

OT Lesson #19

THE REIGN OF THE JUDGES

by Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: Years ago my wife accompanied me to a speaking assignment in the Mesa, Arizona area. We stayed at a motel near the Superstition Mall. On Saturday morning we decided to take a walk. A sidewalk encircled the buildings and the parking lot of the Mall. We had only walked a few steps when I realized that I was looking at something unusual. Landscapers had planted some kind of deciduous tree at close intervals just next to the sidewalk nearly all the way around the mall. And every one of the trees was leaning—not just inclining — leaning at a precipitous angle toward the west. I could feel the wind on my face as we walked eastward on the south side of the Mall. It was not strong that morning, but it was constant. I wondered how many hours and days it had blown against those trees to push them so consistently and completely out of shape.

I watched the same process with fruit trees in my own yard in Orem as the constant canyon winds pushed them away from their normal upright position. I soon learned that when I planted trees, I needed a stake and an anchor to keep my trees growing straight.

Those trees are an effective metaphor for Israel in the Promised Land. There were forces working against her in that environment. She needed anchors to grow up in perfection. Five of those anchors are suggested by the stories in Judges. Four of these stories are given in the lesson. I will add a fifth and try to offer some new insights into those anchors mentioned in the Gospel Doctrine manual.

1. ANCHOR #1" A SAFE ENVIRONMENT:

Righteous parents have a duty to their children to create an environment in which those children can grow up in Christ, without unreasonable pressure from the world. These Israelite parents seem to have been righteous for a time:

And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD, that he did for Israel (Joshua 2:7)

But the Israelites made a calamitous mistake. What do the following phrases and verses tell you about the dangers in which Israel placed her children?

"And the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem" (Judges 1:21)

"Neither did Manasseh drive out the inhabitants of Bethshean and her towns, nor Taanach and her towns, nor the inhabitants of Dor and her towns, nor the inhabitants of Ibleam and her towns, nor the inhabitants of Megiddo and her towns: but the Canaanites would dwell in that land" (Judges 1:27).

"And it came to pass, when Israel was strong, that they put the Canaanites to tribute, and did not utterly drive them out" (Judges 1:28).

"Neither did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites . . ." (Judges 1:29)

"Neither did Zebulun drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, nor the inhabitants of Nahalol . . ." (Judges 1:30)

"Neither did Asher drive out the inhabitants of Accho . . ." (Judges 1:31)

"Neither did Naphtali drive out the inhabitants of Bethshemesh, nor the inhabitants of Bethanath; but he dwelt among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land . . ." (Judges 1:33).

Why would it matter if a few groups of idolaters were left in the midst of Israel? How much influence could so few have on so many? Why was the Lord so concerned?

Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee (Ex 34:12 [12-16]).

The Lord responded to this disobedience with a rebuke and a prophecy:

1 And an angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, I made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I swore unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break my covenant with you. And ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars: but ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this? Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides,

and their gods shall be a snare unto you (Judges 2:1-3).

You will not need to read much of Judges to learn just how devastating these pockets of heathen worship were to Israel.

What *snares* do Latter-day Saint parents place in the environment in which their children are raised? Could a unsupervised TV be such a snare? What about an unreviewed collection of videos? Could the application of *situational ethics* or occasional dishonesty become a snare? How about speaking evil of leaders? Shopping on the Sabbath?

Have we embraced the counsel of the Lord and his leaders sufficiently to drive out all the enemies of righteousness from our homes? A safe environment is a powerful anchor to the young and growing soul.

2. ANCHOR #2: RIGHTEOUS PARENTS

There is a second side to this equation. Children must be willing to follow the righteous example of their parents. Apparently the Israelites children who were born in the Promised Land were not.

