

Week 16 - God Picks a Fight - Judges 13:25-14:20

Scripture Reading: James 1:23-25

Introduction

This is one of those times when I wish I could take two hours to preach

Having looked at Samson's birth narrative last week our passage this week reveals that we have skipped over Samson's childhood completely

The only thing the Bible has to say about his childhood is found in 13:24 [**Judges 13:24**] which simply tells us that he grew up and the Lord blessed him as he grew

Then we encounter one of those unfortunate chapter divisions that occur from time to time as verse 25 of chapter 13 serves to introduce the narrative of Samson as a young adult that begins in chapter 14

That narrative continues all the way through chapter 15 as the two chapters form a seamless account of Samson's judgeship - we see this in the last verse of chapter 15 [**Judges 15:20**] which tells that Samson judged for twenty years

So I wish I could take the time needed to work through the entire account in one sermon - but I fear that would be a bit much for all of us

You have no doubt noticed that I titled this sermon "God picks a fight" and that might surprise you

But, while it may seem a bit uncomfortable to think of God instigating the hostilities that arise in this account, that is the plain reading of the text

What is even more troubling is the knowledge that God had to intervene and stir up hostilities between his people and the Philistines because Israel had become so comfortable in their situation

As we saw last week, there was no cry of pain to God - with the plain implication that there was no pain - so God had to act unilaterally and proactively as he provided Samson to be his deliverer

Left to themselves, Israel would have intermarried with the Philistines and diluted and polluted their bloodline to the point that there would be no more ethnic Israel

So God stepped in to preserve his people by providing Samson to begin to deliver them and then inciting the trouble that would cause Samson to act

Not even the complete indifference of God's people will deter him from keeping his covenant promise to them

Our author proves to be a master storyteller as he relates the events of this long account

He frames the events as the actions of the human actors - primarily Samson - while letting us in on the secret that God is behind it all in permitting Samson to act according to his nature and providing an impetus for tension

We see this in a statement he makes in verse 4 [**Judges 14:4**] which proves to be the key to these two chapters

[Samson's] father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for [the Lord] was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.

That one verse tells us so much about the situation - that everything that happens from here on out is a product of God's initiation no matter how it seems

It would be easy to get caught up in the drama and the human activity and motivations as the narrative unfolds and miss that it is all according to God's divine initiative

But this entire account is one long chain reaction that God sets off when, as we read in 13:25 [**Judges 13:25**] -

The Spirit of the Lord began to stir in Samson while he was at home in Mahaneh-dan

Then in 14:1 [**Judges 14:1**] we see Samson go down to Timnah where he finds trouble

I. Scene 1: Samson finds trouble in Timnah

The first scene of our narrative opens with the news that Samson went down to Timnah, a Philistine village that lay six miles straight west of Zorah, downstream on the south side of the waterway that connected them

As we proceed, we will see that the image our author paints of Samson in this opening episode is quite unattractive

And, although we aren't privy to any of the details of his childhood, I think we can get a pretty fair assessment as to what Samson was like as a kid from the way he acts as a young adult

His words and actions in this opening scene show him to be an insolent and independent young man who is ruled by sensuality and disrespectful of authority

We need to understand that, while Israel was content to be ruled by the Philistines, that doesn't mean they liked them

In the eyes of Israel, the Philistines were on the bottom rung of the cultural and ethnic ladder and are always portrayed as inferior to Israel in the Old Testament with the pejorative "uncircumcised" often attached to their name

According to Israelite perceptions of life after death, the uncircumcised are consigned to the farthest recesses and least desirable parts of the netherworld - so we can safely say the Philistines were seen as worthless in this life and the next

But here we see Samson march into the pagan world of the Philistines seemingly without a care in the world as if he were at home there

And while he was there he "happened" to spot a young Philistine woman that caught his eye

Of course, we are privy to the knowledge that this "chance" meeting was arranged by God for his purposes

So Samson's heart went pitter-pat and he returned home and commanded his parents to get her for him as his wife

In this, Samson is like many a young man as he operates on appearances and for personal interest rather than on any sort of core principles or God-honoring values - and he certainly isn't concerned with the greater good

He simply sees a woman, finds her to be attractive, and demands his parents arrange his marriage to her
And here's the funny thing, we're going to see in just a bit that it seems he hasn't even spoken to her at this point

He's like a kid who sees a puppy in a shop window and demands his parents get it for him

In verse 3 we see his parents react with pain and disappointment to what they see as Samson's misguided demand

But here's the thing we want to take note of

The objections Samson's parents raise are only cultural and social

They certainly don't want him to marry a Philistine but not for the right reasons

