

Shall we open our Bibles this evening to Judges 12 as we continue our study through this book of judges that takes us, really, from the death of Joshua to the reign of King Saul?

Right before Joshua died, the people (the generation that he led) said to him (in chapter 24 of the book of Joshua) that they would serve the LORD. And Joshua said, "You can't do that on your own," and they said, "Oh, no, no. We're going to. We're going to keep Him first. We're going to put away the false gods from our midst. We're going to incline our hearts to listen. He's going to be the God that we serve." And all you have to do is keep reading to know that that didn't happen. In fact, the book of Judges covers almost 340 years of the generations of God's people - over eight generations, if you will - who lived their lives up and down: rebelling, being put on the spot by the LORD so He could get them back, repenting when life got too hard, finding deliverance as God was so good to them, and then settling in, went right back to that same thing again. It's a tough book to study, but it's an important book to learn from because the Bible tells us (1 Corinthians 10:11 as well as in Romans 15:4) that all of the things that were written beforehand were written for our learning. So even in the bad stuff, you can learn good stuff. You just go, "Well, I don't want to do that anymore," and it becomes a lesson in reverse, if you will.

There were about fifteen judges or so that God raised up during this time. We are, tonight, going to look at chapters 12 and 13. We're actually almost at the end of Judges, although you might not think so. We are beginning Samson's life tonight in chapter 13, and we will finish it over the next couple of weeks through chapter 16. And then from 16 through the end of the book, the chronology stops. God, rather, just gives us the signs of the days in which the judges took place, and twice you will read (in those last few chapters) people "did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6 and 21:25). Everybody was just doing their own thing.

So we are, tonight, looking at judge number nine - Jephthah, who we began with last time. He only reigned for six years over the people. We will quickly jump over judges ten, eleven and twelve (they'll just be mentioned), and then we'll get to the most famous judge, I guess, Samson. He's most famous because he's given the

most coverage. God has much to say about him. He's given more literary landscape than the rest. But he's a sad story, and we will learn much from him about what it means to squander your opportunities.

Well, if you were with us last week, we ended our study with Jephthah. He is the ninth judge. His father's name was Gilead. He bore him to a prostitute, and because of that, all of his other brothers (that were born to Gilead's wife) didn't want anything to do with him, shunned him, sent him packing, and refused to allow him to be part of the family. But he's the guy that, set aside, was the one that God would raise up to deliver the people from the oppressors. When the Gileadites, years later, were attacked by the Ammonites, and overwhelmed by them, they sent for Jephthah, and they made the argument with him, "Come and take care of us! We're family!" And Jephthah said, "Well, that's the first I've ever heard of it." He had a reputation for being kind of a tough guy. He had a ragtag bunch of folks that he provided protection, I guess, to the people. He saw right through their lack of genuine love for him, but he accepted their offer to come back and fight on their behalf provided - if the LORD gave him victory - that he would then be made their king or at least their ruler, their overseer, and they accepted. And God gave him great victory. He made a foolish vow - we talked about it last week - of unbelief. He presented us with a dilemma because he vowed that whatever came out of his house, he would sacrifice it to the LORD when he got home. He only had one daughter and a wife. I don't know who he was expecting to come out of the house. But what we talked about last week, as we finished, was that it is entirely possible (based on what we have in the Scriptures) that he didn't kill her - for a lot of reasons - but that he rather committed her service (like Samuel's parents will do with him) to serve in the Temple the rest of her life; to be at God's disposal - not married, not children, just a life exclusively dedicated to Him. He knew the Old Testament Law - God forbade human sacrifice. I don't think there was a priest, even in this fallen generation, that would have participated in the death of his daughter. Her friends, I think, would have intervened just like the friends of Jonathan intervened when his dad carelessly demanded his death (1 Samuel 14). No record in the Bible of her life being taken. And we mentioned last week, Samuel (in the book past Ruth, here) speaks of him being a godly deliverer - someone that God used. And in chapter 11:32 of Hebrews, he is set forward as a man of faith. So there is very little to go on in the negative sense, if you will, from his life. But we ended the difficult verses by saying here's one thing we can take away - don't make foolish vows to the LORD. Let your 'yea' be 'yea' and your 'nay' by

'nay.' So we ended with Jephthah's great victory - delivering the children of Israel from the Ammonites.

