

The Marriage of Samson

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[0 : 00] Our friends, as you know, my normal way is to give you an introduction that will get us in the right frame of mind for hearing the word of God. However, that's really gone out of the window today for a number of reasons.

But I thought I'd just jump into our passage. And really, I think that's OK, because it's got enough interest and excitement and puzzles of its own to keep us engaged, hasn't it? However, before we look at it, let's just get some perspective again.

We've been looking at judges now intermittently for two years. I think it would be fair to say that the journey has largely been downhill. The early judges, well, they did deliver.

And there were some real stars among them. They gained rest for the people of God and peace for them. Since then, many things have really deteriorated.

And the normal cycle seems to have been abandoned by God. And last week, we met Samson. Now, Samson is the last of the really big players among the judges. We noticed last week that he broke the mold somewhat.

[1 : 02] Israel didn't. Israel did what they usually do. Sinned, did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He then handed them over to a foreign aggressor. The foreign aggressor now is the Philistines.

They became rulers over Israel. Chapter 13 told us that last week. And lest we forget, we're told again in verse 4 of our chapter for this week. Now, then what happened last week is that we didn't really get a ready-to-roll judge anyway, did we?

He wasn't even born. Instead, we get a story of his birth. Then we're told that the child who would become judge would only begin to deliver Israel. He wouldn't perform a sort of full delivery.

No, he'd only just begin. No complete deliverance. No rest in the land. No, just a promise of a beginning. Now, let me tell you that today we're going to meet a judge like no other. He is right out there.

And his actions are going to raise more questions for us than answers, as you probably noticed if you're reading the reading with us. So let's get started and see what we can work out today.

[2 : 08] Now, last week we, as I said, started with his birth. This week, he is an adult. This week, we find him doing what many adults do, looking for a spouse.

He's looking for a wife. Now, I need to tell you that apart from his mother, we're told of three women in this man's life. He is amorously involved with all three. He is a bit of a womanizer, actually.

Now, as we look at these verses, just flick your eyes back quickly to the previous verse from chapter 13. Last verse, chapter 13. Can you see it there? There we're told that the spirit of the Lord began to stir him.

Now, verse 1 of chapter 14 tells us that he then goes down to Timnah. I think the two verses are linked. The spirit of the Lord began to stir him and he went down to Timnah. I'm not saying that we should ascribe to God every action that he does in chapter 14.

But I do think that God is stirring him up for a purpose. And part of that purpose involves him going down into Philistine territory. Going down is the very first action that he does.

[3 : 12] And if I might say it, morally, he tends to go further down as well. He physically goes down to Timnah and thus begins a sort of spiritual and metaphorical going down as well.

Now, look at the second half of verse 1. When Samson's in Philistine territory, he sees a young Philistine woman. And in verse 2, he takes what he sees to his parents.

And he tells them, go get her for me. It's a good way to go, isn't it, really? Now, well, it may be or it may not be, I suppose. Now, friends, as you know, marriage is the deepest union between two people.

It's something that God created and that he wants for humans. We know that from the very second chapter of the Bible. However, God also called and created his people for him. He marked them out for him.

And for an Israelite, the marking of that, if you're male, is circumcision. It demonstrates that the whole people of God are set aside for him. Now, Samson's parents know this.

[4 : 15] And they attempt, therefore, to dissuade him from taking a Philistine bride. Look at their argument. Verse 3. His father and mother replied, Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people?

Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistine to get a wife? You see, the parents of Samson know the truth. Marriage to a Philistine will threaten his separation to God as an Israelite.

And he's been made a Nazarite from birth. So he's even specially set apart. But it also threatens not just his identity as an Israelite, but his identity as a Nazarite.

Now, look at Samson's response. And as you do, I should tell you that these closing chapters of the book of Judges are marked by a certain refrain. That refrain marks a deterioration of the people of God.

That refrain is captured in chapter 17, verse 3 and captured in the very last verse of the book of Judges. And the refrain is this. Everyone did as they saw fit.

[5 : 24] Literally, the words are this. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Now, let me give you a literal translation of the last words of Judges 14, verse 3.

See it there? Judges 14, verse 3. Samson says to his father these words. Get her for me. Get her for me because she is right in my eyes.

Friends, can you hear what our writer wants us to hear? What Samson is doing is inappropriate. It is wrong at a whole number of levels. It is a choice that lines him up with all that is sinful in Israel and that Israel will become noted for.

It is a choice that soils his separation to God as an Israelite. And it's a choice that is inappropriate for any Israelite, but also for a Nazarite. Now, with all that in mind, look at what our narrator says in a little aside in verse 4.

