

# Is there a meaning in Dramatic Events?

Jerry Falwell has suggested that the events of September 11th 2001 were a divine judgement on a society that tolerates, among other things, homosexuality.

This raises an interesting question. Below is the first part (slightly edited) of Chapter 1 of my book, *People Who Made History*. It is an expository commentary on the book of Judges, and chapter 1 introduces the theory of history espoused by the biblical author.

In the month of August in the year AD 410, the city of Rome fell to Alaric the Barbarian. For more than half a millennium Rome had represented law and order within the vast boundaries of her empire. Now her vulnerability to the forces of what seemed like blind anarchy had been exposed, sending icy shivers of foreboding across the entire western world.

South of Rome across the Mediterranean stood Carthage, the metropolitan centre of the Roman Empire in North Africa. Not far down the coast from Carthage was the harbour town of Hippo. Soon refugees began to arrive there, staggering wild-eyed and shabby, off the ships. They brought horrifying tales of the disaster that had befallen Rome. They told of famous palaces and gardens now reduced to smoking ruins; of celebrated senators murdered, noble families exterminated and sacred virgins raped. Barbarian carts, they said, filled to overflowing with plundered treasure, were rolling triumphantly south down the Appian Way.

Hippo had a famous bishop, Augustine. Some consider him the greatest theologian of all time. Like everybody else in Hippo, Augustine was distraught by the news from Rome. It was as if the world itself had been decapitated. They used to call Rome 'the eternal city'; clearly now it wasn't. Had Hippo been shaken by an earthquake measuring 10 on the Richter scale, no greater sense of panic and insecurity would have resulted.

Inevitably, people started to ask, 'Why?'

Some of Hippo's pagans superstitiously blamed the Christians, claiming that Rome had fallen because she had forsaken her traditional gods: 'This sort of thing would never have happened in the good old days, before the Emperor Constantine was converted to this new-fangled religion of Jesus.' And, to Bishop Augustine's embarrassment, some of the Christians in his congregation were tempted to murmur cynically in a similar way. 'What have the apostles Peter and Paul achieved for Rome? And what has been the advantage of those martyrs graves encircling Rome?' Like the Jews who complained against Moses in the wilderness, Augustine could detect a 'back to Egypt' lobby gathering strength in the dark arches of Hippo's basilica.

His response was swift. He preached a punchy series of sermons. In them he insisted that it was not the peevish spite of Jupiter or Juno that had precipitated this disaster; it was the judicial wrath of God. He thundered from his pulpit, comparing Rome to the ancient city of Sodom; God had rebuked Rome for her hedonistic lifestyle and

escapist entertainment. Did the apostle Peter die in Rome and was his body buried there in order to safeguard her idiotic theatres and drunken revels? Not so, declared Augustine. The world whose collapse they were mourning was not worth grieving for. Rome burned because it was necessary to force men and women to pause and reflect upon the ephemeral vanity of all material things. God had used Alaric to chasten Rome, so that the diseased flesh of her decadent culture could be cut out of the body politic.

They were very fine and moving sermons. But was Augustine right? Should we too be preaching sermons like that in the West today in the wake of the shocking events of September 11th? Was he correct to have made such a direct analogy between the fall of Rome and that of Sodom? Ought he to have drawn that line of connection between Bible history and contemporary history? Does history repeat itself in that way? Or is it only historians who sometimes repeat one another?

I suspect that the instinct of many Christians would be to agree with Augustine. Certainly Jerry Falwell seemed keen enough to interpret events in New York in a similar way. On the other hand, many academics argue that Augustine was skating on extremely thin ice. C. S. Lewis was one; by no means unsympathetic to Augustine's Christian faith, he nevertheless argued that the great theologian was falling into precisely the same intellectual trap as were the superstitious pagans he was trying to refute. Lewis called that trap 'historicism'.

Historicism is the belief that it is possible to identify a meaningful pattern in history.

The most outstanding historicist of modern times was undoubtedly Karl Marx who, in his doctrine of dialectical materialism, claimed that he could explain why historical events go the way they do. He believed that he had uncovered a scientific law of development within the historical process. The unequal distribution of economic power and resources, he argued, produces an inevitable class conflict that can only be resolved by some kind of social revolution. Though the revolution may change the immediate state of affairs, inevitably new economic equalities arise – so it is only a matter of time before new class conflicts lead to yet another revolution. Thus the cycle continues, said Marx, until socialism emerges. And the battle between socialism and capitalism is the final revolutionary cycle, heralding the arrival of the classless society, a utopian state of permanent peace and justice for all.

