

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Samson & His Exploits – (Judges Chapters 13-15) So far we have explored the lives of eleven of the twelve judges. Some have been explored in depth while others were simply given a passing glance. We have seen how that all have demonstrated to us the mercy of God. This week we will begin the first of a two-part lesson exploring the life of the twelfth and final judge: Samson. As might be expected, his birth and call are extraordinary as is the manner in which God used him to bring salvation to his people. What might not be obvious upon first glance was the low position to which the people of God have sunk. We referenced last week how that the cycle reappearing throughout the book was a downward one. Today's lesson will scrape bedrock. It is believed that Samson is contemporaneous with Jephthah and possibly Abimelech since mention is made in 10:7 of the fact that God delivered Israel into the hands of the Philistines around the same time as he delivered them into the hands of the Ammonites.

Part One: Called from the Womb – The variety of means that God has sovereignly used to call the judges is made even more diverse by the calling of Samson. Samson, unlike any of the judges that preceded him, was called before he was born. The circumstances surrounding his birth ring with familiarity for any student of the OT and sound eerily familiar with another miraculous birth that would prove of greater consequence to the story of the New Testament. The story begins with identifying Samson's parents as being from the tribe of Dan and residents of a town named Zorah. Manoah, Samson's father, and his mother (who remains unnamed) are barren and unable to have children. Then, an angel appears to Samson's mother announcing that she will have a child and that her child will be called or separated unto God from the womb; therefore, he is to be treated as a Nazarite. His mother, during her period of gestation, is to live the life of a Nazarite as well since anything that she ingests will inevitably mix with the embryo's blood stream providing nourishment to her unborn child.

The rules of the Nazarite are given in Numbers 6:1-21. We here read that the one who takes upon himself the vow of a Nazarite usually does so voluntarily. However, this was not the case with Samson. He was an involuntary Nazarite. A Nazarite was instructed to neither cut their hair, or eat or drink any product of the vine, and to come near no dead body. If the stipulations of their vow were violated, then they would have to offer a sin offering and reset the clock for the entire period of the vow. This is significant particularly in the story at hand for several reasons, all of which will be explored in detail below. Even within the class of Nazarites, Samson would have been exceptional simply due to the fact that he was made an involuntary Nazarite from the womb. With the heralding of his birth, his parents should have known that this child was special, especially chosen by God to perform a service among his people that would be salvific.

The angelic being that announces the birth of Samson, appears twice, both times to Samson's unnamed mother. The first occasion, he simply informs the mother of the end of her barren state and identifies the child as a Nazarite. His mother is unaware of the nature of the herald and identifies him as a man of

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God when relating the story to her husband. Her husband is amazed, but doubts. His response is commendable. Judges 13:8 states, *“Then Manoah prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord, please let the man of God whom you sent come again to us and teach us what we are to do with the child who will be born.’”* One cannot help but think of the special calling that was placed on Manoah and his wife as well since they were entrusted with raising and nurturing this future deliverer of God’s people. The angel did appear a second time and provided the same instructions to both parents as he did the mother originally. Manoah sought to honor the angel by offering a burnt offering, which was naturally frowned upon by the angel of the Lord. All offerings were instructed to be offered to God. He then sought for the man’s name so that he might do him honor upon the birth of his son. The angel then makes a statement regarding his name, the nuance of which is difficult to convey in the original Hebrew. He states that his name is יְהִיָּה, which is translated as “wonderful” by the ESV and as “secret” by the KJV. The correct meaning of the word is somewhere in the middle meaning, wonderfully spiritual and therefore secretive. This, along with the fact that the angel ascended to heaven with the smoke of the burnt offering, identifies the being correctly to the couple as an angel of the Lord.

After the birth of Samson, there is an interesting statement, reminiscent of another statement made centuries later in reference to Christ (Luke 2:52). In 13:24 we read, *“And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the Lord blessed him.”* In what specific ways the Lord blessed Samson that would have set him apart from other young boys, we are not told, but one can assume that his extraordinary strength and charismatic personality must have been displayed from an early age. The text goes on to say, *“And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan between Zorah and Eshtaol”* (13:25). Exactly what this means we are uncertain, the text does not enter into great detail. We know that God was with Samson, and like other judges, the Spirit of the Lord was the catalyst in his life for performing great feats for God.

