

Week 15 - Samson 1: God Provides a Deliverer - Judges 13:1-24

Scripture Reading: Numbers 6:1-8

Introduction

This morning, we come to the final, and perhaps best known, judge in the book of Judges - Samson

Samson is one of those larger-than-life characters who capture our imaginations after all; everyone loves a muscular, strongman kind of hero and Samson's feats are legendary

But Samson is far from a savory character and we will discover that his flaws were as notable as his legendary strength

We will take four Sundays to consider the life of Samson - roughly a Sunday for each chapter that God gives to him in the Bible

As an aside, the account of the first judge, Othniel, was only five verses long and he was the ideal, prototypical judge

While Samson, who was far from ideal, is given four chapters to tell his story

Israel has been on a downward spiritual spiral as we've seen them repeatedly go astray to serve other Gods only to have God send an oppressor to bring them back into line, Israel crying out in pain, and God providing a deliverer and peace

Only to have Israel lapse right back into apostasy again and repeat the cycle all over again sinking lower each time

And since Samson is our seventh and final major judge, we shouldn't be surprised to learn that Israel has also reached the lowest spiritual point yet

So let's begin by looking at the situation that existed when Samson arrived on the scene [**Judges 13:1**]

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.

I need to point out that there is a definite article in the Hebrew text that isn't clearly translated in our English version

Where our Bible says "what was evil" the Hebrew says "the" evil - a specific evil - namely forgetting God and serving other false gods

I. The situation

So as the account begins we see Israel in a very familiar place; continuing to practice the primary evil

And God's response was to deliver them into the hands of the Philistines

This is the third time we've seen the Philistines mentioned as being God's instrument of oppression

Earlier we saw Shamgar relieve the pressure by killing 600 Philistines with his ox goad and as the Jephthah narrative opened we saw that as the Ammonites pressured Israel from the east, the Philistines were doing likewise from the west

Our author dropped the Philistine account in favor of relating the resolution of the Ammonite threat but now he returns to the Philistines and God's solution to their oppression

So far, in verse 1, we've seen the apostasy of Israel and the oppressors have been named - both according to the pattern established back in the Othniel account

But in verse 2 the author simply introduces a man of the tribe of Dan and the city of Zorah named Manoah and his unnamed wife who we are told is childless and unable to have children

The original readers of this account would have been filled with anticipation as they would have recognized this introduction as the start of a miraculous birth narrative reminiscent of Sarah, Rebekah, and Hannah

But something is conspicuously absent from the pattern we've come to expect

There is no crying out in pain by Israel; no plea for God to deliver them from their oppressors

And this foreshadows the fact that we are going to see that, in this cycle, the Israelites display little discomfort with their situation and little evidence that they even want to be delivered from it

And their apparent indifference seems to be what causes God to act as he does in providing a deliverer to deal with the Philistines without being asked

Samson is most certainly the big man on the scene of this narrative

But we would fall into the same trap as Samson will prove to do if we think that Samson is the focus of the account

Once more, we are going to see that God is the real hero of the story as he makes provision for Israel's deliverance

And looking at verse 3 we see the plan begin to take form as the angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah's wife

II. The promise

The way he begins his message seems odd - let's look at his message together [**Judges 13:3**]:

"Behold, you are barren and have not borne children"

As if she hadn't noticed - the fact that she was childless really would not have been a great revelation to her

But what came next might well have been - her condition had not gone unnoticed by God and God was about to fix it

And the promise is a two-parter: she will conceive and bear a child - great news all by itself

But just like a modern-day infomercial where the pitchman exclaims, "But wait, there's more!" we see the angel continue by telling and not only that she would have a child but that child would be a son!

To be childless in that culture was viewed as divine judgment - it was a terrible thing - and now she was receiving what amounted to a double blessing

Then in verse 4 we see that the blessing and privilege of bearing a son for God comes with some obligations as the angel of the Lord gives her some pre-natal instructions to govern her own lifestyle [**Judges 13:4**]

Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean

The instruction to refrain from consuming alcohol seems reasonable enough but the fact that she has to be told to keep from eating things that were ritually unclean reveals just how far the people have strayed from God

Keeping kosher must not have been a part of their daily life in those days and it was vitally important that she do so during her pregnancy for the reason that's revealed in verse 5