In his foreword to the 1848 Communist Manifesto, Friedrich Engels claimed that with his theory of dialectical materialism Marx had elucidated the pattern that enables us to make sense of the past and predict the future. In fact, Marx had achieved for history what Darwin would achieve a decade later for biology, when he published in 1859 his *Origin of the Species* – the book in which he first articulated his theory of natural selection and the survival of the fittest.

Today it is generally agreed that Engels somewhat exaggerated Marx's achievement. True, some scholars still consider that he was right to see economic conditions as the primary engine of social change. But it is obvious, from the misery into which just about every society has been plunged that has tried to adopt Marxism as its political ideology, that Marx's theory of history must be, to say the least, seriously flawed.

According to the philosopher Karl Popper (in *The Open Society*), the flaw is fundamental. Marx was a historicist; and historicism, for all its popularity over the centuries, is a huge mistake. The historicists, said Popper, think they have found a pattern in history; but no such pattern exists.

The force of this anti-historicist polemic can easily be seen. You do not have to be much of a historian to realize how complicated is the web of cause and effect that lies behind even the most trivial historical event. For example, Marx, in his obsession with economic factors, completely ignores the historical role that an outstanding human individual can play.

According to Thomas Carlyle in *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic* (1841), all history is the story of great men and women (mainly that of great men, according to Carlyle, but then he was a Victorian). And who can doubt that leaders like Alexander the Great, scientists like Isaac Newton or authors like William Shakespeare have influenced the course of human affairs? Yet, according to Marx's theory, such greatness is always and only the product of the economic conditions prevailing at the time. Carlyle insists that such a deterministic view of history grossly underestimates the creative genius of the human spirit, and the freedom of the human will.

Moreover, even a superficial study of history soon reveals that occasionally the course of human affairs has been directly affected not just by individuals, but by what seem to have been the dictates of pure chance. Bertrand Russell (in *Freedom and Organisation*) cites two brilliant examples of seemingly fortuitous events that had a decisive influence on history. The first is the indecisiveness of the German government in 1917, when it was considering whether to allow Lenin to return to Russia. The grant of an exit visa from Germany to Russia hinged on the decision of one junior minister in the German government. If he had said no, as he might very well have done, the Russian Revolution would have taken place without Lenin. You have to be a strong-minded Marxist to believe that that wouldn't have made any difference.

Russell's other example is from an earlier period. In 1768, Genoa ceded Corsica to France. You may think that was a very minor political settlement, if indeed you have ever heard of it. But had it occurred a year later, Napoleon – who was born in Corsica in 1769 – would have been an Italian! Which would certainly have made a difference.

Any theory of history must be able to take into account the cumulative effect of millions of such random chances and apparently insignificant human decisions. It's easy, then, to see why historicism lacks credibility among rigorous thinkers. Popper and Lewis are surely right to insist that history does not obey rigid scientific laws. It does not evolve according to some simple rational principle. History is essentially complex, chaotic and unpredictable.

Nothing is more dangerous than to think it is not. Most of the acts of political fanaticism that have marred the history of the human race – particularly in the last couple of centuries – have been perpetrated by historicists who were convinced they had understood the pattern of history and that Destiny was therefore on their side.

But those who look for such a pattern in history are exploring a blind alley. No such pattern exists!

Or does it?

I want to suggest, though it is a suggestion that in current academic circles would be labelled highly politically incorrect, that Augustine was not in fact quite so mistaken after all. I want to suggest that the reason Marxism has proven so disastrous to the regimes which have embraced it lies not in the fact that Marx was wrong to look for a pattern in history, but that he found the wrong pattern. You have probably already anticipated my reason for saying so. It has to do with the Bible, and in particular with the book of Judges

### **Is there a meaning in dramatic events? Part 2**

This extract from *People who made history* introduces the biblical book of Judges

Judges is a continuation of the history of Israel covering the period between the death of Joshua and the beginning of the monarchy. The first section of the book (up to 2:5) sets the scene for what follows. It tells how the tribes of Israel, in the absence of Joshua, attempted to continue their occupation of the land of Canaan. At first they had some success. But repeatedly, we read, the Israelites failed to follow up the victories God gave them. Residual pockets of Canaanites were left all over their territory. God was displeased with this lack of tenacity and thoroughness, as was made plain to the people in the oracle given at Bokim which concludes the opening section of the book.

