen to him at my home. Surely you can find your pleasure elsewhere!"

The old man was very concerned about his reputation. But he was much less concerned about the drift into the decaying morality of that time.

"Do as we say," the men growled, closing in more tightly around him, "or you'll never get back into your house!"

The elderly Ephraimite was sure that by now the man they wanted probably had heard the unfriendly voices, and wouldn't come out under any circumstance. In a frantic attempt to escape from this nightmare situation, the old man was moved to make a miserable suggestion. To save his male guest -- and his own reputation as a host -- he self-righteously stooped to an unthinkable compromise.

"Look, fellows," he begged, "Don't consider such a terrible perversion. I have a young daughter inside! We'll send her and my guest's wife out to you to do with as you please if you'll only forget about the man!" (Judges 19:23-24.) The miserable old man thought men were more important and more worthy of protection than women. He reasoned that what he was suggesting was a lesser perversion and would be less sinful.

"We don't care about the women!" was the angry reply.

Sick with fear, the old man ambled back into the house. Hesitantly he whispered the situation to his guest, who turned pale at what he heard. Like his host, his frenzied mind quickly sought a wretched way of escape. As a Levite from the tabernacle at Shiloh, he especially should have trusted God for His promised deliverance. (Leviticus 26:3, 6; Deuteronomy 4:31; 20:4; 31:6.)

"Don't let them in!" the Levite muttered cravenly, seizing his common-law wife. To save himself, he was ready to do anything -- even sacrifice the woman he should have been protecting.

He hauled the surprised woman up to the door, yanked it open and thrust her outside. (Judges 19:25.) Quickly he closed and bolted the door, hoping the mob would be more gentle with her than depraved mobs usually are. It happened so suddenly that the poor woman hardly knew what was happening until she found herself being stared at by the depraved men waiting outside. She wheeled around to get back into the house, pounding feverishly on the door. The men stared lustfully at her, noting for the first time that she was unusually attractive.

"Let's take her and forget about the man for now!" one of them suggested.

The others nodded in agreement. The frightened, struggling woman was dragged away. Though she repeatedly screamed for help, there was no one to even try to rescue her. The men who should have protected her were hiding behind locked doors, completely lacking in the compassion and courage they should have displayed under the circumstances. Theirs was the corrupt type of character that prevailed in a time when Israel was far from God.

Hours later, just before sunrise, the woman came staggering up to the house and fell down at the door. (Judges 19:26.) In the meantime, her cowardly common-law husband was preparing to leave without her. He didn't know where she was, but he was afraid to look for her lest he run into trouble with the depraved men who had taken her.

On opening the door to leave, he was surprised to find her lying there face down. His conscience stung him because of the cowardly, brutal way he had acted. But instead of helping her up, he chose to assert himself as her master, even in the face of her pitiable circumstance.

"Get up, woman!" he barked. "I want to get going for home right away!"

There was no answer or movement. The man motioned for his servant to help the woman up. The servant tried to get her to her feet. It was then that they discovered she was dead.

A Desperate Plan

Without a word the Levite lifted the body onto one of his burros and started for home. (Judges 19: 27-28.) On the way he had plenty of opportunity to consider how cruel and cowardly he had been. He regretted his terrible conduct, but at the same time he hoped that he could place the blame for his common-law wife's death elsewhere. The more he thought about the depraved Benjamites, the more he considered their guilt and the less he considered his. By the time he arrived home, his anger and desire for revenge had grown to such an extent that he conceived a gruesome plan.

The first thing he did was compose twelve copies of this message, a copy to be sent to each of the twelve tribes of Israel:

"My wife was lately seized by wicked Benjamites in their city of Gibeah. She died because of their brutal advances. I am sending proof of her death. I ask that something be done to execute vengeance on the foul men who are responsible."

The Levite immediately sent the letter to all parts of Israel by swift carriers. Wherever it arrived it was startlingly effective, but not just because of the words. With each message the angry Levite included a piece of his wife's body, having cut her up into twelve parts!

Even though most of Israel was in a state of lawlessness and idolatry at the time, people were shocked and angered to hear of the atrocity by the Benjamites. (Judges 19:29-30.) Following a hasty exchange of communication, the various leaders of all tribes, except Benjamin, soon met at the city of Mizpeh, not far from Gibeah, to decide what to do. The head men of the tribe of Benjamin did not attend because of being offended at the ghastly accusation that had come to them from Mt. Ephraim.

Representatives at this meeting asked the complaining Levite to come and give them a more concise report of the miserable event. The Levite welcomed the chance to do so, explaining in detail most of what had happened. He made no mention of how he had thrust his wife into the hands of the men of Gibeah in an attempt to save his own life.

Crime Must Be Stopped!

"It's true that I performed the awful act of cutting her in pieces, but she was dead many hours before I did so," the Levite informed his listeners. "I went to this horrible extreme to try to awaken Israel to the fact that there are such evil men in the city of Gibeah. I trust that I have moved you to do something about this shameful matter!" (Judges 20: 17.)

The Israelites remembered God's command that any murderer should be executed. (Numbers 35:19-21; Deuteronomy 19:11-13.) Enforcing this law would make others fear to commit murder. (Numbers 35:33-34; Deuteronomy 19:20.)

The leaders of the eleven tribes were not long in agreeing that the matter would be investigated as soon as possible. They went so far as to claim that none of them would return home until it was cleared up. They decided that a tenth of all the capable men of each tribe would be drafted into service to supply the army with food and water in the event that force would be necessary against the tribe of Benjamin. (Judges 20:8-11.) Meanwhile, men were sent throughout the Benjamite territory to make a careful inquiry and to demand the death penalty for the murderers.

When the investigators came to the leaders of the tribe of Benjamin to ask about the matter of the Levite and his common-law wife, they were received coldly. All the Benjamites refused to punish the murderers. Instead, they stubbornly defended them.

"This sort of thing you speak of could happen anywhere in Israel these days," the Benjamites observed. "Why point to us as the black sheep of the whole nation?"

"We are not to be put off so easily," the investigators countered. "No matter where such a crime happens, the guilty ones must be punished. We have orders to demand that you seek out the offenders in this case and turn them over to us to be put to death for their crime! We expect you to act right away!"

"Go back to your leaders and tell them that we can take care of our own affairs!" the head men of Benjamin retorted angrily. "Tell them also that we shall resist any effort to force us to do anything about this matter!" (Judges 20:12-13.)

Surrounded by a growing group of hostile men, the investigators had no choice but to return to Mizpeh empty-handed. When they reported what had happened, a state of war was declared by the leaders of the eleven tribes. Men were organized into units to form an army numbering four hundred thousand.

At the same time the Benjamite soldiers gathered at Gibeah, numbering about twenty-six thousand besides the seven hundred men of Gibeah. This was only a small fraction of the size of the army of the other tribes of Israel, but the Benjamite soldiers were well trained. Besides, they were angry because of the accusation that had been made against them, and had more of a desire for battle. They felt confident also because seven hundred of their soldiers were left-handed and unusually skillful with slings. Some of them could sling a stone to hit a man as far away as six hundred feet. (Judges 20:14-17.)

Partial Obedience NOT Enough!

The army of the eleven other tribes was almost ready to march on Gibeah. But one more thing needed to be done. God should be consulted in the matter.

The Israelites went to the city of Shiloh where the tabernacle was, to ask Phinehas the priest to inquire of God which soldiers should lead the attack. Phinehas was surprised that the leaders of the tribes of Israel would ask advice of the Creator instead of going to some pagan oracle. Seeing their sincerity, he spoke to God for them, although he could see they were self-righteous.

God answered Phinehas' prayer by making it known to the priest that the soldiers of the tribe of Judah should be foremost in an attack on the Benjamites. (Judges 20: 18.)

Next morning the troops of the eleven tribes marched toward Gibeah. When they were only a mile or so away, they lined themselves in fighting formation with the soldiers of Judah forming the first ranks. The commanders of the four hundred thousand men planned on surrounding the city and then demanding that the Benjamites surrender. If they refused, the large army was to close in and crush the opposition into defeat.

It didn't quite turn out that way.

Suddenly the whole army of Benjamin poured out of the gates of Gibeah and rushed madly toward the would-be attackers! This unexpected event caused such confusion in the larger army that the troops fell into terrible disorder. The foremost ones broke rank and plunged backward into those following, causing a uselessly struggling, screaming mass of humanity!

By afternoon there was no more action on the field of battle. The Benjamites had withdrawn into Gibeah and most of the army of the eleven tribes had fled to the north. They had left twenty-two thousand soldiers on the battlefield, but these had no more desire to fight. They were all dead. (Judges 20: 19-21.)

This unexpected victory by the Benjamites was a sobering blow to the other tribes of Israel, who had assumed that their cause was so important and just that there was no need of asking help from God. They had thought the eleven tribes could easily defeat the Benjamites. Although the people were shocked and saddened, there was still no appeal for divine aid. Instead, the Israelites went again to Shiloh to weep and merely ask Phinehas to inquire if there should be another attack against the Benjamite army. They still thought they were righteous just because they were trying to punish the Benjamites.

Through Phinehas, God indicated that another attempt should be made to overcome the Benjamites at Gibeah. Next day the troops of the Israelites pushed toward that city just as they had done in the first attack. This time the commanders felt that their men were prepared for anything, and that there would be no more frenzy and disorder.

The Benjamites didn't pour out of the city to meet their opponents as they had done before. This gave the larger army the opportunity to start surrounding Gibeah as had been originally planned. Just as their front ranks were splitting up and going to the right and left, the Benjamites rushed out through hastily opened gates to catch their enemies in such a thinned-out condition that the larger army was again thrown into a sudden state of confusion!

A Bitter Lesson Brings Results

When the action of battle had ceased and each army had withdrawn, the ground was again strewn with dead and dying. This second combat had cost the eleven tribes eighteen thousand more men. (Judges 20:22-25.)

The loss of a total of forty thousand soldiers was an awesome price to pay to try to avenge one person and punish the Benjamites. Leaders of the eleven tribes were so shaken that they all went to Shiloh, along with many other Israelites, to humbly make offerings at the Tabernacle and to ask for God's help. Tears of sorrow and repentance flowed from many eyes as the people realized that their sad losses had occurred because of their departing from God's laws.

After making their offerings and fasting for at least most of the day, they asked God through Phinehas if they should go into battle once more against the Israelite brothers or drop the idea of trying to punish them. All this should have been done in the first place. After Phinehas had made his third request at the tabernacle, God disclosed to him that one more attack should be made. Moreover, He promised that, if they sought Him in real earnest, this next attempt would result in victory for the eleven tribes. When Phinehas passed on the Creator's pronouncement to the people, they were thankful and greatly encouraged. For the time being they resolved to be more obedient so that they might receive more help from God. (Judges 20:26-28.)