The angel of the Lord again tells her to pay attention with the word "behold" and then he tells her again that a son is coming before telling her [**Judges 13:5**]:

"No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

In our Scripture reading this morning we saw that, according to the Israelite Law of the Nazirite, a person under this vow committed himself to three abstentions:

No wine or other intoxicating drink, no haircuts, and no contact with a dead body

Normally, a Nazirite vow was entered into voluntarily and for a specific period of time as an act of dedication to God

But this son had his Nazirite status imposed upon him from the moment of his conception and it was not temporary - it was for life - all serving to highlight his role as a divinely appointed agent

We want to take a moment to notice something else here that we might easily overlook

And that's the biblical conviction that a child is a special creation of God from the moment of conception

This pre-born son has personhood and the conditions that will govern his postnatal life apply to his prenatal life as well

He was called to be a Nazirite from the moment he was conceived -

He was a person with a purpose from the moment of his conception and not just a clump of cells in his mother's womb

Somewhat remarkably, the woman appears to ask no questions of this stranger but instead she simply goes to tell her husband what has happened

And while she's obviously unsure about the messenger's origin and nature, she is very clear about his message to her

And she related the message fairly accurately to her husband only omitting the restriction concerning hair cutting and adding that he would be a Nazirite to God "to the day of his death" - a detail that the angel of the Lord didn't include

For those of us who know the story, those deviations cast an ominous shadow as we recognize that it's the violation of the restriction on hair cutting that will lead directly to Samson's death some years hence

At this point we would expect the narrative to move directly to the birth of Samson but there is a complication in the plot that's raised by Manoah's apparent resentment that the heavenly messenger appeared to his wife and not him

And we see Manoah go to great lengths to try to take control of the situation

The first thing he does is pray to the Lord for the messenger to come again so that he can hear from him first-hand and know at least as much as his wife does

Remarkably, God listens to Manoah's selfish prayer and responds graciously to dispatch his envoy back to earth to reassure Manoah who is portrayed here as being something of a chauvinist and somewhat dim

III. The reassurance

What we see related is kind of comical as God doesn't tell Manoah anything more than his wife has already told him in spite of his machinations to gain not only additional information but dominance over the heavenly messenger

It's reasonable to question what additional information Manoah needed

Unless he was ignorant of the Israelite law of the Nazirite it seems like the instructions were pretty explicit and his repeated use of the pronoun "us" seems to suggest that he was motivated more by jealousy than need

Still, God responded to Manoah's plea but he did so in a humorous fashion that shows he refused to be manipulated

Instead of returning to appear before Manoah or Manoah and his wife, the messenger of God appeared to his wife while she sat alone in a field

And our author makes this seem pointed as he includes the phrase "Manoah her husband was not with her" for emphasis

We aren't told why God chose to goad Manoah in this way but it seems plain that it was intentional

It appears, though, that Manoah's wife had no interest in keeping anything from her husband so, instead of talking with the heavenly messenger again, she went to fetch Manoah and told him that the man had once again appeared to her

Of course, Manoah returned with his wife and, to their relief, the man was still there waiting for them

And Manoah begins to attempt to elicit as much information as he can while the messenger of God stonewalls him

Manoah's first question was unnecessary and rather insulting to his wife because she had just told him the same man who had come before had returned and the reply was a quite curt, "I am" with absolutely no elaboration

Upon hearing this, Manoah seeks an oracle or pronouncement concerning the destiny of this son whose coming birth has been so unexpectedly sprung on him

And just as his first question was designed to authenticate the messenger, this question was designed to authenticate the message

Again, the response he receives is a blunt one with no extra information but it at least authenticates the message his wife had received and passed along to him

And the angel of the Lord laid a charge upon Manoah to see to it that his wife did as he had commanded her

I suspect Manoah was relieved to discover that what he had heard from his wife was accurate

He could indeed look forward to the birth of a son and in verse 15 we see him offer what may have been simply an example of mid-eastern hospitality or an attempt to obligate their visitor as he asked him to join them for a meal

After all, in the Canaanite religious system, feeding a deity or his envoy provided the basis for expectation of divine action on his behalf

But, without explanation, the visitor declines the invitation in a very direct manner saying [**Judge 13:16**] “No thanks” and even if he agrees to be detained - which was not a forgone conclusion - he will not eat Manoah’s food