They never once say that intermarriage with non-Israelites is forbidden by the Lord

They don't remind Samson of his status as a Nazirite before the Lord and how his union with a pagan would be a giant step away from his calling

They don't protest and say that God had called him to deliver Israel from Philistine oppression, not to marry a Philistine

It's sad that they make none of those God-honoring arguments - they simply voice their disapproval and downgrade Samson's demand to nothing more than a cultural and ethnic matter

And Samson's reply to their protest is to once again demand that his father get her for him because, in his eyes, she's the one

What the Hebrew says is that she is "straight" as opposed to "crooked"

In other words, she measures up perfectly as the kind of woman Samson believes to be desirable for a wife

So far, it appears that Samson was merely acting according to his nature and being driven by his appetites

And he was

Samson was acting like his countrymen in general and, driven by his senses, he was doing what seemed right in his own eyes and acting according to his personal standards with no regard for God's standards

But then we come to the pivotal verse 4 and we see that there is also a parallel theological explanation for Samson's behavior - God is working behind the scenes and using Samson and his nature to further his ends

Samson is indeed a free-wheeling rebel, driven by his own selfish interests and doing whatever he pleases with absolutely no respect for his parents, and no respect for God or the claim God has put on his life

But in the process he ends up fulfilling God's will because God can and will use even a rogue doing his own thing to accomplish his will

In the end, as we come to the next section of our narrative, we see that Samson's parents gave in to his demand and the headed down to Timnah with him to arrange his marriage - I suspect Samson was used to getting his way in the end

And as they traveled Samson was separated from his parents for a time because Samson had an encounter that his parents were unaware of

II. Scene 2: Samson and the lion in the vineyard

Verses 5-7 seem to relate an event that is irrelevant to the story that has been unfolding but it will prove to be crucial as the story progresses

Let's look at those verses together [**Judges 14:5-7**] -

Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done. Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes.

This is the first instance we see in the Samson account of his phenomenal strength as we see a young lion leap out of a vineyard to attack Samson only to have Samson tear it in two with his bare hands

It's an exciting occurrence that we could easily get caught up in and so miss the details that matter most

First, we might well wonder why Samson took a detour into the vineyards in the first place given his status as a Nazirite

Remember, he was forbidden from consuming grapes in any form so he had no business in a vineyard

I doubt that he just happened to find himself there in the midst of all that forbidden fruit

And I suspect he ducked in among the vines looking for a quick snack without regard to his status as a Nazirite

Second, his killing of the lion produced a corpse and he was forbidden from being in the presence of a dead body

And while there was nothing wrong with Samson defending himself as he did, there were rules for dealing with such an occurrence

You can read about how a Nazirite purified themselves after being in the presence of death in Numbers 6:9-12

Suffice it to say that it was a lengthy process that lasted eight days and involved shaving ones' head and recommitting to the vow - which Samson obviously didn't do - so he remained ceremonially unclean

Third, we see that the Spirit of the Lord “rushed upon” Samson giving him his superhuman strength which makes us wonder if Samson recognized the source of his power because the text seems to imply that it came and went quickly

We have all heard stories of people who were able to lift immense weights while under stress that they normally would not be able to think of budging and it seems that Samson’s tearing of the lion was like that - a surge of miraculous power

And, **fourth**, Samson doesn’t tell his parents about the encounter

That raises the question of motive because it seems like the kind of thing a guy would share - especially a guy like Samson

We could guess at his motive but perhaps the most obvious reason is God prevented him from sharing to make what comes later possible

Because we will come to recognize that this event is God’s doing as Samson acts in a manner consistent with his character and the lion is sent as an agent of the Lord to provide the catalyst to a chain reaction that will ensue later on

And in verse 7 we read that Samson and his parents continued on to Timnah and it is reported that Samson talks to the woman he is demanding to marry for the first time and still finds her to be the right one for him

When the account resumes in verse 8 we read the words “After some days” but we aren’t told how long the gap is between the first and second trips to Timnah but we are going to learn that it had to have been awhile

Arranging a marriage was a protracted affair in those days that could take months and even up to a year

And that is likely in this case because we see Samson remember his encounter with the lion as he turns aside to go and look at its carcass - again this is an odd thing for a Nazirite to be doing but Samson is obviously casual about his calling

What he finds when he arrives at the spot is surprising - a swarm of bees has taken up residence in the carcass

This also appears to be an irrelevant detail at first glance but it is vitally important and significant for two reasons:

First, bees don’t normally take up residence in corpses - corpses are the domain of flies and worms