Next day part of the troops of the eleven tribes again marched toward Gibeah. Those troops who didn't march had been sent during the night to a hiding place south of the city and to a palm grove to the east of it.

The Benjamites were expecting another attack. They rushed out to meet the enemy troops coming from the north when they reached a point a short

distance from Gibeah. At sight of the oncoming Benjamites the attackers halted. Then they turned and fled -- just as they had been told to do!

Believing that their enemies were in the same state of fear they had shown twice before, the Benjamites pursued them vigorously in the hope of effecting a quick victory. They proved to be the faster runners. Soon the distance between the two groups was so lessened that the men with slings started hurling their missiles. About thirty of the fleeing Israelites were struck and killed before someone among the pursuing Benjamites began shouting excitedly and pointing backward.

The pursuers glanced back. They came to a quick halt when they saw the great cloud of smoke billowing up over their city. Not until then were they beginning to be aware that enemy troops had somehow made their way into the city and set it on fire. When they turned and saw the Israelites rushing back toward them without a sign of fear, they realized that they were the victims of well-planned strategy. (Judges 20:29-32.)

The Worm Turns

It was the Benjamites' turn to panic. Pursued by the ten thousand Israelites who had turned on them, they raced for the hilly area east of Gibeah. As they ran, they could see throngs of their people hurrying out of the city in a frantic attempt to escape the men who had rushed in as soon as the Benjamite soldiers had left. Hundreds were not able to get out.

The escaping inhabitants also headed for the hills to the east. Just as the first of their numbers topped the first large rise, they stopped, then rushed back in the opposite direction. Behind them suddenly appeared the first ranks of the largest division of the army of the eleven tribes. At the same time the troops who had raided the city came out of it from the west in hot pursuit of their inhabitants. (Judges 20:33-34.)

The people of Gibeah and the whole Benjamite army were rushing into a tremendous three-jawed trap that was closing in on them just as fast as they were moving into it!

Chapter 74

"YOUR PEOPLE ARE MY PEOPLE"

THE ARMY of the eleven tribes of Israel had divided into three parts.

After setting the Benjamite city of Gibeah on fire, they managed to bottle up the people who had escaped from the city -- plus the whole Benjamite fighting force. (Judges 20:29-41.)

Unrestrained Slaughter

In the furious battle that followed, about eighteen thousand soldiers of the tribe of Benjamin died. With so many troops involved in such close action, a few thousand Benjamite men managed to escape. Most of these took to the roads leading northeast, hoping to reach a certain mountain hideout.

A part of Israel's massive army hadn't yet been very active that day. These soldiers set off in pursuit of the weary Benjamites, easily overtaking them. About five thousand of the fleeing men were killed in their race for freedom. Another two thousand or so were overtaken and slain in another engagement a few miles farther on.

About six hundred succeeded in reaching a place in the mountains called Rimmon Rock. This was in such a rough, cliff area that the pursuers gave up the chase. (Judges 20:42-47.)

Very few Benjamites had been killed in the first two battles. The almost-complete army of the Benjamites, still numbering almost twenty-six thousand, came to an end in one day. But the action against the rebel tribe that approved homosexuality didn't end there. After a night's rest the Israelite troops moved over all the territory of Benjamin to burn all the cities and kill all the people. (Judges 20:48.)

This destruction was so thorough that the only men left were those who had escaped to Rimmon Rock. This near-death of one of the tribes was a terrible thing, but God allowed it, as well as the deaths of at least forty thousand other Israelite soldiers, because of the disobedience of so many people in all of the tribes. God was letting Israel learn from bitter experience that carefree ways of living would lead only to grief. If the Israelites had continued obeying the laws of their Creator, who constantly warned them against falling away from those laws, their wretched civil war would never have happened.

Not long after these miserable events, the people of the eleven tribes began to be sorry that they had dealt so harshly with the tribe of Benjamin. The leaders of the tribes met to discuss what could be done to make amends, and to express to God their hope that the tribe wouldn't be wiped out. This was indeed a change in attitude.

To show that they regretted their extreme actions, they went to their meeting place at Shiloh. There, to gain God's favor, they made burnt offerings and peace offerings. (Judges 21:2-4.)

When they had met at Mizpeh before the battles to decide what to do, they had sworn that they would never allow any of their daughters to marry a Benjamite. (Judges 21:1.) This seemed to make it impossible for the tribe to survive as pure Israelites. What could they do about the six hundred soldiers who were safely holed up at Rimmon Rock? They had no wives. And if they couldn't marry Israelites, they might marry into Canaanite tribes.

The leaders carefully looked for a loophole out of this discouraging circumstance. At their council of war at Mizpeh, they had decreed that if any part of the eleven tribes failed to help with the war against Benjamin, those people would later be punished by the sword. (Judges 21:5-7.)

So many things had been taking place that there had been no opportunity to check for any family, region or city that might have failed to supply soldiers. An inquiry was made. It disclosed that the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead, a city east of the Jordan in the territory of Gad, had not joined in the civil conflict.

Wives Gotten by Violence

This seemed to present an answer to their problem. Twelve thousand troops were picked to march on Jabesh-gilead and punish the inhabitants by killing everyone except unmarried women. Following so soon after the regretful attitude toward the men of Benjamin, this was an abrupt switch by the Israelites back to their mania for rash action.

After the new senseless slaughter -- which wouldn't have occurred if the people had stayed close to God -- all the spared women and teen-age girls were carefully questioned. The questioning soon revealed those who weren't married and those who had not committed fornication. Four hundred such females were acquired. Others who didn't pass the requirements suffered the fate of the rest of the people of Jabesh-gilead. (Judges 21:8-12.)

Even though their lives had been spared, these four hundred virgins were anything but happy to be dragged away against their will so quickly. They didn't even get to attend the mass burial of their relatives and friends. They were brought to Shiloh and kept there under guard to await the outcome of a trip to Rimmon Rock by Israelite scouts.

This visit to this rugged area was a dangerous one. Those who entered it could easily be picked off by men hiding in the caves and among the rocks. It turned out that the scouts were allowed to come very close. Then a voice coming from some uncertain source commanded them to stop and state their business.

The hiding Benjamites expected to be asked to surrender or expect a mass attack by their Israelite brothers, and so were quite surprised to hear words on quite a different topic.

"Listen, men of Benjamin," one of the scouts shouted in a voice that echoed and re-echoed from one cliff to another. "We are not here to ask you to surrender. You are the only remaining men of the tribe of Benjamin. All the rest of your people are dead because they approved of sex vices.

"But because the leaders of Israel want you to continue as one of the tribes, we have come to make an offer of peace. At Shiloh we have four hundred virgins from whom you may choose brides. If you want them and want to rebuild your tribe in peace, come to Shiloh. First there will have the best choice! Don't be afraid to come. No harm will come to you as long as you are peaceable!"

At first the Benjamites thought that this was a ruse to get them out in the open where they could be attacked. They made no reply. Finally the scouts left. Benjamite lookouts reported that no enemy troops were in sight on the adjoining plains or behind nearby ridges. The six hundred survivors then began to believe that perhaps their Israelite brothers were telling the truth.

They crept in small groups to the Shiloh area. There, by cautious spying, they found out that there were indeed four hundred women being held to give them as wives.

Up to this time, it wasn't known by the eleven tribes just how many Benjamites had escaped to Rimmon Rock. When six hundred men suddenly put in an appearance to claim wives, the competition became somewhat heated. The two hundred Benjamites who emerged empty-handed complained so bitterly that the Israelite leaders felt obliged to produce two hundred more virgins. (Judges 21:13-15.)

Violence on Top of Violence!

This wasn't such a simple task, though finally someone came up with another extreme and violent plan. At this time of year there was a religious festival about to be observed near Shiloh. A part of its social life included dancing in a nearby field by a large group of young women.

It was suggested to the two hundred wifeless Benjamites that they stay at Shiloh until just before the dance was to be performed and hide in adjoining vineyards. Then they might be able to rush forth and seize two hundred of the young women when they came out to dance. (Judges 21:16-21.)

This scheme was even more fantastic than the one by which the four hundred wives had been obtained, though certainly not as bloody. Anxious as they were for wives, the Benjamites questioned the plan.

"This idea sounds good up to a point," they told the Israelite leaders "but won't the families of the girls create trouble for us if we succeed in taking away their young women?"

"Don't be concerned about that," the leaders advised. "Probably the fathers and brothers of the girls will be angry at first, but we'll stop them from any rash action. We will persuade them to let you keep their daughters and sisters without causing trouble because we took the lives of all your women. We swore that none of us should give our women to you men of Benjamin. But if you take them forcibly from us, that is another matter. The fathers will not be guilty of breaking their vow and you will have your wives."

The Benjamites considered this explanation somewhat odd. Nevertheless, they went to where this dance was about to take place and successfully concealed themselves in surrounding vineyards.

When the several hundred young women came to the field to perform, the hidden men had sufficient opportunity to observe and choose. At a planned signal, the Benjamites rushed out of the vineyards and swarmed into the mass of leaping, swaying femininity.

Shrieks filled the air as the girls realized that they were being set upon by strangers. Two hundred struggling dancers were whisked off the field and away into the vineyards almost before anyone could comprehend what was going on.

The rest of the screeching girls fled into the stunned crowd that had come to watch the dance. By the time the men in the assemblage realized that the kidnapping wasn't a new part of the dance, it was too late to rescue the young women.

The six hundred surviving Benjamites lost no time in returning to their territory with their brides. Whether or not their women were ill-gotten seemed of no great matter. No one seemed to care. The war with Benjamin was over, and the tribe was saved from extinction.

Even so, the troops of the eleven tribes didn't disband and go to their homes until the Benjamites were again safely settled in their territory and had started to repair their cities.

In this whole episode, which occurred shortly after the death of Joshua, wisdom and good judgment were rather rare. Everyone did what he thought best, instead of obeying God. (Judges 21:25; Deuteronomy 12:8.) This was a prime example of how death and suffering came to the people when they fell away from God and into idolatry. (Judges 21:22-24.)

Not All Rebelled

But even at such times there were a few Israelites who were loyal and obedient to God. Their lives were rich, meaningful and without violence, though not always without trouble and tragedy.

The story of Ruth depicts that sort of life -- the happy result of obeying God. Ruth was a Moabite, a descendant of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. She had been reared a heathen, but was converted after seeing how God's laws benefited others. She left her land and pagan training to become an adopted Israelite and obey the laws of the God of Israel. She became one of the ancestors of David and of Jesus Christ. Ruth was a type of the New Testament Church which is to come out of the world and be joined to Christ.

During the early years of the time of the judges, there was a drought which made crops especially poor in many parts of Canaan. Besides, the neighboring nations carried off much of the produce, thus helping to create a state of famine for many Israelites.