Let’s look at a couple of reasons why the visitor rejected the offer of a meal

First, sharing a meal together indicates a certain intimacy and *shalom* or peace between the parties

The rejection then could have well been a commentary on the spiritual condition of Israel as a whole and on the household of Manoah in particular

Neither was in a position to fellowship in this way with an envoy of God as a proper relationship must come before fellowship

Therefore, a burnt offering presented as a sacrifice to God would be a necessary first step to restoring the relationship

Just as the messenger goes on to recommend

Second, it’s obvious that Manoah had no idea whatsoever who he was talking to

Clearly, Manoah thought this messenger at most a prophet but no more than that

In fact, our author includes a parenthetical comment that explains that Manoah had no clue that the visitor was more than a man

Looking back to the account of Gideon we saw him likewise offer to prepare a meal for the heavenly visitor who came to him but the difference was that Gideon appears to have understood the nature of his visitor

He referred to the meal he wanted to prepare as a “gift” that he wanted to “set before” his visitor and it was accepted

Whereas Manoah simply makes the secular offer of a meal - the envoy accepted Gideon’s “gift” but rejected Manoah’s mere “meal” perhaps simply because of Manoah’s defective understanding of who he was conversing with

Like I said, Manoah is portrayed as being rather dull because it would seem that the response of his visitor would have clued him in to what was going on and to this “man’s” true identity - but it didn’t

And, no doubt somewhat confused, Manoah changed tactics in verse 17 as he asked for the visitor’s name

Again, this may have been an attempt to manipulate the situation and gain the upper hand as it was believed that knowing the name of a heavenly being gave one power over them

Of course, Manoah frames his inquiry in the most positive way by saying that he needs to know so that they can honor this man after what he says comes true

However, this reveals that Manoah was still doubtful even after God had graciously responded to his request for reassurance and since Manoah didn’t recognize who he was talking to his offer is misplaced because such honor belongs to God alone

It’s interesting that the divine visitor gives Manoah the exact same response as Jacob received in **Genesis 32:29** when he asked for the name of his wrestling partner as the visitor answers the question with a question of his own

“Why do you ask my name?”

That sounds like a rebuke that indicates that Manoah should have caught on by now as to just who he was facing

Still, we have to remember that Manoah had no experience with God or his agents so perhaps his obtuseness is understandable

And, rather than giving his name the angel of the Lord simply says that it would do no good to give Manoah his name because it was too wonderful for Manoah to understand

Have you ever been asked a question by someone you knew didn't have the ability to understand any answer you might give them?

Every parent knows the feeling of being asked questions by their little ones that they simply have to put off answering until the child lives a while longer and has more capacity to understand

Sometimes there is no suitable way to satisfy their curiosity no matter how sincerely they might want to know

I think that's roughly the same situation that the angel of the Lord faced here

Manoah simply didn't have the capacity to fully and truly understand either the visitor's name or the work that God was doing so it would have been futile to answer his question

So the visitor basically deflects Manoah's attention from him and invites him to offer a sacrifice to God and then wait and watch to see what God will do and to try to figure the rest of the riddle out for himself

And, apparently, the tactic worked because we see Manoah and his wife offer the burnt offering to the Lord

Unlike we saw in the Gideon narrative the details the author relates here are rather sketchy

There is no mention of the angel of the Lord reaching out with his staff to produce the fire that consumed Gideon's offering and we are only told that as the flames went up toward heaven the angel of the Lord went with them

As a result, we see Manoah and his wife act in unison for the first time as they both fall on their faces in an appropriate posture of submission due to their belated recognition that they had been in the presence of the messenger of God

Actually, they come to the realization that they have been in the presence of God himself as Manoah's next utterance indicates

In verse 22 Manoah proclaims something that, while being theologically justifiable, was logically flawed [**Judges 13:22**]

"We shall surely die, for we have seen God."

After all, when Moses asked God to show him his glory in Exodus 33, God told him in verse 20 [Exodus 33:20]

"You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."

And God hid Moses in a cleft in the rock and covered him with his hand until he was past allowing Moses to only see his residual glory

So Manoah was right to be afraid in one sense while he was wrong in another as his wife points out to him

First she says that God wouldn't have accepted their burnt offering if he meant to kill them

Neither would he have revealed all the things that had just been revealed to them

Certainly God would not have bothered to tell them they were going to have a son and how they should raise that son from his conception and how that son was to live his life only to kill them before that son was born and raised

It would make no sense to promise a future and then deny that future

And in verse 24 we come to the fulfillment of what God had promised as we read [**Judges 13:24**]

And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the Lord blessed him.

