

A Child Is Born

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[0 : 00] Okay, I'd like you to turn back to Judges, Chapter 13. We're going to look this evening and the next few Sunday evenings.

Well, not next week because it's communion, but the week subsequent to that. God willing, we're going to look at the story of Samson. And it's a great story, the story of Samson.

And I'm going to say a little bit more about Samson in a minute. But before we speak about Samson, I want to just introduce Judges, the book of Judges, very briefly to you, because Judges is a really tragic book in the Bible.

If you want to be depressed, then go to Judges, because it's a disaster. It's a disaster of a book in terms of God's people and their behavior, the way that they abandon God so easily.

It's a... visually, if you could visualize Judges, it's a spiral downwards. That's what it is. It gets worse and worse as you go through the story, because you have the people of God, the Old Testament people of God, they've entered God's promised land, okay?

[1 : 21] You know the story in Joshua and all the great stories of the... you know, Jericho and Ai and all these places. And they've entered the promised land, but they're not great following and loving the Lord.

They keep falling into idolatry. They keep forgetting what God's done for them. And it's a repeated story of release and deliverance from God through different Judges, a period sometimes of good times, and then they begin to gradually get worse and worse and failure, and oppression, and then they get enslaved again, and they cry out to God, and God sends another deliverer, and they get delivered, and then it's okay for them, and then they go...

And it's a repeated story, and it gets... the good times get shorter, and the cries get deeper and louder. Help us, help us Lord! And so he sends Gideon, and he sends Barak, and he sends Deborah, and he sends other Judges that come and release them, and free them from their enemies, and set them back in the promised land.

So here we come to Judges chapter 13, and this is the low point of Judges. It doesn't get lower than this. This is the seventh cycle of plunging into defeat and despair, and crying out to God.

But if you'll notice there's something slightly different about this time. The enemies this time are the Philistines. If you look at verse 1, there's no cry.

[3 : 07] They don't ask for deliverance. They're not enslaved and oppressed, and they're not crying out for God to come and visit them again. This is the only time in Judges that they don't cry out for God to send a deliverer for them.

They did evil in the eyes of the Lord, the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for 40 years. And the reason for that is because this time they were kind of enslaved and taken over, not by the military power and the oppression of an enemy, as it had been in the past.

They were taken over and they were oppressed to some degree by the Philistines. But the Philistines, although they were a very powerful military force, because they had learned the ability to forge iron, and so they had powerful weapons and things like that.

But it wasn't through military might that the people became assimilated here. It was rather through trade and intermarriage.

It was a gentle compromising of the distinctive life of the Israelite people, because they were meant to be God's people, and distinct from the nations around them, because the nations all around them worship idols and didn't follow the morality of God, and didn't trust and believe in God.

[4 : 37] But here was the people of God, and they were assimilated into the culture of the Philistines, not by oppression, but by trade and by intermarriage and by a comfortable lifestyle.

And the Philistines said, yeah, come on in, come on, marry our women. Absolutely. We'll get together. We'll just be similar kind of peoples. We'll trade together. You'll be comfortable. You'll be fairly well off. It'll be fine. Forget about your God. You can worship our idols and things will be good. And that's really the situation that Samson is brought into. And it's a situation where the people of God are very far from God. They've been assimilated into this culture, and they have lost their distinctive, and they are worshipping idols. Okay, so I know it's very different from today, but try and get your head around that.

Try and understand it and see how it relates as we go on. So Samson, if you go home tonight and read through Samson, you'll be a little bit horrified.

[5 : 52] Maybe a long time since you read through Samson. Maybe it was Sunday school last time you read. You know the stories of Samson, there's lions and there's all kinds of things going on, there's foxes, tails getting tied together, and great stories, brilliant stuff.

But maybe it's a long time since you've read Samson. But if you go back and read Samson, you'll think, what is this guy's a complete failure? This guy lets God down and lets everyone down, and he's just lustful and he's selfish and he's disinterested really.