A man by the name of Elimelech lived in the town of Bethlehem, where Christ was born over thirteen centuries later. Elimelech decided to leave Canaan and try to find an area where he wouldn't be troubled by destitute neighbors. He was fairly prosperous, and had become weary of so many people coming to him for food and money.

To move out of Canaan and into a heathen land was not the best thing for Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. In fact, not long after he was settled in the pagan-populated land east of the Dead Sea, his life ended, possibly because he had been selfish. (Ruth 1:1-3.)

Later, Elimelech's two young sons married Moabite women. About ten years later both men died. Their wives, Orpah and Ruth, had become greatly attached to Naomi, their righteous mother-in-law. Although they had been taught to worship pagan gods, they had great respect for Naomi's beliefs and her desires to go according to the ways of the God of Israel.

Life in Moab, without their husbands, became increasingly difficult for the three childless widows. Not only were they very lonely, but they soon became very poor. It was evident that something would have to be done to improve their welfare. That something was sparked when Naomi heard that living conditions had been greatly improved by good weather and abundant crops in many parts of Canaan, including the territory of Judah. Immediately she decided to return to her native land.

Naomi didn't ask her daughters-in-law to return with her, but they helped pack three burros and willingly set off with her to the west. After they had

gone a few miles, Naomi stopped to tell them what was on her mind. (Ruth 1:4-7.)

"Much as I want both of you to go with me back to Canaan," she explained, "I feel that it is unfair to you to move to a nation that is strange in your sight. You have been reared to believe in many things in which I cannot believe. If you go to Bethlehem with me you will probably find things so different that you will regret having left your own country.

"For this reason I'm asking you to turn back to your people and to the homes of your parents. You are yet young, and you should be married to men of your nation. I can return alone to Bethlehem. Go back, and I pray that my God will take care of both of you because you have been good wives and good daughters-in law!"

Ruth and Orpha were distressed at Naomi's words, and especially when she kissed them good-bye as though to finally dismiss them forever from her life.

Each Must Decide Whom to Serve!

"We don't intend to leave you," they assured her after recovering from their tears. "We want to go back with you to your people!" (Ruth 1:8-10.)

Naomi was moved by their display of loyalty, but she felt that they really preferred to stay in their own country, though they were willing to make this sacrifice for her. She tried to make it easier for them to decide to stay, by pointing out that she had nothing more to add to their lives.

"Even if I had another husband and were to bear more sons," she told them, "you wouldn't want to wait till they were grown to marry them. You would seek other husbands long before that, so you can see why it would be wise to go back to your people. I am very sorry you have lost your husbands."

This last little speech by Naomi convinced Orpah that her mother-in-law was right. She sadly kissed Naomi and Ruth farewell and turned back with her burro and possessions toward the place where her parents lived in Moab.

"Your sister-in-law has wisely decided to return to her people," Naomi pointed out to Ruth. "You would do well to try to catch up with her." (Ruth 1:11-15.)

"Why try to talk me into doing something I don't think is right?" Ruth asked. "I want to stay with you. Wherever you go I will go. I will stay where you stay. **YOUR PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. YOUR GOD IS MY GOD.** I want to die in the place where you die, and be buried where you will be buried. If I fail in any of these things, let God deal with me as He chooses."

Naomi was so moved by these remarks that she said nothing more to Ruth about parting. She was convinced that her daughter-in-law was converted and meant all that she said, for which she was very happy. (Ruth 1:16-18.)

The two women arrived at Naomi's run-down house in Bethlehem a few days later, fortunate not to have been bothered by roving bandits. Naomi was glad to see the familiar places and faces, though at first she wasn't recognized because she had changed in appearance. When a neighboring friend realized who she was, however, a crowd of acquaintances quickly gathered about her and Ruth.

"Can it really be Naomi?" some of them asked.

"Yes, it is I, returned from Moab with my daughter-in-law, Ruth," Naomi said to them. "But perhaps it would be well not to call me any longer by that name. It means BEAUTIFUL and PLEASANT, and I am not now beautiful and my life is no longer pleasant. I have aged, mostly because of losing my husband and two sons. It would be more fitting if you would call me Mara, which means BITTER."

"No! No!" some of the bystanders exclaimed. "All of us have aged, Naomi, but you are still a beautiful woman. We are sorry to hear that God has allowed your loved ones to be taken, but we are happy to have you back among us."

Naomi's many friends showed their concern by pitching in on the house-cleaning so the two women would have a suitable place to live. They were comfortable for the moment. But their meager amount of money was practically gone, and Naomi wasn't the sort to prevail on the goodwill of her friends and neighbors for her needs.

Something had to be done right away, or the two widows would run out of food.

Chapter 75

"YOU ARE A VIRTUOUS WOMAN"

AFTER coming from Moab to Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth ran very low on money. (Ruth 1:19-22.) Just when Naomi was becoming very concerned about matters of food and fuel, Ruth came to her with a most timely suggestion.

"It's spring harvest time," she reminded Naomi. "Just this morning I watched women gleaning barley in a field not far from here. Why shouldn't I go

tomorrow to one of such fields and glean the barley that the reapers drop? Perhaps I could bring back much grain just for the taking!"

God Provides for the Poor

Gleaning was the gathering of any produce that was left behind when harvesting took place. It was not stealing. One of the civil laws given to Israel stated that whatever the harvesters left of value in fields, vineyards or orchards could be claimed by the poor, passing strangers, and widows. As poor widows, Naomi and Ruth had a legal right to share in the gleaning. (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22.)

Naomi was pleased and encouraged by Ruth's enthusiasm. She knew this could be the difference between going hungry and having enough to eat -- at least for the present. At the same time she didn't like to see a comely young woman like Ruth venture out by herself among strange harvesters.

"Go if you wish, my daughter," Naomi finally told her with a smile. "But try to find a field not too distant, and don't follow closely behind the harvesters unless you get permission from the owner of the field or his foreman." (Ruth 2:1-2.)

Next morning Ruth took a large cloth bag and set out for a field where barley was being harvested. When she arrived, she noted that a great part of it had already been worked over, and that the harvesters were at quite a distance away. She felt that they were so far ahead of her that no permission would be necessary to pick up what she could find. Nevertheless, she sought out the field foreman to ask if she could glean, and was told that she could.

By the middle of the day she had filled her bag less than half full of barley that had been overlooked or dropped when it had been bundled. In her zeal to accomplish more, she failed to notice that the workers had stopped for the noon meal at a tent just ahead. She looked up to see some of them staring at her. One or two of the women harvesters motioned for her to join them in the shade of the tent.

At that moment Boaz, the owner of the field, rode up on a horse and eyed Ruth with even more interest than the harvesters showed.

"God be with you!" he called to the workers with enthusiasm.

"May God bless you!" was the cheerful response from the people in and around the tent. (Ruth 2:34.)

Such friendly and sincere greetings showed that these men and women had a high regard for each other and for their Creator, and knew that it was God

who watched over them and provided their needs. When an honest man like Boaz was a community leader, the people always had a higher regard for their Creator than when evil men were looked to as leaders.

"Who is that young woman?" Boaz asked his foreman as he glanced at Ruth. "Don't recall hiring her."

"She's not working for you," the foreman explained. "She came to me early this morning to ask if she could glean, and I told her she could. She's the Moabite woman who lately came with Naomi, the widow of Elimelech. She has been working all day, except that she spent a few minutes getting acquainted with the women in the house before starting her work."

Boaz walked over to Ruth, who at first thought that he was angry with her for some reason.

"If you must glean, young woman," he said to her. "I trust that you won't go to other fields. Stay behind my women harvesters, and you won't end the day empty-handed. And don't be afraid of any of my men. You are welcome to any of the privileges that the people have who work for me." (Ruth 2:5-9)

Ruth was so overwhelmed by this unexpected treatment that she fell on her knees before Boaz and bowed her head to the ground.

"Why are you being so considerate?" she asked. "I am a stranger here, and there is no reason that I know of to show such favor to me."

"Ah, but there is," Boaz replied gently, helping her to her feet. "I have heard about how well you have treated your mother-in-law, and how you chose to come here with her instead of staying in Moab. She has told all her friends about your goodness to her. May our God reward you for what you have done, and may He protect you for looking to Him for your way of life!"

"Thank you," she murmured to Boaz. "You have made me feel as though I am as welcome here as one of your workers."

"I am happy that you want to be with us," Boaz smiled. "Now please come into my tent and have lunch with us."

Ruth was a little ill at ease among so many strangers, but she was pleased when the owner of the field sat among his workers and passed food to her. He even had one of his helpers prepare a package of food to take home to Naomi. When the meal was over, Ruth expressed her thanks and quickly slipped back to a spot well behind the harvesters. (Ruth 2:10-14.)

As soon as she was gone, Boaz instructed his foreman to tell the workers that the new gleaner should receive special privileges.

"Let her go wherever she wishes, even if she wants to glean at the heels of the harvesters," the foreman was told. "It might even be a good idea if they purposely dropped a little grain now and then."

The foreman nodded solemnly, but shook his head and grinned knowingly as soon as Boaz had turned away.

A Cheering Bounty

That afternoon Ruth surprisingly found that there were many more stalks of barley left on the ground than there had been in the morning. Close to evening she had emptied her bag several times by the threshing shed. Night being not far away, she worked hastily to beat out the grains on an unused part of the floor. To her great satisfaction the result was about eight gallons of fine barley -- enough to make many loaves of bread after the chaff was sifted out and the grains were ground. (Ruth 2:15-17.)

Ruth easily swung the tied bag of grain over her shoulder and left for home just as it was growing dusk. It wasn't difficult for her to carry in such a manner. If she tired of carrying it that way, she was quite adept at balancing a load on her head.

When she showed Naomi the grain and the package of food, her mother-in-law was pleasantly surprised.

"What welcome bounty!" Naomi exclaimed. "Where did you go to receive such special favor? May blessings come to the one who has treated you so well!"

"I went to a nearby field where barley is being cut," Ruth explained. "The foreman over the workers told me I could glean, but during the morning I was discouraged by the small amount of barley I had gathered. Then the owner of the field arrived on a handsome horse. He invited me to eat in the harvesters' meal tent. He even asked me not to glean anywhere except in his fields. In the afternoon I picked up so much barley that I was able to thresh out all the grain you see. And this package of food is especially for you from Boaz. That's the name of the owner of the field." (Ruth 2:18-19.)

Naomi was happily startled at this last bit of information.

"I know who Boaz is!" she exclaimed. "He is a close relative of my dead husband, and a wealthy and God-fearing man! God has been good to direct us to him. You would indeed be wise not to be seen in any other fields but his. You can be sure that you will be safe if you stay on his property."

