

## "Of God and not of us."

F. B. Hole.

(Extracted from Scripture Truth Vol. 14, 1922, page 257.)

We do not easily learn the lesson that all power is of God, and that the greatest of the servants of the Lord is but a vessel of that power, and nothing more.

In 2 Corinthians 3 the Apostle Paul institutes a striking contrast between the old covenant of demand and that ministry of new covenant blessing which he was appointed to carry on; the one glorious in its measure but transitory, the other of surpassing glory and abiding: the one bringing with it death and condemnation, the other bringing righteousness and the Spirit, and resulting in transformation for those who come into the light of the unveiled glory of the Lord.

In 2 Corinthians 4 he turns from the character of the ministry to the character of the minister, and shows that the latter was in keeping with the former. As entrusted with such a ministry he not only rejected all the discreditable artifices so common amongst men when they are engaged in pushing "a cause" (verse 2), but he kept himself in the background. "We preach not ourselves," he says, "but Christ Jesus the Lord" (verse 5). That "knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," which is the power of transformation in the believer, is also that which shines forth from the servant of the Lord as he carries on this new covenant ministry (verse 6).

The apostle then adds that this treasure, great as it is, reposes in "earthen vessels" (verse 7) and in the succeeding verses he shows how God Himself dealt with the earthen vessel, and permitted all manner of trying circumstances to come upon it, so that in everything the sentence of death might lie upon the vessel, and the excellency of the treasure contained therein be thereby the more clearly manifested. In this way it was shown beyond dispute that the vessel as such was nothing and the "excellency" or "surpassingness" of the power was "of God and not of us."

In the allusions here to the *light* which shines forth, and to the *earthen vessels*, and to the *dealings of God* with those vessels, some have seen a reference by the Apostle Paul to the Old Testament incident of Gideon and his men with the pitchers and lamps inside them, likening the breaking of the pitchers, which permitted the light of the lamps to be seen, to the dealings of God with the earthen vessels, reducing them to nothingness that the light may shine.

Be that as it may, it is very certain that the book of Judges, which contains the story of Gideon, does furnish us with very striking illustrations of the fact that it is God's way to take up instruments and vessels of such a sort as to make it very plain that the power which operates is in no wise that of the instrument or vessel but purely of Himself.

There are at least seven such illustrations in the book.

1. Ehud, the Benjamite, raised up of God to be the deliverer from Eglon, king of Moab, was "a man left-handed" (Judges 3: 15), or as the margin has it, "shut of his right hand." Another translation gives "bound as to his right hand" as a literal rendering of the Hebrew idiom. The "right hand" has become almost an equivalent of "power" or "strength" in ordinary speech. Here was a man "bound" as to his strength, a man quite unlikely to deliver by one powerful blow the whole nation from the oppressor. Yet that was what he did, and as the result of the stroke of Ehud's left hand the land had rest for no less than eighty years.

2. "And after him was Shamgar . . . which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox

goad; and he also delivered Israel" (Judges 3: 31).

Of this Shamgar we know very little. The Philistines sorely oppressed Israel, at least the southern part of the land, for in his days "the highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways" (Judges 5: 6). Apparently too they pursued the policy, adopted by their descendants several hundred years later, of extirpating all smiths from the land of Israel, so that the Israelites might be without weapons and defenceless (*see* 1 Sam. 13: 19-21). Shamgar was consequently reduced to an ox goad for a weapon of war. See him as he confronts at least 600 men armed only with a long stick, on the end of which is a small spike of iron! For the farmer or drover an excellent implement, of course, but when Shamgar turned from his oxen and stood as a warrior with this as his only weapon, the thing became supremely ridiculous. Yet the stars looked down that night on 600 Philistines stark dead, slain every man of them by this primitive weapon. Shall we praise the ox goad? Nay, the excellency of the power was not of it.

3. Again the people fell under the power of their foes, and Jabin, king of Hazor, enslaved them. His oppression is described as "mighty." Yet God began to work, he fell and was subdued. The elect vessel for this fresh service was Deborah, a prophetess. She roused up and inspired the tremulous Barak. There was another vessel used in a secondary way, and this was Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, again a woman; and yet again there was an instrument used, particularly as regarded Sisera, the captain of Jabin's host, and this was "a nail of the tent" — just an iron spike used for holding the ropes.

Directed by a woman, Barak and his ten thousand men confronted Jabin's mighty host and utterly defeated them, though they were fortified by nine hundred chariots of iron. "All the host of Sisera fell upon the edge of the sword; and there was not a man left" is the terse record of Scripture. To crown the defeat, the great Sisera, the hero of so many victories, fell before a woman and a tent pin! Barak had been told previously that the enterprise he so reluctantly and timidly undertook should not be for his honour; and so it turned out. The very weakness and insignificance of the means employed made it clear that all the honour and glory was God's.

4. Yet again Israel sinned and the Midianites oppressed them. God now selected as deliverer Gideon, who himself confessed, "My family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house" (Judges 6: 15). Presently we find Gideon the leader of 32,000 men, and so the hosts of Israel began to assume respectable proportions. Yet before they were usable by God they were reduced to a paltry 300; and to make this contemptible little army really ridiculous their sole weapons were trumpets, pitchers and lamps!

Gideon and his feeble 300 men, however, utterly discomfited the great Midianitish host. They were like "a cake of barley bread" which "tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along" (Judges 7: 13). Trumpets, pitchers and lamps are wonderfully effective weapons if God is pleased to use them, but then manifestly the excellency of the power is not of them but of God.