1. "And they forsook the **Lord God** of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that [were] round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the LORD to anger" (Judges 2:12).
2. "[T]hey turned quickly out of the **way** which their fathers walked in . . ."
3. "[T]his people hath transgressed my **covenant** which I commanded their fathers . . . (Judges 2:20)
4. I also will not henceforth drive out any from before them of the nations which Joshua left when he died: That through them I may prove Israel, whether they will keep the **way** of the LORD to walk therein, as their fathers did keep it, or not (Judges 2:21,22)

Israel's children forsook the God, the way, the covenant, and the walk of their fathers. All of those can be anchors in the storms of life. What do the following verses suggest about the influence of righteous parents? Genesis 18:19; 1 Nephi 2:16; Enos 1:3; Mosiah 27:14; Alma 36:17. Even if our earthly parents are unwilling or unable to do this, we must remember that we have another Father who will.

ANCHOR #3: RIGHTEOUS FRIENDS (ESPECIALLY RIGHTEOUS WOMEN)

The book of Judges shows us a continuing cycle of apostasy, periods of righteousness followed by wickedness and bondage and repentance. To whom were the Israelites in bondage in Judges 4:1-3? Who was the judge in Israel? (4:4).

Through his judge the Lord called a deliverer.

And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedeshnaphtali, and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand (Judges 4:6,7).

Barak was willing to go. In fact he had only one condition that needed to be met for him to take his army against the 900 iron chariots of Canaan and all the Canaanite army. What was that condition? (Judges 4:8) Have you even been encouraged to do something difficult or dangerous because you had a great friend at your side?

My first six-week experience in the army was miserable. I had only been married a few weeks, and was suddenly thrust into the company of several thousand young men in an environment that fell far short of ideal. I was not long off my mission and my loneliness for my new wife was compounded by the filthy language and undisciplined behavior of those soldiers. Only one thing saved me. By the grace of God I ended up in the same platoon and the same squad and the even the same bunk bed with a former missionary companion and dear friend. I cannot tell you how much strength I drew from him in those awful weeks of basic training. When it was time to kneel in prayer, we knelt together. When it was time to go to church,

we went together. When language and discussions became unbearable, we stood together in an appeal for some restraint. Even then it was difficult, but without him, it might well have been impossible.

There is this thing that Barak is supposed to do, and he wants someone beside him who will help him do it. This is a part of the definition of true friendship. True friends will assist you and encourage you in doing what is right. In my own life I have learned what Barak seemed to have learned. A righteous woman is a source of great power.

Boyd K. Packer said something powerful about this:

Men may miss many things that are spiritual. Women somehow instinctively make time for these things. It is that sensitivity that is refined by motherhood. Should that be tampered with, or put aside, or smothered? Oh, how great the loss! Never were we more in need of those tender virtues than today.

Women are deeply sensitive spiritually. How tragic it would be to pull them into a man's world. Oh, what a loss! How tragic if a woman by decision avoids motherhood, resents it, becomes a part-time mother, or, sadder yet, forsakes it (*Mothers*, p. 10).

Brigham Young spoke of an even more dramatic difference between men and women:

[T]he male portion of the human family are the lords of the earth, and they are full of wickedness, evil and destruction, and especially in their acts towards the female sex. But God will hold them accountable. The fact is, let the pure principles of the kingdom of God be taught to men and women, and far more of the latter than the former will receive and obey them (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 18, p. 249).

ANCHOR #4: FAITH IN GOD

In the mid-eighties when I was working with a branch of missionaries at the MTC, I listened to a young missionary bear his testimony. He was from a tiny town in

eastern Washington, and was on his way with five others to begin the work in a brand new country, just opened for missionary work. "My town," he told us, "has six hundred people. I am going to a country of twenty million. But the Lord has called me and I'll get it done!"

I thought of him as I was studying the story of Gideon a few years ago. Gideon was a simple man from humble beginnings who, when he learned to trust in the Lord, accomplished unimaginable things.

