

SERMON FROM PROF. B. HOLWERDA.

READ: Deuteronomy 7

TEXT: Judges 6:1-10

Psalm 80: 6,7
Psalm 119: 2
Psalm 78: 1;2
Psalm 78: 4, 8, 22, 27
Psalm 81: 11, 12

Beloved in the LORD Jesus Christ,

In Judges 6 the Bible begins to narrate the story of Gideon who delivered Israel from the hands of Midian. Our text forms the introduction to that story. It sketches the background against which we can understand Gideon's work and it is therefore important that we consider these introductory verses. However, this introduction becomes even more important when we see that these verses contain a very relevant message from the LORD to His Church today.

As you know, the book of Judges is in essence nothing but a narrative of reformation. It gains its unity of structure from the recurring theme that may be summarised as DEFORMATION, JUDGEMENT, DELIVERANCE, REFORMATION. That was the pattern of events during the time of Ehud and Deborah; of Gideon and Jephthah, and it is repeated again during the time of Samson and Samuel.

Brothers and sisters, when you have finished reading this book from beginning to end, then you say to yourself: What a miracle that Israel continued to exist. That it did not perish in its idolatry and in judgement. For if it had depended upon people, then the children of God would have destroyed themselves right at the very outset, and the church would have been nothing but a very short memory from the past.

That is why this book only leads one to a deep reverence for God. That the church still exists, that it has progressed, that can not be attributed to people. That is only because God's grace triumphed, because He did not forsake the works of His hands.

And isn't it still the same today as it was then?

There is really nothing in this world more miraculous than the church. For that word 'church' contains the most despicable *and* the most glorious thing that exists under the sun in that one and the same word. When we sing about the church we sing in one verse a song of lamentation so depressing as you will hear it no where else AND a song of praise so heart-warming and uplifting as you will hear it no where else. For the church, as it actually exists in this world, can and must always be seen from two sides. For in it you are always confronted with the work of God, a work so exalted and glorious, so pure, sovereign and majestic that there are no words left to describe it. At the same time, however, you always falter and stumble over that which people have made of it. And from that perspective the church is so miserable and pathetic that there is not a pen that can adequately describe it.

For you can read a book on world history; and that is, generally, a tragic story of devious deception, of war and violence, of blood and tears. But now, read a book on church history and gloom overwhelms you. That now is called the church of Christ and it is one chain of sin and corruption, a tightrope of misery in which you trudge through mire so thick it is sickening.

Brothers and sisters, do you know of something more humiliating than that this church is in need of a reformation every so many years again? Because she, regularly, after each new deliverance, works herself hopelessly into the mire again, most often after only a few years?

If that was all we could say, you would turn your back on the church, greatly disappointed and disillusioned. For the only conclusion could be: what a shocking mess.

But you must not for one second forget that other angle: that throughout the centuries reformation came time and again. That the LORD repeatedly delivered His people from oppression and repeatedly led them back to His ways.

Then your amazement will know no boundaries for so much grace! That the LORD was prepared, time and again, to listen to His people, to have pity on them in their distress and misery, that He never said: I've had enough, I will leave them to their own devices.

Have you ever heard anything so wonderful?

For that reason, each new reformation is more humiliating than the previous one. For reformation means that we, after so much grace, have again totally mucked it up. That sin becomes more grievous every time, because it was preceded by so many works of God's grace.

But, reformation also means that God's grace became even more abundant, that the LORD began yet again, after our umpteenth rejection of Him.

Yet this triumph of grace makes our responsibility so much the greater, and our sins so much more serious, when we, despite all these things, should fall away from Him again.

And so you will at once understand the meaning of the book of Judges for our time; the meaning also of this one episode from the time to which the name of Gideon is linked and to which the words of our text form the introduction.

We preach you then the Word of the LORD as it speaks to us of the people of the LORD in the hands of the Midianites.

Our text speaks to us:

1. of the sin, with which the people angered the LORD
2. of the judgement, that the LORD brought upon them
3. of the Word, that the LORD then had declared unto them.

1. Our text must, of course, not be divorced from that which precedes it, namely, the appearance of Deborah and Barak and the deliverance which the LORD gave from the oppression of Jabin and Sisera. The period preceding that is described in the book of Joshua.