*The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said: 'I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, "I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars. Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you". (2:1-3)*

It is not clear whether this 'angel of the Lord' was a supernatural figure or a human being. The Hebrew word for 'angel' means simply 'messenger'; it can be used for either human or supernatural emissaries. I suspect that in this case, as in other angelic visitations recorded later in the book, the divine message was delivered by an unnamed prophet resident, in this case, at the shrine of Gilgal. But it doesn't really matter whether my suspicion is right. The point is, God regarded the failure of the Israelites to drive out the Canaanite peoples who had occupied the land before they arrived as a breach of his covenant with them. The Canaanites were pagans; so their presence posed a spiritual as well as a military threat to Israel's future.

#### **Explaining the pattern**

The next section of Judges (2:5 - 3:6) spells this out. It elucidates for us the pattern that history was going to follow during the period of Judges and it offers us a theological explanation for it.

We are told in the opening paragraph (2:8-9) that Joshua was dead. Once his generation had passed, moral deterioration set in among the Israelites. They began to flirt with the pagan idolatry that they had foolishly allowed to remain in their midst, and this brought about a downturn in their military fortunes. (2:10-15). But it is at precisely this point that the distinctive feature of the pattern of history which this book wants to describe to us becomes apparent:

*Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. (2:16)*

The judges from whom the whole book takes its name were not, generally speaking, judicial figures at all. They were charismatically endowed military leaders. We shall meet several of them in this chapter, but for the moment simply note that any respite that the emergence of one of these judges brought the oppressed Israelites was always short-lived.

*Yet they would not listen to their judges ... they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked. (2:17)*

So, although whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them they were saved out of the hands of their enemies as long as that judge lived, when the judge died the situation went back to being perhaps even worse than it was at the start.

So the pattern emerges: a downward spiral, in which for every step Israel takes forward she seems to take two backwards. Eventually, says the sacred historian:

*The Lord was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died". (2:20)*

God became so exasperated with Israel's backsliding that he decided to take away the possibility of achieving security within her borders altogether. Instead, the Canaanite peoples were to remain, a permanent source of spiritual testing – which the Israelites invariably failed to pass.

*The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.*

### **Othniel, a model judge**

Othniel is the first of the judges about whom the book of Judges tells us. His story is unusual, largely because it has no unusual features. As we shall see, almost all the judges are highly individualistic, with very distinctive elements in their stories. But our author tells us nothing interesting about Othniel at all.

I suggest that this is quite deliberate, for Othniel's story functions as a model or paradigm for all the judges. It comprises a cycle of seven stages; and here is the pattern.

**1. A State of Spiritual Apostasy (3:7) – 'The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals.'**

2. **A Period of Military Oppression** (3:8) – "The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim.'

3. **An Appeal to God in their Distress** (3:9) – 'They cried out to the Lord.'

4. **The Appearance of a Spirit-Filled Saviour** (3:9) – as a result the Lord 'raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz'.

5. **Victory Over the Enemy** (3:10) – 'The Spirit of the Lord came upon him.' He went to war, and the king of Aram was overpowered by Othniel.

6. **Temporary Peace** (3:11) – 'The land had peace for forty years.'

7. **The Saviour Dies** (3:11) – and so the cycle begins all over again.

Here then is the pattern in history of which I spoke. It is a pattern that we observe again and again in this book. Not all the stories of all the judges explicitly display all seven of these stages, but all contain some of them. Othniel represents the pattern in its simplest and least embroidered form. Our author gives us very little information about him as an individual, because he wants to achieve that simplicity. We need have no doubt that he had access to further information that he could have used here; he has already used it back in 1: 9-15, rather than here, so as not to sacrifice the clarity of this initial paradigm in chapter 3.

### **Ehud, Deborah and Shamgar**

He goes on to recount two more turns of the spiral: Ehud (3:12-30), and Deborah (4 - 5); a man called Shamgar is also mentioned in passing (3.31). In the case of Ehud and Deborah, the pattern is followed so pedantically that some scholars question the historical accuracy of our author's work: 'Isn't he just a historicist like Marx, who has a theory about how history should go, and tailors his reporting of the facts so that it conforms to it?' They suggest that the pattern we have identified has become a kind of Procrustean bed, which he cuts every story to fit.