Ruth gladly stayed in the fields of Boaz for the full harvest time of barley and wheat, which was for a month or so. (Ruth 2:20-23.) Meanwhile, she was

treated with special attention by Boaz, insomuch that there was an increasing affection between them, though neither of them expressed it very much in words. Each could see that the other was a person of very high moral standards. As for her gleaning, Ruth daily brought home so much grain that the two widows made a small income by selling part of it.

From the glowing reports Ruth brought home about Boaz, it was plain to Naomi what was taking place. She planned to do what she could to push the situation into full bloom, lest it fail to fully develop naturally.

Boaz was spending most of his time at the threshing shed, where his crew was removing chaff from the grain with the help of strong evening breezes. Naomi knew that the workers didn't go home until after midnight, and that Boaz then slept in the shed to save time in going to his home and back again to work just a few hours later. Besides, he preferred not to leave his large stock of grain unattended, what with thieves constantly prowling about.

Naomi Plans Wisely and Justly

"You know that I want what is best for you," Naomi reminded Ruth, "and continuing to live here with me in this small home isn't the best for a young woman who should have a more promising future. Boaz cares deeply for you, but he hasn't mentioned marriage because you haven't shown him that you're greatly in favor of it."

"I am very happy here with you," Ruth told Naomi. "As for Boaz, I don't want him to think that I'm too bold."

"But you should make him aware of how you feel," Naomi continued, "and the sooner the better. I suggest that you use your best perfume, you put on your prettiest clothes and go on to the threshing shed where he'll be staying tonight. Watch from outside till he has gone to bed. Then slip inside and lie down at his feet!" (Ruth 3:1-4.)

Ruth was startled at the suggestion. When Naomi saw her expression of wonder, she hastily reminded her that it was an Israelite custom and duty that the nearest eligible male kin of a dead husband should marry the widow in the event she had no children, so that she might have the opportunity to have offspring through the family that had chosen her. (Deuteronomy 25:5-6.)

"Boaz realizes just how he is related to you," Naomi observed. "I'm sure he will understand your good intentions and treat you fairly."

At first Ruth didn't want to do what Naomi suggested. To her it seemed a bit too forward, but the more she thought about the matter, the more she was

convinced that this was something that should be done in accepting the right ways of Israel.

"I shall do as you say," she finally told Naomi. (Ruth 3:5.)

Before midnight Ruth went to the threshing shed, careful not to be seen by anyone. The workers had gone, but there was a light inside the building. She peered inside to see Boaz finishing a late meal and relaxing with a mug of wine. She watched him wearily stretch out on the straw-covered floor, lean his head against a sheaf of barley, pull a blanket over himself and snuff out the oil lamp. Ruth patiently waited outside until she could hear the slow, deep breathing that indicated sound sleep. Then she slipped inside, lifted part of the blanket over Boaz' feet, and carefully and silently lay down with the blanket partly over her. (Ruth 3:6-7.)

Even though Boaz had fallen into a deep sleep, Ruth's presence awakened him. He was alarmed when he felt something warm and alive pressing against his feet. Could it be some kind of animal seeking a snug place, or was it some intruder who meant him harm? There was enough moonlight being reflected from the roofless part of the threshing floor to make it possible to see dimly. Boaz slowly pulled his blanket toward his head, gradually exposing the object at his feet. He blinked in disbelief when he realized that he was uncovering a woman curled up on the floor. He was even more startled when he recognized her.

"You!" he blurted. "What are you doing here, Ruth?"

Ruth glanced up in embarrassment, then dropped her gaze to the floor.

Boaz -- A Man of Honor

"I'm here to remind you that you are my closest of kin among men in Israel," she answered in a quiet voice. "I understand that according to your custom, you may marry me, since my husband was your close relative. Spread your blanket over me to show if you are willing to be married!" (Ruth 3:8-9.)

Boaz was so surprised that words failed him for a few moments. This added to Ruth's discomfort.

"May God bless you for this wonderful compliment to me!" Boaz exclaimed, reaching over and putting his hand on Ruth's veiled head. "When I first met you, I thought that you were a most unusual woman because of your beauty and humility. But now I have reason to think even more of you. Everyone in our city knows you are a virtuous woman. You could have chosen younger men even among the wealthier ones."

Encouraged by these words, Ruth forgot her embarrassment and raised her eyes happily and expectantly up to Boaz.

"It's true that I am a relative of yours," he continued. "But I am not your nearest of kin here. There is another man living in this area who is more closely related to you than I am."

Ruth's smile faded. There was an awkward silence as the woman from Moab realized that in a way she was talking to the wrong man!

"But Naomi, my mother-in-law, thought that you -- " Ruth's voice trailed away as she stared at the floor.

"Don't worry," Boaz said softly. "Leave this matter to me, and I'll take care of it tomorrow. Just lie down where you are and rest until morning." (Ruth 3:10-13.)

Ruth lay at Boaz's feet till nearly daylight. When she was about to leave, Boaz spread her sheet-like veil out on the floor and poured a sizable gift of barley on it. Pulling up the corners, he tied them snugly together, thus making a bag of the veil.

"This is a big load," he said. "but I know you are capable of handling it. I also know that you are known as a virtuous woman, so there's no reason to risk spotting your good reputation by telling anyone except Naomi that you have been here to talk with me."

Ruth arrived home before anyone was stirring that morning and related everything that had happened. Her mother-in-law didn't seem too concerned about another man being more closely akin to them than was Boaz.

"I don't know the intentions of this one of whom Boaz speaks," she said, "but don't be upset. If Boaz promised you that he'll straighten matters out, then that's what he'll do."

Chapter 76

VIRTUE IS REWARDED

RUTH the young Moabite woman, had real affection for Boaz, the wealthy, elderly Israelite grain grower. She hoped that Boaz would marry her. Boaz, who himself was probably a widower, hoped that it would be that way, too.

But there was another man in Bethlehem who was more closely related to Ruth's dead husband. He had more claim to Ruth as a wife than Boaz did.

(Deuteronomy 25:5-6.) However, this other man had given the matter no real thought. (Ruth 3:10-18.)

Boaz Plans Wisely

During the weeks Ruth had gleaned in his fields, Boaz had come to love the Moabitess, and he was determined not to lose her. The morning after he found that Ruth cared deeply for him, he went early to the main gate of Bethlehem, the place where most business was conducted in that area. There he stayed, hopeful of finding the unmarried man who was more closely related to Ruth's dead husband, and whose traditional duty it was to marry the widow if she were childless. Boaz was confident he would see the relative before he left town to spend the day working in his fields.

Fortunately, the man soon showed up at the busy place. Boaz sought him out and invited him to share the bench where he, Boaz, had been patiently sitting. (Ruth 4:1.)

"I have some important news that could be very good for you," Boaz told him. "If you will sit here for just a few minutes till I return, I'll tell you about it."

It was the custom then that several people be present as witnesses when business decisions and agreements were made. Boaz wanted to make certain that what he was about to do was duly witnessed. Being well known in Bethlehem, he succeeded in quickly summoning ten of the leading men of the region who were present in the crowd at the gate. They gathered around him and the man he had detained to see that matters were properly attested to.

"I'm here to inform you that Elimelech's wife, Naomi, who recently returned from Moab, has a fine field for sale at a reasonable price," Boaz explained. "Inasmuch as you are Elimelech's nearest relative, you should have the first opportunity to purchase the land. If you prefer not to buy it, then I should like to do so as the next of kin after you." (Leviticus 25:25.)

Ever since Naomi had returned from Moab, Boaz had known that she had intended to sell the piece of land. She didn't want to part with it, but her increasing needs made it necessary. Boaz' colorful description of the field caused his relative to feel that it was indeed a bargain without his even seeing it, though he knew the location.

"I'll buy it!" he exclaimed. "Tell Naomi that I'll bring her the money this very afternoon!" (Ruth 4:2-4.)

"Good!" Boaz said. "And now I have a pleasant surprise for you. The sale of this land also includes something else -- marriage to Elimelech's childless daughter-in-law, Ruth, and having an heir to Elimelech by her!"

The relative's jaw dropped. He stared unhappily at Boaz, who had hoped for just that reaction.

"Then I can't afford to buy it!" he declared disappointedly, when he knew he couldn't get just the field for himself. "From what I've heard, this Ruth would make a wonderful wife. But I can't afford to spend my money to provide an heir for Elimelech. It would be much simpler if you would buy the land, Boaz, and thereby have Ruth in marriage."

The man thereupon yanked off one shoe and handed it to Boaz, which was a custom indicating that the nearest of kin declined to carry out his obligations and left them to the next of kin after him. All this was just how Boaz had hoped and planned that matters would turn out. (Ruth 4:5-8.)

A Happy Solution

"You have seen and heard what has happened here," Boaz announced to the witnesses. "I hereby declare that I will purchase the land that belongs to Elimelech and his sons and Naomi. Besides, by this purchase, and with her consent -- I hereby acquire Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi, as my wife, so that she shall not be childless even though her first husband is dead."

The ten men Boaz had chosen and even many others who had been watching and listening nodded in agreement.

"We are witnesses to what has taken place here," they spoke out. "May God cause your wife to be as fruitful as Rachel and Leah, from whom Israel came, and may you have great success in your work. We hope that your house will be like that of Pharez, from which part of the people of Judah sprang in such great numbers!" (Ruth 4:9-12.)

The tribute was graciously accepted by Boaz, who then lost little time in getting to the home of Naomi and his new wife Ruth. When Ruth saw him approaching, she was filled with anxiety, realizing that the man who was nearest of kin to Naomi's dead husband could have acquired her in marriage, even though she had never met him.

Her fears were swept away the moment Boaz entered the house. She could tell by his excited grin that he had, with God's help, somehow made matters work out right. She fell into the arms of her new husband, silently thanking God that such happiness could be hers.

Naomi slipped quietly out of the room, smiling to herself because of how well matters had turned out, though she didn't yet know what Boaz had done to make them that way.

Some who read the story of Ruth, which gives an insight into the lives of a few of the obedient people of Israel in troubled times, might question the marriage of an Israelite to a Moabitess from the heathen land of Moab.

The answer is Boaz married a woman who had renounced the pagan religion and gods of Moab. She had a desire to become an Israelite by obeying and worshipping the God of Israel. Further, the Moabites were not of another race. Their ancestor Moab was a son of Abraham's nephew Lot. (Genesis 12:5 and 19:36-38.)

God's Church has always been made up basically of Israelites, but Gentiles have been able to come into the Church and become "spiritual" Israelites by forsaking their wrong practices and beliefs and repentantly and earnestly seeking the ways and laws of the Creator, who chose Israel to help carry out His plan.

In due time Boaz and Ruth had a son. Friends suggested that he be named Obed, which means servant.

"Ruth is better than seven sons," they told Naomi, "because she has stayed with you, and now she has given birth to a grandson who will give you great happiness in your latter years. He will also become famous, a man in whom you shall be pleased."