And then we begin chapter 12 tonight with the complaints of some folks from Ephraim that they were not invited to the party. Notice verse 1, "Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, 'Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire!' " Really?! Now, we've seen these guys before. When Gideon had his great victory over the Midianites, they were asked to participate, and they refused. Jephthah had called upon these guys to participate in the midst of the battle, and they had refused. But because of their seeking after glory now, here comes another problem that you find in the book of Judges when a nation doesn't walk with God very much, and that is eventually it leads to civil war or infighting, if you will. Civil wars in any nation's history are dark spots because you're not fighting an enemy any longer; you're fighting yourself.

And it is even worse when it's in the church. It is not good whether that fighting in the church is among individuals or ministry groups within a church or often just a church against another church. And you find that here. Here's one of the consequences of the book of Judges where the people have been away from God for so long. It's natural, now, for them to turn on each other, and you find it a lot here in this book. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians (early on, 1 Corinthians 1, just ten or eleven verses in), he wrote to them and said, "I hear there are contentions among you that some say, 'I'm of Paul,' and others say, 'I'm of Apollos,' and still others, 'I'm of Cephas,' or, 'I'm of Christ.' " And Paul addresses, in chapter 1 especially, this problem of division - civil war within, if you will - and he gets right to the point in the Corinthian letter. He says, "I hear that you guys are at each other's throats over ministry style, over approaches to teaching, over personalities and preferences." He really distinguished them. He said, "Some of you say, 'I'm of Paul,' " and I'm sure that there were some who would have said, "Paul is the most balanced guy in teaching that I've ever heard. He's a Jew, and he's got lots of experience in the Gentile world. He's a real intellectual. He's certainly my favorite. That's the guy that I would want to follow. I'm of Paul." And then the next guy says, "No, no, no. I'm of Apollos who is on the teaching team with Paul. He can certainly speak." In fact, the Bible says he was a great orator. He could use words. I don't know if you've ever hear Chuck Swindoll speak. He used to live in the area out where I live. But he was so good with words. He could paint

pictures with words. I wish I was as good with words as he was. I loved listening to him. He spoke in color. And I can see people saying that of Apollos. "I could listen to him all day." And then there's a third guy who goes, "No, no. I love Peter. Peter's like the blue collar guy like me. Everything he says, I can relate to him. He's so simple. I love his fishing stories. He doesn't hurt my brain." (Laughing) "I just love Peter! That's the guy I want to follow." And then there's the worst group of all who are snotty enough to go, "Well, we're just of Jesus." Really? Mr. Spiritual? But Paul's point was very clear. There shouldn't be this war amongst the body of Christ. And civil wars occurred often in the early church. The apostles, for at least three years of Jesus' three and a half years, fought amongst themselves about greatness, about who was going to get the best position, and where we're going to sit, and who was the most liked by the Lord (Matthew 18, Mark 9, Luke 9, Luke 22). They even found a fellow they told Jesus about who was casting out demons (Luke 9), and they said, "They weren't part of our team, and so we told them to stop it." And they were very proud of their exclusivity, and they didn't expect Jesus to say, "Well, what did you do that for? If he's not against us, he's for us. And by the way, where do you think he gets power to cast out demons anyway?! Not from you all." Paul goes to Antioch and calls Peter out in public (Galatians 2). Paul and Barnabas have a huge falling out (Acts 15). The apostles fight up to the last supper about importance (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22). Two of them bring their mom to Jesus to try to argue (Matthew 20). Look, we talk about the sin of division in the church, and we talk about it a lot. And maybe it's because I'm getting older, but I sometimes don't know if it does any good. Because we have that in our church all the time - strife and contention and division and side-taking. The best thing you can do is just not be a part of it. But it happens.