It seems that God must have caused the lions to dehydrate quickly so that its flesh didn’t putrefy and thus the carcass provided a shell suitable for a beehive where the bees could build a comb and produce honey

Second, the honey produced by the bees provides a test for Samson

Empowered by the Spirit, he had passed the physical test when he tore the lion in two but the honey will really test the spiritual mettle of a man like Samson who wants what he sees and takes it

And, of course, Samson fails the test as we see him without any hesitation scrape some of the honey out of the lion's corpse with his hands and go on his way toward Timnah eating it without a care in the world
We don't want to miss the significance of this simple act

First, contact with a corpse made an object or person ceremonially unclean - any normal Israelite should have left the honey alone because it was unclean and would render them unclean

Second, as a Nazirite, contact with a corpse was particularly defiling

Third, Samson casually and callously involves his parents in his defilement as he shares some of the honey with them without telling them its source

Apparently the only thing that matters to Samson is the satisfaction of his appetites as he demonstrates that he cares nothing about his ritual cleanliness or that of others - his perversity seems to know no bounds

And so, unaware that they have been defiled, we read that they continued on their journey to Timnah where Samson's father would make the final arrangements for the wedding

III. Scene 3: Samson's wedding

In verse 10 we see Samson host a wedding feast to celebrate his marriage which seems innocent enough
After all, a wedding today typically involves a rehearsal dinner and a reception after the ceremony

But the feast Samson held was nothing like a modern-day wedding reception

The Hebrew word translated as "feast" is actually the word for a drinking bout

The Philistines were a drinking people and drinking vessels, from mugs to large drinking bowls, are the most common artifacts unearthed at archeological digs of Philistine cities

The feast that Samson put on was a seven-day drinking binge where wine, beer, and other strong drink flowed freely

We could be generous and assume that Samson abstained as his guests imbibed but I doubt any of us believe that

So we see one more element of Samson's Nazirite vow disregarded and broken

Then we come to the part about thirty "companions" in verse 11 and they present us with a bit of a puzzle

Some think that since Samson was from out of town he didn't have any of his pals there to celebrate with him so the Philistines provided him with some of their young men to flesh out the party

But there is evidence in the Hebrew text that makes this doubtful

I don't want to spend too much time on this but the Hebrew doesn't say that these thirty young men were "brought" to Samson as our ESV Bible renders it or that they were "given" as the NIV Bible translates it

What the Hebrew says is that they were "taken" - these were conscripts assigned to be with Samson

I think these may well have been guards meant to keep an eye on Samson - that it was a somewhat hostile act on the part of the Philistines perhaps because they were mistrustful or even afraid of Samson

That interpretation would fit well with the revelation that God was seeking to stir up tension between Israel and Philistia

Whatever the case, Samson doesn't seem bothered by their presence as he makes a game out of it as he proposes a riddle - a kind of wager for thirty suits of clothes

If his "companions" can solve the riddle Samson will provide each of them with a new suit but if they fail each of them has to give Samson a suit

And the guards were more than willing to take the challenge so Samson posed his riddle - a really unfair riddle that no one could possibly solve unless they knew about Samson's encounter with the lion - which only he knew about

For three days they worked on a solution only to be frustrated so on the fourth day they turned to Samson's new wife

Their level of frustration and panic is evident as they don't come to her with soft words in an attempt to cajole her into discovering and revealing the answer

No, they come and threaten to kill her and her whole family by burning them as they accused her of being complicit in the whole affair with Samson

Sufficiently motivated, Samson's bride first pleads with Samson to tell her the answer with the age-old tactic of raising the question as to whether he truly loves her

And we really aren't surprised to see selfish Samson declare that he doesn't regard his relationship with her as any more intimate or special than that he has with his parents - who he has already demonstrated blatant disregard for

But she persisted; weeping and pleading for the remainder of the feast until finally, on the last day of the feast, Samson caved and told her the answer which she immediately conveyed to her countrymen

This isn't the last time we will encounter Samson's weakness around weeping women and their betrayal once they get what they want

The Philistines then timed their approach to Samson with their answer for the greatest dramatic effect as they came to him at the last moment - right before sundown on the last day of the feast

And they frame their answer to his riddle in the form of another riddle

In the context of the wedding it seems that the Philistines were mocking Samson with their riddle because the answer they were implying was that the sweeter thing was an enticing woman and the stronger was Samson

And Samson had proven to be putty in the hands of his new wife when she turned on the waterworks Samson responds with another "two-liner" as he retorts, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle."