But yet we can be too judgmental. I think too easily judgmental about Samson without really looking at what the Bible is saying.

And we can also look at Samson as if he's a 21st century Christian, with all the privileges we have, with all the knowledge of God's word that we have, with all the historical redemptive history that we know about.

These were very different days. Please remember that as we look at Scripture, as we look at the story of Samson. And remember that he is imperfect. He's God's deliverer, but he's imperfect. I think many people, many commentators, give him a raw deal. I like Samson, and I'm going to defend Samson in the next few weeks.

[7 : 07] Not unreasonably, but maybe look at him with slightly different picture. This is God's man. This is God's man. He's clearly God's man.

We know that from the story tonight that we read. He was raised up by God. He's God's deliverer. He's the one who's been brought by God to begin, we are told, the deliverance from the hand of the Philistines.

He doesn't finish it, we know that. And you know the end of the story, don't you? He's blinded, he goes down the towers. But he begins what God wants him to do, deliverance from the hand of the Philistines. And he is recorded as a man of faith in Hebrews 11, and that's significant for us, isn't it? He's a man of faith. So, Samson, what about his birth then? Very quickly, I just want to go through the story very quickly. A little bit about context after that, and then a little bit about application.

So we wouldn't belong, keep in there. It's significant, good stuff, as we read this Old Testament story. So, we had come at his birth here. This is his birth narrative.

[8 : 25] This is a nativity story in the Old Testament. And God visits this couple, Manoa and his wife, we don't know her name. And I believe they were an isolated couple. God visits, I'll say a little bit more about that in a minute, but God visits this isolated couple. Now, why do I say that they're isolated?

Well, I think they're isolated because we're told very clearly, and the angel of the Lord rather bluntly reminds Manoa's wife that she's childless, that she is sterile, she can't have children.

Now, that in the ancient Near East culture would have been a difficult situation for a married couple to be in. You know that from scripture and from history. Sometimes it was regarded by God's people as shameful, not rightly so, but shameful. They were wrongly judged.

They were often ostracised for not being under God's blessing because they were unable to have children. So, at that level in that society, there would be a degree of isolation for them.

But also, I believe because they were a couple, a people, a husband and wife team, who were at least a degree faithful to God.

[9 : 48] We don't know much about them. We know God chose them. God came and visited them. They knew about prayer. They seemed to be a praying people, and Manoa praised to God.

His wife seemed to have some kind of insight into God's dealings, and they did understand the sacrificial system. So, there's evidence there that these people were at least faithful to a degree, and that also might have isolated them in the synchronistic age that they lived in, and you could

believe in Philistine gods or a little bit of the God of Israel, and a little bit of this and a little bit of that, a little bit of sexual immorality, a little bit of prostitution, and all the things that were going on. There was no distinctive. They may have been isolated because of that. So, we get the story of his birth and the fact that he's visited, and a couple are told this story. They're visited by the angel of the Lord.

It's great. I love the Old Testament, and I love the pictures of the angel of the Lord. Not just an ordinary angel, more than just a messenger. The angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, distinctive, distinctive in different ways.

He often speaks not as a messenger. He doesn't say, thus says the Lord. He doesn't say, I'm coming from heaven with a message from God, but he often will speak in the first person, and he will often identify himself with God, as God, and he will accept worship, all of which happen in this particular story, in the amazing way that he returns as it were in the flames to heaven, so that Manon and his wife, they know about this mysterious angel of the Lord, and say, we haven't just seen a messenger. We've seen the angel of the Lord.

[11:46] We've seen God, and Manon thinks he's going to die because of the privilege of what he has seen. It's what sometimes the commenters would call a theophany, an Old Testament appearance in the flesh, in person, of God, of maybe a pre-incarnate Jesus even.