I don't know if you remember Emo Phillips. He was a comedian in the 90's - squeaky voice, weird hair, weird sense of humor. But he told a story one time that kind of goes along with this, and I liked it, so I'll relay it to you. He's not a Christian, he's not a theologian, he's a comedian. But he said to a guy, "Are you a Catholic or are you a Protestant?" And the guy said, "I'm a Protestant!" And he said, "Well, me too!" He said, "What franchise?" He said, "I'm a Baptist." He said, "Me, too!" "Southern Baptist or Northern Baptist?" And he said, "Northern Baptist." He said, "Me, too!" And this went on for five minutes, trying to figure out where they were all coming from. And finally, Emo said to the fellow, "So let me get this right. You are a Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist from the Great Lakes region, the council of 1879 or of the council of 1912?" And he said, "I'm of the

council of 1912," and he said, "You die, you heretic!" (Laughing) And I always liked they couldn't go far enough until they finally found a place to argue with.

I remember hearing a story of a fellow that they found on a desert island after thirty years of being there by himself, and his rescuers landed, and he looked terrible. And they said, "So glad to find you. How long you been here?" "Thirty years, as far as I know." And they looked up on the beach, and there were these three huts, and they said, "What are those huts for?" He said, "Well, that first one," he said, "I live in that hut. The second one," he said, "I go to church in that one." They said, "Well, how about the third one?" He said, "Well, I used to go to church there." (Laughing) Kind of speaks to the problem.

So here's a big civil war. God has raised up a man to lead them back into the ways of the LORD. They've suffered for years. He comes through. He leads them in a way that honors the LORD. And in the midst of God moving come these goofs, these Ephraimites who were living in the middle of the country, and now that the victory had been sure - it's at the end of Jephthah's ministry, he's about to pass from the scene after God had used him mightily and how he'd risked his neck and all for the people - here come these guys to complain, with threats. "We will burn you and your house down!" This is not a nice group to be hanging around with.

One mark of spiritual carnality is that you are easily offended. If everything just offends you, you're going to have a hard time in the church. It's like a baby who doesn't need a reason to cry. As a new parent, you don't even know why they're crying. "Are they hungry?" "No." "Do they need to be changed? Are they bored? Are they sleepy? Do they want to be held?" They're just easily offended. And so are these guys. It's kind of like that fellow, Diotrephes (he's in 3 John, verse 9), and it says that he always loved to have the preeminence in everything, and he wouldn't receive their visitors because he wanted to be the guy that everyone looked to. And you find the same thing here.

In reality, here's a group of people - the Ephraimites - who missed out on the glory. But now that victory was sure and certain, they wanted to share in it. When the outcome was uncertain, when the cost was extremely high, they wouldn't come out. But now that everything has gone well, they actually come out with threats to take a little bit of the glory for themselves. It's a completely different attitude than you find with Jesus. Right? Even in the early church, you might remember, again, Paul writing to the Corinthians (but ten chapters later, chapter 11) about

communion and how the folks showed up, and they didn't wait for the poor to eat, and they showed up drunk, and they shoved stuff down their faces, and then they started to have communion. And the whole thing was, "What about me?" It was all about, "What about me?"

So they come now, with these threats - after God has blessed the people in the midst of 340 years where it's just a lot of this. But now it's up here, and here comes the division.

Jephthah, verse 2, says to these folks, " 'My people and I were in a great struggle with the people of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands. So when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the people of Ammon; and the LORD delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?' Now Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. And the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, 'You Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites and among the Manassites.' " So they began to foul-mouth the army of Jephthah and say, "Well, you guys really were with us, and so we trained you. We should get glory just for the fact that you are fighting." But look at what's wrong with this picture. "We defeat the enemy. Thank God for the victory, and then you want to come and make us your enemy." Unwilling to listen to his argument (in verse 4), they resort to name calling, trying to justify their anger and their bitterness. "You're just fugitives from our land." It's a horrible picture. I saw an analogy a couple of months ago; maybe it's been a little bit longer. But it stayed with me - of a picture of a crowd who had gone to a wedding, and they were all standing, and the bridal party was up front. And they were all looking over their shoulders to greet the bride. And the bride came in, but she looked terrible. She had a black eye and a bloody lip, and her nose was kind of crooked, and her veil and dress were torn. She just looked like she'd been in a fight, and she hadn't really done very good, and there was mud on her heels. And the picture, at the bottom, said, "The bride of Christ. Doesn't He deserve better than this?" And I thought - wow! That's the, a lot of times, way we live. We beat each other up and go, "Well, the body of Christ."