Our narrator opens up heaven for us and lets us into the mind of God. You see, imagine his parents. Here they are in the midst of life. They're trying to guide their son by giving him godly advice and they're doing the right thing.

[6 : 32] But Samson does not seem to be guided by anything else than an inappropriate desire, that which is good in his eyes. But we are led into the mind of God by the narrator.

And the narrator tells us that the mind of God is that Samson's actions are part of a purpose for which God raised him up. As we saw last week in chapter 13, Samson was raised up by God to begin delivery from the rule of the Philistines.

What a phenomenal few verses these are. Samson's going down to Timnah and it is the result of God's spirit stirring him. There's also a movement toward moral chaos for him and for Israel.

And yet that somehow is part of God's purpose. How weird is that? In accomplishing his purpose, God is working with human resources available, flawed though they may be. There's nothing commendable about what Samson's intending to do.

God knows that the Philistines, though, are ruling over Israel. And that is not his purpose for his people. That rule of the Philistines needs disruption. And he wants to threaten the rule of the Philistines.

[7 : 40] And Samson, sinful though his motivations are, is helpful to God here. He's an ideal candidate, in one sense, to disrupt the rule of the Philistines.

So there we have our first four verses of this story. And the stage is now set. Let's see what happens. It appears from verse 5 that the parents of Samson accede to him.

Perhaps they decide it's better to participate rather than boycott, despite disapproving of his actions. I guess they wouldn't be the very first parents to do this, would they?

And they probably are not the last. Anyway, we've already noticed some worrying signs of Samson's sinfulness. Look at the second half of verse 5. There's a worrying little hint here.

Samson is a Nazarite. Nazarites are supposed to avoid anything associated with wine and grapes.

And yet here he is, with his parents, approaching the vineyards of the uncircumcised Philistine Timnites.

[8 : 41] They are threats to Samson's identity. Here are multiple threats to his identity. Now we know from the verses which follow that Samson becomes separated from his parents, only because we find that out in a few verses.

And threats to Samson's threats to Samson's parents are supplanted and overwhelmed by another threat. Can you see it in the passage? A threat to his marriage. A threat to God's plans through him. A threat even to his own life, because the threat comes in the shape of a young and presumably powerful young lion. Now a single unarmed man is usually no match for such a creature. But look at verse 6. In the past we've heard of the Spirit coming upon or clothing various people. In the past we've also heard of Israel's judges killing with improvised weapons such as short swords, ox goads, pegs through people's temples.

We also know that previous judges used cunning. But here there's a marked development, a heightening among the judges. You see the text literally says that the Spirit rushes on Samson.

[9 : 50] Samson doesn't use a weapon, but his bare hands. And cunning is replaced by just brute strength. Samson does not just kill.

He tears apart with his bare hands. And then our narrator, mind you, did you notice that little aside? Like one would tear aside a goat. I wouldn't try a goat, let alone a lion.

Anyway, our narrator then lets us a bit behind the scenes. He tells us in the second half of verse 6 that Samson keeps his actions quiet from his parents. And we don't know why.

We do know that Nazarites are not allowed to touch corpses. Human corpses at least. Perhaps contact with anything dead would also defile his lifelong vow.

We don't know. However, verse 7 reminds us about the other threat to his identity. It's a Philistine woman with whom he now talks. And behind our translation stands another phrase.

[10 : 55] Do you see it there? It says that he liked her. You know what the literal Hebrew says? She was good in his eyes. You see, now look at verse 8.

Sometime later, Samson returns to Mary. And on the way, he's apparently on his own again, without parents. Perhaps he's reminded of the last time he'd traveled down this way. What would you be doing?

You'd remember killing a lion, wouldn't you? You think, well, that's good. I might revisit that spot again. I think that's probably what's going on here. Anyway, Pat wants to relive the moment.

He turns aside and he finds the carcass of the lion. And there it is. And it's got bees in it. And the bees have built a hive. And there's honey in the carcass.

Now, honey is a symbol of fertility in many cultures. And it's an appropriate food to eat on the way to getting married. So Samson has now seen the honey. And in verse 9, he scoops some out.

[11 : 56] Literally, he takes the honey to his hand. Then he eats it as he goes. Can you hear the three words? He sees. He takes.

He eats. Now, one word used here is slightly different. But where else have you heard that combination of words? That someone sees something. Someone takes something.

And then someone eats something. Yeah, that's right. It's what Eve did in the garden. It's not a good association, is it? In my view, the author is trying to let us know of his disapproval.

And then, Samson, something else has happened to Samson, hasn't it? He's had contact with something dead, with something unclean, something that contaminates him.

