

“Behold, You Shall Conceive and Bear a Son ”

The one hundred and third in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 13:1-14:20; Luke 1:26-38

Many of us were raised on “Bible stories.” One of the most famous of these is the story of the long-haired Samson, and his evil paramour, Delilah. As we have seen throughout our time in Judges, the various men (and one woman—Deborah) whom we know as the “judges” are raised up by God to rescue his people from their plight whenever Israel falls into sin, and is nearly overcome by neighboring enemies. While many Bible stories present these people as role models for Christians to emulate, the fact of the matter is these people are not role models. Rather, they are living illustrations to us as to how deeply sin is rooted in the human heart, including our own. Gideon is not presented in Judges as an example so I can be a “Gideon.” Gideon is a man who is weak in faith, who needs constant reassurance, and who uses his success in battle as the basis to establish a personal empire. Gideon is not an example for me to follow. Rather, Gideon is a picture to me of . . . me. The judges we meet in this book are all sinners who are used by God to save Israel. But the grim fact is these judges can do absolutely nothing to deal with Israel’s deepest problem—human sin. Therefore, these judges are a constant reminder that while God can and does use sinful men and women to accomplish his purposes, it will take a messiah, who is both God and man, to save us from the guilt and power of sin.

Now that we have made our way nearly to the end of the book of Judges, it is obvious that the Judges we have already met—Ehud, Deborah and Barak, Gideon, and Jephthah—would make great characters in a novel, a movie, or even a soap opera. Although God uses them to accomplish his purposes, their sinful behavior, and their personal foibles shock us. Yet, the reality is that these people are just like us. My guess is that the reason that we remember these characters we read about in our youth so vividly into adulthood, is precisely because they are such scoundrels. The best way to prove this my thesis is with a simple question. “Which of Israel’s Judges is the most faithful, and the most successful?”

It is Othniel. Why do we forget about him? Because Othniel was faithful, he married an Israelite, and he did just as YHWH commanded him to do. So, we forget the one Judge who makes the best role model, and who is, in many ways, the very antithesis of the more dramatic Samson—the subject of the next section of Judges. Samson—someone we all remember—is a man who seems trapped between faith in YHWH, and the lusts of the flesh. In this sense, Samson is just like us, struggling with his sins. He is a mighty warrior, even a savior of sorts, and yet Samson is a hot-head and a notorious womanizer. He is given the Holy Spirit, yet he breaks his vows, and stumbles along through life, disobeying the will of God, and suffering the consequences. As we cover the details of his mis-spent life and heroic death, we see yet again, that no sinful human can save our fallen race from the guilt and power of sin.

The account of Samson opens in verse 1 of chapter 13, with an abbreviated version of the now familiar refrain to the reader of Judges.

“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.” Back in Judges 10:7, the author made it plain that Israel’s two greatest threats would come from the Ammonites and the Philistines. In the account of Jephthah, we read of Israel’s deliverance from the Ammonites. Now the author returns to describe a forty-year Philistine oppression of Israel. When Israel entered Canaan and settled in the promised land, the Philistines (known as the Sea Peoples, because they originally came from the Island of Crete) settled in what is now

the Gaza strip. This means that the Palestinians and the Israelites whom you see fighting each other every night on the evening news, are, in some sense continuing a war that extends back some three thousand years. As chapter 13 of Judges opens, we read that the Israelites continue to reject YHWH and his law. And so once again YHWH gave them over to forty years of oppression at the hands of one of Israel's most feared enemies—the Philistines.

It is important that we notice that a real but subtle change has occurred as we come the account of Samson, the sixth and final judge. Previously, the pattern was that when Israel fell into unbelief and YHWH sent an oppressor, the people of Israel cried out to YHWH for deliverance. But this time we read nothing of Israel crying out to God. In fact, those living in the southern part of the nation are living side by side with the Philistines, and are, apparently, so comfortable living like pagans, that God himself must take the initiative to create a situation which causes a rift between Israel and the pagan Philistines.¹ Things have gone downhill a great deal since the days of the pagan Shamgar (mentioned as one of the minor Judges) who saved Israel by killing 600 Philistines with an ox-goad. By the time of Samson, the Philistines occupy much of southern Israel and no one in Israel seems to care. But after the time of Samson, Israel will live in a state of great tension with the Philistines, so much so that in the days of Samuel, the people cry out for a king who will lead them into battle against those whom once again they consider to be enemies.

