

The Birth of Samson

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[0 : 00] Father, we thank you that you are the God who loves speaking to us, because in your speaking to us you help us know how to relate to you and to relate to each other. Father, we pray that as we read the scriptures today we would learn such things.

Please help us to learn about your Son and learn how to live before him. Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please sit down. Friends, I want to begin this Bible talk today with a saying. I'm simply going to say it, and as I do, I want you to let your mind roam, and I want you to ask yourself, what does this mean? To what does it refer? What incidents does it conjure up in my mind?

So here we are, the saying is this. Clenched fists coming, open hands going. Okay, let me say it again.

Clenched fists coming, open hands going. What do you think that saying means? It's richly suggestive, I think.

[1 : 04] Just what did you think of when you heard it? Let me suggest just a couple of directions you might take it in. You may very well imagine an angry man coming to see someone who's made him angry.

What might his fist be? Clenched. But imagine he meets the man and things are reconciled. How might he leave? He might leave with open hands, no longer clenched, no longer angry.

Reconciliation has happened. But perhaps you thought of something else. The original saying is an aura on a riddle about life and death, about birth and death.

And if you've ever tried to loosen your hair, if you had any, unlike me, that is loosen your hair from a tiny fist that has grasped it, then you'll know how infants possess an astonishingly strong grasp. And those of you who have watched someone die know that a dead person's relaxed fingers take nothing with them. Okay? So in entering life, maybe clenched fist.

[2 : 11] In exiting life, perhaps an open one. An open hand. Friends, sometimes sayings and riddles and stories work in multiple ways, don't they? They can have multiple meanings.

They can have double entendres to them and so on. I want to tell you that in our Bible passage in these coming weeks, the story of Samson, it is full of multiple possible meanings.

It is such a rich story. Today we're returning to the book of Judges. We arrive at the last judge. His name? Samson. And Samson's story is full, brimming full, of ambiguity.

It is intriguing with its narrative puzzles. It's perhaps best known of the stories of the judges. We're in for a real treat as we look at it over this coming month or two.

And although we're only going to look at one chapter today, it too, let me say, is full of ambiguities and multiple possible meanings. And perhaps by the end of it, you might see just some of them. So let's get started.

[3 : 11] Let's see what God has to teach us through his word today. Let's start with verse one. Now, in one sense, verse one is same old, same old. That is, Israel does what Israel does.

We saw it two years ago when we looked at the book of Judges. We saw it last year when we looked at the book of Judges. And here it is again. We're returning to the book of Judges. And what are they doing? Well, they're doing what they always do. And the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

That's that's par for the course in the period of the Judges. Then comes a surprising part. After all, perhaps you might remember the pattern that we've seen in the book of Judges.

If you look at your outlines, I put it there for you again, just to remind you. Take a look at it. It generally starts with a downward human action. That is, Israel does evil in the eyes of the Lord. We can see this in chapter 13, verse one that we've just looked at.

The Lord's then second point is that the Lord's anger is aroused at Israel's sin. And so he gives them into the hand of a foreign aggressor. Now, we don't hear of God's anger here.

[4 : 11] However, we do see him delivering them into the hands of a foreign aggressor. This time, the aggressor is the Philistines. And the delivery that he gives from the Philistines lasts nearly 40 years, which is a generation.

Third thing that happens is that Israel invariably cries out to the Lord. There's no reference to Israel crying out here. Perhaps the nation is so degenerated that they've given up crying out to God. And after the last time they cried out to God, he was a bit reluctant himself. So maybe they just think, well, it's not worth it. We won't bother crying out to God any longer. But when they do next, there is an upward movement.

That is, the Lord relents and he raises up a deliverer. Often the deliverer is spirit filled and empowered by the spirit. Well, that's what this chapter is about. The Lord is going to raise up a deliverer.

The Lord then a fifth point. The Lord turns the tide of oppression and gives the foreign aggressor into the hands of a deliverer. Well, in these coming weeks, we'll see that, well, it doesn't actually happen in the story of Samson.

