

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

THE BOOK OF JUDGES.

The book of "Judges" is characteristic, presenting histories that certainly offend our sense of propriety; delineating characters far from those one would desire to see copied. Samson is decidedly one whose walk, judged by the morality taught in our day, is far from being commendable; and Jephthah's vow, by general consent named rash, is not an example to be followed. Of Barak not much appears, yet from Judges iv. 8 one would scarcely have chosen him as a representative of men strong in faith. Should it have required a woman's call to raise a man's courage that Israel might be gathered in a forlorn hope to beat back the foe? Yet the names do thus occur as manifestly present to the writer's mind in reviewing the great and faithful of Hebrew history; monuments of faith and toil, fit to be in line with Abraham, Moses, David; to stand among the great cloud of witnesses as it testifies to the steadfastness of faith.

Are our theologies too narrow? Are there to be found men within the overshadowing of the mercy seat that by those theologies would be hopelessly excluded? Must our standard be lowered to the end that Samson, whose life was not pure, may find his place among the heroes of Christian remembrance? Does God's grace live where we would not?

Let the history of these four of the judges of Israel be briefly told. The writer of the book of Judges writes in an apologetic tone; earnest, but apparently with regret at the wild and mixed character of his history. Mark that sentence so frequently repeated: Judges xvii. 6; xviii. 1; xix. 1; xxii. 25. The state of society then is difficult for us to realize now; there must have been some parallel in the condition of England under the frequent Danish invasions, when, *e.g.*, Alfred gathered his scattered friends together and eventually obtained the victory. The Canaanites were divided into tribes or clans of inconsiderable might, as is plain from the confession of Adoni-bezek that seventy *kings* (chieftains) were gathered under his table (ch. i. 7). Israel, too, was disunited; "Judah went with Simeon his brother" (i. 17), implying that all the tribes did not join in individual wars. Tribe would therefore live by tribe, Canaanite with Israelite, in a state of perpetual distrust. Israel the invader, and therefore the object of attack whenever the native inhabitants felt sufficiently confident of annoying, yet constantly pushing her way into the fastnesses of the place. Ch. i. 2, etc., tersely gives the true position of affairs. Nearly all the sea coast, the strongholds of the plain of Esdraelon, and the rocky fortress of Jebus were still in the hands of the older inhabitants of the land. Such a state of constant distrust and war was not fitted to nurture the kindlier graces of the heart. No central authority; each compelled to look after his own. Even in worship there was no temple. Deborah prophesied under "the palm tree of Deborah" (Judges iv. 5; comp. Gen. xxxv. 8). Bethel, Shiloh, even the sanctuary of Micah (xviii.), were diverse rallying points to the people. No wonder that the virtues manifested should be of the roughest kind. Barak's name in the Old Testament record is inseparable from that of Deborah, who, inspired with the spirit of patriotism, calls upon a chief in the far north to lead Israel's scattered forces against the enemy. The name Barak signifies lightning. Rapidly the tribes gathered unto him; there were exceptions (v. 23); yet it was a rising of the national spirit, and Deborah's almost

savage song of victory graphically describes the scene.

Gideon in like manner, at a time of future straitness, by special voice was called to champion his people. In the defeat of Sisera the last effort of the old inhabitants to regain their now lost territory appears to have been put down. Now from the adjoining desert the Midianites press on; the seed and growing time are allowed to be peaceful (vi. 3-6), but when the harvest is ready to reap the raids begin. Israel becomes impoverished. Gideon is now upon the scene; his stern faith, after having received special confirmation from God, is seen in rejecting all but three hundred of the thirty thousand that first gathered around his standard, and in hurling that little band in the name of Jehovah against the Midianitish host. In the earlier overthrow of Baal's altar he had manifested what so few really have—the courage of their convictions. Upon the whole, there seems less ground for an apologetic tone in the case of Gideon than in that of any of the other judges whose prowess is recorded. We can readily read the hero in him, though in the stern punishment measured out to the men of Succoth we discern the rough sternness of the time.