You know the facts: under the leadership of Joshua the people had gained a firm foothold in the land after a few extremely decisive battles. The power of the Amorites and Canaanites had been broken. And each tribe now had nothing to do but to rid the apportioned sections of the land of isolated pockets of resistance, and thus completely take possession of the land. In other words, it was now merely a question of some mopping up exercises. Deuteronomy 7 tells us what the LORD required in this regard. They were to utterly destroy the inhabitants, break down their altars, level them with the ground and dash to pieces their pillars. They were not to make any covenants with the Canaanites, nor were they to marry with those whom God wanted destroyed. Indeed, that sounds rigorous, inflexible and hard, and it was too!

Yet behind this very specific command shelters the grace of God. This instruction to the people rested on the power of God's election.

No, the LORD'S primary intention was not a bloodbath, nor the senseless destruction of cultural treasures. God's only motive was: ELECTION. God had chosen Israel from all the nations of the earth, not because they were any better than others, nor because they were stronger. He chose them only out of pure grace.

His aim was not to simply help them acquire a beautiful country, or to give them a good life, but in order that they should be His people, the people of His very personal possession who would be privileged to enjoy His very intimate fellowship. Deuteronomy 7:6 says it very clearly indeed.

No one else would be permitted to intrude into this special relationship. For of what use is a marriage relationship if a third party was to come between husband and wife? It would instantly lose its intimate character and forego its special nature. That is true of the covenant also: the LORD alone, and us alone; we together.

That is the treasure, the richness and no third party can be tolerated. It's as simple as that.

And because it was so intimate, the LORD said to Israel: destroy these people without pardon. And everything that belongs to them and make no ties with them whatsoever. For if that would not happen, then those people, those altars, and those marriages would instantly become a stumbling block of temptation for them. Israel would automatically be subjected to their influences and in this way the entire riches of their election would be cancelled out. It would then cease to be a people for God alone.

And that now became the misery, immediately after that very promising beginning. First they had fought some very dogged and fierce battles and achieved tremendous victories. But when each tribe had to begin their mopping up operations, to cleanse the land of the last vestiges of heathendom, they hung up their hats.

Sometimes they were frightened and didn't dare; at other times they weren't really interested either. And very soon they found more subtle and flexible and less dangerous methods by which to gain control of their territories. They made covenants - agreements - with the heathens, and gave and took sons and daughters in marriage. Doing it this way, they reasoned, was far less painful and peace would come all the same. Waging war, breaking down altars? The people said: it can be done in other ways too, less aggressive, less obvious, a peaceful penetration.

Indeed, that is the way they gained all the land.

But they did not remain the people of God's private and personal possession which no third party could lay claim to. Because the idols too, brought their influences to bear.

See, there you have the sharp division between the LORD and His people. He had not given them the land for the sake of that land in first place. But He gave it because He wanted their hearts. And He also expected that to be *Israel's* first concern. They should not in the first place seek to possess riches and power, but to be His people, to belong to God alone. "Thou art our LORD, outside of Thee we have nothing."

But instead Israel said: as long as we get the land and it doesn't matter how. And God remained a distant identity for them.

What meaning and sense did the election then still have?

You know that the bible often uses the image of marriage when it sketches the relationship between God and His people. Therefore, allow me to say it this way: the woman wasn't concerned with her husband, but with her home. As long as she got that and could live a good life, she was quite prepared to share it all with another.

Because, didn't Israel live in Canaan and serve the Baals there?

Well, if the woman's only abiding interest was in her home and not her husband, what does that home still interest the man? And what does it then matter whether *she* lives there or another? That was the Lord's response also. If that is the way you want it, Israel, then those Canaanites may as well also live there again. And the LORD again gave them the power of which He had earlier deprived them and Israel had to sigh and groan under the oppression of Jabin.

And they called upon the LORD again and ... He heard them, because He said:

I have married them, have I not? And he raised up Deborah and Barak. And they destroyed the last bulwark of the Canaanites. It had been a deliverance from the enemy, but what is more, it was also a return to the LORD. Deborah judged the people and taught it again to serve the LORD. For that reason she ended her song with the words: Let those who love Thee, be like the sun as it rises in its might. That was her message: to love the LORD. And to it was tied the promise that now life would prosper again. Hence ch. 5 concludes: and the land had rest for 40 years.

How good it could have been: no enemies anymore, no threatened future, truly, the sun was shining once again. Yet ch. 6 continues - without a pause - 'The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.'