[5 : 12] He has some little forays into Philistine territory and he has some minor victories, maybe one major victory. But he doesn't really turn the tide of the Philistines. Finally, we get item six in this little cycle.

And that is the land has rest for a certain number of years. And that element is totally missing in the story of Samson. No rest. Before we get on, let me tell you a bit about the Philistines.

Very important to understand the Philistines. You might know that in parts of, in the book of Judges and Samuel, they are the arch enemies. Well, we don't really know where the Philistines came from. They apparently came across from the sea, across the seas and they were sea people.

They also had mastered the art of forging iron, which Israel had not at this particular period in their history. They occupied the coastal regions between Israel and the sea.

And they occupied those coastal regions with all their skills. And they had an eye on the land that was just up the foothills where Israel was. The Philistines were a confederation of key city states.

[6 : 17] And some of the names you'll recognize from even modern history. On the coast, there were three major cities, Gaza, Ashkelon and Ashdod. Two more were up in the hill country near Israel, Ekron and Gath.

And for about 150 years, around the time of Samson, the Philistines were the powerful entity in this part of the world. They were the nation to be feared. Higher technology, aggressive, wanting to get land.

And we've just met one judge. Well, we met some time ago, one judge who had some victories over them. Remember Shamgar? He had some victories back in chapter three. But here in chapter 13, the Philistines are a major threat.

They are growing. They are powerful. They are technologically smart. But they are a worry. And Israel seems quite compliant.

They have apparently acquiesced. They apparently think, well, there's nothing much we can do about these folk. And they're sitting still. There's the problem generated by verse one. Israel does not cry out.

[7 : 22] They apparently just are going to cave in or something like that. They apparently do not recognize the problem. Or if they do recognize the problem, think that it's unbeatable and God's not interested. But God does what he does.

He acts in surprising grace. He knows the problem of his people. He knows the problem of the Philistines. He sees their need of deliverance. And he acts. Look at verse two. God's action focuses in on a particular needy but anonymous woman.

She is the wife of a certain man who is named. He comes. He's a man of Zorah. And his name is Manoah. He's from the clan of the Danites. And she, this woman, has a problem.

She's barren. She's unable to give birth. Now look at verses three to five. The Lord sends a messenger, his angel, his aid. And that messenger of the Lord appears to our woman, just as messengers of the Lord had appeared to Hagar, to Sarah and Rebecca, other barren women.

And look at what he says when he appears to her. He says, you are barren and childless. The last thing really you need to hear, isn't it? I suppose if you're in that situation. Actually, it could be

translated slightly differently.

[8 : 32] It could be translated, and I suspect this is the right translation, and this would be greeted very differently. You have been barren and childless. That is, in other words, you have been barren and childless, but that is about to end.

Then come the words in the second half of the verse. You are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Then come specific words of instruction for her. Verse four.

She is to assume a lifestyle that will later find out that her son is to pursue. She is to drink no wine or other fermented drink. She is to avoid eating anything unclean.

Now look at verse five. Verse five is better translated in the present rather than the future tense.

The messenger of the Lord says, behold, you are pregnant and will have a son.

Can you hear the tenses? I think these are the right tenses. The implication is very clear. This woman's past has been characterized by infertility and childlessness. Not any longer.

[9 : 32] She has conceived. She is already pregnant. She is going to bear a son, and he will be set apart. He will be a Nazarite. Now back in number six, verses one to eight, we hear about Nazarite vows.

They are normally temporary vows that are made by people. They're vows taken by either men or women. And for the period of the vow, the people making that vow are to do three things.

One, they are to abstain from wine and any other intoxicants. In fact, they are not even to eat grapes or raisins or any product of grapevines, not even the seeds.

Nothing to do with grapes. Two, they are to refrain from using a razor on their heads. For the period of the vow, they are to let their hair grow long. Three, throughout the period of the vow, they must not go near a dead body.