It is the midst of Israel's seemingly peaceful co-existence with the Philistines (who are often referred to as the "uncircumcised"—a reference to their godlessness), that YHWH disrupts the peace. God sends a messenger to a barren, unnamed woman, from the tribe of Dan. YHWH's messenger informs her and her husband (Manoah) that God will give them a son who will become the sixth in the series of Israel's judges (deliverers). Israel might be comfortable living among pagans, but YHWH won't allow it.

In Judges 13:2, the account of Samson begins with the introduction of the people who will figure prominently in what follows. *"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."* Zorah is a small village between the territories of Judah and Dan, fourteen miles from Jerusalem—the very heart of Israel. While Manoah's wife is not named, she plays a central role in the account, as we see in verses 3-5. *"And 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. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for 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 fact that God chooses to do the seemingly impossible—use a barren woman to accomplish his purposes—certainly recalls to mind similar instances in redemptive-history. We immediately think of women like Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth, and with two of these women, the angel of the Lord likewise foretold of an unexpected birth. During this period of redemptive-history, barren Israelite women were considered to be cursed, and so this announcement is not only telling us that something dramatic is about to happen, the angel brings a word of grace to this unnamed woman.*

After the visitation from the angel of the Lord (who is the preincarnate Christ), we are told in verses 6-7 that *"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*

¹ Block, Judges, Ruth, 392.

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.”” While the woman was overwhelmed by the messenger’s appearance, she is very clear about what was promised (she would have a son), and that she was to raise him as a Nazarite—the specifics of which are spelled out in Numbers 6. Usually a Nazarite vow was voluntarily undertaken and was to last for a limited period of time. But in this case, Samson was to live according to this vow, all the days of his life,² something he fails to do.

Taken aback by the fact that the angel had appeared to his wife, rather than to him, Manoah seeks to hear the same message himself. As we read in verses 8-14, “*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.’ 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. So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, ‘Behold, the man who came to me the other day has appeared to me.’ 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.’ And Manoah said, ‘Now when your words come true, what is to be the child’s manner of life, and what is his mission?’ And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, ‘Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful. 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.’”* Notice that upon hearing his wife’s report, Manoah speaks to God directly, and pleads with him for the messenger to return. He wants to hear for himself what the angel told his wife. Understandably, Manoah wants to know what will become of his son. YHWH complies, but will not be manipulated, and once again sends the messenger to Manoah’s wife, who, dutifully reports everything to her husband.

From verses 15-16, it is clear that Manoah’s response to the angel is one of gratitude, expressed in the form of an invitation to a fellowship meal. “*Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, ‘Please let us detain you and prepare a young goat for you.’ 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.)”* Throughout this period in redemptive history, God often communicates through his Malak (messenger), or angel of the Lord. In this case the angel takes some sort of physical form, and Manoah offers him a meal, which the angel steadfastly refuses.

While the angel is willing to be detained, he is not willing to eat. Perplexed by this, Manoah asks the messenger to reveal his name. People in this period believed that someone’s name revealed their character. Manoah is likely fishing to see if the angel is telling him the truth about the birth of a son. And so “*Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, ‘What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?’”* The angel refused his food, now the angel refuses Manoah’s request to learn his name. “*And the angel of the Lord said to him, ‘Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?’”* This is the angel’s way (politely) of telling Manoah to accept his word of promise. The angel’s person and work would be completely incomprehensible to Manoah. Manoah doesn’t have a clue about what has just happened. It is another act of grace when the angel veils his true identity to Manoah.

Manoah’s response is to make an offering to the Lord, just as the angel instructed. “*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. 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*

² Cundall, Judges & Ruth, 157.

fell on their faces to the ground.” Just as suddenly as he had appeared, the angel was gone. Having been in the presence of the Holy One, we read in verses 21-22, “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. And Manoah said to his wife, ‘We shall surely die, for we have seen God.’” God had chosen this woman to give birth to Israel’s next judge (deliverer). But this couple was still afraid. So much so that the episode ends in verse 23 with the Manoah’s wife offering wise words of comfort to her husband. “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.’”

