

SPARE THE ROD, SPOIL THE CHILD

AN ARTICLE FROM JUDGES 6:1-10

by Robert Barnes

Deborah's leadership of Israel, ever how reluctant, was effective. The nation saw over 40 years of peace after her rule (Judges 5:31b). But as the curtain falls on Deborah's song, darkness falls on the house of Israel.

The Scriptures mark the end of the impact of her rule with a simple statement: "Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for 7 years, and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel" (6:1). But what is different about this description of God's discipline of Israel?

On one level, absolutely nothing is different. It is a familiar mantra of cause and effect, of sin and consequences. But notice that hundreds of years later, Isaiah mentions this season of punishment twice (9:4; 10:26). Perhaps it was especially harsh, as the crops of Israel were destroyed for 7 years straight. Imagine the suffering of 7 years without a harvest, the cries of the hungry children, the raiders gliding in on camels, setting the grain ablaze, and taking the rest. It is not a pleasant place in the national memory.

Or was it something much, much worse? The writer of Judges gives us a hint as to why this was so memorable. "For they [Midian] would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both then and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it" (6:5).

Locusts. Every man and woman and child would recognize the swarm of mad grasshoppers, remembering the stories of how God plagued their enemies in Egypt with them. They would also remember God's solemn curse, one that they could not believe He would ever have reason to keep: "A nation you have not known shall eat the fruit of your land and the produce of your labor.... You shall carry much seed out into the field, but gather little in, for the locust will consume it" (Deut. 28: 33, 38). That the writer of Judges would call the mind's eye and ear back to the curse of the swarming insects in context of the invasion of Midian sets this harsh punishment in an even more dramatic light — this was a covenant sanction, like when so many died at Peor for worshiping Baal, like those who died fleeing the little town of Ai. Israel was not facing a human enemy they could outwit or destroy. Israel was facing the Almighty God.

You and I face New Covenant sanctions when we walk in disobedience to our Lord. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for

the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30). If we are his children, we face the fearsome, careful discipline of our Father. “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons” (Heb. 12:7-8).

We are his beloved sons, for He has lavished us with His love by adopting us into his family. And if we are his sons, he will not spare his rod.