Three characteristics, friends. No products of the vine. No razor on their head. No going near dead bodies. Notice something, though, in verse five, our verse five. This boy is to be set apart from the womb.

[10 : 36] That is, this is not just a temporary vow. This is a lifelong vow. He will be dedicated as a Nazarite to God from the womb. Never have to take him for a haircut.

And his dedication to God will express itself in him taking a lead in delivering Israel from the hand of the oppressors, the Philistines. Here is God's deliverer. Friends, can you imagine what this man like?

I've sort of spent the week imagining what he might look like. Imagine the dreadlocks on him. Long, flowing, unkempt.

He must have looked awesome and wild. However, we don't have time to ponder all of this because a complication arises. Verse six. Look at it with me. The complication is that the husband of this woman has been somewhere else and not involved.

Now, normally in Israel, a woman with a vow needed to have it approved by her husband. Anyway, this woman goes to Manoah and rightly tells him everything that has happened. Now, I want you to look at verses six and seven.

[11 : 40] And as you do, think about what she does not tell her husband. OK, think about what she does not tell her husband. See if you can spot it. The woman goes to her husband. She says to him, a man of God came to me.

He looked like an angel of God. Very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from and he didn't tell me his name. But he said to me, you will become pregnant and have a son. Now, then drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean because the boy will be a Nazarite of God from the womb until the day of his death.

Did you spot the thing she doesn't say? That's right. She doesn't mention the dreadlocks. Sorry, I mean the right absence of a razor. OK, but there's more. She doesn't mention why.

Now, it might be implicit in the term Nazarite, but she doesn't mention why God has called him. She doesn't mention his role as deliverer. And finally, we meet Manoah, verse eight.

Now, he rightly responds in prayer. I must admit, I wonder if he feels a bit gyped at this point that, you know, he hasn't been around meeting the angel. He's missed out on it. He wants a bit of the action.

[12 : 43] So in verse eight, he says this. Pardon your servant, Lord. I beg you to let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born. We've already seen how God is gracious in this story.

Haven't we? Gracious to Israel, even when they haven't cried out to him. Gracious to this barren woman, even though we haven't heard of her crying out about her barrenness. And now he's gracious to Manoah, the husband.

Manoah has already been told what is required. He should already know about Nazarite vows. However, as I said, God's gracious to him. Look at verse nine. God heard Manoah and the angel of God came again.

But I want you to take a look at this tense. Really interesting. Do you notice something about the coming of the angel again? Although God hears Manoah, although God's gracious to Manoah, to whom does the messenger of God come?

Not to Manoah. No, but to his wife. Message comes to the woman out in the field without her husband. And I wonder if this is God's indication that he's not going to be manipulated by this man.

[13:52] Who knows? Anyway, his wife hurries off to tell her husband because, you know, she knows what he's asked. Manoah gets up, follows his wife. And there's this extended interchange between Manoah and the messenger that goes on for quite a few verses.

Now, let me say, it almost has a comical note to it. However, embedded in it are some markers we should observe and take note of. Question one, verse 11.

Are you the man who talked to my wife? Response, I am. Question number two, verse 12. When your words are fulfilled, what will be the rule that governs the boy's life and work?

Response, verse 13. Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink, nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her. The first thing, all I've commanded you is very important. You say it at the beginning and at the end. Okay? Then the woman must do all that she's been commanded.

[14:53] And then the specifics. No eating or drinking of grape-related things. Did you notice what's missing? No mention of dreadlocks.

Sorry, rosers. Okay? But there's more. Just like the woman, the messenger of the Lord does not mention his role as deliverer. Can you see that? He tells Manoah about the rule that must govern the boy's life.

But he says nothing about his work. There is a neat sidestep by the messenger. However, Manoah appears to still want to be in control. Perhaps he doesn't like being sidelined.