But I would reject that allegation about our author. He may be a historicist of sorts, in that he sees meaning in events; but the pattern he describes is a much more subtle and plausible one than that of Marx. The guiding hand behind this pattern is not some inexorable, quasi-scientific law of historical evolution. It is the hand of a personal God, who is dealing with us human beings in a thoroughly personal fashion. There is no hint here of fate bearing events on a remorseless and unalterable tide. Our author is convinced that history is in the hands of a good and just sovereign.

So if there is a pattern that can be observed, it's because he is dependable and consistent in his dealings with us. He is victim to no fickle whims. Like a perfect husband, he is utterly faithful to his promises; like a perfect judge, he is utterly consistent in his verdicts. But there is nothing mechanical or fatalistic about his decrees. He is a personal God and he displays personal freedom in his actions.

One of his main goals in his ordering of the historical process is to teach his people such truths about his personal character.

### **Lessons from history**

The book of Judges then not only observes a divinely ordered pattern in history. It also highlights several different ways by which God achieves his strategic purpose of self-revelation within history.

### **God's freedom of action, and ours**

One way the author does this is by injecting a deliberate air of unpredictability into the pattern. Do you notice the intervals of time between the cycles outlined in chapters 3-5? There's no discernible pattern there. Oppression: eight years. Peace: forty years. Oppression: eighteen years. Peace: eighty years. Oppression: twenty years. Peace: forty years. The people had to wait for a long while, and for an unspecified and indeterminate number of years at that, before God intervened to save them. And the duration of the peace that followed was variable too.

If you think about it, that is the way it had to be. In one episode of the television science fiction series *Red Dwarf*, the space travellers visit a penal colony on some distant asteroid. Superficially it seems to be a most enlightened place, an open prison if ever there was one. There are no cells, no locked doors, no sadistic warders. Instead, the colony is surveyed by a highly sensitive and sophisticated computer system that constantly monitors all human activity. It immediately detects any misdemeanour or crime by the inmates, and instantaneously administers a painful punishment.

The travellers quickly discover there is no way to evade the vigilance of this perpetual nemesis. As a result, whether from conscious fear or from Pavlovian conditioning, behaviour in the colony has become highly controlled and conformist. As may be readily imagined, it is also a totally inhuman place. The regime of immediate and inescapable retribution has the effect of destroying all personal freedom far more radically than prison bars ever could.

When the travellers eventually leave the penal colony they draw an interesting moral from what they have seen. They conclude that it is necessary for there to be a time lag between crime and punishment. Furthermore, the time lag must be of indeterminate duration. Otherwise, there is no freedom to sin; and if there is no freedom to sin, there is no freedom at all.

That is exactly what we see exemplified in God's dealing with his people in the book of Judges. He wants to teach them that there is a connection between moral behaviour and divine blessing. But he wants to teach them this in a way that preserves their human freedom. Hence the erratic time lags between the cycles of the pattern. God enjoys personal freedom of action, and he grants the same precious gift of personal freedom of action to us.

### **Individuals as God's key agents**

According to Marx, the pattern of history is so rigid that no individual can have any ultimate effect on events. Events follow the dictates of dialectical materialism whether or not Lenin is there to help the revolution.

But our author is not so indifferent to the historical contribution of great leaders. On the contrary, he sees it as part of the pattern. God chooses to raise up such individuals regularly and achieves his saving purpose through them. And what eccentric and unexpected individuals they sometimes are, and what eccentric and unexpected means these unexpected individuals sometimes use!

Take Ehud, whom we meet in 3.12. The New International Version says he was 'a left-handed man' (3:15). The Hebrew is a little less specific; it simply says he had some kind of physical impediment. Later events make it clear that the only good arm Ehud had was his left one. I suspect that his handicap was much more crippling than simple left-handedness. Only that, I think, explains how Eglon, king of Moab, was prepared to hold private counsel with him in the absence of his usual bodyguards.

Quite frankly, Ehud does not strike one as a typical super-hero. He assassinates Eglon with machiavellian cunning. He hides a specially prepared short sword on his right-hand side, where swords were not normally worn, and thrusts it into his victim's lower body, puncturing the bowel. That at least seems to be the implication of the rather obscurely scatological reference in the Hebrew text of 3:22.