And then, do you see what he does? He shares it with his parents. So now, he has seen, taken, eaten, and given.

[12 : 55] That's just to cap it off. He's done what Eve did. Okay? Now, again, we're not told that he told them of its source.

Or we're told that he didn't tell them of its source. Most likely, it's because they would disapprove. Anyway, in verse 10, we hear the very last reference to the father of Samson in this whole story.

He disappears from the story from here on in. Presumably, he goes home. Samson is now on his own, distant from his family. He's distanced himself from his identity as an Israelite by entering marriage with a foreign woman from uncircumcised Philistine stock.

He's distanced himself from his Nazarite vow. And now he caps it off by following the customs of the Philistine young men or warriors. Let's see what happens. Second half of verse 10.

Here we see the beginnings of a play on three or 30. As we go through the passage, look out for it. Constant references to three or 30. So, 30 men are chosen as his companions.

[13:56] A picture of the scene. A long marriage festival lasting a week. Happens in many parts of the world still. Anyway, lots of drinking, partying, joke and riddle telling and various other activities.

Perhaps even some alcohol that Samson's meant to abstain from because he's a Nazarite. Now, relationships and communities, though, are being formed by such a long thing. You know, when you have a large party like that and a long party, relationships begin to form.

And perhaps in some breaks, Samson decides he's going to contribute to the party. He's going to tell a riddle. And in verse 12, he literally says, let me riddle you a riddle. And he promises by way of reward, 30 linen garments and 30 sets of clothes if they can get it right.

And he asked them, he asked that if they can't solve the riddle, that they will give him 30. Anyway, Samson plays with, it's a game with the Philistines, isn't it? He doesn't appear to be at all fearful that he's going to lose.

He's playing a game. And it seems somewhat adolescent, maybe even a little unfair. Look at the riddle in verse 14. Let me riddle you a riddle. Out of the eater, something to eat.

[15:08] Out of the strong, something sweet. Now, remember, in an adolescent party, you can imagine that the very first answer that might come to mind would be...

Vomit. That would match the scene, probably. There would be other answers that have sexual innuendo.

But, again, that wouldn't be unusual in a wedding feast setting. However, there's no way the Philistines can possibly work it out, is there? No, they were not with him. They don't know. There's no hint.

However, the challenge is apparently accepted by them. Three days pass. In verse 15, we're told that on the fourth day, they approached Samson's wife. Actually, I think it's not three days. I think it's 12 days.

Because that's from the Greek text and the Hebrew text says... Sorry, it's actually seven days. The Hebrew text says seven days. In other words, this is the very last day.

[16:02] And they are beginning to panic because they're going to lose 30 sets of garments. And so, they approach the woman. They threaten her with death.

And look at what they say to her. Did you invite us here to steal our property? Can you hear what's going on? They say, look, we've been invited to this party. And really, what's going to happen is we're going to lose.

And we will lose and have our stuff stolen off us. Now, what have you done? They clearly feel that the wedding invitation has turned into a trap. They're calling upon this woman to do what Samson had not done.

They're calling on her to fulfill her obligation to her people. To choose between her new husband and her tribal affiliation. Something that Samson was not willing to do. Or he was willing, but that was to desert his own folk in one sense.

She chooses the other. In verse 16, she effectively performs a seduction. She throws herself upon him sobbing. She's already betrayed him.

[17:06] But she says to him, Oh, you hate me. You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer. He's caught, isn't he?

And so Samson responds by bringing his father and mother into the story. He says, look, I haven't even told mum and dad. Mind you, that's no great claim because he hasn't told them lots of things so far.

Anyway, he finally gives in to the wiles of this woman. And in doing so, he himself is tricked by the wiles of the Philistines. He's tried to trick them.

They have tricked him. The trickster has been tricked. He caves in to his wife's pleas. And look at verse 18. Before sunset on the seventh day, the men of the town come to Samson.

And look at their answer. And as you do, I want you to think of an answer to the riddle. Okay, without the context, what would your answer be to this? What is sweeter than honey, stronger than a lion?

[18:06] What is sweeter than honey, stronger than a lion? I think the natural answer is love. And in fact, if you read the book of Proverbs, you'll find that there are Proverbs very close to this. Natural answer is love.

Love is sweeter than honey and love is stronger than a lion. But the Philistines have loaded the answer, haven't they? They have included reference to honey and lions.

And they return the riddle to Samson so that they will tell him that he has been tricked himself. And Samson retaliates in verse 18. And he riddles them another riddle.