Well these guys were an interesting lot. You might remember (like I said a few weeks ago, it's in chapter 7 where Gideon had that great victory) that he called for the Ephraimites to help, and they didn't come. In fact, they came at the end of the battle, and they captured two of the princes of the enemy, beheaded them,

and sent the heads over to Gideon. And when they had victory, they came to Gideon and said, "We're going to burn you down! We're mad at you. Why didn't you call us? Who do you think you are? You left us in the dust!" And Gideon was pretty good with words. He said, "Oh, no, no, no. Wait a minute! What we did was nothing compared to what you guys did! You caught two princes. That turned the tide." And somehow his soft words turned away their wrath, and they went home.

Jephthah's a different guy. He's like this, "Bring it, boys!" Right? He wasn't taking this lying down. So, when they charged him, Gideon was a diplomat. Trust me, this fellow, Jephthah, is not. Forget diplomacy. He wants to fight. And he accuses them of not coming when they were needed and having them force him to jeopardize his own life for the battle. Just civil war. That's exactly what we find. Ephraim kind of exemplifies those who would like to come in at the end of anybody's sacrifice to claim some victory and spoils, even though they hadn't done a thing. They weren't rejoicing with God's people that God had given them victory over their enemies. They were wanting glory for themselves. And Jephthah again shows himself to be very honorable but not compromising. He wouldn't compromise with this.

So we read, in verse 5, "The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped" (because now the battle was on, and they'd mouthed off, but they shouldn't have) "said, 'Let me cross over,' the men of Gilead would say to him, 'Are you an Ephraimite?' If he said, 'No,' then they would say to him, 'Then say, "Shibboleth"!' And he would say, 'Sibboleth,' for he could not pronounce it right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time forty-two thousand Ephraimites" (who couldn't speak very well). So he came up with a huge army to threaten the victors and ended up losing his army entirely. So they take the battle to them, they cross the Jordan, and they block the fords where they would have had to cross to go back to the other side, and then they gave them a phonetics test and asked them to say the word "stream," which is what "Shibboleth" means. It was the streams of the Jordan. Just say "stream," and they couldn't do it, and they mispronounced it. If you go with us to Israel sometime (by the way, we booked another Israel trip on March 4, 2019, so if you really want to go, don't say, "I didn't have time to save," it's a year and a half from now) to the north, there's a place at the headwaters of the Jordan called Banias. And it is one of the three feeding streams or sources that feeds the Jordan River. The problem is it really isn't Banias; it was called Paneas. Paneas is the god of Pan, but the Arabs can't say "p"s,

so they called it Banias. And it remains that way today. I don't know if you've ever gone to different countries. There're some words that are just extremely difficult to pronounce. I was raised Dutch, so we have words that I'm pretty sure you couldn't say. You can come up afterwards - we can try. Be fine. But just your mouth doesn't go that way, you know? And neither did these guys'. But I want you to notice - here's a small seed of jealousy, and it starts a civil war, and at the end of the day, God's people (forty-two thousand) lie dead.....over a stupid matter. Had they just rejoiced or come when they were called or kept their mouths shut! In the body, there's this small member known as the tongue. James 3:8 says no man can tame it. I don't know if you've ever looked at a snail. Snails have very long, narrow tongues. Go study the snail sometime. They have thirty thousand little teeth in their tongues. They can saw through (well, for you it's not) leaves and stems because of their tongues. But it takes a tongue. And the Bible talks about our tongue being the same way. So, in the end, here's civil war. It's tragic, and it was avoidable. And had the Ephraimites not mouthed off, forty-two thousand people didn't have to die. But they did. And this is the end, literally, of Jephthah's reign. This is how things ended for him. In fact, verse 7 says, "And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried among the cities of Gilead."