IV. The fulfillment

The birth announcement signals the end of the first phase of the Samson cycle

It consists of four simple statements:

The woman gave birth to a son; she named him Samson; the boy grew; and the Lord blessed him

The first statement is a simple acknowledgement that the promise that was announced was fulfilled

However, the second statement that his mother named him, while not unusual in the pages of the Old Testament as mothers named their children more often than fathers did, serves to further marginalize Manoah in this case

And it also serves as an example of just how prominent women are going to prove to be in Samson's life

Exactly what we're to make of the name she chooses is a bit less clear

The name Samson is based on the Hebrew word for "sun" coupled with a diminutive ending and means something like "little sun" or "sunny boy"

And while it's tempting to give the name a positive spin as though Samson was a bright spot in a dark world or a ray of sunshine or even a foreshadowing of his powerful strength as being like the sun

It seems more likely that his name is linked to the solar cult that existed just a few miles from Zorah, where Manoah and his wife lived

The sun god worshipped there was Shemesh and it seems most likely that his name was given to honor that false god rather than giving him a more appropriate name honoring Yahweh

The third and fourth statements are variations of what we read about Samuel in 1Samuel 2:21 and 1Samuel 3:19-

The boy Samuel grew in the presence of the Lord and Samuel grew and the Lord was with him respectively

And, while we aren't told precisely what form the Lord's blessing took, we can reasonably say that it likely included the gift of exceptional health and vitality along with the development of extraordinary strength based on the remainder of the narrative

Conclusion

Once again, we are faced with people who aren't exactly role models as there are many troubling things revealed about them in this birth narrative

First, we might well wonder at the level of obtuseness demonstrated by Manoah and his wife and wonder how it could have possibly taken them so long to recognize their visitor

We might also question why Manoah and his wife only refer to God as *Elohim* which is the generic term for a deity and *Adonai* which is the generic term for "master" - they seem to have no familiarity with Yahweh at all

Perhaps the most disturbing of all is the fact that this barren couple, who conceive and bear a child solely because of the gracious intervention of the Lord, name that son Samson, which if not overtly pagan is dangerously close to it

Again, we have to give up any romancing and idealistic notions about Israel as a nation during this time

The people have been becoming increasingly Canaanized as they've spiraled downward away from God and into depravity with each judge cycle

And the time of Samson, the final judge, represents the lowest point of the period of the judges yet

In the words of **1Samuel 3:1-3** - the word of the Lord was rare in those days and there was no frequent vision and the lamp of God was in danger of being extinguished

Those were spiritually dark days so perhaps it's little wonder that Manoah struggles in his encounter with deity and that his wife names her son after the Canaanite sun god - in spite of the fact that it was God who caused her to conceive

They just didn't know any better

And so we must shift our focus from the people involved to God and what is revealed about him in this account

Even though Israel was thoroughly content in their apostasy and quite comfortable living under the rule of their oppressors, God was active in providing them with the deliverance they weren't even seeking

Israel may have been doing everything wrong and determined to destroy itself from within but God remained faithful and worked to preserve his people

And God's character shines all the brighter when we contrast it against the human players

And lest we are tempted to think that God was acting in some ad hoc fashion throughout the book of Judges in using whoever was available to deliver Israel, this time, he goes all the way in providing a deliverer "from scratch" as it were

And as we come to the end of this first chapter in the Samson narrative we have great hope that this deliverer will do great things

After all, God has blessed him with every advantage - no other deliverer, not even Othniel, comes close to matching Samson's potential to do great things for God

Yet we are going to see as we continue on that Samson is a man of his times and he will turn out to accomplish less for his people than any of his predecessors

That only reinforces the fact that it's not Samson who is the hero but God who plans and executes deliverance for his people no matter how undeserving they prove to be or even if they seek or seem to desire deliverance

And we can and should rejoice that God remains gracious and faithful in spite of the fact that his people are often ambivalent and apathetic toward him

Because we aren't immune from those tendencies today and there are many filling pews in churches today who don't really want to be roused from the lethargy they have sunk into and spurred to deeper spirituality

And we also need a healthy dose of God's amazing grace

Let's pray