One generation later and Israel found themselves under the oppression and power of the enemy again, worse than the time before. Verse 1 states the fact without adding specific details. But as you read on you find out what was happening and why. In verse 10 you hear a prophet make the reproach that the people had not given heed to the voice of the LORD when He had instructed them not to pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites.

Again it was the same old tune: they served the powers of nature which allegedly provided them with rain and fertility. Further on in this chapter you can read how deep they had again fallen.

In Ophra, where Gideon's father apparently held a position of leadership, there was a completely decked out altar dedicated to Baal. It even had a 'pillar', a tree which was the symbol of the goddess Asherah, the goddess of sexual life.

Here, amid the people of God, you find all the horrendous and abominable practices of the heathens, the pagan prostitution by which people thought to engage the fertility bestowed by the gods. Also the sacrifice of young children, for one grain must die if life is to be brought forth a hundredfold. That is what you read in those few sentences relating to the fitting out of the sanctuary. To it are tied the most repugnant and repulsive immorality and the most barbaric sacrifices.

How had it degenerated to such an extent in a mere forty years?

Oh, it's not difficult to ascertain the factors involved.

When the church receives a time of peace and affluence, then generally speaking, spiritual stagnation sets in. And that spiritual indifference often assumes the form of spiralling deformation.

The people felt so sure of themselves. Now that they had ruthlessly annihilated that Canaanite remnant of Jabin, they no longer had anything to fear.

Maybe you ask: But why did they not serve the LORD instead of the idols?

You must not imagine that they had completely set the LORD to one side in order to serve strange gods. Everyone in Ophra would have felt greatly offended and insulted if one had accused them of idolatry. Because there, at the altar of Baal, they served the LORD. The LORD was their Baal, He was LORD and Master of their land. They hadn't forgotten that for one minute.

Of course they served the LORD, so they thought. They did not however do it according to what He had commanded them in His Word, but according to the manner they had learnt from the Canaanites according to the tradition of years gone by, as it had always been done here and as it was delivered to them by their parents.

Really, you must not be amazed that the altar of Baal was found in Ophra.

Yes, theoretically, it is extremely simple: Break down that thing and build your own church. Dead simple! Yes, except in practice it is different. We know that ourselves, don't we?

How difficult is it not to say 'No' to something that has been part of your life for so long? Who doesn't wish to remain friends with those who have shown they are unfaithful? Who doesn't find it unpalatable to sever ties with those whose choice of church membership is contrary to God's revealed will?

That the people of our text were unable to draw one straight line of reformation right through their entire existence - even if that should mean a severing of relationships with old acquaintances - need not surprise us one bit.

And there is one thing in particular that played a major role here.

In ch. 8 we read that Gideon had a concubine in Shechem, a Canaanite woman, and that speaks volumes!! A mixed relationship is considered absolutely normal, even though the LORD had expressly forbidden it. There may not be anything else that brings the church so quickly and silently to its knees, to disaster, as a mixed marriage. Because such a partner brings with them their gods, their faith, their values, their convictions into that relationship and thus that partner will also influence the children. Little wonder then isn't it, that inside 40 years the entire reformation has again hopelessly run itself aground and that, one generation further, people are again back to where they started?

Brothers and sisters we have been so richly blessed with so much of God's grace. Deliverance from slavery, redemption by Jesus Christ, called to be His Own special people to serve Him in truth according to his Word. How rich we are as His church, rich in the forgiveness of sin, rich in the promises of a new life with Him.

But when you read our text then the question "How long shall it be well with us?" refuses to go away. Remember, it was but 40 years before Israel had again degenerated into an idolatrous nation. Only 40 years!

Oh, I am not speaking of the fact that in our churches too, we have to do with people who so easily stumble. All of us shall, until our last breath, have to continue the struggle that we have. We will never attain a perfect church here. We as church do however have to continue to strive for perfection in everything!

But it is here that the concerns present themselves. How deep lies the conviction that we are the church of Christ? Has it touched our hearts that the LORD has called us, all of us, to be His special people? What does it mean for us to be Reformed?

Looking back into our church history we too may be thankful for God's deliverance. We were allowed to say NO to the opinions of men. True, in the days before the Liberation we made a name for ourselves as churches. We had our theories for everything. But where was everyday life consistent with the will of God, rather than mere tradition? We read what our leaders had to say, but who still simply knew what the Bible had to say? Was there a living vibrant faith that worked through love? Yes, our organisations looked impressive, but how was it with the spirit amongst us and what about our lifestyle?