The Ancestry of Jesus

This prediction, whether or not inspired, turned out true. Naomi became a nurse to Obed, and greatly enjoyed the privilege of helping rear a boy. Obed not only became an outstanding Israelite, but he also was an ancestor of Jesus Christ. (Ruth 4:13-17.)

The lineage of Christ at the time of Judah (see Genesis 38, especially verses 27-30) had a ! strange twist at the birth of Judah's twin boys. The midwife present, realizing that two babies were to be born, noticed that a little arm was first to appear. She hastily tied a red thread around the protruding wrist to indicate for certain which baby obviously was to be born first, inasmuch as the firstborn son would ordinarily be the one to whom the greater honor and heritage would be due. In this case, the royal line ending in Christ would be carried on through the one born first.

The baby with the red string on his wrist wasn't the first, however. The other twin was born before him, to the surprise of the midwife. He was named Pharez, the one referred to by Boaz' witnesses when they expressed their

hope that all would go well with him. The other baby was named Zarah. (Genesis 38:27-30; Ruth 4:18.)

This unusual birth situation was mentioned in the Bible because it had to do with who and where Israel is today -- something that presently isn't understood by most ministers, religious leaders and Bible scholars.

There were seven generations and about four and a half centuries from Pharez to Obed. Obed was the grandfather of David (Ruth 4:19-22), and then there were twenty-eight more generations of the line of Judah to the time that Jesus was born. (Matthew 1:17.)

There were several long generations among the ancestors of David after the Israelites arrived in Canaan. Boaz was born after the arrival in Canaan. Yet his great-grandson David -- the third generation afterward -- was born about three hundred years later. The Bible tells us Jesse was very old compared to other men when his son David was a young boy. (I Samuel 17:12.) Some of these men must have been over a hundred years old when their last sons were born, just as Abraham was. (Genesis 21:5; Genesis 24:1, 67; Genesis 25:1-2.)

In those days people were healthier and had a more natural diet and got plenty of exercise. They were vigorous until they were very old. (Deuteronomy 34:7.)

God had a hand in what occurred in this matter of His Son's ancestors. This doesn't mean that people are always caused to think and act only as the Creator wills. If that were so, we would be little better than robots. But God does choose to work through certain people. Those whom He chooses don't always realize that God is leading them to decide to do certain things in certain ways insomuch that it all results in some end God had in mind.

Take the Problem to God

About a century and a half after the birth of Obed, there was a man by the name of Elkanah living in a town in the high elevations of the Mt. Ephraim region. He was a Levite, and he had two wives. This wasn't right and he, being a Levite, should have known better. But there were many things not right in Israel in those times when the people had fallen so far away from God. However, the fact that this man had two wives for so many years was part of the means through which he was used to later bring another of God's servants onto the scene. (I Samuel 1:1-2.)

Elkanah tried to obey God the best he knew how for the most part, including observing the annual Sabbaths. But still, because of his bigamy, all was not peace and harmony in his home. One of his wives, Peninnah, was jealous of the other, Hannah, because their husband showed Hannah more affection.

Hannah, however, was unhappy because she had no children and Peninnah had several. To add to the trouble, Peninnah often vexed Hannah, telling her that she wasn't a good wife, and that it was obvious because she had no children. Hannah could hardly bear up under such taunts, what with it being considered a disgrace in ancient times for a woman to be childless in Israel.

Elkanah would have spared himself and his family much grief if he had wisely considered how matters were bound to turn out for a man craving and taking on two wives. On the other hand, God eventually allowed this tragic situation to serve a purpose.

The tabernacle and ark were still located at Shiloh, a town in the mountains of Ephraim about twenty miles north of Jerusalem. During one of the times Elkanah was there with his family to make peace offerings, Peninnah was especially troublesome to Hannah.

It was according to the rules of sacrificing that meat for peace offerings was in most part returned to the one who had brought it, if he were present. Then it was ordinarily consumed at the family meals that were prepared during the feast days. This time, as usual, Elkanah saw to it that Hannah was served twice as much of the choice meat as any other person in his family was served. (I Samuel 1:3-5.)

"Does our husband feel that you might at last be able to bear a child if you are fed especially well?" Peninnah smugly whispered to Hannah.

Hannah winced at this remark. She realized that she had trouble in being as loving and kind as she should be to Peninnah's children, but she didn't feel that Peninnah had sufficient reason for constantly making such snide statements. She arose from the table and walked away to seat herself at a distance. When Elkanah noticed what she had done, he went to her and was grieved to find her sobbing.

"Why are you crying?" he asked her tenderly. "Why did you leave the table?"

"Don't worry about me," Hannah breathed, struggling to hide her tears. She said nothing about Peninnah's cruel conduct.

"I wish you wouldn't be unhappy because you are not yet a mother," Elkanah murmured. "There is a lot of time yet. Meanwhile, don't you believe that I love you even more than ten sons could care for you?" (I Samuel 1:6-8.)

"I know," Hannah replied. "But just let me sit here by myself for a while." Elkanah understood that she wanted to be alone. He returned to the table to join the others of his family, unaware of the smirk on Peninnah's face.

Hannah sat by herself for quite a while. Then she went into the tabernacle enclosure and started to pray, though not aloud. Because her eyes were

closed, she wasn't aware that she was being closely watched by Eli, the old high priest, who was sitting in an elevated seat close to one of the corner posts of the tabernacle fence.

"God of Israel, please make it possible for me to give birth to a baby boy," she fervently prayed. "If you will just do this for me, I will gladly give him to you to use in your service all the days of his life!"

Hannah kept on praying silently. Her lips were moving, and she was unwittingly bending farther and farther forward in her state of great emotion. Eli was still watching her. Finally he got to his feet and strode to where she was crouching. (I Samuel 1:9-14.)

"Young woman!" he snapped impatiently. "Young woman, straighten up! You should be ashamed of yourself! How much longer do you intend to hang around here in your drunken condition? If you want to stay around this tabernacle any longer, stop drinking before you pass out completely!"

Chapter 77

GOD RULES HIS MINISTRY

HANNAH wife of Elkanah the Levite, was at the tabernacle praying when she was startled by the harsh voice of Eli, the high priest. He accused her of being drunk. (I Samuel 1:12-14.) Prayer was so rare in Israel that Eli did not realize Hannah was praying.

Having become lost to her surroundings because of her fervent request to God for a son, Hannah opened her eyes and looked up to see the priest frowning down on her.

"I assure you, sir," Hannah said respectfully, "that I am not in a drunken condition."

A Change of Attitude

"But you have been acting very strangely," Eli told her. "There are certain young women who stay around the tabernacle for wrong purposes. If you are one of them, I prefer that you leave."

"I am not one of them," Hannah explained. "I am sorry to have given you the wrong impression. If I seemed to have had too much wine, it was because I have been very unhappy. I am childless, and I was bringing my

problem to God. I told Him that if He would give me a baby boy, I would give up the baby so that he could become God's servant for the rest of his life!"

"That is indeed a worthy purpose," observed Eli, who was not convinced that Hannah was telling the truth. "If it's a son you want, where is your husband?"

"He is the man Elkanah, sitting over there at that table," Hannah answered, pointing to a little group eating by themselves. "Unfortunately, I must share him with another wife whom you see there. The children around them are hers."

"I am beginning to understand, my daughter," said Eli. "I am sorry I spoke to you as I did. I should not have misjudged you, but there have been so many young women coming here for no good that I considered you just another one of them. Return in peace with your husband to your home. I believe that God will grant the request you have made of Him." (I Samuel 1:15-17.)

This encouragement from the high priest of Israel was a great help to Hannah. She was so inspired with hope that she cheerfully returned to her husband's table to join in the meal. Elkanah was elated to note her change of mood, but Peninnah was perplexed and troubled. She saw nothing good in Elkanah and Hannah being in such a happy state.

Next morning, after making a last offering, Elkanah returned home with his family. Although most of Israel was in an ill spiritual state, there were many such as this Levite who made a special effort to observe the annual Holy Days God had instituted. They were more obedient to God than millions and millions of English-speaking descendants of the ancient House of Israel are today, because churchgoers today are told by their leaders to have nothing to do with God's Holy Days that He set apart to be observed forever -- and that means the present day as well as back then. (Compare Leviticus 23:1, 41 with I Corinthians 5:7-8 and Acts 18:21.)

When Elkanah went back to the tabernacle a year later, Hannah didn't go with him and Peninnah and her children. It wasn't because she didn't want to go. It was because she had given birth to a son! She named him Samuel, which meant ASKED OF GOD. (I Samuel 1:18-20.)

A Good Reason to Stay Home

"I shouldn't go to Shiloh until after our son is weaned and trained," Hannah told her husband. "When he is of the proper age, I shall deliver him to the high priest for a life of service at the tabernacle just as I promised."

"If you think you should stay home, so be it," Elkanah agreed, "but I shall miss you while we are away."

Hannah was sad to see her husband leave, but at the same time she was relieved to be out of Peninnah's presence for a few days. Peninnah could no longer chide her for having no children, but this envious wife had now developed other types of caustic and unkind remarks with which to try to keep Hannah uncomfortable. In spite of these things, Hannah was happy because of her son.

Hannah didn't go to Shiloh the following year or even the year after that. In those times a child was often two years old before it was weaned, a custom that prevails today to some extent among various peoples in the Middle East.

When Samuel was at last taken to Shiloh, he was probably nearly three years old. Besides the usual meat to be offered, Elkanah took three bullocks, over seven gallons of flour and a leather bag of wine -- often called a "wine skin" in modern translations of the Bible. These extra things were to be used in the consecration offering having to do with little Samuel. (I Samuel 1:21-24.)

As soon as they arrived at the tabernacle and made an offering, Hannah took her son to Eli, who was still high priest. So much time had passed that Eli didn't at first recognize her.

"I am the woman who was here praying by myself a few years ago, and to whom you spoke because you thought I was drunk," she explained. "Perhaps you will remember that I told you that I was pleading to God for a baby boy, and that if God would give one to me, I would dedicate him for his whole life to the service of the tabernacle. God heard and answered my prayers, just as you said at the time that you believed He would. Here is the boy. I have come to the tabernacle to turn him over to you!" (I Samuel 1:25-28.)

Eli remembered Hannah. He knew that it required much courage for a mother to give up her only child. It occurred to him to refuse to accept such a young lad, so that he might spend a few more years with his parents, but he realized that it would be even more difficult for the mother to bring Samuel back again.

When the time came for the consecration offering, Hannah voiced an unusual prayer of praise. She was so thankful for what God had done for her that she was happy even for the opportunity of giving up her son. (I Samuel 2:1-10.)

After the time of worship was over, Elkanah and his family returned to their home, leaving little Samuel to be reared and instructed in the simple duties he would at first be required to perform at the tabernacle.