Samson is not a lovely character; save his great strength, ever used against the enemies of his people, there appears at first sight nothing specially heroic in his life. His life was not pure, and his fall was the direct cause of his weakness in virtuous ways. True, there was a grim humour pervading his life. The turning adrift into the Philistines' standing corn the foxes with the firebrands tied to their knotted tails, was not only vengeance, but a droll prank on the part of a giant. Indeed, the name Samson indicates "sunny," bright, and the jocular vein is seen in all his mighty doings. Yet the twenty years during which he judged Israel could not have been exhausted by the records we have regarding him, the inference plainly being that by those doings the Philistines were rendered comparatively harmless, and those twenty years of comparative peace were enjoyed through the means of one man. Peace presents few records; none the less is it truly great and good. The real history of righteousness is often that of uneventful sowing beside all waters. The connection of xvi. 1 with xv. 20 make plain that under Samson Israel had rest until the strong man, forfeiting his integrity, became weak as a child in the hands of his foes. Most frequently the cultivation of mere physical strength does not make sensitive the moral faculty; giants in muscle are not thereby made giants in heart and mind. Samson must therefore be judged by the rude times in which he lived, the situation of his tribe, and in light of those peculiarities of temperament most generally associated with possession of gigantic strength. Thus judged, we shall find much to commend, even follow. His strength was ever exercised upon his country's side, or in the redressing of a wrong; and we must not forget that in the absence of a central authority, each man becomes the avenger of his own wrong, and he who thus redresses a private wrong from a troublesome neighbour is really a public vindicator and benefactor: this was Samson.

Jephthah possesses more marked lines of heroism. The son of an unmarried woman, he was thrust out from his father's house as though a bastard had no rights others were bound to respect. Dwelling apart, his brethren sought him. The spirit of revenge at least is absent, and his—what we would call—diplomatic correspondence with the king of Ammon, with the final appeal to Jehovah as judge (Judges xi.), show moral strength and courage. His vow is an acknowledged difficulty, and yet the heroism of both father and daughter sheds a kindlier light than the

sacrificial fire. Our living poet has caught the spirit of the daughter, which is but the reflex of the father's:—

"My God, my land, my father! these did move
Me from my bliss of life, that nature gave;
Lowered softly with a threefold cord of love,
Down to a silent grave.

"When the next moon was rolled into the sky,
Strength came to me that equalled my desire;
How beautiful a thing it was to die,
For God and for my sire!"

The deed was hateful, but the spirit which yielded an only child—the entire surroundings show tender attachments—was a spirit of heroic trust.

I can account for the enrolment of these names on this roll call of faith upon the principle nominal Christianity is too prone to forget, and which pressed upon the narrow-hearted Rabbis the truth that "other" than Jewish outcasts are to be gathered in. For those of us to whom Christ is preached, and upon whose acceptance He is constantly pressed, no excuse can be urged that will free us from the dread responsibility of rejection. By our light we shall be judged. If you say, "I cannot believe," after having earnestly sought, I can only say, God demands not impossibilities; but if you spell cannot by a latent *will not*, you cannot complain if upon you should fall the weight of eternal damnation. But no man has a right to be as severe with another as with himself; not that he is to allow compromise with evil. Samson's lust is hateful exceedingly; it was the wreck of his life, and the tale of vengeance is simply told. We are not at all concerned with any attempt to render the proceedings narrated in "Judges" less hateful than they should appear; lust is debasing, superstition cruel; but the man born amid and moulded by such surroundings may be at heart loyal to truth and supremely trustful in the God they have made their own. 2 Cor. viii. 12 states a rule of God's judgment. The widow's mite weighs more in eternity's balance than the wealth of the wealthy heartlessly given; and the rugged, oft-times mistaken, faith of those whose entire surroundings are against moral growth may have a truer grasp upon God's mercy than the sleek respectability which has no sincerity or usefulness to commend it. Judged by their light and intent, Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah have been deemed worthy of a place where names of worth alone are found. Judged by *our* light, "shall we among them stand?" Remember our outward standard is not theirs, but such as Christ hath left us. There is a king in Israel, known; His laws of love, mercy, truth are before us—"As ye have received, so walk," remembering that God judgeth not according to mere outward seeming. *Man* judgeth from outward appearances, *God* judgeth from the heart.

May we be enabled to stand that all-searching test!—*Canadian Independent*.

ASSURANCE.

Our salvation depends on the meritorious work of Christ, and His truth in telling us of it. But I cannot judge of Christ's truth by looking into my own heart! I may find whether I believe Him; but his worthiness to be believed is to me a matter of evidence, not of feeling. There is a serious mistake made here by many who have no assurance, because they are not considering "the record that God gave of His Son," but only their own feelings.

I have to cross a bridge. I have heard many conflicting reports about it. I have seen some who had utterly refused to trust themselves on it, while others assert they have gone over it. I am in sight of it, and my trouble increases. Shall I sit down, and ask myself, "Am I bold enough to go over it?"