And yes, that is just as insulting toward his wife in the Hebrew as it is in the English as he accused both her and the Philistine guards of sexual infidelity - even though we have no evidence that was the case as only the threat is recorded

Still, Samson knew he had lost the wager even if the Philistines had cheated and he was ticked about it

Verses 19-20 represent the climax of the whole account as we see Samson pay his debt in a way no one would have imagined

In verse 19 we again see “the Spirit of the Lord” rush upon Samson and he is thereby impelled to go down to Ashkelon where he struck down thirty men showing that once again the Spirit gave Samson super-human strength

And then Samson stripped the bodies of their clothing and brought the thirty garments back to Timnah and thereby provided the thirty Philistine “companions” with the promised garments

Ashkelon was some 25 miles from Timnah and was the main city of Philistia so impetuous, self-centered, vengeful Samson, while under the control of the Spirit, had struck the very heart of Philistia

And so God used the temperament of Samson to sow seeds of conflict between Samson and the Philistines

However, the fact that we don’t see any reaction on the part of the Philistines tells us that the residents of Ashkelon likely didn’t know who it was who committed the thirty murders

And since Samson struck so far from Timnah the Philistines there apparently didn’t immediately connect the dots either

So the matter ended without any further hostilities and we see Samson stomp back to his father’s house still fuming

Then in verse 20 we see another seed of conflict sown as his father-in-law assumed Samson had repudiated his daughter so he gave her to the Philistine who served as Samson’s best man as was customary in those cases

And that’s this week’s cliff-hanger of an ending that sets us up for next week when we’ll look at chapter 15 to see how Samson reacts to this latest development

Conclusion

Certainly we can see lessons here as Samson provides us with a negative example

Samson seems to be the embodiment of walking by sight and not by faith contrary to **2Corinthians 5:7** as he shows himself to be a man governed by his senses and appetites

And Samson is careless about his calling

So careless it seems that he might well be purposely sabotaging it

He’s also shown to be disrespectful to his parents, disobedient to God’s law for all Israel, devoid of loyalty to his people, compromising in his ethics, rude to his wife, and flippant with his words

It’s not a flattering portrait to say the least and the only time he is able to do anything positive is when he is empowered by the Spirit of God

In all his ways, Samson is a one-man embodiment of the nation of Israel at that point in history

Consider that Samson, like Israel, was raised up and uniquely set apart, called and gifted for divine service

And he not only freely fraternizes with the enemy but seeks to live among them and even join himself to them at the most fundamental level - just like Israel was doing

But we also see that God is in control as we're let in on the secret that God is working to provoke tension between Israel and the Philistines so as to cause a fight that will extricate Israel from their control and influence

Perhaps the most important thing we learn about God is that he can and will use imperfect tools to fulfill his sovereign will

Samson had no idea that he was actually working on God's behalf as he acted according to his nature

And yet everything he did served to further God's interests in bringing about the rift God wanted

Therefore, we see that God isn't limited by our flaws and weaknesses

And while that serves as a kind of encouragement, wouldn't we rather be used for our strengths rather than in spite of our weaknesses?

But we also learn that any good we do is to God's credit

Like Samson, we can only act as the Holy Spirit enables us and all praise must go to God for the good we accomplish in the Spirit's power

As a side note, I had a revelation as a result of seeing that both times Samson is shown to have great strength it was because the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him

Maybe this won't be news to you but have you ever noticed that nowhere does the Bible say that Samson was a big, muscular dude?

We always see him pictured [Samson] that way because we infer from his account that he must have looked like a body builder

But Scripture never says he appeared different in any way from everyone else except he had long hair that had never been cut

His strength was not a result of his muscularity and perhaps not even continual

Rather it seems that it was the result of God intermittently empowering him for his service and I suspect Samson only had immense strength when God supernaturally gave it to him to accomplish his ends

Lastly, we are reminded that God's ways are not our ways

Samson's desire for the Philistine woman was contrary to God's law for Israel and his actions were often contrary to his status as a Nazirite - but God not only permitted those things; he set them up and used them to accomplish his will

Of course, Samson was acting according to his nature and he acted on his own volition and he alone bore the guilt for the things he did

But we do see that God was behind the scenes orchestrating the events that gave Samson the opportunity to do what he did

We may not always be able to predict how God will work in any given situation, but we know that he will always be working toward accomplishing his ends and we know that his ends are always ultimately good

Even when his servants and their actions are flawed, God's will is certain to prevail

Because God's faithfulness to his people and his success in accomplishing his will is not dependent on anything but his character and might

So we can trust in God's sovereignty and faithfulness no matter how dismal things appear

Let's pray

James 1:22-25 (page 1011)

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.