

SHAMGAR AND HIS OXGOAD

"And after him was Shamgar the son of Anath, which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an oxgoad: and he also delivered Israel" (Judges 3:31).

We do not know anything about Shamgar, a judge in Israel, except what this verse tells us, which is so little that the average reader of the Bible is not conversant with his name. But this verse is enough for us to know that he did something real in his day, something which entered into the life of the world. From this verse we learn the value of a man, to his own times and through them to the ages. We are not told anything about the inner processes of Shamgar's life -- his ways of thinking, his attitudes, or his ups and downs. The outcome only of all these is stated. The man was on God's side and performed well for Him.

The days in which Shamgar lived were rough, but they had a zest of their own. In those days there were only two sides to the question, and men were either on the side of sworn friends or on the side of sworn enemies. God sent into those rough times men who were suited for the work which He wanted done.

In Shamgar's time Israel was in dire need of a deliverer. The Israelites were completely at the mercy of their long-time enemies, the Philistines. If any Israelite succeeded in cultivating a crop of wheat, no sooner would he have threshed it than the Philistines would swoop down upon him like birds of prey and carry it all away. Or, if any succeeded in raising a flock or sheep or herd of cattle, these animals were driven off just before they were ready for the slaughter. For this reason the people were often in dire want and living in constant fear. The people dared not travel on the highways, for they were infested with robbers and murderers, who made no secret of their mission, so that honest men were compelled to crawl about in ambush, and creep through byways in going from place to place. They secretly approached the wells and watering places lest they forfeit their lives when they came hither to draw. It would be difficult to conceive of a more terrible state of things than the one which existed. And the most painful fact, in their bitter experience, was that they had brought it all upon themselves.

Israel's failure was abject, and it was superinduced by discouragement. Her people did not see any chance to fight back. Their conquerors had seen to it that they should remain completely at their mercy. To gain this end the Philistines had compelled them to give up all weapons of war. They had taken a further precaution by refusing to allow a single blacksmith to remain in Israel, thus leaving them without any chance of making any weapons. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that the morale of the nation was broken. They were not only defeated, but hopeless in the sense that they did not have any expectation of a better day. It would be hard to imagine a people in sorer straits than were the Israelites when Shamgar came upon the scene.

The safety of the Israelites was under continual threat. They feared for their lives and the lives of their children. They were not allowed the main thoroughfare for their traveling, but were forced to use the bypaths for their needful journeys. They were not permitted to garner and keep their barley and other products which were produced by their hard labor with their simple implements.

It was during these times that Shamgar lived. He ate with the family the simple rations left to him by the enemy. He was both ashamed and discouraged. He cast

about for a ray of light. He searched his heart for an element of hope. Something must be done or oblivion would be the consequence.

When faith begins to stir in the heart of a discouraged man hope is being born. Shamgar's faith in God took on unusual aspects. He believed that God would help the Israelites if someone would throw caution to the winds, trust God, and with complete abandon move into the conflict. He was willing to trust God and take the next step. His hope was based on the greatness of God. He firmly believed in the possibility of a complete victory if there were any who would trust God and make the necessary sacrifice.

In this state of discouragement and demoralization, it seems that Shamgar was far more hopeful than his neighbors. He refused to give up in despair. Shamgar was not a man of position, prominence, or prestige. It is doubtful if he had ever had a single day of military training. He was a man of the people. Evidently his greatest achievement thus far had been the breaking and driving of a yoke of oxen. Yet it was this ox driver whom God chose to bring deliverance to the Israelites.

Why did God choose Shamgar? He did not choose him because of his obscurity or his disadvantages. He did not choose him because he was a favorite of His. He chose him because Shamgar possessed those qualities that made it possible for God to make use of him for this great service.

Shamgar was possessed of a noble discontent. He was heartsick because he and his people were so cowed, broken, and humiliated. He was enraged because his people were enslaved. When he saw the wheat of his neighbor carried off, and when he saw his own cattle driven away to become the food of his enemies, he could not take it complacently. He could not look upon it as an inevitable calamity that must be borne.

Shamgar was a man of faith. He could see the difficulties, realize the strength of the Philistines, and realize the weakness of the Israelites. He knew that they did not have any weapons with which to fight. But the difficulties were not all that Shamgar saw. He saw the forces that make for conquest. He knew something of the history of his people. He knew how again and again God had come upon the scene to work in their behalf. With strong faith Shamgar turned toward God. He recognized the fact that all the deliverances that God had ever wrought had been through human instrumentality. He believed in the willingness of God to use men. He believed in God's willingness to use him. With a strong and vital faith that God could and would use him, Shamgar set about his task.

When the enemy came upon Shamgar, instead of running he stood his ground. He resolved that he would use every resource that God put at his disposal, even if death should ensue.

Shamgar threw himself with what he had on the side of God. He put himself in God's hands. His battered oxgoad seemed to be a very poor weapon, but after all it is not so much the instrument that counts. It is the hand that wields it, and the heart that backs the hand. Instead of waiting for a better weapon, and talking about what he would do if he were more fully equipped, Shamgar used what was in his hand against great odds. Shamgar was one against six hundred, and yet he won one of the most singular and astonishing battles in the history of the world.

If Shamgar had been situated where the foe could only come one or two at the time, the victory would not have been so wonderful, but he was in the open field, literally surrounded by six hundred desperadoes, who were bent on plunder and death. This gives us some idea of what pluck and courage can do for a man when he is fired with a love of home and country. One wonders how Shamgar could muster enough courage to face so many, and how he escaped death when surrounded by such a multitude. One also wonders that, when the Philistines saw that they were being slaughtered at every blow, and that they did not have any power to injure their mysterious antagonist, they fought on and stood their ground until the last man was slain. In the light of the tremendous odds against which Shamgar fought, we are reminded that numbers do not mean everything with God. Sometimes we boast of our numbers, what really counts in Christian work is our relationship to God. A minority really with Him can work miracles. A majority out of touch with Him will be spiritually ineffective.

Shamgar's oxgoad was sufficient because the power of God was behind it. We may not command much in the way of weapons. Our talents, our means, and our equipment may all be scanty, but, if what we have is yielded, God can and will use it. Think of what God did by means of Moses' rod; think of what Shamgar did with an oxgoad; think of what David did with a sling and a stone; think of what the boy in the gospels did with his five barley loaves and two fishes! Let us not waste our time lamenting our limitations and restrictions, but let us give God our all and see what He will make of it and do with it.

Shamgar provides us with an illustration of victory in dark days, victory against great odds, victory through an obscure man, and victory with an unimpressive weapon.