Well starting, then, in verse 8 (and to the end of the chapter), we are quickly taken through several other judges. Verse 8, "After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had thirty sons. And he gave away thirty daughters in marriage, and brought in thirty daughters from elsewhere for his sons. He judged Israel seven years." So that means he had sixty kids, which is why he died, I think. (Laughing) Who's got time to rule? I don't know. But he only made it seven years, and then he keeled over. It's all we know about him. This is how the LORD wants it. Here's all we know.....except the judges, more often than not, turn the hearts of the people back to the LORD.

Verse 11, "After him, Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel. He judged Israel ten years." That's all we know about him. "And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the country of Zebulun. After him, Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy young donkeys. He judged Israel eight years." By the way, the word for grandson, in Hebrew, is nephew. It's kind of an interesting word. But however their relationship, eight years - very short reign. And God sees fit to pass over these lives - seven years, ten years, eight years; Jephthah - six years before that.

So added all up, you get quite a few years where there's some godly leadership, even though we don't know much about it, and God sees fit to pass over their rulership, if you will, so that we can turn our attention to the next guy - to the thirteenth guy, the thirteenth judge - Samson, who He will devote much to (four chapters). And the first one, I just wanted to get our bearings on Samson tonight, and then we'll look at the next two chapters next week, and then we'll look, after that, to his sad ending where he brings the house down, but that's about it.

So, there's lots to learn. Imagine having the strength of the Rock and the morality of Hugh Hefner - because that's pretty much Samson. Samson could rip a lion in shreds with his bare hands. He could rip up a city gate and carry it on his back for miles. Never saw a woman he didn't love (or thought he did). But he's our example from the Bible on how to walk with God and how to not walk with God - what to do and what not to do. And God gives to us, of Samson's life, the whole naked truth. I mean, everything is in there for us to see - no sugar coating at all. If you had to outline these four chapters, let me just give you a quick outline: there is the supernatural calling of God upon Samson's life; there is the sinful wandering of Samson for the examples that were given from his life; there is the single-handed fighting of Samson (because he's different than every other judge - every other judge came up, gathered an army and went to fight for God's people, Samson always fought by himself, no one ever fought with him, he didn't rally the troops, he was a one-man show); and it ends up being a sad ending to his life. Supernatural calling, sinful wandering, single-handed fighting, sad ending - I think those are all "s" words. And he could have been so much more if it wasn't for his moral failure. I mean, he had every possible advantage that you could have.

We had the baptism a few weeks ago, and there were a lot of young people that were getting baptized, more so than I remember. And not just 7 or 8 but 15, 16 years old. And when you said, "When did you get saved?" and they'll say, "I was 5 at home or 6 at home," and I thought, gosh, I would have given anything to have been saved at 5 or 6 because I have those years in there between 13 and 17 which I don't want any of you to ever find out about. (Laughing) You know what I mean? Those are years that you just are so sorry for. You couldn't have lived a worse life! Embarrassingly so. And I think about these kids that are out there getting baptized - they have every advantage in the book: Christian home, Christian parents, good example, starting early, not a lot to I don't know what a 9 year old, "Well, I need to be saved from my sinful ways." You know it couldn't have

been much. But praise the LORD they don't have to go through high school without Jesus! Or through college without Jesus.

He could have been so much more, and he wasn't.

Verse 1 (of chapter 13) says, "Again the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years." Maybe it's just me, but aren't you getting sick of reading the same thing? I mean, here comes the next generation, and it seems (at least in the book of Judges) every generation has to learn the hard way, by themselves. Nobody can read a history book and go, "Yeah, we shouldn't do it that way." Because we all think we're smarter, I guess. And, by the way, this is the last time you will read this phrase in the book of Judges. It's the seventh example of that sin-drome that we were talking about. But this'll be the last time that we read about it in this book. Like I said, after Samson the last five chapters are all general statements of the condition of the people during these years - characterized by everybody "did what was right in their own eyes."

We are told (in verse 1) that the children of Israel went into captivity for forty years which, by the way, is the longest recorded time of oppression. And you'd think it would get shorter after six examples of this - this is the seventh - but, instead, it gets longer. The people seem to realize their sin more slowly than ever before, come back to the LORD with much more reticence. By the way, there is no cry here from the people for deliverance like you find in the other six examples. God just begins to move or remove, if you will, the Philistines away (as the oppressors) long before the people repent. It's just a gracious act of God.