The Priesthood Profaned

At this time matters were anything but right at the tabernacle. Eli's two sons, priests next in rank under their father, had the same duties and authority as those of Aaron's two sons when the tabernacle was at Mt. Sinai. Those two, Nadab and Abihu, met sudden death when they overstepped their authority. (Leviticus 10:1-2.)

Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's sons, were swiftly heading for a similar fate. They were committed to serving God with fear and reverence, but they had become increasingly greedy, careless and immoral. They were careful to try to hide their evil conduct from their father, but they didn't seem to care what God thought of them. They were far from fit to be priests, but God allowed them to carry on for a time, just as He often allows sinful men to continue in their ways. If every person were struck dead the moment he first sinned, there would be nobody living. But there is always a point at which God deals with those who continue to break His laws.

According to the Creator's instructions for making peace offerings at the tabernacle, a carcass was to be divided three ways: the part for God, including the fat, the part for the priests, including the right shoulder and breast, and the portion that was left, which was to go back to the one who offered it. Only God's part was to be roasted on the altar. The rest of it was to be boiled for the priests and Levites and for the family making the offering. (Leviticus 7:11-17; 28-34; II Chronicles 35:13; Ezekiel 46:20, 24.)

Hophni and Phinehas didn't go along with such rules any more. When a carcass was brought in as a sacrifice, they seized their share of the meat before the rest of it was taken to be used elsewhere. Often they would roast their part of it before God's part was burned on the altar. Furthermore, they would go to the huge seething pots that had just been filled with raw meat to boil, and yank out as much as they wanted of it with large, three-pronged hooks. They would thus take much of the meat belonging to persons who had brought it for offerings. Everyone could see they were violating God's ordinances. Those people who were bold enough to object to this unlawful practice were told that the priests would do as they pleased, even if they had to get their way by force.

This situation was so difficult that even the most zealous Israelites came to abhor the offerings they knew they should make. (I Samuel 2:11-17.) They feared to complain, having been warned that no one should accuse a priest of doing wrong. (Exodus 22:28; Acts 23:5.) The conduct of Hophni and Phinehas was damaging to Israel, just as the disobedience of today's religious leaders is doing great harm to our people. The priests' sins within a short time led to the spread of idolatry (Judges 8:33), after the death of Gideon.

A year after Samuel had been dedicated, his parents came to Shiloh as usual. There they saw their son busy in his service at the tabernacle. He was dressed in a special shoulder garment that caused him to look very official, for a young boy.

It was a happy week for Hannah, who spent many hours visiting Samuel. She gave him a coat she had made, and for a number of years afterward she brought him a new coat each time she and her husband came to the tabernacle, which was during the fall at the Festival of Tabernacles. The parents of Samuel had no difficulty attending God's Festival each year as it was still a time of peace under Gideon, shortly before an Ammonite-Philistine invasion. (Judges 10: 7.)

God Rewards the Generous

During one of the festivals, Eli asked a special blessing on Elkanah and Hannah because of their giving their only child to the service of the tabernacle.

"Reward this couple for bequeathing their firstborn son," the high priest asked of God. "Make it possible for them to have more children."

God answered Eli's request. In time Hannah gave birth to three more sons and two daughters. Having a total of six children, she no longer felt secondary to Peninnah, who by that time had given up her efforts to appear as the superior wife. (I Samuel 2:18-21.)

As Samuel was growing into a young lad who was of increasing worth at the tabernacle, Eli was reaching an age at which he realized that his life could end any day. He had hoped that his last years would be peaceful, but for a long time he had been receiving indirect reports of his sons' conduct. At first he gave little heed to these rumors, but when they began increasing, he knew he would have to speak to Hophni and Phinehas. Eli's intention wasn't turned to action, however. He dreaded the unpleasant task of reproaching his sons. As an excuse, he kept reminding himself that the rumors possibly weren't true.

That was before he received an anonymous tip that his sons were carrying on in a shameless, wanton manner with some of the women who stayed in the tabernacle area. Eli had noted evidence of this flagrant misconduct by Hophni and Phinehas, but he had chosen to overlook it. Now that the people were beginning to be aware of it, he realized that he could no longer delay rebuking his sons.

"I have been receiving some alarming reports about things you have been doing here at the tabernacle," Eli grimly announced to Hophni and Phinehas next time he saw them alone.

The two priests glanced at each other with expressions of righteous indignation.

"Who are those who dare tell lies about the priests of Israel?" Hophni demanded.

"The people have no right to judge us!" Phinehas muttered.

"Both of you would probably be better off if they did," Eli told them, frowning. "However, it is God who judges us, and I know you have much to fear from Him for the outrages you have been committing. Don't you realize that you are causing the people to sin because of your bad examples and by your driving them away from the tabernacle? If your misbehavior were only against man, it would be bad enough. But you have been defying the Creator whom you have been chosen to serve! Unless you give up your evil ways now, God will take your lives!" (I Samuel 2:22-25.)

"Those who have accused us are the ones who should repent!" snapped Hophni as he turned to stride away with Phinehas.

It was plain to Eli that his sons only resented his remarks, and had no intention of changing their ways. He knew that further words would only be wasted. He was painfully aware that if he had been properly strict with them years before, this calamitous situation probably never would have occurred. There was only one course left now for the good of Israel. That was to put Hophni and Phinehas out of their capacity at the tabernacle, and replace them with two priests next in line for such offices. That, however, was something that Eli didn't quite have the courage or inclination to do.

Eli Is Warned

Not long afterward an unusual stranger came to the tabernacle to talk to Eli. When Eli saw the man, he was somehow uncomfortable in his presence. There was something about him that made the high priest feel as though the fellow could read his innermost thoughts, and that he was aware of all that had been going on at the tabernacle. When the man spoke, Eli was startled to learn that he DID know what was going on.

"When your forefather Aaron was in Egypt, God chose his family for the priesthood," the stranger reminded Eli. "At that time God gave definite instructions concerning the offerings and the manner in which the tabernacle was to function. I have been sent to tell you that God is well aware that you and your sons have failed miserably in running matters rightly. You honor your sons above God -- which is idolatry. You have allowed them to steal from those who brought offerings so that all three of you might gorge yourselves. (I Samuel 2:27-29.)

"Even though God promised that the priesthood should be in the family of Aaron forever -- and set your family in the priesthood -- the Creator can't go on using men like you as His most high-ranking servants. You will die soon, but not before you see an enemy come on the Israelites to take away their wealth. As for your sons, they will both die the same day, and not long from now. Then God will choose from among Aaron's other descendants a high priest who will be faithful. Others in your family will come and beg him for food and for work. Furthermore, all your male descendants shall die before they are of middle age. Consider these things, and how you have brought them on yourselves!" (1 Samuel 2:30-36.)

When the stranger finished speaking, Eli was so upset that he was speechless. He was shaking as he watched the man stride away from the tabernacle and disappear.

At this time Samuel was probably about twelve or thirteen years old. He was of increasing help to Eli, who was a heavy man in his last years, and who needed someone in attendance because of the high priest's having difficulty in moving about. For this reason Samuel's bedroom was close to Eli's in the high priest's quarters near the tabernacle, so that the lad could quickly wait on Eli in the event he needed help during the night.

One night Samuel was awakened by a voice speaking his name. Thinking that Eli had called, the boy ran to the high priest's bedroom.

"Here I am, sir!" Samuel whispered out of the darkness.

Eli's loud breathing ended with a sudden snort.

"Is that you, Samuel?" the high priest muttered sleepily. "Why have you awakened me? I didn't call you. Go back to bed!"

Samuel returned to his room, puzzled as to the source of the voice. Before he could fall asleep, he distinctly heard his name spoken again. He jumped up and once more announced his presence to the sleeping priest, who again informed him that he had not called.

Samuel returned to his bed. He was too perplexed to get back to sleep. (1 Samuel 3:1-7.)

"Samuel! Samuel!" a voice startled him for the third time, strangely seeming to come to him from all directions.

Chapter 78

"THE ARK OF GOD IS TAKEN!"

ONE night young Samuel, who was sleeping in a room adjacent to Eli's near the tabernacle, heard a voice calling his name. Thinking that Eli, the high priest, had summoned him, he hurried to Eli's quarters. The high priest told Samuel he didn't call him. The same thing happened a little later, and again Eli told him that he hadn't called. (1 Samuel 3: 1-6.)

A Call From God

After Samuel returned to his bed he heard the voice speak his name for the third time. He hesitated to bother the high priest again, but there was just the chance that this third call had come from the increasingly helpless old man. So for the third time he went to Eli's quarters and timidly asked if he could be of service.

Eli slowly sat up and peered through the gloom at the boy, who was fearful that he would be rebuked.

"If you heard someone speaking your name it wasn't I," Eli muttered thoughtfully. "What was the voice like?"

"The first time it sounded a long way off," Samuel explained. "The second time it seemed closer. The last time, just a couple of minutes ago, it sounded closer yet, as though it came from everywhere!"

Eli sat in silence for a few moments. He realized that an awesome thing was taking place. He was certain because this thing had happened to him in the past.

For some purpose God was speaking to Samuel! (1 Samuel 3: 7-8.)

To Eli this was a snub from God, inasmuch as the high priest was the one to whom the Creator usually spoke unless there was a leader in Israel who was unusually close to God. Eli understood why God had chosen to contact another, even one who was only a child. It was because of the careless manner in which he, Eli, had conducted matters at the tabernacle.

"Go back to your bed, my son," the high priest sighed. "If the voice comes to you again, be sure to answer, 'I hear you, Lord! Please tell me why you are calling me.' "

This instruction was puzzling to Samuel. He obediently went back to bed, but he didn't sleep because of being so curious and excited by what the high priest had told him to do about the mysterious voice. He was so keyed up that when he distinctly and closely heard his name pronounced again, he almost forgot what he had been told to answer.

"Y-yes, Lord!" he stammered, not really knowing whom he was answering. "I'm listening!" (1 Samuel 3: 9-10.)

"Do not be fearful," the voice went on. "I am the God of Israel, here to inform you of some important things."

Samuel was greatly startled to learn that God was speaking to him. But somehow he became at ease as the seconds passed. He listened intently as the voice continued to come to him out of the night.

"I am going to cause some very unhappy events in Israel. If I were to announce to all the people what I shall do, their ears would tingle with the dread words. First I shall bring judgment against the family of Eli. Even though you are yet very young, you should know that your high priest has been offensively careless in his high office. He has allowed his sons to do some very vile things. The sins of all three have been so great that no sacrifice or offering can atone for them. Because of their disobedience, the lives of these people will violently end at a time I shall soon choose." (1 Samuel 3: 11-14.)

A Very Unpleasant Duty

Samuel was stunned by what he had heard. He had never been aware of Eli or his two sons doing anything wrong. To be informed that his superiors had displeased the God they served was a shock to him. There was little sleep for him the rest of the night.