So he engages in two strategies. First, he tries to detain the messenger. Don't let him get away. There's nothing wrong with that. Abraham does the same thing in Genesis chapter 18 when the angels come to visit him.

However, my suspicion is he doesn't yet know who he's dealing with, which at least Abraham did. I think that the messenger's response makes that clear. Look at verse 16. The angel of the Lord replied, even though you detain me, I will not eat any of your food.

[15:56] But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the Lord. So I'm not going to socialize with you, as it were. But if you want to do something, want to cook something, then offer a burnt offering. Now, notice the aside at the end of the verse.

Manoah did not realize it was the angel of the Lord. You see, he didn't know who he was dealing with here. So his first strategy fails. He cannot detain the messenger. In verse 17, he engages in a second strategy.

He tries to get the name of the angel. You see, in the ancient world, to have the name of someone has to have power over them. Okay, so he tries to get the name. Look at verse 17. Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the Lord, What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?

It's a good lead-in, isn't it? I want to honor you. Need to have your name to do that. Now, look at the response of the messenger. Verse 18. He says to Manoah, It's a non-answer, really. Why do you ask my name? It's beyond understanding.

In other words, you won't get it. You won't get my name. I'm not going to be manipulated by you. I think that's what's going on here. You get the impression there's something of a rebuke here, don't you?

[16:58] But in reply to the specific question, he responds that his name is beyond understanding. That is, it is extraordinary. It is awesome. Anyway, Manoah presses on, and in verse 18, he slaughters a goat, and he offers a sacrifice.

And then the Lord does the extraordinary and amazing thing. The angel of the Lord just ascends in the flames from the fire. Manoah and his wife, understandably, fall on their knees.

And finally, Manoah realized this is a messenger of the Lord. And superstitiously, he thinks it might mean death for him. But he's got a wife, and his wife straightens him out with some clear logic in verse 23.

Says to him, Look, if the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things that he's told us. Makes good sense, doesn't it? Friends, we started off this passage with a problem and a promise, didn't we?

The problem was a barren woman. The promise was a child who would lead in deliverance of Israel. In verses 24 and 25, we get problem resolved and promise fulfilled.

[18:09] Verse 24, the child is born. The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson, which literally means Sonny. Okay, not S-O-N-N-Y, but S-U-N-N-Y.

He grew, and the Lord blessed him. Verse 25, the promised judge is appointed. Do you remember the mark of a judge in Israel? It's the Spirit of God, isn't it?

It's possession of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of God coming on the judge. Look at verse 15, new judge appointed by God through his Spirit. For the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him while he was in Mahanadan between Zorah and Eshtayol.

So we've got a judge. So there's our chapter. Now, in the remaining time, I just want to do two things today. Briefly, I want to assess the main human characters in this story.

And then I want us to stand back and to look at one key verse in this chapter and how it works out in the rest of Scripture. So first of all, the human characters. Friends, one commentator has called Manoah a dolt.

[19:16] It might be a little harsh. Nevertheless, he's certainly not the hero of this passage, is he? No, he isn't introduced gloriously. He's simply a certain man.

His tribe is minimized by being called not a tribe, but a clan. And the angel doesn't come to him, but his wife. And when he finally gets to meet the messenger, he's presented as being rather skeptical, if not a little thick.

He overreacts and he can't even see his lack of logic. And so his wife has to straighten him out. Now, compare that to his wife. She is never named.

Unlike him. That is, she's downplayed in relation to her position. However, even if she's not named, she's in good company. After all, the messenger of the Lord is not named either.

What's more, she is the first woman in a series of women in Samson's life. Do you remember the others? There's three others. This one's the best of them, let me tell you. Mind you, it's not hard.

[20:19] But she shines. The others are a shady lot. She is not. In the story of Samson, she bears the closest relationship to God. She models the behavior that God is looking for in his people.

Obedience and trust. She is quiet. She is submissive to God. She's attentive. She's obedient. Unlike her husband. Unlike her son will grow to be.