Absenteeism from catechism classes, Bible study clubs, poor church attendance, lack of involvement in church life generally and the number of mixed marriages - they were not uncommon. There was concern, of course, but you accepted it, that was the way it was and a comparison with others wasn't all that unfavourable.

Indeed, that was the misery: theories and reasons for everything, but no longer was there a simple listening to the WORD.

But God gave deliverance, He brought reformation. And has IT SO TOUCHED OUR HEARTS that we can not but say: What a miracle that the LORD has made a new beginning with us yet again? Will we now fearfully and diligently watch out for everything that can again bring us to deformation? What is now going to dominate our lives? The Word of God or the institutions and traditions of man?

Brothers and sisters, will we loose it all again?

Are we now so mortally afraid of mixed marriages that parents and children will not even THINK about them anymore, much less enter into them? Or do we gloss them over and say on the occasion of the engagement or before: well, he/she isn't Free Reformed, but what can you expect? I mean they do still go to 'a church', besides they even show an interest *in our church*.

Are we really prepared to break with everything that can again lead us to deformation and disobedience of the Word? For if we are not, then we may be imagining that we are keeping intact that which has been built up over the years without giving it a thought that the LORD Himself may destroy it because of unfaithfulness.

2. That was the situation in our text. Forty years later those who served the LORD so diligently in their own manner, were again sighing, this time under the oppression of the Midianites. And this oppression was worse than that suffered at the hands of the Canaanites. True, the first one had lasted 20 years, this one only 7. Significantly shorter. The Canaanites had made their presence felt in no uncertain manner, but at least Israel could stay in their own homes and eat the produce of their own land. But these Midianites came storming down upon them on their proud camels and wherever they went nothing remained standing. They laid the land absolutely bare and waste, as if it had been ravaged by a plague of locusts and they had either taken the harvest or set the harvest ablaze with fire. All they left behind were heaps of rubble. And that happened seven years in succession. Every time these hordes descended, the people of Israel would flee to the mountains, seeking refuge and shelter in caves and dens, like a pack of frightened animals. And this left them totally impoverished. The entire country devastated, the whole country under siege. If the Midianites attacked in the centre, then the Amalekites appeared in the south, while the people of the East invaded the north.

You ask: what drove these plunderers to their invasion, year after year?

Look, you can offer a completely 'natural' explanation, like those you read about in certain history books.

For the Midianites and those other tribes came from the desert. A free people roaming the vastness of the country before them. In their hearts they despised these peaceful farmer peasants and would do anything to disrupt their serenity of life.

A second reason is that their own territory produced little food and if a drought was prolonged, their hunger forced them to plunder what and wherever they could.

In this context one should not forget the third reason. For these people were Israel's old enemies, dating back to Israel's time in the desert. You know that when Moses had his arms raised upwards the Israelites routed the Amalekites in a terrible bloodbath. They did the same to the Midianites some time later - read Ex. 18, Numbers (22,25, 31) In other words, the Midianites and Amalekites

had a score to settle with Israel and they had been biding their time ever since. And the people from the East were their allies. You will remember that Balaam was called upon by the Moabites and Midianites to curse Israel. Well, Balaam was one of these people from the east.

Now, add up all these things together and it wasn't difficult to predict that sooner or later there would be a terribly stormy situation.

But, brothers and sisters, the Bible says: *and the LORD gave them into the hands of Midian*. It wasn't the pride, the hunger, nor the hatred which pressed them, although they were contributing factors. Yet they could not have lifted as much as one finger if the LORD had not given up Israel in His anger. God restrained all these wild and violent hearts for as long as his people served Him. However, when they turned to the idols, then the LORD allowed the floodgates of revenge to open widely.

And so our text takes on its significance. That the misery comes from the side of these tribes means that God's anger is more intense than during the time of Deborah. Then He said: if that is the way Israel wants it I will allow Canaan to regain its lost dominance over the land, after all they had prior claims. Now God says: I'd sooner give the treasures of this land to total strangers than to My own people. Sooner to strangers whom I hated with a perfect hatred than to the people of My intimate love.

Do you remember that the LORD had sworn in His anger that he would totally destroy every remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens? That He would not allow one trace of them to remain?

Yet in our text He says: You doomed Amalekites, for the next seven years: Come in and eat of the food which I did grow for My own chosen people.

Do you remember that the LORD had commanded Moses in His last instruction to him, to utterly destroy in Midian all that was male, even children and all married women?