Next morning he got up as usual to open the entrance to the tabernacle. With the coming of dawn, the event of the night before became to him as a strong dream he almost wanted to forget. He had no intention of revealing it to anyone, but when Eli called him later to talk to him, he was fearful that he was going to be asked to give an account. It isn't always pleasant to be a prophet.

"I know and now you surely know that it was God who spoke to you last night," the high priest told Samuel. "He must have called you again after the third time I told you to go back to bed. He must have had some message for you. I want you to tell me everything that He told you. Don't hold anything back, or God might deal even more harshly with you than He would deal with me if I were to disobey."

Frightened by these words, Samuel related all that God had spoken. When Eli heard what God had to say about him and his sons, he almost regretted questioning Samuel. He bowed his head and stared submissively at the ground.

"If it's God's will," he murmured, "then it will surely happen the way He has planned it." (I Samuel 3:15-18.)

God hadn't revealed just when these things would happen. For the next several years Eli was in a state of fearful uncertainty for himself and his sons. Meanwhile, Samuel grew up to become a well-known young man. All of Israel knew him as one whom God had chosen as a prophet. Samuel didn't ask to be made a prophet: God chose him. He increased greatly in wisdom and intelligence, and foretold events that came true with startling accuracy because God continued to speak to him from time to time. (I Samuel 3:19-21.)

The leaders of Philistia, the coastal nation that had for several years lorded it over Israel, meanwhile had received increasing reports of the rising young leader at Shiloh. Fearing that Israel might be organizing a rebellion against them, they sent out an army to march among the Israelites and remind them that it would be foolish to rise against the Philistines.

When it was reported that a Philistine army was moving into an area about twenty-five miles west of Shiloh, the elders of Israel quickly formed a fighting force that moved swiftly to within a few miles north of where the enemy stopped to camp.

When the Philistines learned of the presence of the army of Israel, they decided to attack before the Israelite soldiers could become greater in number. The Bible doesn't state how many troops were in each army, though there were probably at least forty or fifty thousand on either side. Whatever the numbers, when the encounter was over and each side had withdrawn from the battlefield, the Israelite army went back to its camp with about four thousand less soldiers. (I Samuel 4:1-2.)

No Help for the Wicked!

The leaders were stunned by this defeat. They felt that their forces weren't meant to lose because they were part of God's chosen people! They seemed to have forgotten that Israel was chosen for an example of obedience, not for special favors. What with most of Israel being in a state of disobedience, the leaders had no sound reason to expect victory.

Nevertheless, some of the elders came to the camp with an idea they thought would insure the Israelites' winning any other encounter with the Philistines.

"We should have the ark with us," they suggested. "Our ancestors took it with them in times of war. They had it with them when they went against Jericho, and the whole city fell. God wouldn't let anything happen to the ark, and He would have to spare us to keep the ark safe!"

This stratagem was vigorously acclaimed by the troops. Men were sent at once to Shiloh to bring the ark to the camp with all possible haste so that it would be on hand in the event the Philistines attacked again.

When the soldiers arrived at the tabernacle to request the ark, Eli was greatly troubled. He felt that it would be a grave mistake for a sinful nation to rely on the presence of the ark as a kind of fetish to insure safety in battle.

"I think the ark should remain in the tabernacle," Eli resolutely informed the men. "I can hardly agree to your taking it!"

Having been awakened because of this matter, the old priest shuffled back to his bed, leaving a group of very disappointed men.

Next morning young Samuel went as usual to open the gates of the tabernacle. To his surprise they were already open. After trying in vain to find Phinehas and Hophni, he awakened Eli to tell him that his sons weren't on duty. The sightless old man groped into the tabernacle, thinking that they might be there. They were gone!

When he came back out, he was pale and shaking.

"They have unwisely taken the ark!" he muttered to Samuel. "God will not deal lightly with those who have done this awful thing!"

When the ark arrived at the camp of the Israelite army, along with Hophni and Phinehas, a thunderous cheer went up from the waiting soldiers. The shouting was so loud that it was plainly heard in the Philistine camp a few miles to the south. Alarmed officers feared that it meant that powerful reinforcements had arrived for Israel. (1 Samuel 4:3-5.)

"We should have attacked again instead of retiring," some of them bitterly observed. "Now it may be too late for another victory."

A little later they learned from spies just what had caused the Israelites to cheer so wildly.

"The God of Israel has come into the camp of the enemy!" the spies excitedly declared. "We learned that He is in a box, and that this box was brought from Shiloh tonight! The enemy troops were so pleased to learn that their God had come to help them that they shouted like madmen with glee!"

"I have heard of that mysterious box," a Philistine officer said. "It is said to be the dwelling place of a powerful God -- the one who long ago brought some horrible plagues on Egypt so that the Israelites could escape!"

"I have heard that when the God of Israel is angered, He is more powerful than any other god," another Philistine added. "If that is true, we might be wise to return to our country."

Fear Turned to Courage

The superstitious Philistines, filled with growing fear and futility, were on the verge of agreeing to give up their war on Israel. Then one of the leading officers demanded to be heard.

"We brought our army here for a purpose!" he shouted angrily. "Now what is all this cowardly talk about running back to our homes? Why are we imagining that we are destined to lose to Israel? We are strong, and we must use that strength to make certain that the Israelites continue to be servants to us. If we give in, we will become servants to them! We must fight! We must prove to all that we are men determined to do what we have set out to do!" (I Samuel 4:6-9.)

This short speech was so inspiring to the Philistines that they decided to set out even before dawn for Israel's camp. The Israelites were depending on the ark to keep them safe, and weren't as prepared as they should have been. The Philistines suddenly swarmed in among them with such savage force that within minutes the ground was strewn with dead and dying Israelites. Many were trapped in their own tents. Others who were out in the open foolishly tried to escape by dashing into their shelters. The shouts, the screams of pain, the clashing of metal against metal produced more noise than had gone up from the cheering men only a few hours previously.

On slashing into one of the larger tents, Philistine soldiers came upon two men crouching close to a large box-shaped object covered with a fancy cloth. Spears hurtled into the two men, killing them at once. The Philistine soldiers had no way of knowing that they had just put to death two priests of Israel -- Phinehas and Hophni. They strode toward the covered object to see what it was. (I Samuel 4:10-11.)

"Don't touch that!" one of the soldiers barked. "That must be the box where Israel's God dwells!"

The soldiers froze in their tracks, then backed off a few steps.

"Why should we be afraid of that thing?" another soldier muttered. "It didn't keep us from killing these two fellows who must have been here to guard it!"

Anxious to show his courage, the soldier stepped up and touched one of the poles by which the ark was carried.

"See?" he triumphantly asked. "Let's take this to our commander. We'll receive some special favors for being the ones to capture the God of the Israelites!"

By that time the fighting was over. The only Israelites in the camp were dead or wounded. All others, and that didn't include very many, were either fleeing or hiding.

Israel had been defeated to the amount of thirty thousand dead soldiers! If there had been obedience to God instead of reliance on the ark, matters would have turned out differently. (Leviticus 26:3-8.)

The Tragic Result of Sin!

Killing thirty thousand Israelites was a great triumph to the Philistines. But, in a way, the capture of the ark was even a greater one, inasmuch as many of them really believed they had captured a god. The ark was taken to their camp, where a noisy celebration took place. There was great curiosity and speculation as to what was inside the object, but somehow no one dared to try to open it. Most of the Philistine soldiers, having heard wild rumors about the ark, chose to stay away from it. They were superstitious.

A few hours later a tattered Benjamite soldier who had escaped from the Philistines staggered wearily into the main streets of Shiloh."

"Our army has been wiped out!" he shouted as he scooped up a handful of dirt and tossed it on his head. (I Samuel 4:12.)

As the bad news spread through town the people began groaning and shrieking. The depressed high priest, sitting at his usual outdoor place where the people could easily contact him, wondered at the cause of the noise. It was then that the exhausted Benjamite trudged up to him to announce that he had run all the way from the Israelite camp to bring news.

Trembling, Eli anxiously asked what had happened.

"The Philistines attacked our camp this morning," the Benjamite muttered hoarsely. "Only a small part of us escaped. The rest are dead, including your two sons. They died when the ark was captured."

This was too much for the old priest. He knew that when God removed His protection from Israel and let the ark be taken, He had forsaken His people. Eli reeled backward and toppled off his elevated chair.

The soldier ran to him, but Eli was already dead. He was a very heavy man, and the fall had broken his neck. (I Samuel 4:13-18.)

Chapter 79

"REVERENCE MY SANCTUARY"

AN ANGEL had told Eli, the high priest of Israel, that he and his two sons would soon lose their lives. All three of them had knowingly failed to conduct themselves as proper servants in God's service. (I Samuel 2:27-36; I Samuel 3:11-14.)

The prediction came true when Eli's two sons were killed by Philistine soldiers. Eli fell and broke his neck just a few hours later. (I Samuel 4:10-18.) God had warned Eli and the people, "reverence my sanctuary" (Leviticus 26:2). He had warned them that only authorized persons should touch the ark, and that it should not even be looked upon except when authorized. (Numbers 4:15; Leviticus 16:2.)

Ark in Pagan Hands

To add to the family tragedy, the wife of Phinehas, one of the two slain sons of Eli, was about to give birth to a baby. Then she heard of the death of her husband and father-in-law and about the capture of the ark, which the priests had removed from God's sanctuary. She was so shocked and troubled that she died shortly after her son was born. Just before she died, she gave her son the name of Ichabod, which was meant to refer to the wretched state into which Israel had fallen. (I Samuel 4:19-22.)

While this was going on at Shiloh, the Philistine army was triumphantly marching into Ashdod, one of the chief cities near the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Ashdod was one of the places where there was a temple containing a statue of one of their main gods, Dagon. The ark was placed in front of the idol to defy the ark or whatever might be in it to try to prevent Dagon from continuing to tower over the ark. (I Samuel 5:1-2.)

Next morning the priests of the temple got up earlier than usual to gloat over the sight of the sacred treasure of Israel reclining as a sort of gratitude offering before their god. They froze in fearful amazement when they entered the main room.

Some time during the night the statue of Dagon had toppled to the floor in front of the ark! (I Samuel 5:3.)

In the next few hours there was feverish activity within the temple. The people of Ashdod weren't allowed inside or to learn what had happened.

Workmen who struggled with ropes, pulleys and pry poles to haul the idol back into place were threatened and warned -- and sworn to secrecy.

It was an awkward day for the Philistine priests, who tried to convince themselves that their idol had been erected off balance, and that a slight earthquake during the night was just enough to cause it to topple. Late that afternoon the statue was hoisted back into place in time for the public to come into the temple to worship that day.

Next morning there was still a greater shock for the priests. They arrived to discover that the statue of Dagon was again on the floor. This time it was mysteriously broken off at the base part, which remained where it was. The arms and head were sheared off and scattered in pieces across the threshold of the temple.