In the closing verses of Judges 13 and throughout the balance of chapter 14, we come to the account of Samson, the promised child, and next judge (redeemer) of Israel.

In Judges 13:24-25, the promised child’s birth is announced in very straight-forward terms. “*And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the Lord blessed him. And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.*” Interestingly enough, the name Samson was in common use by Canaanites before the Israelites settled there—it is a pagan name. Here, in words reminiscent of the early years of both John and Baptist and Jesus, we are told that the Lord blessed Samson, and that YHWH’s Spirit was upon him, an indication that he will be used for God’s purposes in delivering his people from the Philistines.

The degree of the Canaanization of Israel can be seen in the first 3 verses of chapter 14. “*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.’ But his father and mother said to him, ‘Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?’ But Samson said to his father, ‘Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes.’”* Manoah and his wife knew it was a violation of God’s law for Samson to take Philistine wife (i.e., Exodus 34:16), but nevertheless he takes a Philistine wife anyway.

That being said, verse 4 informs us of the fact that YHWH is working through Samson, despite his sinful desire for a non-Israelite woman. “*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.*” This tells us that YHWH is going to use Samson to accomplish his purposes and disrupt the cozy relationship between Israel and the Philistines. As one writer points out, “if the Israelites do not have the heart to take action against the Philistines, God will cause the Philistines to take action against them.”³ That is exactly what is going on here—God will not allow Israel to lose their covenantal identity as his people. He will intervene. In this case, in the most surprising of ways, through the most unlikely of men.

Having pressured his family to arrange a marriage to a Philistine woman, Samson leaves for her hometown for the wedding. But as the reader of Judges has come to expect, the story takes a sudden and very unexpected turn. As we read in verses 5-8, “*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.*” The lion attack seems

³ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 426.

random, but is vital to the story. It is clear that YHWH's Spirit gave Samson the strength to kill the lion, but we are not sure if Samson himself understands what has happened, or if he sees the hand of God. Samson is far more interested in the woman who was "*right in his eyes.*"

In verses 8-9, we learn that "*after some days [Samson] returned to take her. And he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. He scraped it out into his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion.*" Clearly, this is not an ordinary occurrence. According to the terms of his Nazarite vow in Numbers 6, Samson was not allowed to come near a corpse. When he takes the honey from the carcass of the lion (supernaturally preserved), he has broken his vow, which explains why he didn't tell his parents about the source of the honey. Even worse, he knowingly gave to them some of the honey to eat, which he clearly knew was ceremonially unclean, rendering them unclean as well.

In verse 10, we read that "*His father went down to the woman, and Samson prepared a feast there, for so the young men used to do.*" In an act of willful disobedience to his Nazarite vow, Samson attends the wedding feast—a seven day drinking bash in the home of the bride's parents—an event which causes the local authorities to send security guards as recounted in verse 11. "*As soon as the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him.*" The reference to these "thirty companions" likely indicates that the Philistines regarded the presence of Samson as a threat. And so they placed thirty men—like modern security guards—on site to keep things from getting out of hand.

Samson isn't bothered by this, and even makes light of it, asking the men a riddle. As we read in verses 12-14 "*Samson said to them, 'Let me now put a riddle to you. If you can tell me what it is, within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes, but if you cannot tell me what it is, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes.'* And they said to him, '*Put your riddle, that we may hear it.*' And he said to them, '*Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet.*' And in three days they could not solve the riddle." Samson, is of course, referring to the lion carcass and the honey.

Samson's guards are stumped by the riddle and begin making threats against his new bride. "*On the fourth day they said to Samson's wife, 'Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is, lest we burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us?'*" This puts Samson's new wife in a very tough spot with her people. "*And Samson's wife wept over him and said, 'You only hate me; you do not love me. You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is.'*" Samson's response to his wife is cold-hearted and indifferent. "*And he said to her, 'Behold, I have not told my father nor my mother, and shall I tell you?'*" Not surprisingly, the new bride, "*wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted, and on the seventh day he told her, because she pressed him hard.*" Samson's wife, in turn "*told the riddle to her people.*"

According to verse 18, "*And the men of the city said to [Samson] on the seventh day before the sun went down, 'What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?'*" Samson quickly realizes that he's lost the bet, and that the Philistines have figured out his riddle. Despite Samson's great physical strength, his personal weakness has been revealed when pillow talk with his wife is now thrown back in his face by his enemies. The Philistine men mocking him may even be aware that he has broken his Nazarite vows. Samson reacts in anger and disparages both the Philistines and his wife with another quip. "*And he said to them, 'If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle.'*" Samson accuses them of cheating, and calls his new wife a heifer (cow).