Israel was in bondage again, this time to Midian. What terrible thing did the enemies of Israel do to her? (Judges 6:3,4). In these circumstance we first meet Gideon. Where is he and what is he doing when his call comes (Judges 6:11).

When Gideon was told, "The Lord is with thee," (6:12) he was understandably skeptical. He asks the kind of question some of us have heard from others, or perhaps even asked ourselves in times of trouble: "Oh my Lord, if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where [be] all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?" (Judges 6:19).

Why is it that we sometimes determine only to worship a God who operates according to our standards and our timetable?

The call came:

And the LORD looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee? (Judges 6:13).

Gideon asks for a sign; in fact he asks for at least three of them before he gets started on his mission. I have never felt that these signs he seeks are the kind condemned by the Savior. Rather, they are the kind asked for by the father with the possessed son. Jesus said to him,

Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt believe all things I shall say unto you, this is possible to him that believeth. And immediately the father of the child cried out, and said, with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine

unbelief (JST Mark 9:20,21).

Gideon is not saying, "unless you show me a sign I will not believe." He is saying, "I want to believe. Please help me" (Judges 6:17)

Have we not all had such feelings? When the Lord gives us a task beyond our experience and ability, we must turn to the Lord for courage and support.

Gideon saw his meal consumed like a sacrifice (6:19-22); he saw the wet fleece and the dry fleece (6:36-40). As he prepared to go to battle against an army of 135,000 (see Judges 8:10), he watched his army reduced from 32,000 (odds of 4-1) to 10,000 (odds of 13.5 to 1) and then to 300 (odds of 450 to 1). But he took his fears to God and overcame them and did the thing the Lord had commanded him to do. A similar experience follows:

Nearly forty years ago I was on a mission in England. I had been called to labor in the European Mission office in London under President Joseph F. Merrill of the Council of the Twelve, then president of the European Mission. One day three or four of the London papers carried reviews of a reprint of an old book, snide and ugly in tone, indicating that the book was a history of the Mormons. President Merrill said to me, "I want you to go down to the publisher and protest this." I looked at him and was about to say, "Surely not me." But I meekly said, "Yes, sir."

I do not hesitate to say that I was frightened. I went to my room and felt something as I think Moses must have felt when the Lord asked him to go and see Pharaoh. I offered a prayer. My stomach was churning as I walked over to the Goadge Street station to get the underground train to Fleet Street. I found the office of the president and presented my card to the receptionist. She took it and went into the inner office and soon returned to say that Mr. Skeffington was too busy to see me. I replied that I had come five thousand miles and that I would wait. During the next hour she made two or three trips to his office, then finally invited me in. I shall never forget the picture when I entered. He was smoking a long cigar with a look that seemed to say, "Don't bother me."

I held in my hand the reviews. I do not know what I said after that. Another power seemed to be speaking through me. At first he was defensive and even belligerent. Then he began to soften. He concluded by promising to do something. Within an hour word went out to every book dealer in England to return the books to the publisher. At great expense he printed and tipped in the front of each volume a statement to the effect that the book was not to be considered as history, but only as fiction, and that no offense was intended against the respected Mormon people. Years later he granted another favor of substantial worth to the Church, and each year until the time of his death I received a Christmas card from him (Gordon B. Hinckley, "If Ye Be Willing and Obedient," Ensign, Dec. 1971, 124,125).

ANCHOR #5; THE POWER OF COVENANTS

How many babies can you think of in all of earth's history who had their birth announced to the parents in advance by an angel? Isaac, John the Baptist, Jesus, and . . . Samson. I cannot think of others. What was to be unique about Samson from the time of his birth?

Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean [thing]: For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for *the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb*: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines (Judges 13:4,5, emphasis added).