This time the fear and consternation of the priests couldn't be hidden. Within hours it was known all through Philistia that the God of Israel had struck down the statue of Dagon in Ashdod. The disgrace was so great in the minds of the Philistines that the leaders decreed that no one should put foot on the threshold of any temple containing a statue of Dagon because of what had happened. (I Samuel 5: 4-5.)

Philistines Befuddled

This destruction of an idol was embarrassing and unpleasant for the Philistines. But God didn't stop there in dealing with them. He brought misery to the people of Ashdod and those who lived for miles around. Overnight they became afflicted with bleeding ulcers, painful to such a degree that they couldn't even sit down without great distress. The superstitious Philistines were right in their guess that this trouble had come on them because of their treatment of the ark. (I Samuel 5:6-7.) Leaders met to decide what to do to try to escape the plague that had come to a part of the people.

"If giving that box back to the Israelites will relieve us of this miserable condition, I'm for sending it to Shiloh right away!" the ruler of Ashdod declared.

There was a chorus of disagreement.

"The capture of the ark of Israel was a great triumph for our armies!" the ruler of the Philistine city of Gath exclaimed heatedly. "Without it, Israel will soon crumble, but you want to give it back! I say no!"

"You wouldn't say that if you were in my condition!" Ashdod's ruler retorted, grimacing with discomfort. "If you think that fancy box should remain in our nation, take it to YOUR city and see what happens!"

There was a chorus of approval. None of the rulers of the other cities of Philistia wanted to be responsible for keeping the ark. The ruler of Gath realized that he had spoken with too much haste. He had no choice but to agree that the ark should be transported at once to his city.

This time it wasn't put in the same room with an idol, but it was only a matter of hours before the people of Gath, several miles southeast of Ashdod, began to feel the pain of the same kind of plague that had come to Ashdod. Within a few days it had spread to every Philistine family in and around the city. Some, as in Ashdod, were so painfully afflicted that they died. (I Samuel 5:8-9.)

The people of Gath pleaded that the ark be sent elsewhere. Through various pressures and arguments, the ark was moved to Ekron, a main Philistine city about fifteen miles northeast of Gath. Almost as soon as the ark arrived there, the people of Ekron were struck by the same ulcerous condition that had come to the people of Ashdod and Gath. (I Samuel 5:10-12.)

At the same time the area was visited with hordes of mice that seemed to come out of nowhere to overrun fields, barns, homes, streets and public buildings.

All this was too much for the inhabitants of Ekron, who begged the rulers of the leading cities to meet in Ekron and consider moving the ark elsewhere.

"We have had enough!" the ruler of Ekron complained to his fellow leaders when they met. "Our people are suffering terribly. Many of them are dying. If the ark isn't taken away soon from here, we'll all be dead. Your people in Ashdod and Gath are recovering, and we want the same opportunity."

Philistines Test God

"But there is no real proof that the Israelite box is causing your trouble," one of the leaders observed who hadn't yet kept the ark in his city, but wasn't in favor of giving it back to Israel. "Before we make any rash move, let us send for our chief priests and seers and ask for their advice on this matter."

Most of those present agreed on this proposal, inasmuch as most Philistines believed that their priests, magicians, seers and astrologers had unusual wisdom. After a meeting of those revered men, a spokesman made their opinions known.

"Probably it would be wise to return the ark to the Israelites," he declared. "It shouldn't be returned without a trespass offering, however. If the Israelite God is actually punishing us because we have this box, we should at least try to make amends by doing something that might please Him."

"What should this trespass offering be?" the Philistine rulers asked.

"Because Philistia is divided into the leadership of five main cities," the spokesman explained, "it would be fitting to send an equal number of costly images of the things that have plagued us. If we return the ark to the Israelites, we should send along golden images of five mice. As you know, it is our custom to appease our own gods by making images of things that have brought trouble to us. Therefore we should even make five images of the type of sores that have come to Philistia. They should also be made of gold and included with the five images of mice. It would be well to remember the tales that have been handed down about how the God of Israel dealt with the Egyptians when they held the Israelites against their will. [Exodus, chapters 7 through 12.] To make a further effort to avoid such curses, the ark should be returned in a fine, newly built cart drawn by untrained cows whose calves have been taken so far away from them that they won't be turned aside because of sensing them in any direction. The animals should then be sent off with what they have to pull. This way we can test the God of Israel and see if He is the One who brought our troubles upon us. If the cows take the cart to Beth-shemesh, it will be a sign to show us whether the God of Israel is powerful enough to work miracles. But if the cows choose to haul the ark in any direction they choose except that of the Danite village of Beth-shemesh, then we will know that it was only by chance or by natural

conditions that the sores and mice have come to Philistia." (1 Samuel 6:1-9.)

Fantastic and even droll as this plan might seem, the Philistine leaders took it quite seriously. They believed in the ideas of their priests and seers.

The suggestions were carried out as soon as possible. The cart and golden images were made and the images were put into a coffer, or box. The ark and the box containing the golden images were loaded onto the cart. Two cows with calves were brought to hitch to the cart, and the calves were taken to the opposite side of the city of Ekron. (1 Samuel 6:10-11.)

The Sign of the Cows

As soon as the cows were harnessed to the cart, everyone stood back to see what would happen. A few moments passed. Then the cows suddenly set out together to harmoniously pull the cart as though they had been trained all their lives as a pair to do just that.

The Philistine rulers and others present stared in amazement, but not just because the two cows had agreed on how to pull the cart. The astonishing thing was that the animals had chosen to go directly to the road that led to Beth-shemesh! This was the sign that was supposed to prove to the Philistines that the ark was the source of their trouble.

"This means that the God of Israel has been dealing with us because of our capturing the box!" one Philistine ruler exclaimed.

"I'm not convinced yet," another observed. "The animals are starting out in that direction, but they could turn at any moment and go elsewhere. I'm in favor of following them to see what they'll do."

The others agreed. It was an odd sight -- two cows lowing for their calves as they pulled the new cart along, and the five Philistine rulers and their aides and advisors following curiously on their various mounts.

The animals didn't turn to right or left from the road that led into Beth-shemesh about twelve miles southeast of Ekron. Some Israelite harvesters just outside the village caught sight of the unattended cows pulling the cart, just as they reached the field of a man named Joshua, but not the same Joshua who had many years before led Israel across the Jordan River. (Joshua 3:9-17.) They ran to the road, stopped the animals and swarmed around the cart to see what it contained. (I Samuel 6:12-13.)

When the Philistines saw this, they turned off the road and watched, unnoticed, from a nearby grove of trees. They saw the Israelites rip off the top of the box containing the golden idols, then move around excitedly when they discovered what was inside.

Many of the harvesters ran to the nearby villages to tell others that the ark had been found. It resulted in every inhabitant of that area rushing forth to see for himself. The cows and cart were taken off the road and into a nearby field. >From there they were guided up a large, rocky mound that jutted up through the field.

"God has chosen the people of our village to find the ark!" a leading citizen loudly proclaimed. "Let us show our devotion to our God by sacrificing these two cows!"

There was a chorus of agreeing shouts. The animals were immediately slaughtered and dressed by the village's Levites. The wooden cart was broken up and set ablaze under the carcasses. While thousands of the people watched with rapt attention, other thousands inspected the odd trespass offerings sent by the Philistine rulers.

Ark of the Sanctuary Profaned

Unfortunately, there were many who examined and handled the ark without proper reverence for God, even to the extent of lifting the lid and peering inside. Obviously they weren't aware of or hadn't remembered what had happened to certain other people who had touched the ark. That ark

represented God's throne. Such crass disrespect was bound to bring an awful penalty.

These things were witnessed by the Philistines. They at last had seen enough to convince them that they had blundered in taking the ark away from the Israelites and holding it in Philistia for seven months. They returned that same day to their country to commend their priests and diviners for giving them proper advice concerning the ark. The rulers could never know that the God of Israel had caused matters to work out as they did, even to the extent of working through the so-called wise men of Philistia. (I Samuel 6:14-18.)

Following the departure of the Philistines, a "great calamity" fell on the village of Beth-shemesh and on all the country around. Fifty thousand and seventy men suddenly were seized with a strange, painful condition that brought death to all upon whom it came. (I Samuel 6:19.) These were thousands who had treated the ark irreverently. Not even the Philistines had done so to it! The Israelites should have known better, what with a part of them being Levites who surely realized that God had warned the Israelites that death would come to any who looked into the ark or touched it except by its carrying poles -- or showed any lack of reverence for God in their conduct toward the ark. (Leviticus 16:2; 26:2; Numbers 4:5-6, 15.)

There was loud mourning in the villages for the next few days. Some felt that God had dealt unfairly with them. (I Samuel 6:19-20.) Most of the people were anxious to have the ark taken away. Messengers were sent to the nearest town, Kirjath-jearim, to ask men there to come and remove the ark from the area of Beth-shemesh.

The officials of Kirjath-jearim were pleased at the opportunity to have the ark in their town, though some of the people there feared it. They hurriedly sent more than enough men to carry it.

At Kirjath-jearim, built on a hill, the ark was taken to the home of a man named Abinadab. His son, Eleazar, was chosen to keep and guard it. No one would have guessed then that it would remain in that place for the next twenty years. (I Samuel 7:1-2.)

Meanwhile, the Philistines continued to trouble Israel by constant raids and attacks. Life became increasingly miserable for those in western Canaan, and their complaints to Samuel increased accordingly. Always Samuel's answer was that if the Israelites would give up their worship of pagan gods and turn back to the one real God, they wouldn't be troubled by their enemies. The Israelites were so weary of grief that they did gradually pull away from idol worship.

And Finally -- Repentance

Though this change required several years, Samuel was greatly pleased. When the time for the Festival of Tabernacles came, he called the people to meet at Mizpeh, only a few miles from Kirjathjearim and the ark. There many thousands of Israelites prayed, fasted and acknowledged their sins. The assemblage was led and directed by Samuel, who spent most of his time and efforts in giving advice and instruction to those who had problems and needed help. (I Samuel 7: 3-6.)

Just when the people were in the midst of this long-due event, a man rode swiftly into Mizpeh.

"The Philistines have learned that we are gathered here!" he shouted excitedly. "They have sent a huge army that will be here very soon!"

Within minutes the startling news had spread to all the people. Even though many of them were armed, a large part of the Israelites fell into a state of panic because of a fear of being slaughtered. They realized that escape to the east wasn't very probable, inasmuch as there weren't enough roads for so many of them to use.

Thousands quickly milled around Samuel's quarters, and thousands of voices joined in a thunderous plea for help from Samuel. At last the Israelites realized only God could help them.

"Ask God to save us from the Philistines!" they shouted. (I Samuel 7: 7-8.)