It's a colourful story, this; full of human interest and unexpected twists! But thus the divine pattern was achieved, and Israel for a while was delivered from her oppressor. Yet, I think you'll agree, not in a way that suggests some mechanical fate is at work.

The same is true of the brief reference to Shamgar in 3:31. He was a warrior whose exploit was notable not for left-handed stealth but for bizarre weaponry; he killed 600 Philistines with some kind of ill-defined agricultural implement. The NIV calls it an ox-goad. Whatever it was, it wasn't a conventional weapon of personal combat. Perhaps we are to draw the conclusion that the Philistines had disarmed the population of the territory they had conquered, so ox-goads and the like were the only weapons someone like Shamgar could improvise. Even more unusually, Shamgar was almost certainly not even an Israelite. His name is probably Hurrian, not Hebrew. That may explain why our author does not list him as one of the judges. Again, he picks out an anomaly in the pattern, disrupting its normal flow. Once again, God is doing his stuff; but not in a way that gives one the confidence to make future predictions.

Even more is that the case with the third judge in this series of cycles, who (wonder of wonders, in a culture so unashamedly patriarchal) is a woman! Indeed, not only is Deborah a woman; but so too is the person who, in the providence of God, slays the cruel Canaanite general Sisera, who is oppressing Israel with his 900 iron chariots: his assassin is the non-Israelite Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. Again, the story in chapter 4 is a macabre one. We're not told whether she drove the tent-peg through the temple of the sleeping general with her left hand or her right, but it's a very unusual kind of incident.



Do you see what I mean, then, when I say that though the book of Judges clearly believes there is a pattern in history, it is a very different kind of pattern from that proposed by Marx? It is full of space. Space for human eccentricity; space for the unexpected surprise. It is the sort of pattern that Israel could recognize with the benefit of hindsight, but never presume upon in any crisis. For it is a pattern drawn by a personal God who acts consistently in history, but never in such a way as to encourage fatalism or complacency.

That, I suggest, is the kind of pattern that the Bible encourages us to look for in our history too.

### **Lessons for today**

Of course, the history of Old Testament Israel and that of the modern world are fundamentally different. Old Testament Israel, according to the Bible, was the chosen people of God. The reason God acted so reliably and frequently in her history was that he had a special covenant with her that he was honour-bound to keep. However, it is possible to see this pattern of history, which we've discovered in the book of Judges, in other areas. In fact, we can even see it in our own lives and in events of our own days.

### **God is in command**

The pattern teaches us, first, that God is in sovereign control of all history.

When it comes to the period of the judges, of course, we have the good fortune to possess the book of Judges, written by a prophet who has divine authority and inspiration to interpret events. Nobody can comment infallibly and authoritatively in that way upon events today, but that does not mean the pattern is not there. We may not always be able to trace God's hand, because we do not have an interpretive, prophetic word to enable us to do so. His strategies in human history are often very inscrutable. But the book of Judges teaches us this pattern, because it wants us to know we can always trust God's heart. As Paul assures us:

*We know that in all things God works the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)*

In our day and generation, it is enormously important to teach once again this biblical doctrine of providence. For many people exist in a state of meaninglessness. They feel that events go nowhere and that there is no pattern to things. Many others turn to superstition, believe in fate, look to New Age cults or consult the old lady down the road who looks into a crystal ball; all in the attempt to reclaim some kind of control over their lives.

The biblical view of providence as we find it in the book of Judges is hugely important to human beings like us, adrift in the sea of time as we are, if we are to have any kind of assurance or peace of mind.

### **Judgment follows human sin**

The pattern teaches, secondly, that human sin will issue, sooner or later, in judgment; and often that judgment will be temporal in the here-and-now, as well as eternal in the hereafter. Again it is Paul who talks about *the wrath of God being*

*revealed* (present tense) *against all the godlessness and unrighteousness of the human race* (Romans 1.18). So when we see disaster befall a nation, it is not inappropriate to draw attention, as Augustine did after the fall of Rome, to the element of divine chastening, warning and retribution inherent in the situation.

