



The Twenty-Eighth Century of His-Story: The Church under the Judges Needs the Office of Priest

The twenty-eighth century of His-story opens upon a band of 600 Philistines entering the heritage of Shamgar, a man of God in Israel. They had poured their energy and resources into developing superior iron tools and weapons and felt ready to press into the land of these despised people who put their trust in God. Flushed with pride and meeting but feeble resistance, the Philistines gathered in small bands to drive deeper and deeper into the land of Israel, looking for more victims upon which to enact their hatred for the church and lust for power and wealth. They came into the field of a man named Shamgar. He was alone and an easy target for this mob of 600 men as they began another rampage of terror. Unknown to them, however, this man was filled with love for his God and a holy jealousy for the church to which he belonged.

As the Philistines approached with their weapons of steel, Shamgar stood unmoved. In his hand he gripped an ox-goad, a mere stick of wood for prodding his cattle along. It was time for God to make clear that within his kingdom, he is pleased to make known his power and glory through what appear outwardly to be weak means. The real power and might of the church belongs to God, and it is worked through men who walk by faith in close communion with God. This would be the last raid this band of 600 Philistines would make upon Israel. We read simply, "[Shamgar] slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad: and he also delivered Israel" (Judges 3:31). Only one verse is devoted to this faithful judge, but with this act of faith God introduces his work through the judges of this period of history.

The Philistines were not the only ones who had begun to oppress Israel. The power of sin had taken firm hold in the church, and now multiple enemies had risen up to oppress the church from different directions. The Philistines in the southwest had grown

in power and in their hatred for the church. With their superior technology in iron weapons, they had begun to strike out with groups of well-armed men to kill and loot among the homes and farms of Israel. At the same time Jabin was leading the Canaanites with horses and chariots of iron in raids on the northern parts of Israel. Such raids were going on continually and were increasing to the point that the people were living in constant fear and were unable to conduct normal day-to-day activities of life. Instead of being filled with travelers and traders, the roads were empty as the people tried sneaking from place to place through round-about trails. The fields were left to grow wild, and villages were abandoned. We are given this picture of misery at the beginning of Deborah's victory song when she sings in chapter 5:6–8: "In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways. The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel. They chose new gods; then was war in the gates: was there a shield or spear seen among forty thousand in Israel?"

That question at the end of the quotation is rhetorical. The church does not rely on earthly weapons and superior technology for her protection. But when the source of her strength is cut off through a lack of knowing God through the office of prophet, and a lack of covenantal communion with God through the office of priest, she becomes weak and vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy. God uses the three-fold office of prophet, priest, and king to uphold the spiritual health of his covenant people. We looked at the previous hundred-year period in light of the office of prophet, and in this article we highlight the invaluable role of the office of priest in the life of the church (though in the judges of this period the office of prophet continues to be prominent, especially in the work of Deborah).

When we look especially at the office of priest, it is helpful to describe the sin of the church in terms of spiritual adultery, because the priestly office has to do with our covenantal relation of friendship with God and maintaining faithfulness to our covenant God. God speaks to his people through the office of prophet, and his people respond to God with prayer and thanksgiving through the office of priest. This office is critical for covenantal life between God and his people. The work of the priests in the Old Testament gave a three-fold picture of this fellowship: 1) they offered sacrifices pointing

ahead to Christ; 2) they offered incense as a picture of the prayers of God's people ascending to God; 3) they pronounced the blessing of peace and joy upon God's people who lived with their God in covenantal fellowship. Until Christ, the great high priest, came to remove the barrier, the priests were authorized by God to intercede between God and his people. But the church had forsaken her spiritual husband and exposed herself to the wicked lusts of her enemies.

Due to the serious lack of attention to prayer and personal fellowship with God founded upon the knowledge of God as revealed by the prophets and recorded in the word, the people were attracted to the excitement and popularity of new kinds of worship. Ignoring the word of God, they "chose new gods." They were bored with the tabernacle and the ark in Shiloh, and invented new forms of worship to suit their own style and convenience. Judges 17–18 tell the story of a young man, Micah, who ignored the form of worship that God had prescribed for his people and exercised his own creative energies to establish a more exciting and fulfilling worship experience for himself and his family. He even built a special sanctuary where he could display his talent for carving images that he thought would help him focus on his worship of Jehovah. He even made his own ephod like the priests had so he could seek the will of God. He consecrated his son as his priest until a wandering Levite happened to stop by and took up that office within his house.

These distortions of church life and worship came about in part because the office of prophet was not actively engaged in Israel. The parents of this man did little to teach him what God had revealed throughout their history, and allowed this son to do as he pleased. He stole money from his mother and was but lightly rebuked. God explains this behavior in 17:6 with the well-known refrain, "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Micah's little experiment with worship may have been enjoyable and exiting for a time, but it led to misery and the corruption of worship for the whole tribe of Dan. A group of men from the tribe of Dan kidnapped Micah's priest and stole his images for their own use. The end of this story is summarized in the last two verses of Judges 18: "And the children of Dan set up the graven image: and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land. And they set

them up Micah's graven image, which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh." In close connection with feeble exercise of the office of prophet in the church, the office of priest had also become distorted and corrupt.

Having opened the door of the enemy, the Philistines entered from the southwest and the Canaanite descendents of Ham invaded with Jabin from the north. The Philistines and Canaanites who put their trust in physical power and superior technology would again see that the God of Israel, the only true God of the heavens and earth, does not rely upon the inventions of men to gather and preserve his church. Rather, God is pleased to display his power through the work of the Holy Spirit within the heart. For this display he chose an obscure farmer in the south and a mother in Israel in the north. Soon it would be shown in Samson, and later in David when he came as a boy to fight the Philistines' military champion. God would have to remind Elijah of this power with the still small voice, and he continues to work through the simple preaching of the cross to create a new heart in his people. "(For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4–5). By the sovereign grace of God at work in her heart, Israel repents and cries out to God, and he demonstrates his longsuffering faithfulness and love in delivering her from her sin and shame.

Interestingly God used a woman to exercise the office of prophet during her time as judge in Israel. As a prophetess she received the word of God and taught it to the people. She composed the song of praise that proclaimed the deliverance and glory of God. She also ruled as a judge and led the battle against Sisera. Even so, she referred to herself as "a mother in Israel," because being a wife and mother was her primary calling in the kingdom of God. God makes it clear that he will have men appointed to the special offices in the church as a picture of Christ as the head of the church, but under special circumstances he may be pleased to appoint a woman to this position. Beginning with the unlikely defender Shamgar with his ox-goad, God chose a series of Judges (Deborah, Barak, Gideon, and Samson) who were weak in themselves or alone or with only a few

men to make it clear that it was God who was pleased to bring peace to his people in the way of knowing and loving him.

Eli was born about half way through this century during the time of oppression by Sisera and began to exercise his role as priest at the tabernacle in Shiloh. He would also serve as a judge during the last 40 years of his life (1 Samuel 4:18). Though he himself was a godly man who faithfully exercised his office, his sons took up this office toward the end of this century, and by the middle of the next, it had become absolutely corrupt. In the next and last one hundred year period of the Judges we see that while the office of the priesthood reaches a shameful low point in Hophni and Phinehas, the office of prophet reaches new heights in Samuel. Then the office of king will also be introduced to shed more light again upon the promised Messiah who will be *the* prophet, priest, and king. How precious and valuable are these offices as they are exercised in the faithful church to the blessing of covenantal fellowship and peace for the people of God!