Now, whenever you read of the Philistines - and you're going to read them a lot as we go through the Old Testament, especially to the days of David and beyond - the Philistines did not originate in Israel. They originated in Greece. If you're going with us in a few weeks on the Footsteps of Paul (tour), most of the Philistine people came out of the Aegean, out of the islands, if you will. They migrated by ship. They came to attack Egypt. But Egypt was a lot tougher than the Philistines were (this people group), and they were shoved by the Egyptians north along the coast, about 1200 B.C., and they all ended up along the Mediterranean as a people group. They occupied five major cities. We will run into them constantly in the Bible - Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. Those are the big centers of commerce, if you will. But it was the Philistines, and the cause of the Philistines, that caused

the Romans to begin to call the land Palestine. Because the name "Palestine" just means land of the Philistines. So when you hear on the news people saying, "They're occupying the land of Palestine," that's an offense to everybody. These people showed up in 1200 B.C. God gave the land to Israel well before that. It wasn't the land of the Philistines. They were invaders and would eventually be moved on.

So, the Philistines (at this time) occupied Israel for forty years. They gained lots of strength. They really aren't defeated at all in battle until you get to 1 Samuel 7, where there is (under Samuel) a rallying of the people at a place called Mizpah. And there is a battle of Mizpah where they were almost eliminated, but they weren't. And they kind of have a chance to reconstitute themselves until the time of Saul, where they come out with their new super-weapon, Goliath (nuclear Goliath) from Gath. And then they're around until the time of David. But they were known for (these guys) the fact that they were metallurgists. They were extremely smart in being able to mine iron and form it into weapons and chariots. And so, historically, the Philistines could fight against you with one-tenth the number of army troops that you had. They were mobile, they were well-equipped, they could take advantage of their insight, and they were a formidable foe.

So, thirty-one years of Jephthah and Ibzan and Elon and Abdon, thirty-one years of godliness and blessing and victory, and it all kind of falls by the wayside as these judges disappear from the scene. And now they are subject, again, to God's vengeance, and He subjects them to these powerful Philistines. And I read verse 1, and I say to myself, "Will they never learn?" and then I look at my own life, and I quickly pipe down. But don't you feel like that? When will they ever learn?

Verse 2, "Now there was a certain man from Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren and had no children. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Indeed now, you are barren and have borne no children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Now therefore, please be careful not to drink wine or similar drink, and not to eat anything unclean. For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. And no razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.' " Having lots of children (in this culture) was a blessing. Psalm 127:3-5 says, "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them." And it makes perfect sense, I think, if you're in an agrarian

society that you have a lot of kids. Everybody gets to work on the land, and the parents can retire at some point. Childlessness was a cultural stigma viewed as God's curse. Now, there's no support for that biblically. There were some individual cases where God dealt with individuals for their benefit, but to say that God's curse was not having children is ludicrous; it was borne in a lot of idolatry. It certainly isn't supported by the Bible. However, I am sure that someone like Manoah, here, his wife felt that way. You might remember when one of Jacob's wives, Leah, finally became pregnant with Reuben, she said out loud to no one in particular (Genesis 29:32), "The LORD has looked upon my affliction. Now my husband will love me." Because that was the outlook of the time. "God has punished me." Like I said, no biblical support for that whatsoever, but it was certainly something that was held to the heart.

So here comes a little boy, Samson, supernaturally given advantage from the very start. He's a miracle kid. He's born to a mother who hasn't been able to have any children. Not only that, he is declared to be a deliverer to Israel from his birth - that God says he should take a Nazirite vow. You can read about that in Numbers 6. It was usually made as a vow to the LORD for a short time, thirty days or so. You will find Paul, in the book of Acts, doing this as well (Acts 18:8, 24:5). In fact, maybe the person who seems to have committed to it for the longest time in the Bible is probably John the Baptist (Luke 1:15). But here was a boy that, to his mother, he is going to be dedicated to Me from the time that he is born. And there were restrictions upon the life of a Nazirite. You couldn't cut your hair, you couldn't be around a dead body. There were a lot of things you couldn't do. You did so in your devotion to God. It was almost like a season of real devotion. But God wanted his life dedicated to Him from the very first moment it started.