And his name, as we're reminded in this passage, is beyond understanding or can be translated wonderful, the same name given to the Savior in Isaiah 9 verse 6.

So it's a great story, isn't it? A great birth story. And then we come to the Nazarite vow in the story, in his birth story, because it's remarkable, isn't it, that Samson's going to be set apart because he's going to be a Nazarite.

Now, maybe we don't know what a Nazarite is. Maybe we do. But if you go back to Numbers chapter 6, you'll find out what a Nazarite, someone who took a Nazarite vow was.

And just very simply, it was someone who vowed to be set apart, to serve the Lord in a special way for a temporary amount of time.

[13:11] It was voluntary, it was willing, it was temporary, it was something very public. They didn't cut their hair, they weren't allowed to cut their hair so that after a while, people, well, not in my case, you wouldn't know if I was having a Nazarite vow.

But for these days, their hair wouldn't be manicured, it wouldn't be cut, it would be obvious, it would be public, in other words, that they were involved in this being set apart to God.

And they weren't to drink any fermented drink or wine. Not that these things were evil or wrong, but they were generally a sign of luxury and a sign of opulence and a sign of celebration.

And they were to be disciplined and be set apart for a simple life. And the mark of that was to not drink the fruit of the vine, not be near dead bodies.

They were to be serving God, they weren't to be ceremonially unclean. And that was the Nazarite.

So now Samson's a slightly different, isn't it? It's not quite the same.

[14:24] It's not a voluntary thing for a start. It's God who's setting him apart. And it will become public. And he will not cut his hair, a very famous part of the Samson story.

I'm not so sure about the dead bodies, but nonetheless we have this recognition that Samson is being set apart to serve the Lord.

That's his work. God has decreed that that be the case. So that's the story. What can we make of it?

What can we make of this introduction to the story? Well, can I just place a little bit of context here, just for a minute or two, okay? And remind ourselves that God is unfolding here, his redemptive plan.

This is still part of the Old Testament, remember? Moving towards Jesus Christ. And the reminder to us is that God is working out his purposes to bring us to the place where we know we need a Saviour that's better than Samson.

[15:34] Or better than Moses. Or even better than King David. That none of these are adequate to be Saviours for humanity. And so we find that God is preparing us and teaching us and preparing his people for that.

He's revealing that need that we come to recognise for a greater Redeemer than even a strong man like Samson. Who isn't going to be the kind of Redeemer that will satisfy humanity.

It's a reminder in the context too of the Bible. Maybe sometimes you say, what's the point of judges? Or what's the point of the Old Testament? So this is from my own life and thinking. Remember that redemption, the work of Jesus, the coming of Jesus, is not an afterthought in God's plan.

He didn't try all these things and then come to Jesus and say, oh, now we need to try Jesus. Because everything else hasn't worked. And maybe Jesus will be able to save humanity. But before the creation of the world, we know that Jesus is the only Redeemer. And these initiatives are bringing us to recognise that.

[16:46] They're all part of God's redemptive plan. And also, within this, right through the Old Testament, we find that it's God's initiative.

Humanity really is helpless to redeem itself. Even in a story like this, it's God who intervenes to bring Samson into the picture.

And he does it not by using a superior... Who does he not go to? He doesn't go to the flashiest, nicest, most gifted, richest, most talented couple in the land.

Does he? That's not who uses the most fertile and the most beautiful and the most perfect couple of individuals.

He works into, in the situation, hopeless situations. From a human point of view, barrenness. And he works miracles.

[17:54] He's bringing Redeemers that are not just natural born killers in Samson's case. They're those who God has raised up.

And if you look through the Old Testament, it's very interesting that that is often the case in the people he raises up to be significant in redemptive history.

Can you think of some of them? There's Sarah, who was barren, giving eventually birth to Isaac and Genesis 11. There's Rebecca, Genesis 25, Esau and Jacob. There's Rachel, Genesis 29 to Joseph.

Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 giving birth to Samuel. And then the sadness that she experienced as she cried out to God. Then jump forward to Elizabeth in the New Testament, barren.

And she miraculously bears John the Baptist. And then uniquely, Jesus, not born of barren womb, but a virgin birth, uniquely Jesus Christ.

[18:57] And so we have this picture of Samson that has messianic undertones or overtones, or whichever way you want to look at that. This nativity story in the Old Testament, it's actually quite similar to Jesus' nativity in many ways.

There's a messenger from heaven with a special announcement. There's a calling of the child. There's worship that follows the announcement.

The birth is noted, then there's no record of his childhood. And it goes straight on to him as a grown-up. That could be the nativity story. There are similarities between the birth of Samson and the birth of Jesus.

Because it's pre-messianic, as it were. It's pointing towards a greater messiah. The Old Testament is an unfinished story. Please remember that.

But Christ is not an afterthought. Even at this point, the angel of the Lord, maybe the pre-incarnate Jesus, is thinking about his own birth and his own work on the cross.

[20:10] So, okay, that was context. Very briefly, some points of application. How do you apply Samson? Now, this is the easy chapter in Samson to apply.

I'm not looking forward quite so much to the fox's tails getting tied together and set a light. I'm trying to apply that. But we'll leave that for another week. Maybe get a knee up and preach that week or something. But the application, how can we apply a passage like this for ourselves today?

Well, can we take from it that God uses the unlikeliest of people to do His will? Isn't that great? Just turn with me just for a minute.

It will keep you awake as well. To 1 Corinthians chapter 1, you know this passage well. 1 Corinthians 1 and verse 26.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

[21:12] The weak things to shame the strong. The foolish things and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast. And so that's a great hope

for us, isn't it?

In our lives, God uses the unlikeliest of people. Are you wanting to be a spiritual superman? Are you wanting to be someone who's unusually gifted for God's work?

Well, God uses the unlikeliest of people to do great things for Him. The most ordinary of people. And you and I, we are the most ordinary of people.

But we mustn't therefore think we're not superstars. We can't serve God. We can't do His will. We can't do great things in His name. God uses the unlikeliest of people because it's all about Him. It's all about God and His grace in our lives. And so we can take from this passage, I think that God doesn't see hopelessness in the way that we do.

[22 : 13] I wonder, you know, people may have looked at Manoha and his wife and thought, they're losers. She's barren, they're hopeless, there's nothing for them. I wonder if Manoha and their wife prayed a lot about that.

Lord, please, please help us in this situation. I don't know, it's just unsurprising. They may have done that. If they were people of faith, I'm sure they did. And for them, grace broke into their situation in the most remarkable way.

It wasn't without heartache, but certainly grace broke into their situation. Now, our situations may be very different. Maybe you feel a sense of hopelessness, maybe it's financial, maybe it's relational, bad things going on in your families or in your marriage or in your boyfriend or girlfriend.

It may be to do with your family, maybe to do with a lack of family. You can't have family. Maybe you too are crying out to God. The hopelessness of your situation, maybe it is a lack of faith. You're crying out about that. And can I say that from Scripture we can be assured that God hears our prayers and He answers them.

[23 : 31] It may not be the way we expect. It may not be the answer we want and crave. Because maybe the answer we want has become our idol.

It may be that. But He will bring hope into our situation. He will always bring hope and He doesn't see hopelessness and the impossibility of it as we commit ourselves to God in our lives.

Will we do that? Now, the danger, we can also learn of being a frog in a pan. Now I've used this illustration here before. And you laughed at me the last time.

You know the story of if you put a frog into a pan of boiling water, it will jump out. Because it's hot, boiling. If you put a frog into a pan of cold water and heat it up slowly, it will gradually just die. Because it doesn't recognize that the water is becoming dangerously hot. Now you all laughed at that. And you said, that's just an urban myth.