And everything about it is insulting. It is full of innuendo, isn't it? Can you hear it? He says to them, if you had not ploughed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle.

I mean, it is really loaded. Now look at verse 17. Now it's the third reference to the spirit. The spirit stirred him up to go down to Timnah. The spirit rushed on him to defeat the lion.

[19 : 04] And the spirit rushes on him now as he goes down to Ashkelon in personal revenge. Friends, each of these interactions by the spirit is not without problems, is it?

The actions are totally those of the sinful man here. They are not without sin. And yet the text tells us that God is behind them. How can that be?

Well, we'll return to it later. But at the moment, let's see the result. Now look at verse 19.

End of verse 19. The whole incident began with a desire in Samson for a woman who was good in his eyes, but not good in God's eyes. And he goes home without her.

Burning with anger, he returns to his father's house. And Samson's wife is given to one of the young men who solved the riddle by treating Samson's wife wrongly.

[20 : 28] So friends, there's the story. Now let me ask you a question. What do you think of our new judge in Israel? How would you summarize him?

Maybe I could give you my summary. He's a rough character. I wouldn't even say he's a rough diamond. He is just rough.

He's disrespectful of just about everyone. Most worryingly, disrespectful. No, no. I'd say abusive of his parents. Then callous.

Then careless of his calling as a Nazarite. Then disloyal of to the covenant God made with his people. Slack in his identity as God's person. Somewhat adolescent, petulant, conceited, immature, barbarous, callous, calculating, malicious and cruel.

Driven by self-centeredness. Determined to do what is right in his own eyes. And as we'll see, he's one with the people to whom he is sent. He does what is right in his own eyes at any cost.

[21 : 34] You see, he's like the Philistines, no different from them. But he is also more importantly, as we will see when we read on in Judges, like his people. He is like Israel.

Like Israel, he's a special child of God, chosen by him. Like Israel, he's immature and sinful. He is opportunistic, rash. He has a weakness for women. He's enticed by them, just as Israel is enticed by them and their gods.

And eventually, Israel, like Samson, will be overcome, bound, subdued and sold into the power of her enemies, as God had promised in Deuteronomy, if they kept going the way they were. Friends, if Israel is like Samson, what hope do you think Israel has?

None. There is none without some intervention from outside of them, because they are left on their own. They cannot save themselves. And that intervention is what we've seen in the hero of this chapter. But let's be frank. And not only consider how this judge Samson is presented, let's be frank and consider how God is presented here. After all, it looks very strange here, doesn't it?

[22 : 49] The text clearly presents God as behind Samson's journey down to Timna. That journey leads him to violate his culture and his family.

And yet, we are told, that is from the Lord. Then the spirit rushes on him twice. This is God's spirit. Rushes on him twice. On the first occasion, he kills a young lion. And the second, and that results in him breaking a Nazarite vow.

On the second occasion, he murders 30 innocent men, steals their clothes, and uses it to pay off the wager he'd made. Murder, theft, unleashed anger.

All break laws God gave his people. And yet God uses them. Friends, later in Israel's history, God's intervention will look as strange as it does here.

It will cause Israel to call God her enemy, as she does in the book of Lamentations. It will cause Israel to question God.

[23 : 45] It will cause them to think that he's an enigma. Please hear me. You see, what Paul does here is absolutely, totally wrong. God does not condone it.

But somehow, God uses it for his purposes. Somehow, it's even within his plans, as it were. God, God's use of such people does not condone their actions.

However, it also does not prohibit God's use of such actions for good. We see that various places in Scripture. Joseph acknowledges that of the bad actions of his brothers.

Friends, we Christians know it too, don't we? For we too know that God can use the greatest evil for the greatest good. He can send his son into the world to be slaughtered by sinful people. His own people, actually, who put him in the place. He can send the son into the world to be slaughtered by sinful people. And through that very act of sinful people, he can provide a way for sin to be forgiven and us to be reconciled to him.

[24 : 56] But there's one more thing to be said here, and that's this. Let me ask you. If Israel is like Samson, do you foresee any future for Israel?

If humanity is like Samson in Israel, do you think there's any future for humanity? Let me tell you what I think. I think that if Israel is like Samson, they are doomed.

And if we are like Samson, we too are doomed. However, there is hope. For God is for humanity. And that is our only hope. If God is for us, who can be against us? For if God is for us, he can forge a saviour for us. He can forge salvation for us.

And he can, through this, bring us to himself. Despite our sinfulness. We can never get there on our own, friends. But if God is able to use sinful people to accomplish his purpose, he can forge a saviour from his son and bring us to himself.

[26 : 11] Thank you.