But how deeply must Israel have fallen that God virtually forgets His deadly hatred against the surrounding tribes whom He had vowed to annihilate? He allows the land of His most loved children to be destroyed by His most cursed enemies.

Doesn't it make you recoil in horror?

It can reach the stage that the LORD allows powers to oppress us in such a terrible way that previous experiences are hardly worth remembering. And that all because of our sins. He could give His children, who are called Reformed, over to the others whom He hates.

And are people not afraid today? They hear of massive weaponry, of atomic missiles and chemical warheads by which those of totalitarian persuasions are out to conquer the world.

But do you know what the problem is? That we approach these things completely from the human angle. We act as if the affairs of this world are all determined by the various relationships of power and of conflicting influences. And the media does its level best to foster those understandings.

Sometimes you wish there were no papers, no electronic media. Not because they make people nervous, but because they only consider human factors. Because they cause us to forget that all these matters are religious questions.

It is totally irrelevant which plans the world powers may have, which weapons they possess. They will simply not trouble us—unless the LORD releases them upon us in His anger. The Bible doesn't speak about the mentality or disposition of the Midianites, nor of their hunger, nor of their deep hatred. The deciding factor was whether the LORD would *allow* them to harass Israel. Without His will they could do nothing, simply NOTHING at all.

We have nothing to fear from anyone. They can not do anything to us without the will of Christ. Therefore the deciding question is: whether we sincerely turn to the LORD or whether we anger Him again by our unfaithfulness and idolatry.

If we are truly church, The Bride, who loves the Bridegroom alone because she is His possession alone, then the LORD will hold in check all enemies, and if they should come, He will not forsake His people.

And to all Reformed people who stammer out their nervousness and insist that everything is going wrong, and that there is no way that we and our children will survive ' I say: You have it in your hands what happens here today.

3. And so we read the last part of our text. The people of Israel cried to the LORD and begged Him for help. And He sends them a prophet who goes through the country saying: Why do you cry to Me as if your misery can be attributed to Me? Was it not I who delivered you from Egypt, and from the power of all your enemies? Was it not I who gave you their land and all its treasures? That you are again oppressed by enemies, and your land is destroyed can certainly not be charged to Me as if I were not able to or would not deliver you. Surely I have demonstrated in the past that you were My beloved people.

Do you want to know the real cause of your disease?

I said to you: I am the LORD your God. I am yours alone, and I proved it to you. But I added to that: *now you must live only for Me*. You must not give your love to the gods of the Amorites. But you did not want that. And now that you suffer great misery, you must not wail as if I have not been faithful to you but you have not been faithful to Me!

Perhaps you say: that was a message Israel could well have done without. They called for help and now the LORD comes with an accusing finger. This sinks them into misery even further.

But we said earlier that the LORD had not delivered them in order that they should now have a good life for themselves, but because they should now live for Him alone. *That* is the issue. And that is why the people of Israel were not truly delivered once the Midianites had gone. The LORD pushes through to the root of this misery: they are truly delivered only if they are really people of the Lord again. Therefore He says: that you are being ravaged and harassed, that is not My fault. Because I have always helped and delivered you. For My part you would never again have suffered under the Midianites. If you had done what I commanded you to do, this would never have happened. But you went your own way and served your own gods. You wanted it that way. I wanted your deliverance, your freedom, and nothing else. For you were the only ones for Me. But you didn't want Me and therefore you didn't want your own deliverance. You yourself have sought this misery, and obtained it, actually, you begged for it.

Now there is little else to say, brothers and sisters.

As long as you now understand: whether enemy powers come or not - that is not a matter of fate over against which you are powerless. That is yours for the choosing.

As far as the LORD is concerned, He has delivered you not only from Egypt, but in Christ He has delivered you from *all* the powers of hell and death, from the power of devils and people. And today also He wants nothing else than that your life will prosper because you are His very special and personal possession. For He has elected you, has He not, you alone to be His alone and to have life for ever. Your future in this turbulent world, where satanic powers play their great political game is really so simple and straight forward.

It is but a question of faith and faithfulness.

Do you want to belong only to Him?

Do you hate and abhor all idols?

Do you want to keep His Word?

As long as you wish to be faithful church, you are safe!

For He has said it so often and proved it a hundred times: for then you are His, and you will remain the apple of his eye which no mortal can touch.

Oh, that you would acknowledge this day, that which serves your peace!

AMEN.