[24 : 34] Now I looked it up on Wikipedia. He's found of all knowledge. And apparently these particular experiments were done in the 19th century. And I thought, great, that's what happens.

And then it said that the frog that the guy was doing the experiment on that stayed in the water and died because it boiled up, it removed its brain. Well, no wonder it was going to stay in the water, it removed its brain.

It kind of took away the power of the illustration as far as I was concerned. But then it said it tried it subsequently with ones with brains and it still happened. And the point I'm making is that it's very often, it's by assimilation.

You see, the Israelites here, they didn't even cry out for deliverance because they were comfortable. You know, idolatry had just wrapped itself around them slowly through trade and intermarriage, through love, through relationships.

And they broke trust with God because things were good for them, things were easy. It was just gradually warming them up. Whereas before it was oppression and persecution and slavery and they cried out.

[25 : 44] And so that is often Satan's tactic, is it not? That luxury or assimilation or just being like the world around us because it's kind of comfortable and nice is a much more powerful weapon than persecution.

And as Christians, we have to consider the fact that very often we're not even crying out for God's deliverance.

We don't even see the need for God. We're kind of comfortable, we're assimilated, we're compromised in our standards in the world around us and we don't even see our need of God.

And we're prayerless before Him. We're silent before Him. We're not even looking for a deliverer or a Samson. And you know, I've wrestled long and hard about the prayer meeting and wrestled about

wanting lots of people from the church coming to the prayer meeting every fortnight and wondering why do I want that?

Is it just so that we feel good about ourselves and have a full prayer meeting? Is it a culture-free church, cultural thing? Lots of people at the prayer meeting, then everyone's healthy spiritually. I'm not naive enough to suggest or think that.

[26 : 56] But no, it must be a good thing that as a people together we pray and we cry out to God because we need Him. And because it's significant and because there's a cost involved in that.

Ah, I've got a lot of things on it, so I'm tired now. Yeah, I know all these things. But shouldn't it be the case? Am I wrong? Please tell me if I'm wrong, that it's a good thing that we make the effort to come.

I know we can pray lots of other times of the day and night as well but that we do come together deliberately and in a costly way to pray so that we don't find ourselves simply just being assimilated into the life and culture around us and recognize our need of God's deliverance.

And in Christ, in terms of lessons, just finishing, we're all set apart. You know, the Nazarets were set apart in a voluntary and special way. I think it kind of looks forward to the day of Pentecost where all of us in Christ are set apart.

We're kind of New Testament Nazarets. And I don't mean that with the specific, you know, not cutting of the hair and the non-fermented wine. They were specific to that situation.

[28 : 10] But we're all set apart in our hearts to God, every one of us. We're willing. It's to be evidenced in the world around us. It's not going to be our haircut, but by our life, by our grace, by what we're talking about this morning, our patience together.

And it's to be sacrificial in the way it was for Samson. Simple living. Financial cost, spiritual cost, relational cost being set apart for Christ.

And we recognize that we are to be in contact with this living Savior in our lives. We're all set apart, every one of us, wherever we are and whatever we're doing.

And lastly, God, in terms of applying this chapter to us, God is still awesome. There's a lot of mystery in this chapter. There's mystery in the amazing way that he returns to heaven.

There's mystery in the angel of the Lord designation. There's mystery in some of the things he says in the way he deals with Samson and the chapters to come. But Manohar fell in his knees and worshiped this God because he was awesome.

[29 : 23] And still, there's lots we don't know about God. There's lots we're not told. But we're told enough to recognize how awesome he is.

And we're looking for the spirit of power of God among us that will transform our lives and our worship so that it reflects the kind of awesome nature of our God.

The way we sing, the way we listen, the way we interact, the way we respond, the way we rise from worship and go and live our lives of worship, all speak about what we think of God, don't they?

So let us remember that this awesome and in far greater ways in a sense, through the cross of Calvary, do we see how awesome our God is?

Amen.