

Sermon 11: Judges 13: The Birth of Samson

OUTLINE

God works in darkness
God works through weakness
God works despite ignorance

INTRODUCTION

We come now to the last of the judges, Samson. Among all the judges he stands out. He more than any other judge is more evidently appointed by God, this is seen in a miraculous birth. He more than any other has evident gifts fit to deliver Israel from her enemies. He who should have been the greatest hero turned out to be one of the greatest disappointments. Samson seems set up to appear like he is a microcosm of Israel. One comparison draws out these points: both are miraculously brought into being by God; both are called to live a consecrated and devout life; both prove to be rash and immature; both are addicted to foreign women and are unequally yoked; both experience bondage and oppression due to their infidelity; both are abandoned by God though they are unaware of it; both are blinded; both cry out to God from oppression. As with all of the other disappointing judges it is God who stands out as the real hero, their dark lives act as a canvas to contrast his grace with our sin, His strength with our weakness. Even though he had the most powerful gifts he became more like those he was supposed to defeat than any of the others. He who should have defeated and overrun the enemies of God became more entangled with them than any other. In fact we will see that instead of Samson bringing about the deliverance of Israel as he fulfils his role as a judge; rather Israel is incidentally delivered as Samson tries to disentangle himself from his own foolish decisions. The actions of God to liberate Israel through Samson are of grace from beginning to end. The cycle pattern of the judges is all but eroded at this point. The following chapters show the people of God like the nations, they are apathetic to their oppression; fraternize with them; and we will even see Judah capture Samson to hand him over to the Philistines. There was no repentance that prompted His gracious advances in causing Samson to be born, and very unideal conditions that God worked in spite of, in order to save Israel. Today we will look at Samson's birth.

God works in darkness

V1, '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.' Our scene begins with a period of oppression as long as Israel wandered around in the wilderness. This protracted period of 40 years under the Philistines sees the rise to prominence of a new power which began just before Jephthah's rule and will endure through Saul's reign finally killing Saul and Jonathan until finally David totally suppresses the Philistines. The Philistines came to be in Israel through a failed attempt to invade Egypt and the Pharaoh then settling them in coastal towns which led to them becoming a thorn in Israel's side. We have seen the reign of three judges, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon who had many sons and appeared to practice intermarriage and acted like kings but who did not bring the land peace. It is time for the Lord to intervene into this dark situation. We do not see the usual pattern of the people crying out first and then God acting instead we

see God on His own gracious initiative sending a saviour. God as always makes the first move.

This reminds us of what God has done in the gospel. We are all dead in sins, we have all fallen short of the glory of God, it was not because we repented that God sent Christ but we were all under wrath and worthy of judgement. However, God in His kindness and grace took the initiative towards sinners who hated Him and were replacing Him with idols. He chose to save His enemies by paying the high cost of Christ for them. Paul puts it well in Romans 5:8, 'but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'

It is worth stopping and pondering the phrase, 'what was evil in the sight of the Lord.' What is sin? Today sin is something that we do against man or ourselves. Sin is thought of as the highest crimes against man but not God. Today the biggest sin is not being true to yourself; not acknowledging your feelings; and not acknowledging the feelings and identity of others. How man centred and feeling centred our definition of sin has become. How typical. When you remove God from His central position we replace Him with something else, man is now at the centre of all things and sin is redefined around our emotions. Here we are reminded that our revisions of the definition of sin are inadequate. Sin is that which is evil in the sight of the Lord. His nature; His will which is revealed in His word defines sin. The unbeliever condones drunkenness, sexual immorality, greed, rebelliousness, gender non-conformity etc. but God does not. We can be warped in what we approve God cannot look upon evil with approval.

God works through weakness

The story of Samson's birth reminds us of one of the main ways that God works, that He shows His strength through weakness. It has often happened that God has magnified His strength and the fact that flesh does not save itself by working through miraculous births. We see in Sarah, Hannah, Rebekah, Rachel, Elizabeth and Mary that impossible births are used to advance His purposes. God chooses to use this method in particular in fulfilment of the original promise in Gen. 3:15 that the Seed would be born to a woman who would crush satan's head. Weakness is God's opportunity because it is the truth about us unable to save ourselves, and it is the canvas upon which we see that our own hope for salvation is God not ourselves. Here we see Samson's mother, in Scripture a nameless woman who is added to this prestigious line of blessed women whom the Lord used to show His strength 13:2-3, 'There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children. ³And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son.' Although Samson himself has no resemblance to Jesus Christ in his character, this miraculous intervention of God is a prefiguring of the birth of the Saviour who would save His people from their sins.

Manoah's wife is given instruction that Samson is to be a Nazirite from the womb to the tomb. And that she is to keep his vows vicariously even while he is in the womb, v4-5, 'Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, ⁵for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. 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.' The rules of the Nazirite can be found in Numbers 6. John the Baptist, Samuel and Samson are the only life-long Nazirites, ordinarily the condition of being a Nazirite was

temporary, but as a foreshadow of Christ Samson was to be consecrated to God from the womb to the tomb pointing to His life of active and passive obedience. Likewise Samson was not voluntarily a Nazirite but was set apart by God from birth. Nazirite vows were vows of dedication to God. It is a form of dedication shown in a type of mourning. Think of a period of official mourning marked by outward signs, where you give yourself over to an intense focused time of mourning. The Nazirite vow was this as a time of focused consecration to God. You could make the application that the whole of the Christian life is like a permanent Nazirite vow in the sense that we are a living sacrifice. One's personal appearance was neglected by not cutting their hair. There was a show of being set apart for training and discipline by the abstinence, and a priest-like consecration in not touching dead bodies or drinking wine which priests were not allowed to drink while about their priestly functions. Hair, avoiding contact with the dead and the fruit of the vine were the 3 essentials of any Nazirite vow. We will see that Samson violates all three of these conditions. Even though God defined Samson for set apart service even before he was born, being raised in an institution but without a heart change means nothing and can achieve nothing. Every human being is made for service being made in the image of God, some of us were even born into Christian homes, and brought up in church. But how many are like Samson, in a privileged position, fitted for service, existing by God's grace; but instead of purity and dedicated service we are rash, headstrong, driven by passion and conceit?