5. Following Gideon came Abimelech, his very unscrupulous son, who became a real scourge to the nation. They were now afflicted from within and not from without, and for a few years there was unrest and civil war. Abimelech, however, was a forceful character, and it looked as if his tyrannical yoke would be only the more securely fastened on Israel's shoulders, when suddenly deliverance came. Abimelech had taken Thebez, and in desperation its surviving inhabitants had taken refuge in a tower. Just as fire was about to be applied to their destruction Abimelech was smitten down. And how? A *woman* threw down from the tower a *piece of a millstone*. It struck his head, "and broke his skull" (Judges 9: 53).

Again a woman became the vessel of God's power, and a worthless fragment of a once useful millstone became the instrument.

6. Once more Israel fell under foreign domination and Ammon became their oppressors. This trouble stirred up Israel to a measure of repentance and confession, and the putting away of strange gods. Finally they rose up to shake themselves free of the enemy, but a leader was lacking, and the question was as to where one was to be found.

Upon whom did God lay His hand for the leadership in this work of deliverance? Upon a most unexpected individual. Hitherto we have noticed how He was pleased to use weak and insignificant and even ridiculous things. Now we see Him selecting one whose very origin suggests not insignificance but *shame*.

"Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valour, and *he was the son of an harlot*" (Judges 11: 1). Truly in these things God's ways are different from ours.

7. Last on the list of Judges came Samson. In physical frame he was by far the strongest of them all: in character he appears to have been the weakest of any.

His remarkable physical powers were clearly not his own, however. They lasted for just so long as he preserved his Nazariteship intact. Then the presence of danger nerved him and in moments of crisis "the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him." True to God's way, even then the instruments used to accomplish his mighty feats were of the simplest. On one occasion we read "he had *nothing* in his hand" (Judges 14: 6), and on yet another, when an instrument was used it was but "*a new jawbone of an ass*" and therewith he slew a thousand men (Judges 15: 15).

We should all agree that viewed as an instrument the jawbone of an ass, new or old, is about the limit of inefficiency, yet even so it is after all better than nothing at all!

How fully, then, do these incidents from the book of Judges illustrate that great Scripture in 1 Corinthians 1 where we are told that "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world, . . . the weak things, . . . the base things, . . . things which are despised, . . . yea, and things which are not . . ." — the nothings of the world. Not only has God chosen such to be His saints, but also in His work He chooses such as His servants.

The Corinthian saints, being carnal, thought far too much of man and of his qualifications and powers. Eloquence and wisdom mightily appealed to them. The Apostle Paul expressly disclaimed such things (1 Cor. 2: 1). To him they were only an encumbrance, as Saul's armour was to David. He laid them aside as definitely as he did the disreputable artifices which men sometimes employ to achieve their own ends, as we have seen in 2 Cor. 4: 2. The weapons of his warfare were not carnal at all (2 Cor. 10: 4), for he recognized that only the power of God suffices for the accomplishment of the work of God. But let us remember that God does not vary the fundamental principles of His procedure. His way of working is just the same today.

We have often heard much surprise expressed, and felt it ourselves, when God has manifestly wrought through what were to us most unlikely and unsuitable channels. We listened to a gifted servant of the Lord who preached the Gospel with much faithfulness and point, and with an intelligent grasp of its foundation principles that delighted us; yet no striking results followed. Another came with none of these qualifications; we could but regard him as sadly lacking in ability and in understanding, and yet very notable effects were produced. We need not have been astonished, however, for such a dealing on God's part was in strict keeping with what we have seen in the book of Judges.

The truth, we judge, is this: that since the power that really does God's work is "of God and not of us," the thing of prime importance is that what is done should be manifestly by God's power and to God's glory. Ability and gift and intelligence on the part of the servant are desirable, and not to be despised, but if the servant possessing them be at all tempted to rely on them, or, what is even worse, parade them, God will pass him by and use some foolish or insignificant instrument to our astonishment.

God has frequently done this in the past and is frequently doing it today — sad evidence this of how rarely any of us do possess ability or gift or intelligence without our being tempted into relying upon it.

Let no one imagine that we are issuing a kind of plea against intelligence and understanding in the things of God. We are not. Were we doing so we should be advocating what is quite opposed to Scripture, since the apostle's prayer for saints was that they "might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" (Col. 1: 9). Further, let no one say to themselves, "Well, then, I shall not aim at Scriptural knowledge. I shall go in for what aims at the conversion of souls, but I shall not attempt to travel beyond that." To deliberately stunt one's growth in spiritual understanding in that fashion is to ask for ultimate trouble and disaster.

We do, however, earnestly pray that we may all remember that the first qualification in a servant of Christ is that he thoroughly takes the servant's place of insignificance and nothingness: that while exercising what gift he may possess with all the intelligence he may have gained, he, in his own mind, divests himself of all the appearance of power and *éclat* which his gift may give him, so that as to his own state and consciousness he is like a left-handed man, or an ox goad, or a tent nail, or trumpets, pitchers and lamps, or a piece of millstone, or the son of a harlot, or the jawbone of an ass, or even nothing at all.

Thus pre-eminently was the Apostle Paul. Who had such mighty spiritual gifts as he? Who such intelligence in the whole counsel of God? Who such forcefulness of character? Yet as an earthen vessel he was buffeted and reduced to nothingness. Hence the accomplishment through him of such results as have never been equalled in the church's history. He and his companions were known as "These that have turned the world upside down" (Acts 17: 6). There was a power about them that none could deny, and the excellency of that power was very manifestly OF GOD.

The apostolic age is long since passed, and we are in days very analogous, in many respects, to the time of the Judges, and this only accentuates what we have been saying. "My glory will I not give to another" (Isa. 42: 8) is ever God's word, and we may depend upon it that in these days, the days of the church's unfaithfulness and consequent confusion, God will accomplish His work in such a way as to manifest His glory and make nothing of man.