And Manoah was from the tribe of Dan. They had been seeking to have a child to no avail, when the Angel of the LORD appeared. That's Jesus, right? We've talked about that a lot. The theophany, when you read it as it is written here, is the appearance of Jesus in the Old Testament, prior to His birth. We won't see any more Angels of the LORD after the birth of Jesus. He is called the LORD oftentimes in these encounters with folks. But He brings her good news. But notice that even in His words to mom, there are indications that Samson will not live up to his full potential because we read that the LORD was going to "begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines." In other words, he wasn't about to finish the work that God had given him to do.

Well, this was good news to say the least. Verse 6 tells us, "So the woman came and told her husband, saying, 'A Man of God came to me, and His countenance was like the countenance of the Angel of God, very awesome; but I did not ask Him where He was from, and He did not tell me His name. And He said to me, 'Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. Now drink no wine or similar drink, nor eat anything unclean, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.' Then Manoah" (this woman's husband) "prayed to the LORD, and said, 'O my Lord, please let the Man of God whom You sent come to us again and teach us what we shall do for the child who will be born.' And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the Angel of God came to the woman again as she was sitting in the field; but Manoah her husband was not with her. Then the woman ran in haste and told her husband, and said to him, 'Look, the Man who came to me the other day has just now appeared to me!' So Manoah arose and followed his wife. When he came to the Man, he said to Him, 'Are You the Man who spoke to this woman?' And He said, 'I am.' Manoah said, 'Now let Your words come to pass! What will be the boy's rule of life, and his work?' So the Angel of the LORD said to Manoah, 'Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful. She may not eat anything that comes from the vine, nor may she drink wine or similar drink, nor eat anything unclean. All that I commanded her let her observe.' Then Manoah said to the Angel of the LORD, 'Please let us detain You, and we will prepare a young goat for You.' And the Angel of the LORD said to Manoah, 'Though you detain Me, I will not eat your food. But if you offer a burnt offering, you must offer it to the LORD.' (For Manoah did not know He was the Angel of the LORD). Then Manoah said to the Angel of the LORD, 'What is Your name, that when Your words come to pass we may honor You?' And the Angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why do you ask My name, seeing it is wonderful?' "

Now, Manoah did not recognize God himself. He'll get it, here, in a couple of verses. His question, to me, is interesting. "What's Your name?" You might remember Jacob, when he was wrestling with the LORD (way back in chapter 32 of Genesis). In the midst of the wrestling, the LORD said to him, "What is your name?" and Jacob said, "It's Jacob." And He said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel. You have struggled with God and have prevailed." And then Jacob said, "Tell me Your name," and the LORD said, "Why is it that you ask My name?" and He blessed him. Didn't give him a name. Here, He gives a name - Wonderful. You find that name, don't you, in the book of Isaiah 9:6, "And His name will be called Wonderful."

"So," verse 19, "Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it upon the rock to the LORD. And He did a wondrous thing while Manoah and his wife looked on - it happened as the flame went up toward heaven from the altar - the Angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar! When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell on their faces to the ground. When the Angel of the LORD appeared no more to Manoah and his wife, then Manoah knew that He was the Angel of the LORD." He knew they had spoken to God. In fact, verse 22, "Manoah said to his wife, 'We shall surely die, because we have seen God!' " which, I think, is a pretty common reaction in the Bible.

Maybe that happened to you as well, I guess, when you get saved - that you recognize that you're talking to God. Before, it was kind of religious, and there was a lot of separation. But it seems, when you see God's glory, when you see Him for who He is, you also get to see who you are. I think that the longer I've been saved, the worse I look in my own eyes (maybe in yours, too, but certainly in my own), and the greater God looks. And I guess you learn that as you go. But the more you get to know the LORD, the greater your sinfulness looks ugly. You can have a great round playing golf until Phil Mickelson shows up to play. And then you never want to hit the ball again. "No, no. You go ahead. I'll just watch." And all of a sudden your good isn't so good. And I think it's like that with God in the spiritual sense. You're good until you see who He is.

