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The Tragedy of the Unfinished Task

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Nov-Dec 1969, Vol. 47-6.

This evening we move in thought into the Book of Judges - and how very different it is from the Book of Joshua! I think the Book of Judges is the most terrible book in the Bible! And why is it such a terrible book? Because it is the book of the unfinished task.

In the Book of Joshua the people of Israel went into the land, and had a wonderful history of victory after victory, moving more and more into God's full purpose. Then, before they had finished the work, they settled down. In the last chapters of the Book of Joshua we see the people just settling down before the work is perfect. They had heard the great call of God. God's purpose had been presented to them and they had made a response to it. They had moved so far, and then, before it was all finished, they settled down. The Book of Judges follows, and that is the book of the tragedy of the unfinished work.

None of us will say that there is nothing like that in Christianity today! There are many Christians who make a wonderful beginning. They see the vision of God's great purpose, and certain words in the New Testament make a great appeal to them, such as: "Called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). That is a wonderful vision! "According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ephesians 3:11). Such a thought makes a great appeal to these people and they make a heart response. They go on so far, and then many stop too soon. They lose the vision; they lose the inspiration; they lose the sense of purpose; they lose the energy to go on, and of some we have to say: 'Something has gone out of their faces. What was there with them once is not there now. They were so positive once, so occupied with the heavenly calling, but something has

happened.' These people may not be altogether conscious of it, and they would not tell you that something has happened, but it is quite evident that something *has* happened. They have just lost something, and you do not get the response now from them that you once got. They are not so interested now as they were. The heavenly vision has gone out of their lives. That is true of many Christians, and it could be true of all of us.

And the Book of Judges is our instructor in this matter. What I say now is not in judgment - although it is from the Book of *Judges*! I have a very great deal of sympathy with these people. Oh yes, I know how wrong it was, and how this book spelt the failure of these people. I know how sorry the Lord was about it, but from my own experience I cannot help being sympathetic, for I think I understand.

Weariness In The Battle

Why did these people stop short of finishing the job? I think that very likely it was because they became weary in well doing. The battle was long drawn out. It was spread over years and was very exhausting. No sooner had they gained one victory than they had to start fighting again. They did not have much rest between one battle and the next one. It was a long drawn-out warfare; they got weary in battle, and in their weariness they lost the vision, they lost heart, and they lost the initiative.

I am so glad that with all the strong things that the New Testament says, it says some very kind and understanding things about this: "Let us not be weary in well-doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9); "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, ... your labour is not vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58); "God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love" (Hebrews 6:10). What a lot of things there are like that! And Jesus said to His disciples, who were being brought into the battle: "Let not your heart be troubled!" (John 14:1), while we can hear the Lord's words to Joshua: "Be strong and of a good courage; be not affrighted, neither be thou dismayed" (Joshua 1:9). Again, the Lord Jesus said to His disciples: "He that endureth *to the end*, the same shall be saved" (Matthew 24:13).

These people in the Book of Judges were discouraged by weariness - and we are all capable of that! Sometimes it is not easy for us to give up - or perhaps I ought to say that it is not *difficult* for us to give up! - because we do not want to get out of the battle, and yet, at the same time, we do want to get out of it. The battle is inside, and even so great a man as the Apostle Paul had that battle. He said: 'I really do not know what to do! I have a strong desire to depart and be with the Lord in order to get out of the battle, and yet I know that duty to the Lord would keep me in the battle. I do not know whether to give up or to go on!' I say that that is a possible temptation to every Christian, and the Lord knows all about that! The New Testament is full of understanding things about it.

The first reason why these people settled down too soon, then, was discouragement. It was not because they had had no victories - they had had many - but because they said: 'There is no end to this battle! It looks as though we shall *never* finish!' So in weariness and discouragement they settled down too soon.

I feel sure that this Book of Judges recognizes that. Every time these people stirred themselves again they found that the Lord was very ready to go on with them. This book is a picture of an up-and-down Christian life. One day these people are down in despair, and another day they are up in victory. It was that kind of Christian life which was always up and down, but when they turned their

faces to the Lord they found that He was waiting for them. The Lord had not given up. He was always ready to go on. I think that is the first great lesson in this Book of the Judges.