Unlike the people of God in these days. Although underprivileged, she is the star here. I don't think there's any shadow over her. Oh, by the way, friends, this star is not unusual in the Bible, is it?

She's not unusual in the history of God's people. She wouldn't be the first woman with a doltish husband. And she probably won't be the last. And she won't be the first woman to hear God and obey while their menfolk treat God with disdain.

Friends, while men stayed at home with the great mission movement in the last two, three, four centuries, the women went. She wouldn't be the first godly woman to show up spiritually immature men.

[21:30] However, friends, the real hero of this passage is not the unnamed wife of Manoah. Though she is a star, it is not Samson, the son of Manoah. And this woman.

No, let me show you the real hero of this passage. Look with me at verse five again. These are the words of the messenger of God to this woman. And he says, you will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazarite dedicated to God from the womb.

He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines. Now, I think that translation hasn't quite got it right here. Let me read to you a more literal translation from the English Standard Version.

Just read along with me. Verse five. It reads like this. For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head.

For the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb. And he will, here's the crunch, begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. Not he will save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. [22 : 40] He will begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. You might think that's nothing. But actually, what it's saying is this is not going to be a complete job at the end of Samson's life.

It says this of Samson, the child of this woman. He shall begin to save Israel. So, if this Samson is not the one who's going to save Israel from the Philistines, who is?

Who is? He is appointed as the one who will begin to save Israel. But who will be the one who will actually do the job? Who will complete the task? Let me tell you who that person is.

And let me give you just a bit of background to him. First, he's introduced the person who introduces the person who will get rid of the Philistines.

He's introduced in the same way. We're told of a certain man from a certain tribe. Then we're told that his wife is barren but godly.

[23 : 39] Then we're told that his wife conceives miraculously. And then we're told that this woman gives birth to a prophet who sometimes looks like a judge. And then we're told that this prophet is called to anoint a shepherd boy from the tribe of Judah.

And that shepherd's boy's name is David. And it will be he who finishes off the task that Samson began. It will be he who delivers Israel from the Philistines.

However, let me tell you that the great enemy of God's people is not the Philistines. No, it's Israel itself. And not even David could save Israel from themselves.

David sinned himself. A sin not unlike that of Samson involved a woman. His son sinned.

His son sinned. His son's son sinned. And the descendants of David engaged in harlotry just like Samson. And they were apostate.

[24 : 47] They flirted with the world just like Samson. And like Samson, they were led into captivity. And in an incredible irony, the last king of Israel, do you know how he ended up?

Like Samson, in the court of a foreign king with his eyes gouged out. That's where humanity ends, friends. But do you remember the hero in our chapter?

Wasn't Samson. It wasn't the woman. It was God. For it was God who, despite Israel not even calling upon him, decided that he would raise up a deliverer.

And it's God who, despite his people not calling on him, acts to appoint someone who will begin to save. And I would argue that the ultimate and final saving does not come from the Philistines under David.

I would argue that it does come from the line of David. And it is the Lord Jesus. In fact, there are remarkable echoes of the birth of Samson. In the birth, in the conception and birth of Jesus.

[25 : 56] You see, it is Jesus who delivers us from that which Samson could not deliver himself. You see, it is Jesus who delivers us from what David could not deliver himself. And from what all his descendants could not deliver themselves.

He delivers us from sin. Friends, the real hero of the passage is God himself. And his salvation comes through his son, the descendant of David.

A saviour. The great saviour. Not a saviour from Philistines. No, a saviour from the true enemy. A saviour from human sinfulness. Our sin.

And those of everyone else in humanity as well. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that our only help lies in you.

Thank you that your salvation has come through your son, the descendant of David. That even though David might finish off the Philistines, he could not deal with sin. But thankfully, Father, his descendant can.

[27 : 01] Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you for his dealing with sin. We thank you for this in Jesus' name. Amen.