We now come to the key point of the story—not only is Samson’s marriage short-lived, but using Samson’s rage, YHWH disrupts the peaceful co-existence between his people and the Philistines. As we learn in verses 19-20, *“And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon [Samson], and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of the town and took their spoil and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle. In hot anger he went back to his father's house. And Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.”* Samson not only killed thirty men in the neighboring town, but he mocks the thirty men who have been guarding him by giving them their dead countrymen’s garments. In a rage, he returns to his father’s house and leaves his wife to one of the security guards.

As we will see next time, Samson will kill a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey, he will end up with the deceptive Delilah, become an object of ridicule to the Philistines, and yet dies a hero. Such are Israel’s judges. And such is the mysterious way in which God accomplishes his purposes.

What, then, are we to take from such a passage?

When we come to the dawn of the messianic age and the birth of a Savior as recounted in Luke 1:26-38, we not only see how God must send his eternal son to save sinners from their sin, we see Israel’s final redeemer born in a miraculous way, completely surpassing the surprising but completely natural conception of Samson. No doubt, the language used by the Angel to announce the birth of Jesus echoes the announcement made to Manaoh’s wife. *“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”* It will take God in human flesh to finally bring to pass salvation for God’s people. This child will save his people from their sins. Unlike Israel’s judges, Mary’s son will live a sinless life and die a sacrificial death so that we might be delivered from sin’s guilt and its power. Unlike Israel’s judges, this child will deal with our fundamental problem—not oppression from our godless, pagan neighbors—but with that sin which has enslaved our race from the days of our first father, Adam.

And while the gospels tell us of people who were longing for the time of God’s long-expected salvation, the sad fact is that most of the people in Israel at the time of Jesus were still pretty much in the same spiritual state as they had been back in the days of the Judges. Yes, the Jews at the time of Jesus’ birth chafed under Roman rule. But even though many longed for the coming of the Messiah, they did so for the wrong reasons. Just as in the days of the Judges, when Israel longed for a king so as to be rid of a Gentile oppressor, in the days of Jesus, Israel wanted a king, and they wanted to become a great nation again. But many in Israel did not want a Savior who would summon them to die to sin and self.

Thus, in many ways, the birth of Jesus accomplishes on a grand scale, the same kind of thing as the birth of Samson—God completely disrupts the status quo of his sinful and apathetic people, who were quite content to turn their backs upon him and do what is right in their own eyes, even though he had come to them to spare them from that wrath which they deserved and which was certain to come.

And while Jesus comes to us this very Lord’s day through his word and sacrament, visiting us with his promised salvation, he does so in such a way so as to disrupt our sinful complacency. Just as in the days of Samson, and especially with the coming of the Messiah, we, as God’s people cannot simply go on in our sin and ignore our Savior when he comes to us with his word of blessing. Although his mercy knows no bounds and his blood and his righteousness cover every one of our sins, his very holiness moves us to repent of our sins, and seek to do his will. And so we will leave here this morning with the promise that

our sins are forgiven, but at the same time we see yet again that the Savior's grace completely upsets and disrupts our sinful existence.

Beloved, let us leave here this morning fully assured of God's pardon toward us in Christ. Yet let us also leave here with hearts filled with gratitude for all that he has done, desiring to do his will, and bearing witness to those around us of our Savior's love and mercy. Even though God sent Israel a series of redeemers to rescue them from their enemies, these judges could do nothing about human sin. But the redeemer God has sent to us—Jesus Christ—has forever broken sin's guilt and power. This is why the virgin was with child. Our redeemer loves us and has set us free from our sins through his own precious blood. But he will not allow us to be at peace with our sin. Amen.