The Loss of Heavenly Vision

But what was the effect of this loss, of this stopping too soon? It was the loss of vision. They only saw the things that were near and lost sight of God's eternal purpose. They lost sight of what Paul calls the "prize of the on-high calling" (Philippians 3:14). Now this sounds like a contradiction, but they lost sight of the things that are not seen! You say: 'What do you mean by that? That is nonsense! How can you see the things that are not seen?' Paul says: "The things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). They lost sight of the things which are eternal because they were looking too much at the things which are seen. They lost the heavenly vision for they became satisfied too soon. It was all good so far, but the good became the enemy of the best.

The first thing that happened, then, was the loss of the heavenly vision. It works both ways. If we lose the heavenly vision we settle down too soon. If we settle down too soon we lose the heavenly vision. And what do we mean by settling down too soon? We mean: losing the warring spirit. In this Book of Judges the Philistines resorted to a very subtle strategy: they took all the weapons of war away from Israel, and all that they had left was one file to sharpen their agricultural instruments, so that every farmer in Israel had to take a journey to the blacksmith to sharpen his farm instruments. All the sharp instruments had been taken away and the spirit of *war* was undermined. The Philistines had made it impossible for Israel to fight and you know that there is a very big Philistine about! The strategy of this great enemy of the inheritance is to take the fighting spirit out of us. Oh, what a lot of mischief the Philistines have done to Christians! What about our prayer life? There was a time when we were mighty warriors in prayer. We fought the Lord's battles in prayer. What about our prayer meetings? Where can you find the prayer meetings now that are out in spiritual warfare? Yes, we ask the Lord for a hundred and one things, but we do not battle through to victory on some situation. There is some life in terrible bondage, there is some servant of the Lord having a hard time, and there are many other calls for battle, but where are the prayer groups who take up these issues and will not give up until they are settled? The warring spirit has gone out from so much of the Church. That is a clever strategy of the devil! Lose the spirit of spiritual battle and you will stop short of finishing the work.

The Spirit of the World

The next thing that caused these people to settle down too soon was the spirit of the world getting in amongst them. What is the spirit of the world? It is the spirit of: Have a good time! Let us have a good time! Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die! And these people of Israel looked at the world around them and, if I understand it rightly, they said: 'These people do not have all the hard time that we do. Our life is a life of continual battle. They do not know so much about that, but they believe in having a good time.' I think that is how it was at this particular time.

Of course, up to this time Israel had given the people round about a bad time! But Israel had lost the fighting spirit now, and the world was having a good time because the Church was no longer fighting it. Instead of fighting the world they made friends with the world. They made the world their friends, and so they did not finish the work. Compromise is a dangerous thing to the inheritance! Trying to

be on good terms with the world and having an easy time will result in our losing a large part of the inheritance.

Recovering the Fighting Spirit

But let us finish on a better note. As I said before, God did not give up, and whenever the people took up the battle again and turned again on the Lord's side to fight the enemy, they found the Lord waiting for them. So we have the story of Deborah, the story of Gideon - and dare I mention Samson? However, although Samson was a poor sort of man, if only the Lord gets a poor chance, He will take it. You may not think much of Samson - but do you think better of yourself? We are all poor creatures! We have all been discouraged, we have all been tempted to give up, we have all stopped too soon, we have all been weary in well-doing, but take the sword of the Spirit again! Take up the battle again, and you will find the Lord is ready and waiting for you.

Gideon - Deborah - Samson - and all the others. But I think there is one who is better than them all - do you remember that beautiful little Book of Ruth? Everybody is charmed with that book! What a lovely book of spiritual recovery it is! What a picture of the Lord's patience, the Lord's readiness to take advantage of every opportunity! How does that book begin? "And it came to pass in the days when the judges judged..." The Book of Ruth was in the times of the Judges, which until then was the most terrible time in history of Israel, but God was ready to change the whole picture. There are the two different pictures: the Judges and Ruth, but both were in the same period. Do you see what I am trying to say?

Dear friends, we are in a great battle, and it is long drawn out. We can get very weary in the fight. We can become discouraged and give up too soon. We may have to stop before the work is finished. That is always our temptation, the tragic possibility in the Christian life, but the Lord does not give up. He does not faint, nor is He discouraged, and if we will turn again to Him, rise up again, recover our fighting spirit and continue to fight the good fight, we shall find the Lord is ready every time, and He is always wanting to help us to fight to the end. He will help till the day is done!