And poor Manoah. He isn't getting it. But now he kind of gets it, and he thinks he's cooked. Wasn't it Isaiah who said (9:6), "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips"? Or Peter (Luke 5), who gets in the boat with Jesus to go fishing after they'd fished all night, and when the boat began to fill up, Peter went, "This is the Lord." In a boat filled with fish, something that you would think makes fishermen excited, Peter falls on his face and says, "Get out of the boat. You've got to get out of the boat. Depart from me, Lord." And the fisherman - the proud fisherman - was humbled.

So, as Manoah asked the Angel of the LORD to come back and is heeded, and now he sees who He is, he says to his wife, "We're gonna die!" And I like verse 23 because wives are much more sensible than men. She says, " 'If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor would He have shown us all these things, nor would He have told us such things as these at this time.' " In other words, "That doesn't make any

sense! What's wrong with you, goofball?" (I'm pretty sure that's in there). "Now, it's unreasonable."

Verse 24 tells us (and we jump ahead), "So the woman bore a son and called his name Samson; and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to move upon him at Mahaneh Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol" in the north. So, here's the record of his birth. His name means brilliant or sunny. You could call Samson "Sunny boy." He was to be a bright light in Israel, a man with potential that was tremendous, a miracle baby announced by the LORD Himself to godly parents, raised as a Nazirite, consecrated to the LORD. You read this, and you go, "He could be the next Moses! He could revolutionize the world. He'll be a forerunner to David, maybe someone like Paul." And you get to verse 25, and you read this miraculous kid has miraculous supernatural capabilities. God is gifting him. The LORD is proving Himself to him. The Spirit of God has come upon his life. He's a miracle!

But with any gift from God comes the temptation to use it for your own benefit. God enables you. I always like worship leaders because they use their gifts to worship God. You could also use those gifts to make millions of dollars - just serve yourself. Sometimes the dilemma for these Christian worship people - they start off serving, and they end up in arenas with \$100 price tags. Now they don't know what they're doing. Gotta pick a side. Do something with your life.

So, his strength - as we shall see and should know - did not come from a workout regimen. It wasn't good genes. It wasn't, really, even his long hair or his Nazirite vow, although those were important. It came because of verse 25 here - the Holy Spirit had come upon his life. And his relationship with God was to be his strength. And when he lost that, even by cutting his hair, he became weak. So here's a young man - and it's all we know about him for twenty years. The next chapter takes us twenty years forward, and the next (chapter 16) takes us another twenty years. That's all we have. We have four little vignettes spoken of his life over a forty-year period. Like, "Oh, my goodness. There he is. Born. Uh oh. Oh, that's not good. That's horrible." You get to look through the window. God gives you to look at all that you can learn from this man's life, and it goes by very quickly. But I read Samson's life, and I always think about Jesus saying, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). And I think that the quicker you learn that, the happier you'll be. I think that is why God sometimes consigns us to times of weakness so that we might return to Him and find strength.

Here's one thing I learned from Samson - good beginnings and spiritual privilege don't ensure or guarantee spiritual success. You can have all of the things to go forward, but you can also squander them. And, unfortunately, he, like others that maybe you know, because of the weakness of their flesh, they head in the wrong direction. They have great potential, but they are compromised, and so they don't really find God's best.

So, we go from not having a child to a child being born to him being in his 20's. And in verse 1 of chapter 14, he's already out scouting girls in the Philistine camp. He's forever going to the enemy's place, where the devil is waiting for him in the form of these women. And I say the devil because the devil always dresses up temptation to make it appealing. And, man, Samson never saw a girl he didn't love. And none of them loved him. And God used him, but God used him despite him. He was always in the way.

So, chosen by God before he was born - in answer to his godly parents' prayers, God's hand upon him, God's plans for him spelled out, the Holy Spirit early on moving in his godly home, the natural setting, the supernatural calling. We will (next week) pick up with the sinful wandering, the single-handed fighting (two chapters) and then end up with the sad ending. Because, unfortunately, Samson is a guy that says, "Man, you could have been so much more," and he certainly could have.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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