Part Two: A Matchmaker’s Nightmare – It does not take long for things to begin to unravel for Samson. He is notorious for placing himself in forbidden places. The beginning of chapter 14 states, *“Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. Then he came up and told his father and mother, ‘I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife’”* (14:1-2). Whether this was Samson’s first trip to Timnah or he were a frequent visitor to the Philistine city, we do not know. What we do know is that he was playing with fire. Perhaps his youth coupled with his extraordinary strength made him feel invincible and capable of doing whatever he pleased. For all the steps of preparation that Manoah and his wife may have taken to raise Samson in faithfulness to his Nazarite vow, they apparently failed to instruct him in the law of God. Even when he informs them of his desire to marry a Philistine woman, their response is more ethno-centric than spiritual. They do not reference the fact that what he is seeking is expressly forbidden by God. Could it be that the cultural currents of the day made even this command seem outdated or irrelevant?

One quick note about the town of Timnah, it was originally given to the tribe of Judah (Joshua 5:10, 57), then to the tribe of Dan (Joshua 19:43). The fact that the Philistines lived there and apparently had control over the city is indicative of a prevailing darkness within Israel that is unique to the era of Samson compared to the previous judges. This will be explored in depth later when we look at the greatest deliverance wrought by Samson on behalf of the people of God. For now, it will suffice to say that the degree of cohabitation among Israel and their Canaanite neighbors had reached a new level, even to the point of intermarriage between the two being ordinary and possibly encouraged. They were not the type of oppressor as the Ammonites and Midianites since they seemingly sought to co-mingle

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with God's people. Instead, they oppressed Israel through infiltration and demoralization akin to the incident at Baal-Peor when Israel was yet encamped in the wilderness (Numbers 25:3). We know from archaeological discoveries made in the region dating back to this period that the Philistine influence on the arts and culture of the region was extensive and pervasive. This may well have been the reason that Samson's mother, when repeating the message of the angel to her husband, neglected to mention the fact that he, "...shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (13:5). If the oppression of the Canaanite nation was severe, this would have surely been the characteristic of the angel's message foremost in her mind.

So, against his parent's wishes, Samson enters into an arrangement to marry the young Philistine lady because, "...she is right in my eyes" (14:3b). The editor of the book of Judges here inserts a very interesting (and potentially troubling) comment. He states, "*His father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel*" (14:4). One may wonder, was Samson truly seeking an opportunity against the Philistines? Of course, the answer is, no. The text gives every indication that Samson was sincere in his love and passionate desire to marry the young girl. How then, could the Lord (the only other identified subject in the sentence) employ disobedience as an opportunity for deliverance? The answer may surprise you. We will explore this next week.

When preparing for the marriage, scripture provides further insight into Samson's carelessness. Judges 14:5 states, "*Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah.*" This statement is interesting for several reasons, the most being the fact that Samson had no reason to be in the vineyards any more than he had reason to be pursuing a Philistine woman. Remember, Samson was a Nazarite, and as such was not allowed to partake of the fruit of the vine either in a fermented or non-fermented form. However, he remains behind in the vineyard while his dutiful parents march ahead into the jaws of a proverbial lion. While in the vineyard, a real lion roars on Samson, and he kills the wild beast with his bare hands. This event plays a major role in the story and might be seen as the catalytic event that both saved Samson from consummating the marriage with the Philistine lady and launched his antagonism towards the Philistines.

After making the necessary arrangements for the wedding, Samson returned to take the young lady to be his wife. On the journey between Zorah and Timnah, he passed by the slain carcass of the lion and noted that bees had made a hive in the carcass. He, "...scraped it out into his hands, and went on, eating as he went" (14:9). When arriving in Timnah, he was engaged in the feast, which lasted seven days. On the first day of the feast, the Philistines appointed thirty companions to be with him. This may have been because he had no friends of his own, or it may have been out of fear. The text simply states, "*As soon as the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him*" (14:11). It was customary in that period (as well as later periods in the ancient near east), for the bridegroom to surround himself with "friends" or companions that would be with him and celebrate with him during the ceremony. This may well have been the purpose of these men. Samson, ever the charismatic personality proposed a riddle that was inspired by the honey he had eaten from the carcass of the lion. He issued the playful challenge that if they were unable to guess his riddle, they would have to purchase for him thirty linen garments, and thirty changes of clothes. If they guessed his riddle, he would have to do the same for them. He was quite certain they would not be successful at guessing the riddle.

Unfortunately, we catch the first glimpse of Samson's greatest weakness: his desire to please Canaanite women. For after three days, the thirty companions realize they cannot determine the answer to the Baney, Lesson 14 Winter/Spring 2016

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riddle, and approach Samson's espoused wife asking her to find out the answer or bear the consequence of death. She pleads with him using all her womanly charms and convinces him to tell her the answer. The fact that she listens to the thirty companions instead of her espoused husband may indicate the loyalty she continued to have to her people (the Philistines) and the mistrust towards Samson. After all, if she had told Samson of their threat, he would have surely protected her and her father's family, having proven himself brave and capable of mighty deeds. She then, tells the companions the answer and they relay it to Samson, who immediately knows they have coerced his wife.

