



Judges - Chapter Thirteen

II Judges 3:7-16:31 - The Downward Spiral of Israel's Apostasy (continues)

Summary of Chapter Thirteen

Samson's story opens with the typical statement about Israel's apostasy, but the rest of Chapter 13 is a lengthy and atypical introduction to Samson. It details the encounter between Samson's parents and the angel of the Lord, who announced Samson's birth and mission. Clearly, Samson was to be used by God against the Philistines (Judges 14:4), even if, in his own life, he did not follow God's instructions.

II.m Judges 13:1-16:31 - Samson

Samson was the twelfth and last judge; he lived around the beginning of the 11th Century BC, about 50 years before Saul became king. His strength was unparalleled. Rather than lead an army, he battled the Philistines single-handedly. He was a deeply flawed hero whose life was unduly entangled with the people against whom he fought. He violated a number of the Ten Commandments, as well as his own Nazirite vow.

This is one of the strangest stories of the OT. It is the story of a great opportunity and a disastrous failure in the case of a man who might have wrought a great deliverance but failed. Samson embodied in his own tragic-heroic life the traits that Israel exhibited during this period. While he was used by God for deliverance, and while he even called upon God on occasion to help him, his life was nevertheless one of continued unfaithfulness, just like that of the nation he served as judge.

II.m.i Judges 13:1-25 - The Birth of Samson

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.

Judges 13:1

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. The cycle of sin, bondage, repentance, deliverance, blessing, and sin again continued in the history of Israel. Into these times was born the next judge of Israel, Samson. In this sense Samson was truly a man of his times. He was a study in contrasts; a man of great strengths and great weaknesses. In this, he was a picture of Israel's history both during this period and generally; a picture of great heights and deep lows.

Samson is also an important example of unfulfilled potential. Although he did great things for God, it is staggering to consider what he might have done and been for God had he adopted the mindset of Jesus: <<He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'>> (Mark 14:36).

The Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. Because of Israel's sin and rebellion, God gained their attention again by bringing them into subjugation to the Philistines. They never learned the lessons of their own history.

² There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children.

³ And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son.'

Judges 13:2-3

There was a certain man of Zorah. The town of Zorah is about 14 miles or 22km west of Jerusalem. It was in the land of the tribe of Dan.



The angel of the Lord. The angel's appearance was awesome (v.6), but his essential character was not to be revealed (vv.17-18). Some commentators and theologians believe this was God's representative, either a human prophet or angelic being, speaking authoritatively to the people about their apostasy. Others firmly believe that the language would indicate this to be one of several theophanies, pre-incarnate appearances of the Messiah. Refer also to the comments made on Judges 2:1.

Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. This promise came as a great blessing to this woman burdened by childlessness. The second part of the message is very similar to that given to a young virgin over one thousand years later: <<*The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David'*>> (Luke 1:30-32).

⁴ Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, ⁵ for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.' ⁶ Then the woman came and told her husband, 'A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like that of an angel of God, most awe-inspiring; I did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name; ⁷ but he said to me, "You shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death.'"

Judges 13:4-7

Any man or woman could take a vow to become a Nazirite, to separate himself or herself to God; refer to Numbers Chapter 6, which shows that it was to be voluntary, for a limited time, and involved three provisions:

1. Abstinence from wine, strong drink, or anything associated with the vine (Numbers 6:3-4).
2. The hair was to remain uncut for the duration of the vow (Numbers 6:5).
3. There was to be no contact with the dead, including the laying out of a close family member (Numbers 6:6-8).

If a person became unclean, there were elaborate cleansing rituals, as recorded in Numbers 6:9-21. Three things are unusual concerning Samson and this vow. First, he did not take it voluntarily; it was his lot from birth. Second, it was not limited in time; it was to last to the day of his death. This would set a precedent for

Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11), and for John the Baptist (Luke 1:15). Third, he broke every one of its stipulations: his head was sheared (Judges 16:17-19); he associated with the dead (Judges 14:6-9 and 15:15); and he undoubtedly drank at his wedding feast (Judges 14:10-20).

God, through his prophet, blames Israel for leading Nazirites and prophets astray: <<*And I raised up some of your children to be prophets and some of your youths to be nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? says the Lord. But you made the nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, 'You shall not prophesy'*>> (Amos 2:11-12).

Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean. Manoah's wife also had to share in the Nazirite vow during the time she conceived and carried Samson in her womb. In fact, it was likely that she would have to keep to these restrictions at least until Samson was weaned.

It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel. Samson's successes were only for a time, since the Philistines were still adversaries of Israel in the days of Samuel, Saul, and David. Indeed, there is a certain sensitivity in these words indicating that Samson's mission will both have success and failure, the latter due to his departure from God's will and reliance on his own strength and initiative, and that this was foreknown at the time the angel delivered his message. Deliver in the sense of Samson's mission can also be translated as salvation.

A man of God designates prophets elsewhere in the OT, e.g. in Deuteronomy 33:1, 1 Samuel 2:27, and 1 Kings 17:18. At first, Samson's mother may have thought she was dealing with a prophet, but she quickly realised this was someone greater.

I did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name. This shows the profound impact the appearance of the man of God had upon Manoah's wife. He was most awe-inspiring; so much so that she did not ask normal questions about where he was from or what his name was.

⁸ Then Manoah entreated the Lord, and said, 'O Lord, I pray, let the man of God whom you sent come to us again and teach us what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born.'⁹ God listened to Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her.¹⁰ So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, 'The man who came to me the other day has appeared to me.'¹¹ Manoah got up and followed his wife, and came to the man and said to him, 'Are you the man who spoke to this woman?' And he said, 'I am.'¹² Then Manoah said, 'Now when your words come true, what is to be the boy's rule of life; what is he to do?'¹³ The angel of the Lord said to Manoah, 'Let the woman give heed to all that I said

to her. ¹⁴ She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine. She is not to drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. She is to observe everything that I commanded her.'