Incidentally I see these verses as also affirming the personhood of the unborn baby. In our modern age that seeks to justify abortion some have tried to say that the bible is not a text book that clearly identifies the newly conceived child as a person. It is true that the bible does not speak in terms of trimesters, fetuses and embryos, but we do see that Samson's Nazirite vow had to be kept on his behalf vicariously through his mother when he could not keep it himself. God was requiring obedience to the vow from Samson through his mother, this sees God treating Samson, even though unborn as a person whose vows must be kept.

God works despite ignorance

Manoah's wife went to tell him that a man of God had appeared to her and he prayed that the man of God might return v6-8, 'Then the woman came and told her husband, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name, ' but he said to me, 'Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death. 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.' Manoah does not seem to be painted in a positive light and his wife appears to have more faith and a better understanding of things than him. Some suggest that Manoah almost jealously is trying to insert himself into the situation. God graciously answers his prayer but once again the angel appears to his wife not him, v9-10, 'And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field. But Manoah her husband was not with her. ¹⁰ So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, "Behold, the man who came to me the other day has appeared to me." Manoah tries to get more info out of the angel who merely repeats what was said to his wife, v11-14, 'And Manoah arose and went after his wife and came to the man

and said to him, "Are you the man who spoke to this woman?" And he said, "I am." ¹² And Manoah said, "Now when your words come true, what is to be the child's manner of life, and what is his mission?" ¹³ And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, "Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful. ¹⁴ She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. All that I commanded her let her observe."

The last section of this chapter has a Gideon like moment where Manoah and his wife experience 'God with us.' Manoah's experience highlights God's kindness to Israel. Manoah was in a hopeless no future situation under the physical effects of the Mosaic curse with no offspring while being oppressed in the land. A messenger of God arrives with a promise, Manoah typically underestimates the messenger and seeks assurances about the promise. Manoah's wife seems to have a more willing faith and a quicker grasp that there is more to this messenger, in v6 we see that she calls him a man of God, with the appearance of an angel which was very awesome. Manoah begins by thinking that the messenger is merely a 'man' who spoke to his wife, and treats him with traditional ancient hospitality, v15, 'Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, "Please let us detain you and prepare a young goat for you." The angel seems to rebuke Manoah for not recognizing God for this promise and refuses food to make an offering instead, v16, 'And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I will not eat of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the Lord." (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord.)' Manoah still missing things asks for the angels name to honor him, v17, 'And Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, "What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?" Despite this ignorance the angel answers, v18, 'And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?" Now we know that the Angel of the LORD is a curious figure in the OT. The Angel of the Lord speaks in the first person as God; is often associated with the presence of God, and so many scholars think him a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. Here Manoah asks his name, and where it appears He does not answer, I think He does. I can't help but think of Is. 9:6, there like here the context is the promise of a child who will deliver and rule, 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' V19-20, 'So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to the one who works wonders, and Manoah and his wife were watching. ²⁰ And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground.' Manoah's perspective is radically changed. What he thought was merely a man, even a messenger from God he realizes was God Himself. How many have had this realization concerning Christ. The only appropriate action is to fall on our faces.

Manoah's ignorance continues though. V21-23, 'The angel of the Lord appeared no more to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord. ²² And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." ²³ But his wife said to him, "If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these." As with many others Manoah associates the Angel of the Lord with the presence of God preparing us for the NT doctrine of the Trinity where God who is One is tripersonal. Manoah has a sinner's first impression of God, He will kill us. Now

those instincts are not altogether wrong. We are sinful, He is holy and just, we are deserving of punishment. To be in the presence of God is no small affair we see in the angels of God's court who cover their eyes and feet that God is immeasurably holy. But Manoah misses what his wife sees. God did not come among them to destroy them but to save them. This is what we see when God comes in the flesh in Jesus Christ, John 3:17, 'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' Manoah's wife is informed where he is ignorant. She recognizes that God has accepted their offering, that fellowship between God and sinners can occur because an offering has paved the way. More than that she reflects on what God has revealed. God has promised a child to be born to deliver them, would God now kill them in light of what He has revealed. Where many have a reaction to God's holiness and think that He desires to simply wipe us out, we can learn from Manoah's wife's faith to look at the sufficiency of the sacrifice that has been accepted by God; and the promise and intention of God to save and have confidence in His presence that He is willing to save sinners.

V24, 'And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the Lord blessed him.' Promises have been made and here they are spelled out as kept. The promise of a child fulfilled; the promise of a son fulfilled. But the ignorance of this couple could be further amplified by the name they give the child that God has given to them, they call him Samson, this can mean something like 'Sunnyboy' or more insidiously Son of the Sun. In Canaanite religion the sun was worshipped as a god, and this couple may be betraying their syncretistic views by seeing this gift and miracle wrought by God as by a Canaanite god.

But despite this obvious wrong God's Spirit begins to stir in the young man, v25. Technically this verse belongs to the next chapter but it is encouraging for us to note that God does not wait for perfect conditions to act because He acts by His grace.