Numbers 6 explains what it means to be a Nazarite. The word comes from the root *Nazar* (it has nothing to do with Nazareth) which means, "To hold aloof; abstain from . . . impurity; spec. to set apart (to sacred purposes) i.e. devote;--consecrate, separate (Strong's Concordance, p. 77). The three defining words in Numbers, with regard to the vow of a Nazarite, are separate (vss. 2,3,4,5), consecrate (vs. 7), and holy (vss. 5,8). A Nazarite made a vow—he entered into a covenant with the Lord—to be separated, consecrated, and holy. We ought to note that a person under the vow of a Nazarite could not, among other things, cut his hair. This the length of hair was indicative of the length of the vow. And this vow was made for Samson before he was born!

Samson was born with a most unusual and remarkable spiritual gift. He had muscles the size of Montana. He was born in Zorah, midway between the upper lands of Israel and the lower lands of the Philistines on the Mediterranean coast. Living in such a place, Samson had two choices. He could go up to the religious centers of his people, or he could go down to the worldly pleasures of the Philistines. According to the first words of Judges 14:1, what did Samson do? "And Samson went down . . ."

In the chapters that describe this man and his accomplishments, he seems to do down almost continually, systematically shattering every covenant he had made—every part of the Nazarite vow.

What does this man decide to do in Judges 14:1-3? Can you be separated, consecrated, and holy if you marry out of the covenant? Nazarites were not to touch any dead bodies. But in Judges 14:19, how many men does he kill to pay a gambling debt?

What does Samson do to violate his covenants in Judges 16:1?

These chapters are filled with accounts of the exploits of Samson. But none are more impressive than what happened at Gaza. The Philistines were anxious to capture Samson, and had tried many times. When they learned that he was in Gaza, one of their own cities, they

. . . compassed [him] in, and laid wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, saying, In the morning, when it is day, we shall kill him (Judges 16:2).

But Samson did not wait till morning. He

arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put [them] upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that [is] before Hebron (Judges 16:3).

Samson took the gates to the city, the posts upon which they were hung, and the bar used to secure them when they were closed and carried them to the top of a

hill "before Hebron." If "before" means "near", Samson carried that load for about 40 miles!.

Samson's next adventure was with Delilah. How much did the lords of the Philistines offer Delilah to help them capture Samson? (16:5). The value of this payment can be appreciated by a look at Judges 17:10 where a priest was hired for 10 pieces of silver a year!

You know this story. Delilah is finally able to get Samson to tell her what he perceives to be the source of his strength. His hair is the only remaining vestige of his vow as a Nazarite and of his covenant with the Lord. He seems to know that if breaks his final covenant of separation, the all traces of his spiritual gift will depart (16:17).

Why they have not departed already, I cannot say. Certainly they have begun to depart. For when he awakens with his locks shorn, he was so far removed from his early spirituality (13::25) that "he wist [knew] not that the Lord was departed from him." The result of a lifetime of going gradually and continuously down was that he did not even know he had reached the bottom.

How would the history of Samson be different if he had kept his covenants? How would our feelings about him be different. But Samson was far removed from the attributes of a covenant people. He was more a Philistine than the Philistines.

What happens in our own day when members of the Church turn from their covenants. Do they begin to take on the attributes of the world a Samson did?

If Samson had been anchored securely to his covenants, he might have grown into one of the greatest men the world has ever known. But the winds of temptation and self-love twisted him into a shape almost useless to the Lord.

CONCLUSION:

Paul wrote to the Colossians about what would happen to them if they anchored themselves to Christ. He speaks of being "grounded and settled" that we "be not moved away from the hope of the gospel . . ." (Col. 1:23). He tells us that if we receive Christ and walk in him, we will be "Rooted and built up in him, and

stablished in the faith" (Col. 2:7).

I have a great blue spruce in my front yard. It is grounded and settled and rooted and established. Like Israel of old, it was planted in a good spot, but unlike Israel, it grew straight and tall.

Judges shows us the pattern for our own preservation. Let us tie ourselves and our children to the anchors of good environment, righteous parents, great friends, faith in God, and covenants,

that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall (Hel. 5:12)

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