The consequence of the answered riddle was, *"the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him (Samson), and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of the town"* (14:19) He used their garments as compensation to the thirty companions. However, when he returned to pay, his wife had unknowingly been given to his best man.

Part Three: The Spring of the One Who Calls Out – After Samson discovered that his wife was given to his best man, he retaliates in a manner that gets the attention of the Philistines: he essentially burns their crops. For this, they cannot forgive him and pursue after him into the land of Judah. They make a raid against one of the towns of Judah named Lehi, which means "jaw" in Hebrew. The men of Judah were surprised that the Philistines had invaded, an atypical response for an oppressed people that is indicative of a darker spiritual collusion at work between the Philistines and the people of God. An army of 3,000 men of Judah send for Samson and request him to surrender. Their response disclosed in 15:11 is telling: *"Then, the 3,000 men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson, 'Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?' And he said to them, 'As they did to me, so have I done to them.'"* The attitude of Israel towards the Philistines was not that of an oppressed people to their oppressor, but of a subdued people convinced of the value of assimilating with a perceived superior power capable of wielding an untold influence over their lives. An army of 3,000 men led by Samson would have been more than adequate to loosen the grip of the Philistines, and serve as the first of many successful campaigns, but they were more interested in appeasing the enemy than in fighting the enemy.

Samson agrees to surrender to the Philistines, and as a result God uses him to exact judgment on them. Again, the Spirit of the Lord enables Samson to behave supernaturally. Verse fourteen states, *"When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then, the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands."* The story continues to inform us that he finds a fresh jawbone of a donkey and uses it to kill 1,000 Philistines.

After his victory, Samson, the man who is able to perform super human feats under the influence of the Spirit of God, becomes so thirsty and weary that he is afraid of death. Judges 15:18 states, *"And he was very thirsty, and called upon the Lord and said, 'You have granted this great salvation by the hand of your servant, and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?'"* God's reply to Samson is supernatural. He causes a spring to erupt from the hill of the jaw (at Lehi) and cool refreshing water came from it. Consequently, he named that place, En-Hakkore which means, *the spring of the one who calls*, in Hebrew. This spring is symbolic in many ways. It is indicative of Samson's realization that God is the one who sustains him and enables him to fight. His fear of death did not come from the sword of the enemy, but from being deprived of something as natural as water. On a much larger scale, the spring is symbolic of a spiritual eruption that is taking place among God's people. Truly Samson is a Baney, Lesson 14 Winter/Spring 2016

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lone voice, calling out to the God of the covenant to be faithful to the covenant and redeem his people from the enemy. The enemy took a different path in the time of Samson, they were much subtler, more deceitful, more dangerous. The voice of the one who calls, reverberates within the cavernous deep of the souls of God's rebellious people reminding them that they cannot live without the water that comes from the rock of life. Although the sword was not a threat to God's people, spiritual apathy and collusion was a threat, a much greater one. The enemy had gone underground, out of sight, and out of mind. The actions of God's man, Samson, brought them to the surface in a moment of sobriety for the apostate people.

One final point should be made before we conclude the lesson for the day. Twice in chapters 14 and 15 has a violation of the Nazarite vow led to the sovereign work of God in the deliverance of his people. As a Nazarite, Samson was forbidden to touch a dead or unclean animal. He violated this command when he not only scraped the honey from the decaying carcass of the lion, but ate it as well. He also violated this command when he touched and used the fresh jaw bone of a donkey as an instrument of war and killed 1,000 Philistines. God seems to be working in the life of Samson using what was explicitly forbidden in the law of God (both the intermarriage between Samson and Canaanite woman and the touching of a dead and unclean animal) as an occasion to execute his just judgment against the Philistines, the enemies of God. What is God up to? We will explore the answer to this question in depth next week.

Conclusion: As we begin our study of the life of the last judge, it is helpful to assess the unique characteristics of the man, Samson, and to ask what applications can be drawn from these characteristics for contemporary Christian living. Why was it important that Samson be called before his birth? What responsibility did this place on Samson's parents? Why do you think it is important that Samson's parents were barren? How does that feature contribute to the story? What does the birth of Samson communicate about the role of parenting today?

Note how frequently the phrase, "the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon Samson..." occurs in the chapters we have read. What relevance do you think this statement lends to the story?