Judges 13:8-14

O Lord, I pray, let the man of God whom you sent come to us again and teach us what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born. Manoah already knew what God wanted him to do because the angel of the Lord had already told him. Here he asked for confirmation of the word previously spoken.

God listened to Manoah. God is faithful and hears the prayers of his people: <<*So we fasted and petitioned our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty*>> (Ezra 8:23), <<*But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer*>> (Psalm 66:19), and: <<*The prophet Jeremiah said to them, 'Very well: I am going to pray to the Lord your God as you request, and whatever the Lord answers you I will tell you; I will keep nothing back from you'*>> (Jeremiah 42:4). Although prayers are always answered in the way God determines, on this occasion he responded also precisely in the way Manoah had asked, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field.

What is to be the boy's rule of life; what is he to do? God honoured Manoah's request for confirmation; but he did not answer this request to know the future. He simply called Manoah and his wife to obey what God already told them to do.

¹⁵ Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, 'Allow us to detain you, and prepare a kid for you.' ¹⁶ The angel of the Lord said to Manoah, 'If you detain me, I will not eat your food; but if you want to prepare a burnt-offering, then offer it to the Lord.' (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord.) ¹⁷ Then Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, 'What is your name, so that we may honour you when your words come true?' ¹⁸ But the angel of the Lord said to him, 'Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful.'

Judges 13:15-18

Allow us to detain you, and prepare a kid for you. There was a strong customary practice in showing hospitality but Manoah's gesture goes beyond that. He was not just going to offer bread and wine, but would prepare a young goat for his guest - more of a mini banquet than a simple meal. This is also reminiscent of Abraham's response when the Lord visited him on his way to judge Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:1-8.

The angel's name was too wonderful to comprehend, so he does not reveal it to Samson's parents. Many believe that the angel of the Lord shows himself here to be Jesus, in taking the name wonderful: <<*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*>> (Isaiah 9:6).

If this is the case, the name is later revealed in a vision given to John: <<*His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God*>> (Revelation 19:12-13). Or perhaps as Paul describes it: <<*God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come*>> (Ephesians 1:20-21), and: <<*Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name*>> (Philippians 2:9).

¹⁹ So Manoah took the kid with the grain-offering, and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to him who works wonders. ²⁰ When the flame went up towards heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground. ²¹ The angel of the Lord did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah realised that it was the angel of the Lord.

Judges 13:19-21

So Manoah took the kid with the grain-offering, and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to him who works wonders. The angel of the Lord proved he was wonderful by doing a wondrous thing by ascending in the flame of sacrifice up towards heaven.

Again, there are those that believe this could be the pre-incarnate Messiah: <<*As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him*>> (Daniel 7:13), and: <<*They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven'*>> (Acts 1:11).

Then Manoah realised that it was the angel of the Lord. For the first time, Manoah and his wife understood that this person was no mere man or messenger from God. They realised they had spoken with God himself: <<*Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I*

do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves>> (John 14:10-11).

Sadly, it seems that many Christians today fail to realise that, because of Jesus, they stand in the presence of God, yet they are not in awe of doing so.

²² And Manoah said to his wife, 'We shall surely die, for we have seen God.' ²³ But his wife said to him, 'If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt-offering and a grain-offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these.'

Judges 13:22-23

We shall surely die, for we have seen God. Manoah's fears echo those of Gideon on encountering the angel of the Lord: <<*Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the Lord; and Gideon said, 'Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face'*>> (Judges 6:22). Manoah would have known the Scriptures: <<*So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved'*>> (Genesis 32:30), and: <<*'But', he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live'*>> (Exodus 33:20).

If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt-offering and a grain-offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these. This was a perceptive response from Manoah's wife. She understood that God had not said all this to them just to abandon them now. God's past work in life is a promise of his future care and blessing for his people, individually as well as collectively. Manoah's wife was an invaluable source of encouragement for her husband's faith. She did not criticise Manoah. She did not say, "What a silly man you are. What a stupid man you must be to be so frightened." The faith of others can never be strengthened by criticising them or by belittling them. Christians are required to do as Manoah's wife did - encourage others to build up their faith.

He would not have accepted a burnt-offering. The basis of the faith of Manoah's wife was that she knew that the Lord had accepted their offering to him. The same principle works for the Christian believer today: If the Lord wanted to harm someone or bring evil upon them, he would have never accepted an offering on their behalf - the offering of Jesus on the Cross. Therefore, it is written: <<*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*>> (John 3:16).

²⁴ The woman bore a son, and named him Samson. The boy grew, and the Lord blessed him. ²⁵ The spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

Judges 13:24-25

The woman bore a son, and named him Samson. The promise from the angel of Lord was fulfilled. It was proven to be true. Once again there are echoes of the later birth: <<*After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb*>> (Luke 2:21).

The Spirit of the Lord began to stir him. God's Spirit was pushing Samson toward the work that God wanted him to do: <<*His father and mother did not know that this was from the Lord; for he was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel*>> (Judges 14:4). This is the source of the great strength seen in Samson later. Some people usually think of Samson as a man with huge, rippling muscles; but others could not figure out why he was so strong. It is reasonable to think that he did not look very strong. Whether he looked strong or not, it was the Spirit of the Lord who made him strong. Refer to the comment made on Judges 14:6.