In the Old Testament we find the prophets doing this regularly; not just for Israel, but for the pagan nations too. Jonah, classically, was sent to Nineveh, a pagan city, with just such an interpretation of events to offer. Jesus himself interpreted a disaster of his own day in this fashion; when the tower of Siloam fell he said it was a sign of divine judgment against the world. Interestingly, he was careful not to individualize that judgment, as if those who perished were more guilty than anybody else. He specifically denied that, saying instead that such events are to be interpreted as general pointers to the coming wrath. They are evidence that God is angry with the world. They are chastening warnings, as Israel's military defeats were in the days of the Judges (cf. Luke 13:4).

### **'We have learned nothing from history'**

*What experience and history teach is this – that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it.*

Hegel's famous observation may serve as a summary of the third, somewhat sadder, lesson that the pattern in the book of Judges teaches us.

You would have thought that after three cycles of apostasy and judgment, Israel would have begun to get the message. But the book of Judges goes on to describe how the spiral of decadence continued down and down.

Marx, by contrast, was an optimist. He believed that history was making progress towards a glorious man-made utopia of the future. Some Christians, called post-millennialists, entertain similar hopes. But neither the book of Judges nor the book of Revelation really gives us solid ground for that kind of optimism today. Human beings are inveterate sinners, and as a result we must expect that *evil men will wax worse and worse* (II Timothy 3:13) and that there will be *wars and rumours of wars* (Matthew 24:6) until the end of time. In fact, the view history espoused by the book of Revelation is very similar to that of the book of Judges – a downward spiral.

Many secular historians, of course, have observed this cycle of cultural deterioration and built their histories around such a theory. That is how in the ancient world Hesiod interpreted the history of Greece. Every twist of Greek history was a movement further and further away from the classical age. If you know anything of Chinese historiography, a similar kind of view of history is found there. Every emperor begins with a divine mandate from heaven; eventually his dynasty falls into corruption; then a new dynasty emerges with a new divine mandate. But the general pattern is still downward. Among modern Western historians, Arnold Toynbee is the one who developed this with most erudition, surveying over twenty ancient and modern societies. His conclusion was that there is a cyclical pattern in the history of civilization, and its overall direction is always downwards.

**God will respond in mercy when his people confess their sins**

Fourthly (and more hopefully), the pattern in Judges encourages us to believe that God will respond to the prayers. Furthermore, it suggests that frequently the way in which he will inject new hope after a period of distress is by raising up a leader.

There is a very strong doctrine of leadership in the book of Judges. In national history that leader may be a politician. Some of us would want to say perhaps that Winston Churchill was raised up in just such a fashion, in response to the prayers of people in Britain. In church history the leader may be a great evangelist, like John Wesley or George Whitefield, who is used by God to turn the tide of spiritual declension and bring about revival. In the history of individual churches, too, it is not difficult to detect how variations in the fortunes of a congregation are tied to the leadership which that church enjoys at any particular moment. It seems that God puts a lot more store by the contribution of the exceptional leader than Marx did.

### **No human deliverer ever fully meets our need**

However, although judges appear and some remission is granted on the downward spiral, it is only temporary and never a total reversal of the pattern.

There is a very clear reason for this which we noted earlier: the judge always dies. So long as the judge is alive, everything gets better; there is peace and security. But then he dies and it's back to square one. And the people have to wait decades upon the gracious providence of God before another judge brings security and peace once again. This is the recurring story that we find as we read the history of the judges.

Eventually, the people of Israel tried to escape this state of being hostage to death by appointing a dynastic monarch. One of the social forces driving the period of judges in the direction of monarchy was undoubtedly the desire to escape the uncertainties that arose from a judge's finite lifetime. Once a dynastic monarch is on the throne, they reasoned, there will always be a successor in line. But reading on in the books of Samuel and Kings we discover that this was no real solution either. For there was no guarantee that the royal successor would be the kind of godly person whom the Spirit of God would be pleased to anoint and bless. So, in the later history of Israel, as often as not it is the kings who lead the people into idolatry.

The hard truth is that no human leader can really meet our needs. Even if they do nothing else wrong, they always eventually die.

But, by teaching the Israelites that depressing pattern in history, God was of course preparing them for a leader yet to come; one who would not die. We are told the stories of some fascinating characters in the book of Judges: Gideon, Samson and Jephthah. None of them are perfect, by a very long chalk. But each of them in his own way does prepare the ground for the true Judge and the true Saviour:

**Jesus**